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No. 28

The Bridge Between Two Worlds

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PREACH TO
THE IGNORANT,
THE DOUBTFUL,
AND SINNERS

MARK DEVER

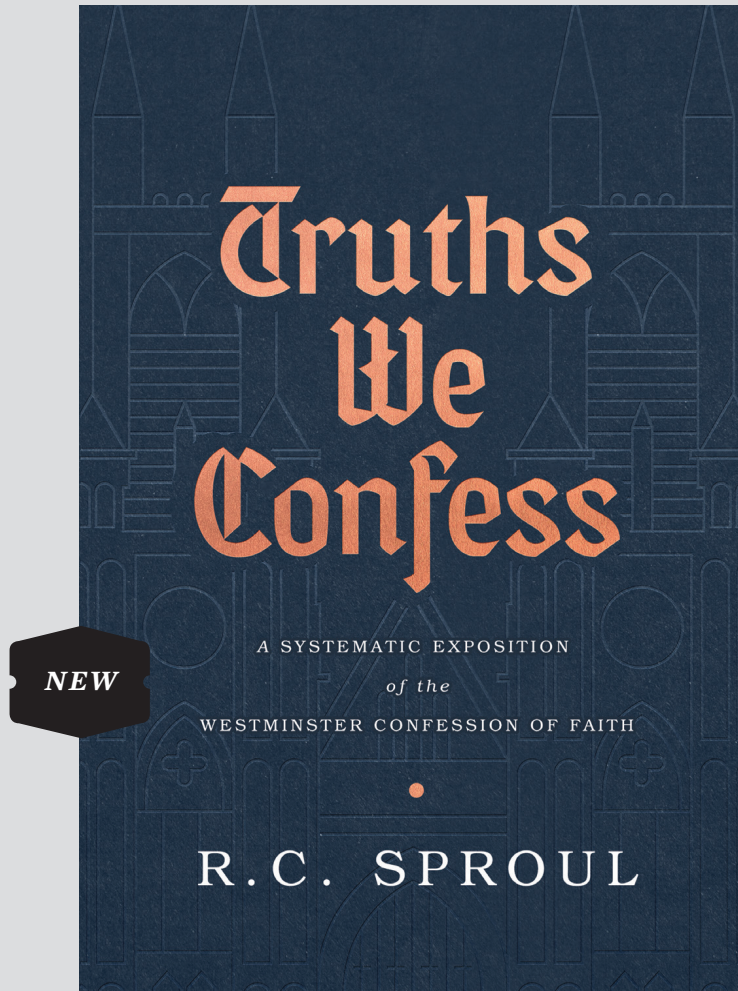
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Get to the *so what?*

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



When I was a doctoral student in seminary, I took a Christian Worldview class that was quite valuable for my thinking. I will never forget the words the professor said during class one day. He said he would come to hear us preach—sitting right in front of our pulpit on the first row. In the middle of our sermon, he stated, he would hold up a large sign that would face us directly. On the placard would be printed only two words—“*So what?*”

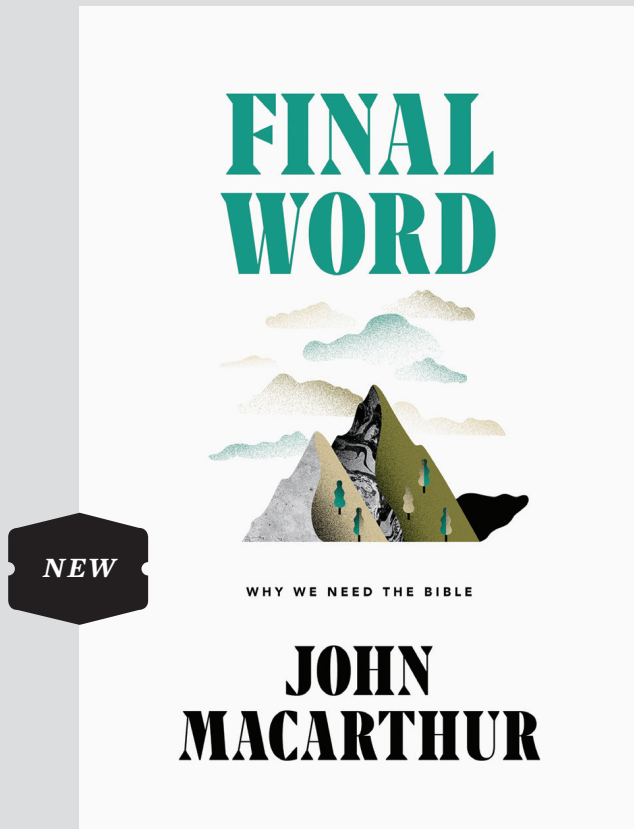
This probing question was really a strong statement. Our professor was challenging us to get to the practical relevance of whatever we were preaching. In other words, so what does this truth you are preaching have to do with my daily life? What practical action steps are required in light of this reality? What does this message necessitate from me?

In a single word, the *so what* of any sermon is the application. It concerns the call to action integral to a message. Though my professor never came to hear me preach, I can, nevertheless, see his sign in my mind’s eye every time I prepare a sermon. I visualize those two crucial words every time I enter the pulpit.

As preachers, we must always get to the *so what?* in our sermons.

This is the way much of the Bible is written—first doctrine, then duty. First is what we must believe, followed by *how* we must live it out. For example, the first eleven chapters of Romans are doctrine, but the last five chapters are application based upon that doctrine. The book of Ephesians is structured similarly, as the first three chapters are doctrine, and its last three chapters focus on application.

In this issue of *Expositor* magazine, we want to turn our attention to this vital aspect of our preaching—the application. Here is the point where our sermons become personal and penetrating to the souls of our listeners. May the Lord help each of us who stands in a pulpit to excel in this all-important art of application. ♦



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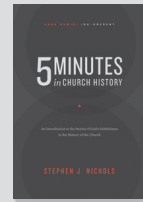
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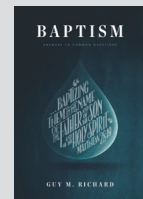
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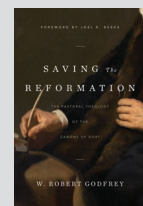
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EXPOSITOR

ONEPASSION



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The Bridge Between Two Worlds

S T E V E N J . L A W S O N

An expositor lives in two worlds. On one hand, he dwells in the far-distant past, completely immersed in the ancient world of the Bible. At the same time, he lives in his own immediate context—and speaks directly into the lives of his listeners. The preacher must bridge the gap between these two worlds.

As he opens the New Testament, the one in the pulpit must take his listeners back to the stormy Sea of Galilee and put them into the fishing boat with Jesus and His disciples. Or the preacher must transport the people back three thousand years to the Old Testament and place them into a cave with David as he hides from Saul. Or he must lead his flock back four thousand years and have them climb alongside Abraham up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac.

As the expositor takes this journey back in time, he should explain the meaning of words in the original Hebrew and Greek languages. He should give the background for unique cultural distinctions from long ago. He should show the geographical setting in which the biblical passage took place. He should provide the right interpretation by discovering the authorial intent of the verses. In all this, the preacher must answer the most fundamental questions: What did the biblical author mean by what he wrote to his original audience? How were they to understand what he meant by what he wrote? More specifically, what does God mean by what He says in the text?

But now the expositor must address the subsequent question:

What does this ancient truth require from our modern-day listeners? Put another way, what is the practical relevance of this biblical text for daily life? The answers to these questions force the expositor to bring the truth of the Scriptures into the current world.

Having reached back to the ancient world of the Bible with one hand, the expositor must reach forward and lay hold of the listeners with the other. He must show the relevance of the truth to the contemporary world in which they live. He must relate the biblical text to the many pressing issues that a person faces today. He must show how the Bible addresses the various pressures and temptations of the modern world. He must show the practicality of the Word of God for everyday life.

THE MOST RELEVANT BOOK

Let us be clear: The expositor does not have to make the Bible relevant for today. As it is, the Scripture is as relevant today as the day it was written. The role of the preacher is simply to show its implications to those to whom he speaks. The Word of God is the most practical book ever written. Every page speaks to every human life in every place. No one is left unaddressed by the Word of God—it addresses any issues a person may face with personal examples, specific commands, and timeless principles.

THE FIRST AND FOREMOST AIM OF OUR PREACHING IS TO MAGNIFY THE GREATNESS OF GOD AND AWAKEN THE HEARTS OF LISTENERS TO WORSHIP HIM.

If the preacher ever releases his grip on the ancient message of the Bible, he is no longer an expositor. Whatever else he may do right, if he neglects the Word of God, he is downgraded to being, at best, simply a speaker. He is reduced to playing the role of a life coach or a religious guru, espousing his own opinions. Or, worse, such a person is an entertainer, someone who can fill the building with crowds, but never fills the pulpit with power. God forbid that any man should stand in the pulpit and forfeit his hold on the sacred Scripture.

On the other hand, if the preacher keeps his grip on the biblical text, but neglects to explain its application to the modern-day congregation, he is also not an expositor—not in the truest sense. Without showing how the passage is to be lived and apart from exhorting the listener, such a man is relegated to being only a lecturer in the pulpit—a sort of academic professor. Such a man is wonderful in the classroom, but not in the pulpit. Teaching is only the means to a greater end. The ultimate goal of preaching is not merely the transfer of information. Rather, the higher aim of the preacher is the transformation of lives into Christlikeness. A sermon without application is like a bridge that is attached to only one side of a chasm, left dangling without support. So it is in preaching that fails to show the practical relevance to listeners, not connecting with the congregation at the deepest level possible.

In this article, our focus is upon the latter of these two worlds. We must consider how the sermon reaches the listener with the life-changing application of the biblical text. Because life is multifaceted, so must the application be shown on multiple levels. As we seek to make our preaching more life-changing, we must aim at no fewer than thirteen end points or effects of rightly focused application. This is not to say that every sermon with have thirteen points of application! But thinking about

each of these in turn can help the preacher build a bridge between his listeners and the biblical text.

ADORATION: WE MUST EXCITE WORSHIP

The first and foremost aim of our preaching is to magnify the greatness of God and awaken the hearts of listeners to worship Him. The primary purpose of the Word of God is to exalt God. We are to be *exaltational* expositors who elevate the greatness of God so that people give glory to God. In so doing, the preacher is to be the primary worship leader, whose first duty is to lead the people to adore God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

This was the intended effect of preaching in the early church. As the truth was proclaimed, it was with the purpose that the listener “will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1 Cor 14:25). We preach so that men and women will humble themselves and give the worship to God that He so rightly deserves. The Apostle Paul writes, “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart” (1 Tim 1:5). This aim begins with promoting love for God, from which flows love for others. This is the fulfillment of the greatest commandment, namely, that we love God with our entire being (Matt 22:37-38). This must be the highest goal of our preaching—to inspire hearts with greater love for God.

Ask yourself these questions: How can you draw more attention to God in your sermon? How can you make much of Him? How can you be used to excite hearts for Him?

CONVICTION: WE MUST EXPOSE SIN

In the preaching of the Word, exposing sin in the lives of his listeners should be a great concern to the expositor. Paul

commands Timothy, “Preach the word, reprove” (2 Tim 4:2). The word “reprove” (*elegmos*) means “to correct what is wrong,” whether it be false doctrine or false living. Reproving is intended to convict people of wrong beliefs and wrong behavior.

God told the prophet Jeremiah “to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow” before he was “to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). So it is in our preaching ministry. We must uproot sin before we can build up people in personal holiness. As we expound the Word, the light of Scripture exposes those habits hidden in darkness. We must call out sin as sin, both in heart attitudes and outward deeds.

This is what Jesus did in His preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28). Jesus named this inner sin for what it is—adultery. His exposition of the Word was designed to expose any pretense and hypocrisy in the lives of His listeners. There cannot be repentance from this sin until it was clearly brought to light.

The Scripture is represented as “sharper than any two-edged sword and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit” and as “able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The preached Word cuts to the bone and exposes what lies deep beneath the outward façade of a person’s life. The author of Hebrews adds, “There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (v. 13). The Word of God brings to the surface the iniquity within a person’s life, in order that there would be its confession and resulting repentance. This occurs when we stand in the pulpit and unsheathe the sword of the Spirit—which is the Word of God—wielding it in the supernatural power He gives.

As we preach the holiness of God, this truth reveals what is unholy in our own lives. Such was the experience of Isaiah when he was confronted with the flawless moral purity of God: “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5). This is the inevitable result once people behold the holiness of God—a powerful conviction of sin.

Do you seek to expose sin in the lives of your listeners? Do you teach the great sinfulness of sin? Do you reveal the ugliness of sin to the listener? Do you depict it as loathsome in the sight of God?

CORRECTION: WE MUST REDIRECT LIVES

After exposing sin, our preaching must then redirect our listeners back to the narrow path of personal purity. We must

show the steps that lead back to the pursuit of holiness. In Paul’s instruction concerning how we must preach, he further charges us to “rebuke” (2 Tim 4:2). “Rebuke” (*epitimaō*) carries the idea of bringing the erring person to repentance. It means “to charge sharply, to censure sharply.” The idea is to turn around the person who sins, away from the error of their way, and point them toward the narrow path that leads to life. Rebuking takes people where they are and redirects them to where they need to be.

As expositors, we should call our listeners to be life-long repenters. We are to urge them to return to the path so clearly marked in the Word of God. John the Baptist began his preaching by calling, “Repent” (Matt 3:2). Jesus launched His public preaching ministry by issuing the same command, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). In the Great Commission, Jesus charged His disciples to preach “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 24:47). Proclaiming repentance is a non-negotiable application in sermons that follow Christ’s charge.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter did likewise as he preached a powerful sermon that demanded, “Repent” (Acts 2:38). Throughout the book of Acts, the preaching of repentance was strongly prevalent: “Repent and return” (3:19; cf. 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). The predominant message of Jesus to the church at the end of the first century followed this very trajectory: “Remember from where you have fallen, and repent” (Rev 2:5; cf. 2:16, 22; 3:3, 19).

In like manner, we must issue the call for people to repent and return. In the pulpit, we must redirect their steps to the way that is pleasing to God. If we fail to do so, we are certainly not preaching like Jesus. Neither are we fulfilling our responsibility to issue this divine application and show people the path that leads back to personal godliness.

Do you lay out the steps the listener must take to return to living in holiness? Do you spell out what it means for them to confess sin? Do you explain what repentance requires? Do you shine light on the path that leads back to personal godliness? Do you assure the one who has turned away of God’s grace to restore him or her back to living in obedience?

EXHORTATION: WE MUST URGE LISTENERS

In applying the Scripture, we not only call the listener to turn back to God’s path, but we must exhort them to do so. After Paul writes, “Reprove, rebuke,” he commands, “Exhort with much patience” (2 Tim 4:2). The word “exhort” (*parakaleō*) is a compound word in which *para* is the prefix meaning “alongside,” and *kaleō* is the main root word, meaning “to call.” *Parakaleō* means “to call to one’s side.” The idea is to entreat, beseech, and implore.

When the preacher exhorts, he is urging the listener to pursue

the right path. “Exhort” can also have the idea “to encourage, comfort, and cheer.” The primary meaning carries the idea of summoning and pleading with the listener to pursue the right direction. In other words, it is not enough to merely point out the clearly marked path that leads back into the will of God. Exhortation goes a step further and challenges people to apply the Word of God to their daily lives.

This kind of an appeal must be heard—and even *felt*—in the preacher’s voice. His preaching must go beyond instructing the mind to igniting the heart and urging the will. This is precisely how Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. The narrative reads that he “kept on exhorting them” (Acts 2:40). This is how every preacher today must exhort his congregation—goading and spurring them on to pursue growth. Exhorting covers a broad spectrum that comprises the core elements of dynamic preaching from encouraging to exciting the listener.

The Apostle Paul describes “the exhortation of Scripture” (Rom 15:4). *Paraklēsis* is the noun form for “exhortation.” This is to say, Scripture itself was written to exhort people. So, when we preach the Word, it has a built-in exhortation in it. Paul later instructs Timothy, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Tim 4:13). In this passage, “exhortation” is an indispensable component of all true preaching. Otherwise, it falls short of the apostolic mark. Paul stated that an elder must be “able...to exhort in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9). Paul says to


Titus, “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority” (Titus 2:15). Having stated the sound doctrine, Titus—and all preachers—must “exhort” with it. This means the teaching of theology must seek to move the hearers in the right direction.

Do you exhort those to whom you preach? Do you seek to compel them to respond to the message? Do you plead with them to act upon what they have heard? Do you appeal to them to live for the Lord? If there is no exhortation, there is no true expository preaching.

ADMONITION: WE MUST WARN PEOPLE

As the expositor preaches the truth, he must also admonish his listeners to respond to it. Paul describes his own preaching this way: “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man” (Col 1:28). The main verb, “proclaim,” is modified by the participle “admonishing.” The word “admonishing” (*noutheteō*) means, literally, “to put into the mind.” This speaks of giving counsel to the listener with a warning that divine punishment will follow sinful choices. Admonishment cautions people that there are negative, even painful consequences if wrong paths are taken. The Apostle Paul says he admonishes “every man,” indicating no one was beyond his warning.

This is precisely how Jesus warns His listeners in His preaching. He admonishes those with hatred in their hearts, “Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand



DO YOU EXHORT THOSE TO WHOM YOU PREACH? DO YOU SEEK TO COMPEL THEM TO RESPOND TO THE MESSAGE? DO YOU PLEAD WITH THEM TO ACT UPON WHAT THEY HAVE HEARD? DO YOU APPEAL TO THEM TO LIVE FOR THE LORD? IF THERE IS NO EXHORTATION, THERE IS NO TRUE EXPOSITORY PREACHING.

you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent” (Matt 5:25-26). Jesus did not hesitate to lay out the painful consequences if their sinful hearts did not repent.

Again, Jesus cautions, “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell” (vv. 29-30). Jesus soberly threatens His listeners with hell if they do not take proper action.

For a period of three years, Paul admonished the elders who were given charge over the church in Ephesus. He says, “Night and day I did not cease to admonish each one with tears” (Acts 20:31). He was continually cautioning those to whom he spoke about the painful consequences of their actions. Moreover, he did so with tears, which was a reflection of the deep emotion with which he preached. As we preach, we can do no less than this. We, too, must be warning our listeners that if they continue down the wrong path with wrong attitudes, the chastening hand of the Lord will bring strict punishment upon their lives. This discipline of the Lord is the inevitable end result of a believer pursuing sin without confession and repentance. If we see the danger that lies ahead and we fail to warn of its reality, it is a shirking of our duty and a withholding of love.

Do you issue warnings in your preaching? Do you caution your hearers that there is an inevitable connection between sowing and reaping? Do you sound the admonition that a devastating harvest may follow sowing seeds of sin?

PERSUASION: WE MUST CONVINCHE HEARERS

Expository preachers must never adopt a passive mindset toward the response of their listeners. They must never adopt a “take it or leave it” mentality with those who hear them. Instead, we must wholeheartedly attempt to persuade people to follow the truth of the gospel. We must contend for souls, like Jacob’s determination in wrestling throughout the night with the angel of the Lord. Preachers must be compelling, expending effort to secure a positive response from their congregation. If a man is not persuading, he is not preaching. Genuine expositors are always attempting to capture a commitment to Christ from those who sit under their preaching.

For example, on Paul’s first missionary journey, Luke records, “Many of the Jews and the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). “Urging” (*peithō*) is a strong word that means “to prevail upon,

to win over.” This indicates that Paul and Barnabas sought to gain a positive response from those who heard them preach the Word. The intent is to convince the listener to believe the truth. Apostolic preaching involves prevailing upon the hearers to commit their lives to follow Christ.

On Paul’s second missionary journey, Luke describes his visit to Thessalonica, “Some of them were persuaded [*peithō*] and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” (Acts 17:3). In his preaching, the Apostle Paul used a strong appeal in order to win people to Christ. In Corinth, Paul “was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade [*peithō*] Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). Again, persuasion was an integral part of Paul’s intent in preaching. In Ephesus, Paul “entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading [*peithō*] them about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). Paul did not know of any preaching that did not involve applying persuasion with his hearers.

Wherever Paul journeyed, he was preaching to persuade men and women to believe the gospel. He sought to influence them from unbelief to faith in Christ. We read, “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded [*peithō*] and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26). Paul was a most convincing preacher, and we must be as well.

When Paul stood before King Agrippa, it is recorded, “For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded [*peithō*] that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). The apostle was so compelling in his gospel presentation that Agrippa replied to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade [*peithō*] me to become a Christian” (v. 28). Paul spoke to Agrippa and those in his court in order to persuade his listeners to submit to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Throughout his ministry, Paul attempted to persuade men to believe in Christ: “When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade [*peithō*] them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe” (Acts 28:23-24). The apostle’s persuasion was a deliberate attempt to win people to faith in Jesus Christ. He explains, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor 5:11). It is reverence toward God that produces convincing appeals.

Do you attempt to persuade those to whom you preach?

Do you try to convince them to follow Christ? Do you attempt to win them to the truth you are proclaiming?

CONSOLATION: WE MUST MINISTER COMFORT

In our expository preaching, we must be an instrument in the hand of God to bring comfort to hurting hearts. We must apply the Scripture in such a way to bring supernatural peace to discouraged souls. God says, “Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins’ (Isa 40:1-2). No greater comfort can be offered in preaching than the abundance of divine forgiveness that far exceeds our sins.

In His preaching, Jesus sought to bring comforting relief to those filled with anxiety: “Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt 6:25). He preached this to bring calming tranquility to their worried hearts. He adds, “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (v. 34). By this preaching of Jesus, He sought to ease the heavy burdens of those with weakening, weary hearts.

On his first missionary journey, Paul returned to preach in churches he had already established. He promises, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). These words were intended to reassure new disciples that suffering for the kingdom of God is to be expected. Paul’s preaching aimed at bringing the peace of God to those greatly suffering for their faith. In the book of Hebrews, the writer encourages his readers, “He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?’” (Heb 13:5-6). This unnamed preacher attempted to bring much-needed consolation to persecuted believers by reaffirming that in their present difficulties, Jesus will never desert them.

This is the consolation that every expositor must be used by God to impart. The preacher is to be a merchant of hope, who provides large measures of encouragement when his listeners are languishing in valleys of despair. In our expositions, we must attempt to bind up broken hearts that are suffering under the difficulties of life. We must seek to lift up the downcast and pour a healing balm into their open wounds. When beaten and bruised by the blows of life, believers should find relief from stress and anxiety under the preached Word.

Do you purposefully seek to comfort troubled souls in your preaching? Do you have a sensitive heart toward those who are downcast? Do you make application to people under the

heavy blows of life? Do you include those who are hurting?

EDIFICATION: WE MUST STRENGTHEN SOULS

In our pulpit ministry, we must make further application that builds up and makes strong those people in our pastoral care. Our preaching should aim at infusing spiritual strength into their souls as we expound the Word of God. The Scripture preached brings the enabling power of the Holy Spirit that makes our hearers strong in the grace of God. Expositors must seek to embolden people in their faith in the areas where they need to be matured.

On Paul’s first missionary journey, he preached the gospel and made many disciples, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith” (Acts 14:22). By his preaching, Paul was “strengthening” (*epistērizō*) their souls, which means “to make stronger, to confirm.” His preaching was the means of imparting sanctifying grace into their lives. The same took place under the preaching of other men who “encouraged and strengthened (*epistērizō*) the brethren with a lengthy message” (Acts 15:32). One of the goals of Paul’s preaching wherever he traveled was to be “strengthening the churches” (v. 41) in God’s grace.

The edification of the listeners must be one of the preacher’s goals in his exposition of the Word. Paul realized that “the word of His grace . . . is able to build you up (*oikodomeō*) and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). “Build up” (*oikodomeō*) means “to bestow, grant, supply, deliver.” It pictures someone building a house to be strong, to withstand the elements. The preaching of the Word imparts spiritual strength to believers and builds them up in their faith.

In your preaching, do you purposefully intend to build up the faith of those under the influence of your expositions? Do you have that goal as your target? Do you make it your aim to edify after you seek to convict and challenge? Do you intend to encourage spiritual growth?

PREPARATION: WE MUST EQUIP BELIEVERS

As expositors, our application must include equipping believers to follow Christ and serve Him. The Lord gives gifted men to the church—“evangelists, pastors, and teachers” (Eph 4:11)—“for the equipping of the saints to do the work of ministry” (v. 12). “Equipping” (*katartismos*) means “to restore something to usefulness.” The idea is that the ministry of the Word from God-gifted preachers should prepare His people to be effectively used for the work of God. Biblical preaching must be training believers for active service in the Lord.

In our expositions, we are demonstrating for people on a weekly basis how to study and interpret the Bible. As we expound Scripture, we are giving people the tools to rightly

WHILE PREACHING THE WORD, THE EXPOSITOR SHOULD SEEK TO AWAKEN PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR SLUGGISH SLEEP OF SPIRITUAL LETHARGY AND MOTIVATE THEM TO LOVE GOD AND LIVE FOR CHRIST.

handle the Word of truth. By our example in the pulpit, we are modeling for our listeners how to practically apply the Bible to their own lives. Further, we are training our people in how to counsel others as we teach and apply the Word to their lives.

Moreover, our preaching of the gospel should be equipping people to witness to others. They are learning from our expositions the essential truths of the gospel that they will share with their family, friends, and work associates. They are learning how to refute the many arguments they will hear posed against the gospel. They are being trained in how to bring unbelievers to the point of decision for Jesus Christ without manipulation or worldly tactics.

In your preaching, do you model for your congregation various ways to present the gospel? Do you give your listeners the answers they will need as a rebuttal to the pushback they will receive to the gospel? Do you provide them with a defense for the hope that lies within them? Do you give them a variety of biblical ways to present the gospel?

CONFIRMATION: WE MUST INSTILL ASSURANCE

As we preach the Word, we are to help people gain the assurance of their faith. In our expositions, we must give the scriptural means for them to have genuine confidence that they know the Lord. We must be used by the Spirit to help believers gain the true assurance of salvation in their hearts. This God-given assurance in the heart is the natural result of the gospel being preached with crystal clarity.

This is why the Apostle John wrote his first epistle. He states, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Throughout this epistle, he gives the necessary evidences of the new birth. His reasoning

is that wherever there is the root of regeneration, there will be the fruit of a changed life. These two—the root and the fruit—are inseparably connected. Regeneration always produces sanctification. John reasons that the reader may have the assurance of salvation as he sees the reality of sanctification in his life.

This affirmation must be prominent in our preaching. Those who hear us may be assured of the genuineness of their relationship with God as they see evidences of sanctifying grace in their life. It is our responsibility to give them the basis for having a true assurance of salvation. We must point out that confessing sin (1 John 1:5-10), obedience (2:3-6; 3:24; 5:3), love for the brethren (2:7-11; 3:14-17; 4:7-21), decreasing love for the world (2:15-17), spiritual discernment (2:18-27; 4:1-6), practicing righteousness (2:28-3:10), answered prayers (3:22), and faith in Jesus Christ (3:23; 5:1, 5) are distinguishing evidences of a true believer.

In your expositions, do you address your congregation regarding the legitimate basis for true assurance of their salvation? Do you expose the false evidences upon which to base such assurance? Do you bring the affirmation needed that instills valid confidence of personal conversion?

MOTIVATION: WE MUST IGNITE PASSION

While preaching the Word, the expositor should seek to awaken people out of their sluggish sleep of spiritual lethargy and motivate them to love God and live for Christ. Believers often lapse into a state of spiritual idleness. They can leave their first love (Rev 2:4). Preaching should go forth like a trumpet blast that sounds an awakening alarm. It should arouse the attention of the one who sits under the Word and reignite his or her passion for God. It should come with arresting force that captures the ear of the listener.

Exposition must be riveting. Rather than putting people to sleep, it stimulates the mind and excites the heart. To this end, it matters not only what the preacher says, but *how* he says it. He should proclaim the truth in a way that burns its way into the soul of the listener. This is precisely how Jesus spoke on the road to Emmaus, after which the two disciples responded, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). It was the exposition of Jesus that opened up the meaning of Scripture and ignited their souls with one holy passion for God.

This was the powerful effect of the preaching of John the Baptist. Jesus describes him as “the lamp that was burning and was shining” (John 5:35). That means his preaching was like a lamp that gave off both light (“shining”) and heat (“burning”). That is, he was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Matt 3:3), emitting the light of understanding with the fire of passion. This kind of life-changing preaching can only come with the power of the Holy Spirit. Such proclamation gives the illumination of the truth, with flaming intensity. This bold preaching burns its way into the soul of the listener.

So it is today. Spirit-empowered preaching should ignite the hearts of listeners with a renewed love for God. It should enflame them with new excitement for the kingdom of God and His righteousness. It should raise their affections to live for Jesus Christ. It should motivate them to move forward with renewed zeal to pursue the will of God.

Do you intend your exposition to come with a spiritual dynamic that arouses those who are in spiritual lethargy? Does it aim at awakening slumbering saints from their drowsiness? Are you mindful of inspiring believers to run the race God has laid before them with greater resolve? Does your preaching come with a motivating force that energizes your listeners to do the will of God?


SELF-EXAMINATION: WE MUST REQUIRE SOUL-SEARCHING

God blesses the preaching that calls for the self-examination of the listener. True expository preaching stresses that those who hear us must search their souls for genuine evidences of saving grace. Paul states, “A man must examine himself” (1 Cor 11:28). He writes, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” (2 Cor 13:5). In like manner, the Spirit-empowered preaching of the Word summons the congregation to look within themselves and discern where they stand with God. If the unexamined life is not worth living, the preaching that fails to call for self-examination is not worth giving.

In self-examination, the preacher often shifts from the indicative mood, which issues statements of fact, to the interrogative mood, which raises questions that require self-evaluation. The indicative is when the preacher makes a statement about the way things are. But with the interrogative, the expositor calls for the listener to look inward and audit his own soul. Instead of merely stating, “Christ’s sacrifice secures believers’ salvation,” the preacher transitions to a pointed question: “Has Christ’s blood secured your own salvation?” These piercing questions require an inward self-audit regarding how the proclaimed Word relates to the listener’s life.

By way of example, the first question in the Bible—“Where are you?” (Gen 3:9)—was not raised for God to gain knowledge that He did not already possess. Rather, the intent of the question was to be a catalyst for Adam to take stock of his own life. God designed this interrogation for the first man to assess where he stood in his relationship with God. Even so, our preaching should cause people to look inward and process where they are with the Lord. They should be taking stock concerning where they spiritually stand.

This pedagogical method of posing questions to the congregation was used by Jesus throughout His preaching ministry.



**TRUE EXPOSITORY PREACHING STRESSES THAT
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AN EXPOSITOR MUST NOT ONLY BE CASTING THE NET IN PRESENTING THE GOSPEL, BUT BE DRAWING THE NET IN BY MAKING PERSUASIVE APPEALS TO BELIEVE. THIS KIND OF EVANGELISTIC PREACHING IS MANDATORY FOR ALL WHO EXPOSIT THE WORD.

He often raised questions such as “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, and walk?’” (Matt 9:5). The intent of this question was to require those present to carefully think about and ponder the answer. On another occasion, He probed, “Do you believe I am able to do this?” (Matt 9:28). Jesus knew the answer, but the question was designed to cause those present to consider their own beliefs. On another occasion, Jesus asked, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt 16:13). Then, He plunged deeper, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). Jesus further pressed the issue, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (v. 26). Here is a model in exemplary preaching for every expositor today.

In the same way, our preaching should ask heart-searching questions of those who hear us. This is a key component in making effective application. For example, those questions should be similar to: Where do you stand with the Lord? Have you been converted by His grace? What holds you back from committing your life to Jesus Christ? Is it peer pressure? Is it the sin you would have to abandon? What keeps you from Christ? Why do you hesitate coming to Him? Do you doubt He will receive you?

Do you raise such questions in your expositions that cause people to examine themselves? Does your preaching regularly call listeners to evaluate where their spiritual lives are? Do you intentionally shift from indicative statements to interrogative questions? Does your pulpit ministry cause individuals to test themselves concerning the state of their souls?

INVITATION: WE MUST WIN SINNERS

Making an evangelistic appeal is a non-negotiable part of applying the sermon to the listener. Jesus says, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). According to this, those whom Jesus calls to preach His Word must be summoning lost people in order to capture their souls for Christ. An expositor must not only be casting the net in presenting the gospel, but be drawing the net in by making persuasive appeals to believe. This kind of evangelistic preaching is mandatory for all who exposit the Word. A non-evangelistic expositor is a contradiction in terms.

When Jesus preached, He was continually calling people to respond to the truth He proclaimed. After His profound teaching, He commanded His listeners to respond: “Enter by the narrow gate” (Matt 7:13). To fail to respond was to live in disobedience to His words. On another occasion, He called, “Come to Me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me” (Matt 11:28). These imperative commands brought His listeners to the point of critical decision. Again, He cried out, “If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37). Through these many appeals, it is clear that Jesus demanded an immediate response of obedience to His gospel invitations.

Consider the preaching of the apostles in the first century. Their powerful proclamations of the gospel were the primary means for the ingathering of unconverted sinners. Peter’s first sermon on the day of Pentecost was a model of evangelistic preaching that ushered three thousand souls into

BIBLE PREACHERS MUST BE THOSE WHO SEEK TO WIN PEOPLE TO CHRIST.

the kingdom (Acts 2:14-41). As Peter and the other apostles proclaimed the gospel truth, their expositions were the chief method by which souls were being converted to Christ. This evangelistic preaching continued throughout the whole book of Acts as countless souls were won to faith in Jesus Christ.

As we “preach the word,” Paul explicitly says we must be diligent to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). In this immediate context, evangelistic preaching begins with those within our own churches. Expositors are charged to be soul winners. Bible preachers must be those who seek to win people to Christ.

This same evangelistic fervor likewise must mark our expositions of Scripture. It is not enough that we preach the truth. We must press further and call our listeners to act upon it. They must not be merely hearers of the Word, but doers of it. This necessitates that we summon people to respond with obedient faith to the message proclaimed. While the gospel is not in every verse, we can—and we *must*—get to the gospel from every passage. The message of God’s salvation is the power of God unto redemption. Every preacher must invite the lost to Christ and “compel them to come in” (Luke 14:23).

Do you call sinners to believe the gospel? Do you invite them to exercise their will to believe in Christ? Do you ask them to commit their life to Him? Do you compel them to come by faith to Him?

CALL FOR THE VERDICT

In conclusion, I urge each of us to think about the application of our sermons in the aforementioned ways. To use another analogy, the preacher is like an attorney in the courthouse. In the trial, he argues his case as convincingly as he can. He calls to the witness stand those who will bolster his case. In so doing, he is to examine them in order to secure their testimony for the jury to hear. He is to build a convincing argument in order to win over the jury.

The lawyer is to present his supportive evidence—Exhibits A, B, and so forth. He is to cross-examine those witnesses whom the other attorney calls to the witness stand. He is to

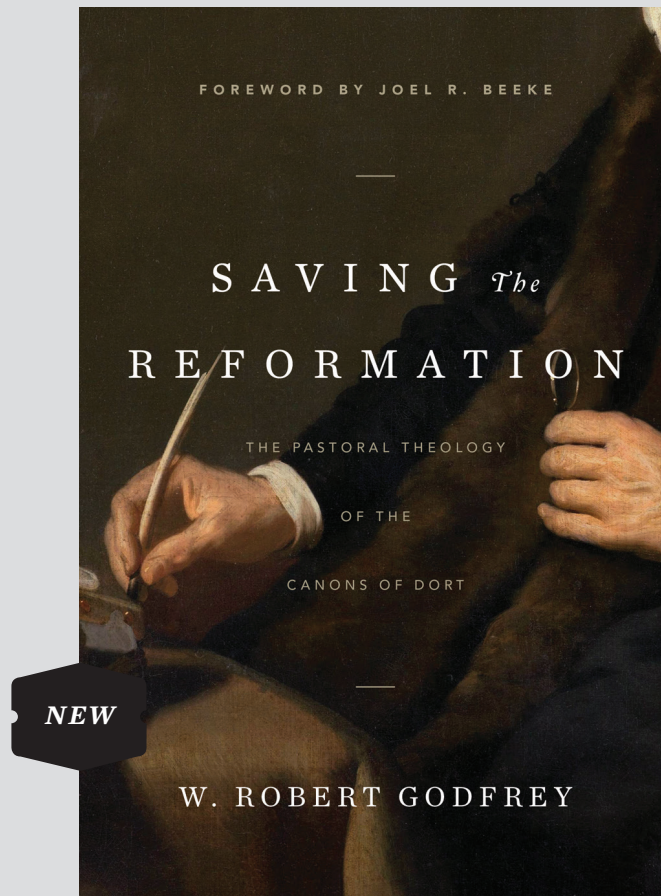
expose the weakness of their testimony. He is both presenting the truth and refuting error. Through all this, he is submitting an air-tight case to win a favorable decision.

But then comes the dramatic moment when the attorney approaches the jury and makes his final summation. Based upon the witnesses he has questioned, the evidences he has submitted, and the errors he has exposed, he appeals to the jury to render the favorable verdict. He now calls for the verdict. It is not enough that he presents a concrete case based upon verified facts. He must go to the next step—securing a favorable verdict in the minds and hearts of the jury.

This is precisely what the preacher must do as he stands before the congregation. He must present the testimony of the biblical authors from the pages of sacred Scripture. He must expose the fallacies of other witnesses who testify from the bankrupt philosophies of this world system. He summarizes what has been presented and then calls for the final verdict from the jury. He presses his appeal as persuasively as he can. He seeks to convince them of the decision he knows they must make. He must decisively win them to Christ.

We must understand that it is not enough that the preacher is right in what he says. Advancing further, he must be convincing and secure a favorable decision for Christ from his congregation. It has been said that the sermon starts when the application begins. To be persuasive to win over his listeners is to preach like Jesus and the apostles. This is the clear mark toward which each one of us should strive.

In the ultimate sense, only the Holy Spirit can convict and win people to Christ. We, of course, understand that doctrinal truth. But as Spirit works through means, that primary means is through the preaching of the all-powerful Word of God. We must be instruments in the hand of the Spirit, through whom He works to win the elect to saving faith. God will honor the man who honors His Word. May God enable you to make your application clear and your exhortation compelling. He will use the faithful preaching of His Word to resonate with listeners and bridge the two worlds, so they might respond in obedience to the truth. ♦



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What Does This Verse Mean “to Me”?

J O H N M A C A R T H U R

That’s a fashionable concern, judging from the trends in devotional booklets, home Bible study discussions, Sunday-school literature, and most popular preaching.

The question of what Scripture means has taken a back seat to the issue of what it means “to me.”

The difference may seem insignificant at first. Nevertheless, our obsession with the Scripture’s applicability reflects a fundamental weakness. We have adopted practicality as the ultimate judge of the worth of God’s Word. We bury ourselves in passages that overtly relate to daily living, and ignore those that don’t.

Early in my ministry, I made a conscious commitment to biblical preaching. My first priority has always been to answer the question, “What does this passage mean?” After I’ve explained as clearly and accurately as possible the meaning of God’s Word, then I exhort people to obey and apply it to their own lives.

The Bible speaks for itself to the human heart; it is not my role as a preacher to try to tailor the message. That’s why I preach my way through entire books of the Bible, dealing carefully with each verse and phrase—even though that occasionally means spending time in passages that don’t readily lend themselves to anecdotal or motivational messages.

Now and then someone tells me frankly that my preaching needs to be less doctrinal and more practical.

Practical application is vital. I don’t want to minimize its importance. But the distinction between doctrinal and practical truth is artificial; doctrine is practical! In fact, nothing is more practical than sound doctrine.

Too many Christians view doctrine as heady and theoretical. They have dismissed doctrinal passages as unimportant, divisive, threatening, or simply impractical. A best-selling Christian book I just read warns readers to be on guard against preachers whose emphasis is on interpreting Scripture rather than applying it.

Wait a minute. Is that wise counsel? No, it is not.

There is no danger of irrelevant doctrine; the real threat is an undocctrinal attempt at relevance. Application not based on solid interpretation has led Christians into all kinds of confusion.

No discipline is more sorely needed in the contemporary church than expositional biblical teaching. Too many have bought the lie that doctrine is something abstract and threatening, unrelated to daily life.

It is in vogue to substitute psychology and spoon-fed application for doctrinal substance, while demeaning theological and expositional ministry.

But the pastor who turns away from preaching sound doctrine abdicates the primary responsibility of an elder: “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the

THE NUCLEUS OF ALL THAT IS TRULY PRACTICAL IS SOWN UP IN THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE. WE DON'T MAKE THE BIBLE RELEVANT; IT IS INHERENTLY SO, SIMPLY BECAUSE IT IS GOD'S WORD. AND AFTER ALL, HOW CAN ANYTHING GOD SAYS BE IRRELEVANT?

teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9).

Practical insights, gimmicks, and illustrations mean little if they're not attached to divine principles. There's no basis for godly behavior apart from the truth of God's Word.

There are only three options: We teach truth, error, or nothing at all.

Before the preacher asks anyone to perform a certain duty, he must first deal with doctrine. He must develop his message around theological themes and draw out the principles of the texts. Then the truth can be applied.

Romans provides the clearest biblical example. Paul didn't give any exhortation until he had given eleven chapters of theology.

He scaled incredible heights of truth, culminating in Romans 11:33–36: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

Then, in chapter 12, he turned immediately to the practical consequences of the doctrine of the first eleven chapters. No passage in Scripture captures the Christian's responsibility to the truth more clearly than Romans 12:1–2. There, building on eleven chapters of profound doctrine, Paul calls each believer to a supreme act of spiritual worship—giving oneself as a living sacrifice. Doctrine gives rise to dedication to Christ,

the greatest practical act. And the remainder of the book of Romans goes on to explain the many practical outworkings of one's dedication to Christ.

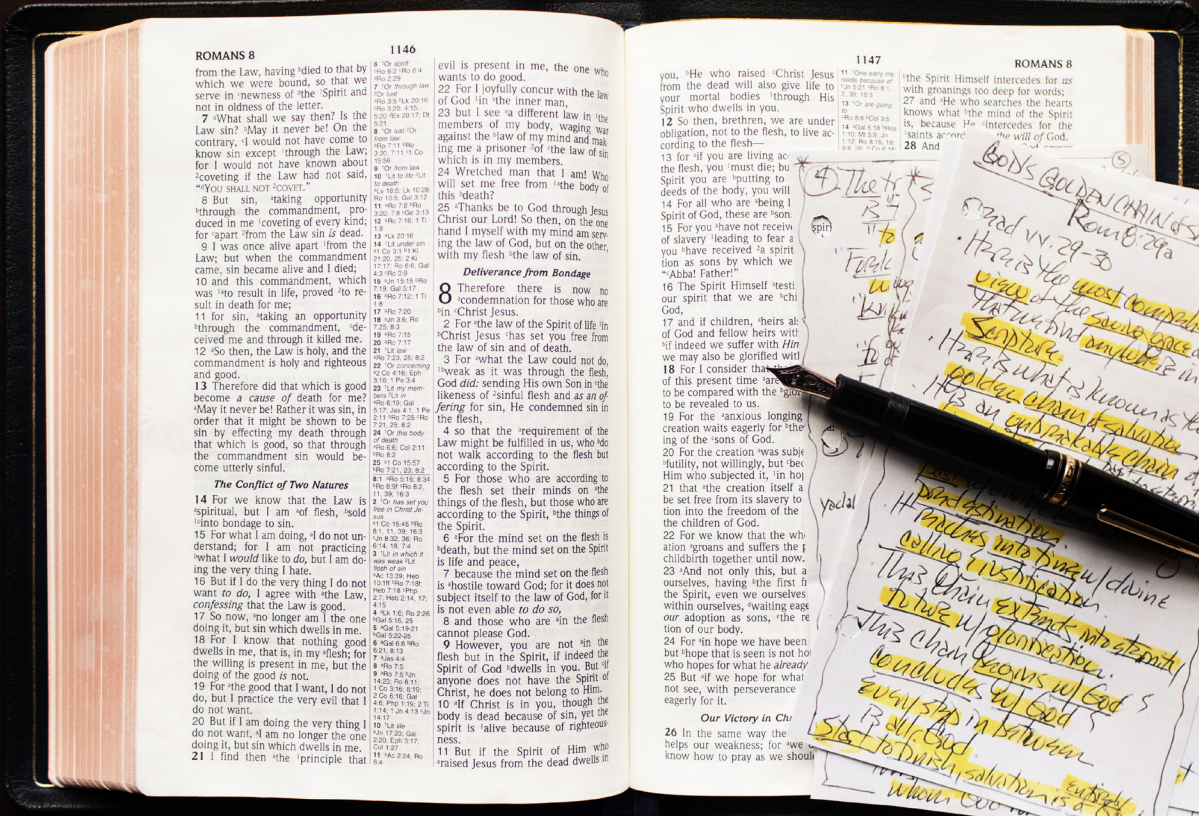
Paul followed the same pattern in Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. The doctrinal message came first. Upon that foundation he built the practical application, making the logical connection with the word "therefore" (Rom 12:1; Gal 5:1; Eph 4:1; Phil 2:1) or "then" (Col 3:1; 1 Thess 4:1).

True doctrine transforms behavior as it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. But it must be understood if it is to have its impact. The real challenge of the ministry is to dispense the truth clearly and accurately. Practical application comes easily by comparison.

No believer can apply truth he doesn't know. Those who don't understand what the Bible really says about marriage, divorce, family, child-rearing, discipline, money, debt, work, service to Christ, eternal rewards, helping the poor, caring for widows, respecting government, and other teachings won't be able to apply it.

Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about salvation cannot be saved. Those who don't know what the Bible teaches about holiness are incapable of dealing with sin. Thus, they are unable to live fully to their own blessedness and God's glory.

The nucleus of all that is truly practical is sown up in the teaching of Scripture. We don't make the Bible relevant; it is inherently so, simply because it is God's Word. And after all, how can anything God says be irrelevant? ♦



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Practical Application in Preaching

J O E L R . B E E K E

Today, much of what is preached on Sunday mornings falls short of biblical preaching. We hear academic lectures, colorful storytelling, or moralistic lessons, but not true, biblical preaching. J. I. Packer once said that preaching consists of two elements: teaching *plus* application. Where those two elements are missing, “Something less than preaching occurs.”

In *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, T. David Gordon estimates that in Reformed and Presbyterian churches “less than 30 percent of those who are ordained to the Christian ministry can preach an even mediocre sermon.” The failure to preach well is particularly evident in preachers’ application of Scripture to people’s lives. And, as Geoffrey Thomas says, “Preaching that lacks application is the bane of the modern Reformed pulpit.”

Many preachers who are called to Christ’s work in His church are misguided about applicatory preaching. Because of this, we need to seriously reflect on applicatory preaching. When we fail to apply what we preach in a biblical way, our people are left starving for the truth. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “We live in an age when the primary need is for our people to be instructed in the teaching and application of Scripture.”

In this article, we will explore what applicatory preaching is, why the church needs applicatory preaching, prerequisites to applicatory preaching, general principles for applicatory preaching, basic subject matter for application, and forms

and methods to use in applicatory preaching.

WHAT APPLICATORY PREACHING IS

To explain what applicatory preaching is, we must first recognize the difficulty of answering this question. An effective sermon is like a multi-faceted jewel. All of a sermon’s parts work together to give it richness, beauty, and completeness. A sermon cannot be complete without expository preaching, doctrinal preaching, Christ-centered preaching, experiential preaching, and practical preaching.

But we must limit ourselves in this article to examining just one diamond-like facet of a sermon—its applicatory element. William Perkins (1558–1602), the great Puritan of Cambridge, defines sermon application as “the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation.” More simply, application is the process by which God’s Word is brought into the lives of listeners, enabling them, by the Spirit’s grace, to put Christianity into practice.

Jay Adams’s definition of sermon application is even more specific: “Application is the . . . process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent to members of their congregations that they not only understand how these truths should effect changes in their lives but feel obligated and perhaps even eager

APPLICATION IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE UNCHANGING PRINCIPLES OF GOD'S WORD ARE BROUGHT INTO LIFE-CHANGING CONTACT WITH PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD.

to implement those changes.” Like the Puritans, Al Martin puts more focus on the conscience, saying, “Application is the arduous task of suffusing the sermon with pointed, specific, and discriminating force to the conscience.”

Application is the process by which the unchanging principles of God's Word are brought into life-changing contact with people who live in an ever-changing world. Building on these definitions, we would say that applicatory preaching takes place when the unchanging truths, principles, and doctrines of God's Word are brought to bear upon people's consciences and every part of their lives to increasingly transform them into Christ's likeness.

In one sense, these definitions seem obvious. However, some preachers think that once they have explained the meaning of a Scripture text, their work is done. They make little attempt to determine what the text means to people today. Exegesis thus becomes merely a scholarly exercise detached from real life.

Other preachers want to connect Scripture with practical living but believe that application is the Holy Spirit's job, not theirs. They say, “We explain the text, the Spirit applies it.” This tends to leave listeners at the mercy of their own subjective inclinations. Douglas Stuart talks about the unfairness of this approach, saying, “The exegete leaves the key function—response—completely to the subjective sensibilities of the reader or hearer, who knows the passage least.”

What is more likely is that listeners will do nothing at all. John Calvin writes: “If we leave it to men's choice to follow what is taught them, they will never move one foot. Therefore, the doctrine of itself can profit nothing at all.”

WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS APPLICATION

Is application an indispensable element of biblical preaching?

Should we agree with John Bettler, who says, “The essence of preaching is application”? Many advocates of redemptive-historical preaching argue against personal application. Bill Dennison, for example, says that

Good preaching does not apply the text to you, but applies you to the text. The preacher is not drawing the text into your world; he is drawing you into the world of the text. The preacher ought not add to his preaching text subjective applications to a supposed objective historical text. Rather, the preacher as a herald of God's living Word should proclaim the Word...and allow the Spirit to use it as He wills.

Preaching without application often focuses on history to the exclusion of ethics. It emphasizes the indicative at the expense of the imperative. Geerhardus Vos's sermons, *Grace and Glory*, are an example of this. There you will find beautiful and instructive sermons with little application. They leave application to the reader or listener.

Scripture justifies and warrants application. Here are just a few of the many examples of application that we find in the Bible:

- In Matthew 19:16-22, Christ applies the law to a rich young ruler.
- Peter, in Acts 2:22-27, applies the prophecies of the Old Testament to his generation (vv. 25-28; 34-35). His intent is to change his hearers. Notice how often he uses the second person (vv. 22, 23, 29, 33, 36) to call people to action (vv. 38, 39). By the Spirit's grace, such preaching prompts this question in listeners: “What shall we do?” (v. 37).

- In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says the history of Israel was written as an example and admonition to later generations (10:11).

Our Reformed and Puritan forefathers were united in emphasizing the need for applicatory preaching. William Gouge (1575-1653) writes, “Ministers are herein to imitate God, and, to their best endeavor, to instruct people in the mysteries of godliness, and to teach them what to believe and practice, and then to stir them up in act and deed, to do what they are instructed to do.” Puritan preachers stressed the need to inform the mind, to prick the conscience, then to bend the will, believing that a sermon must connect with the people, and by the Spirit’s grace transform them and their wills. That is the heart of applicatory preaching.

In his classic *The Christian Ministry*, Charles Bridges (1794-1869) powerfully promotes applicatory preaching. He says, “For this end we must show [our hearers], from first to last, that we are not merely saying good things in their presence; but directing what we say to them personally, as a matter which concerns them beyond expression.” Likewise, the great preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) stresses the necessity of application in saying, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.”

Well-known twentieth-century preachers also agree with the need for application in preaching. John Stott writes:

This was an essential element in the classical understanding of public speaking. Cicero had said in *The Orator* that “an eloquent man must so speak as to teach (*docere*), to please (*delectare*) and to persuade (*flectere* or *move*).” Augustine quoted Cicero’s dictum and applied it to the responsibility of Christian preachers to teach the mind, delight or inspire the affections and move the will. “For,” he went on, “to teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness, to persuade is a victory.” Our expectation, then, as the sermon comes to an end, is not merely that people will understand or remember or enjoy our teaching, but that they will do something about it. “If there is no summons, there is no sermon.”

In ongoing conversations today about the issue of application, many say that the very character of Scripture teaches the need for application, since the indicatives of Scripture are never divorced from its imperatives. The Apostle Paul says, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom 15:4, KJV). The Holy Spirit and the human authors of the Bible agree that God’s Word is never to remain an abstraction.

This indicative-imperative pattern abounds throughout the epistles and sermons of the apostles. They continually connect the truth of God with real-life situations and real people because the gospel message is connected with the people who hear it. This truth sets a pattern for our preaching, which is to take those truths forged in God’s divine counsel and proclaim them to men. The message is God’s message, not man’s message (Gal 1:11), and since God has not left His truth in abstraction, neither can we when we preach those truths.

PREREQUISITES TO APPLICATORY PREACHING

There are many prerequisites for applicatory preaching, but let us examine three important ones.

First, to be sound applicatory preachers, we must first have personal, experiential knowledge of the doctrines we preach. In Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s memoir, Andrew Bonar says of M’Cheyne: “From the first he fed others by what he himself was feeding upon. His preaching was in a manner the development of his soul’s experience. It was a giving out of the inward life. He loved to come up from the pastures wherein the chief Shepherd had met him—to lead the flock entrusted to his care to the spots where he found nourishment.”

True applicatory preaching cannot be learned in seminar-ies or through textbooks unless preachers have studied in Christ’s school and fed on the manna of the Word. If we endeavor to preach on the intercession of Christ, we will fail to apply it adequately if we are not personally acquainted with its reality and riches. As under-shepherds of Christ, we feed the flock with the nourishment our Shepherd gives us. If we would have our congregants know how to live, we ourselves must walk in the footsteps of our Master. Charles Spurgeon notes, “The truth as it is in Jesus must be instructively declared, so that the people may not merely hear, but know, the joyful sound.”

Second, to be sound in application as preachers, we must cultivate personal closeness with God. Fellowship with God makes Christianity real and personal; a man cannot, consequently, be a great preacher if he lives distant from the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, the Apostle Paul explains the contrast between true and false preachers. A true minister of the gospel is sincere, Paul says; he cannot fake nearness to the Lord. Like children who listen to every word and observe every move of their parents, true children of God are always listening to their preacher, looking at him, and examining the way he lives. If he is not living close to God, his preaching and counsel will eventually expose any falseness and hypocrisy. Richard Baxter says, “Pride makes many a man’s sermons; and what pride makes, the devil makes.” Likewise, what hypocrisy makes, the devil makes.

How is this closeness to be cultivated? God reveals Himself

to us in His Word, in prayer, and in other spiritual disciplines. A minister's solemn duty and joyful privilege, then, is to labor tirelessly in private prayer and to be a diligent student of the Bible. In regard to prayer, Spurgeon says, "Prayer will singularly assist you in the delivery of your sermon; in fact, nothing can so gloriously fit you to preach as descending fresh from the mount of communion with God." Prayer must be the life-blood behind the sermon, for you need divine assistance, first, as you prepare for the sermon and, second, as you deliver the sermon. As for studying Scripture, Geoffrey Thomas observes, "We will not be affected by the Scriptures, we will not tap the power that is in them, unless we read, read, read, and read them yet some more." We should also consult teachers of the Bible who will help give us clarity and insight into the mysteries of the gospel. In this our Reformed forefathers and the Puritans can be of immense value—whether it be Owen's majestic eloquence, Sibbes's Christ-centeredness, or Flavel's simple style.

A third prerequisite for applicatory preaching is to understand human nature. If you want to connect your message with people, you must know people's natures and personalities, especially those in your own flock. The heart is the throne of natural corruptions, fears, weaknesses, and sin. A preacher must strike a balance between how things are and how they ought to be. A medical doctor must know how the body ought to operate before he can diagnose an ailment. You trust his prescriptions, or even his scalpel, because he has proven himself to be an expert of the human body. Likewise, the pastor must discern from the Scriptures how things are and ought to be as well as how biblical remedies should be applied. You must be a master of the human soul so that your people can trust what you prescribe.

PRINCIPLES FOR APPLICATORY PREACHING

There are many principles of application. Here are ten of them:

Applications are derived from rightly preaching a text.

It may seem obvious to say that applications in a sermon should be based upon the Bible, particularly the text being preached. However, we need this emphasis, because today, many churches increasingly set aside the Bible to make space for moving stories and personal anecdotes from which the pastor draws morals or inspiration. The faithful preacher must instead base his application on God's Word, particularly on the passage from which he is preaching. Douglas Stuart says:

An application should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process. It cannot be merely tacked on to

the rest of the exegesis as a sort of spiritual afterthought. Moreover, it must carefully reflect the data of the passage if it is to be convincing. Your reader needs to see how you derived the application as the natural and final stage of the entire process of careful, analytical study of your passage.

To rightly apply a text, we must first understand the text rightly, both in its immediate context and in the broader context of all Scripture. Sound hermeneutics paves the way for sound application. Charles Bridges warns: "The solid establishment of the people may be materially hindered by the Minister's contracted statement, crude interpretations, or misdirected Scriptural application." We must be careful not to base a doctrine or practice on an isolated or obscure text without first ensuring that the doctrine is consistent with Scripture as a whole.

We may sometimes be tempted to preach right application from the wrong text. Thankfully, the Word itself directs us in application. The divine author has intended, through Scripture, to accomplish specific purposes in every generation. In determining this, we learn another crucial lesson in interpreting Scripture. "It is absolutely critical to determine the purpose of a text if I am not going to pervert it and compromise the integrity of Scripture," writes Bettler. "The application must be that of the text."

Application that does not emerge from "the purpose for which God himself gave his Word [will] lack credibility and power to motivate hearers," adds Dennis Johnson. If we rightly understand our text, the heart of its application has already been given to us. So, we must labor to discern the mind of the Spirit in our interpretation. In short, getting the text right paves the road to applying it correctly.

Determine the primary application. Furthermore, we must not draw applications from the accidental, incidental, or coincidental parts of a passage, but from its essentials. This is especially important when preaching from historical narratives or parables. Often, parables make one main point, so we must not found a doctrine or practice on one of its incidental points. Or, as an old Baptist minister used to tell young preachers, "Don't turn a monopod into a centipede."

One of the best ways of finding the primary application of a particular passage is to ask, "What was the application to the original audience at the original time of writing?" Jay Adams says, "The truth God revealed in Scripture came in an applied form and should be reapplied to the same sort of people for the same purposes for which it was originally given. That is to say, truth should be applied today just as God originally applied it."

Make applications throughout your sermon. Although

A SERMON SHOULD ADDRESS A CONGREGATION IN VARIOUS SITUATIONS SO THAT INDIVIDUAL LISTENERS KNOW THAT IN EVERY WORD, GOD IS SPEAKING TO THEM.

at times it may be appropriate to put most applications at the conclusion of a sermon, it is usually best to offer them throughout. Bridges highlights the persistent application of history and doctrine throughout the book of Hebrews and concludes: “The method of perpetual application, therefore, where the subject will admit of it, is probably best calculated for the effect of applying each head distinctly.” Of course, we should avoid the clinical method of inserting precisely one application after each exegetical or doctrinal point of a sermon, as that makes the sermon appear contrived.

We must also remember that application is not an epilogue to the sermon. John Broadus says, “The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done.” Right application is what Bridges calls “perpetual application.” Listeners must realize that all of a sermon is useful; all its doctrines, historical circumstances, and prophecies are for our advantage, not just the last part of a sermon. Bridges likens a good sermon to a portrait, saying, “A good portrait... looks directly at all, though placed in different situations, as if it were ready to speak to each—‘I have a message from God unto thee.’” So, a sermon should address a congregation in various situations so that individual listeners know that in every word, God is speaking to them.

Adams speaks of applicatory introductions as well as conclusions, saying, “It [application] should begin with the first sentence and continue throughout.” We must not think that listeners have the natural capacity to make all the applications of a sermon, nor that we should leave this task for the Holy Spirit. To be sure, the Holy Spirit will make applications during or after a sermon that we may not have considered, for which we praise God, but His normal way is to use preacher-spoken applications.

Bettler says that all preaching is application. That goes a bit too far, but he is right that a preacher must keep application in mind from choosing a text to post-sermon discussions. He should think of applications throughout the preparation, preaching, and post-delivery discussion of a sermon.

Prepare and pray for applications. While many preachers spend hours on the exegesis of a text, they often spend little time on application. Sometimes this is for theological reasons. The preacher cites texts such as Matthew 10:19, which says the Spirit will provide the words in accord with His promise. However, such promises of the Spirit’s help in speaking without preparation were given to disciples facing arrests, court trials, or other dangers, not to ordinary preachers in their pulpits. Remember what Stuart says: “An application should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process.” Failing to prepare applications in a sermon usually results in repetitive and ineffectual applications, as the preacher, who is mentally tired after the exertions of explaining his text, resorts to the well-worn lines of application that he has used in the past.

One of the best ways to prepare applications is to pray over a sermon, asking God to show you how to apply it. God’s Spirit knows the hearts of listeners better than you do, and He can reveal people’s needs to you by His Spirit.

All of this does not mean that you need to stick rigidly to prepared applications while preaching. A prayerful spirit while preaching can also result in God guiding you to speak to specific needs in your hearers that you did not contemplate during your sermon preparation. What an early theological instructor said about preaching as a whole is particularly true of making good applications: “We need the Holy Spirit twice in every sermon—first, in the study, and then, on the pulpit.”

Finally, because the fear of man can ensnare and disable applications, we must pray for constant deliverance from such sinful fear, particularly in applying a text. John Brown says that proper fear, which is esteeming the smiles and frowns of God to be of greater weight than the smiles and frowns of men, should prevail.

Make up-to-date applications. There is no point in simply taking the applications made by early Puritans and Reformers and repeating them verbatim to people today. Their applications were up-to-date when written, but some of them are now well past due. Others may be used but need to be translated into contemporary language and freshened up. One of the greatest helps in finding applications is to keep informed about the people we preach to and the world in which they live. We must know our people's troubles, struggles, problems, and needs to preach to them.

Another way to improve applications is to go through your congregation, describing each person in a word or two that characterize his or her spiritual condition. You will then have a ready-made checklist of various kinds of listeners in your congregation on which to focus your applications. To get you started, some broad categories of listeners include: Christian/non-Christian, Old/Young, Rich/Poor, Parents/Children, Married/Singles, Employer/Employee, Male/Female, Atheist/Agnostic/Persecutor. More specific categories of people in the broader categories include: sick, dying, afflicted, tempted, backslidden, hypocritical, immoral, discouraged, worried, tired, salvation-seeking, doubting, proud, bereaved, broken-hearted, and convicted.

Make applications personal. Daniel Webster once said, "When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter, a personal matter!" His point is that application starts with a preacher's application of God's Word to himself. Al Martin says: "Here is the main reason why there is so little applicatory preaching. Men are not applying the Word to their own hearts. A minister's life is the life of the minister."

What we want to focus on here is the importance of second-person application. That is not to say that other applications are wrong or out of place. Application may sometimes work well with first-person singular or plural pronouns. When the preacher wishes to personally identify with the application, he uses terms such as "We must," "He died for us," or "Our privilege is . . ." (e.g. Heb 4:1, 11, 14, 16). Application may also include the third-person approach. For example, a sermon preached to a congregation including singles on the duties of husbands or wives may include terms such as "Husbands will," "When wives are," or "She usually knows." An application about the errors of false religions and the cults may also include the third-person approach, "They wrongly believe and teach" (e.g. Titus 1:10-16; John 3:5).

While first-person and third-person applications are both scriptural and, at times, appropriate, the majority of applications are better off using second-person pronouns, such as "You must," "You should understand," or "Your experience will be" (e.g. John 3:7; Rom 12:1). This does not exclude the preacher from his own application. However, it does reflect that the preacher holds an office and so is not preaching in his own right but as an ambassador of God sent to deliver a message to the people of God. He therefore speaks in Christ's stead, or as Christ would speak, were He present. This practice avoids this difficulty described by Al Martin: "Many sermons are like unaddressed, unsigned letters which if one hundred read them would not think the contents concerned them."

Sermon listeners must know they are personally and individually being addressed. As Charles Bridges says: "Preaching, in order to be effective, must be reduced from vague generalities, to a tangible, individual character—coming home to every man's business, and even his bosom." The editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper kept a notice on his desk saying, "Always remember that a dog fight in Brooklyn is more important than a revolution in China." The point is that what happens at home is more important than what happens far away. Go through your congregation one by one, and ask how to apply your message to each person.



SERMON LISTENERS MUST KNOW THEY ARE PERSONALLY AND INDIVIDUALLY BEING ADDRESSED.

Make application pointed. It is not enough just to draw a general principle out of a passage, such as, “You should be holy.” This general principle must be broken down so it applies to specific, concrete, everyday situations. Only by answering the questions of who, when, what, where, how, and why of holiness does an application become pointed. David Veerman puts it this way: “Application is answering two questions: ‘So what?’ and ‘Now what?’ The first question asks, ‘Why is this passage important to me?’ The second asks, ‘What should I do about it today?’”

We should not expect listeners to make precise applications for themselves. As Bridges says, “We must not expect our hearers to apply to themselves such unpalatable truths. So unnatural is this habit of personal application, that most will fit the doctrine to anyone but themselves.” Massillon, a famous French preacher, used to say, “I don’t want people leaving my church saying, ‘What a wonderful sermon, what a wonderful preacher.’ I want them to go out saying, ‘I will do something.’”

One way of sharpening the point of our sermons is to make each application specific. For instance, John the Baptist preached the necessity of fruit-bearing repentance, but then specified exactly what fruit each group should bring forth (Luke 3:10–14).

Another way of making our sermons pointed is by directing most of our applications within an overall application, rather than offering a disparate, disconnected series of exhortations. This should culminate at the very end of a sermon. Bryan Chapell says, “The last sixty seconds are typically the most dynamic moments in excellent sermons. With these final words, a preacher marshals the thought and emotion of an entire message into an exhortation that makes all that has preceded it clear and compelling. A conclusion is a sermon’s destination. Ending contents are alive—packed with tension, drama, energy, and emotion.”

Our sermons must also point to the main issue. We must insert the knife of God’s Word into the parts of people’s lives that are especially putrid. We must lance the boils. John Stott tells about Alexander Whyte, who experienced a crisis towards the end of his ministry in Edinburgh. He knew that some people regarded him as little short of a monomaniac about sin, and he was tempted to muffle that note in his preaching. But one day, while walking in the Highlands, he heard what he deemed a divine voice speaking with all-commanding power in his conscience. Whyte says,

He said to me as clear as clear could be: “Go on, and flinch not! Go back and boldly finish the work that has been given you to do. Speak out and fear not. Make them at any cost to see themselves in God’s holy law as in a

glass. Do you that, for no one else will do it. No one else will so risk his life and his reputation as to do it. And you have not much of either left to risk. Go home and spend what is left of your life in your appointed task of showing my people their sin and their need of my salvation.”

When God’s Word is pointedly applied to people’s hearts, it will bring friction that causes pain and heat. When we apply the sword of truth, we can expect action and reaction!

Strive for balance in application. We must vary our applications. Some preachers condemn while preaching a text such as “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” Others comfort when preaching “Flee the wrath that is to come.” Such preachers are unbalanced in their applications. We achieve balance, first, by preaching from Scripture passages that allow us varied applications, and second, by applying the Word in a varied way. John Stott illustrates this point by saying:

Anthony Trollope in Barchester Towers very evidently despised his character, the Rev. Obadiah Slope, for this very thing. Although “gifted with a certain kind of pulpit eloquence,” yet, Trollope wrote, “in his sermons he deals greatly in denunciations.” Indeed, “his looks and tones are extremely severe...As he walks through the streets, his very face denotes his horror of the world’s wickedness; and there is always an anathema lurking in the corner of his eye...To him the mercies of our Savior speak in vain...In a neat phrase of Colin Morris, he used the pulpit “to purvey Good Chidings rather than Good Tidings.”

Following our Master and the Apostle Paul, we must call sinners to behold both the goodness and truth of God in our applications.

Most preachers have a bias that they should be aware of, lest they become unbalanced. Some are great comforters and some are great disturbers. Stott concludes: “Every preacher needs to be both a Boanerges (having the courage to disturb) and a Barnabas (having the charity to console).”

Be passionate in application. No part of a sermon requires more of a preacher’s emotional involvement than application. The arguments have been made; now is the time for persuasion. Robert L. Dabney writes: “To produce volition, it is not enough that the understanding be convinced; affection must also be aroused.”

The preacher’s emotions should reflect the nature of the application. If his application issues a warning, the preacher should be solemn; if it calls for worship, the preacher must show devotion; if it offers a promise, the preacher should show confidence; if it offers comfort, he should show tenderness; if

LET THE WORD OF GOD FREE YOU TO APPLY SCRIPTURE WITH LIFE-CHANGING POWER TO YOUR LISTENERS.

it commands something, the preacher should show authority. Dabney explains:

The preacher's soul should here show itself fired with the force of the truth which has been developed, and glowing both with light and heat. The quality of unction should suffuse the end of your discourse, and bathe the truth in evangelical emotion. But this emotion must be genuine and not assumed; it must be spiritual, the zeal of heavenly love, and not the carnal heat of the mental gymnastic...It must disclose itself spontaneously and unannounced, as the gushing of a fountain which will not be suppressed. What can give this glow except the indwelling of the Holy Ghost? You are thus led again to that great, ever-recurring deduction, the first qualification of the sacred orator, the grace of Christ.

This emotional connection with the Word is related to what our forefathers referred to as Spirit-given unction. It is better caught than taught, better experienced than explained.

Be Christ-centered in application. Holy passion must be peculiarly manifest when preachers speak about the beauty and glory of Christ Jesus, our Immanuel. Samuel Rutherford speaks of the need to preach a "felt Christ." Today, one of our greatest needs in preaching is for more Christ-centered applications. Christ-centered applications help God's people fall more in love with their perfect Bridegroom. They simultaneously deliver preachers from moralizing and legalism.

For example, if a sermon is based on biblical history, Christ-centered application will show how history pre-figures and points to Christ, or eventually leads to Him. If a sermon is based on a Psalm, Christ-centered application will show how the psalms help us worship Christ. If the sermon is based on Proverbs, Christ-centered application may show how Christ is ultimately the Wisdom of God. If the sermon is based on the prophets, Christ-centered application will show how prophecy predicts Christ. If preaching is from the law, Christ-centered application will show how the

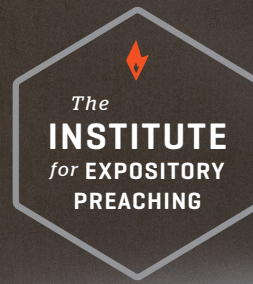
law points to our need of Christ. If preaching practical duties, Christ-centered application will show how to practice obedience by loving Christ. If preaching Christ's words, Christ-centered application will show how what we say can magnify Christ. If preaching on suffering, Christ-centered application will show how suffering brings us into fellowship with Christ's sufferings. If preaching duty, Christ-centered application may show how Christ forgives our failings in the line of duty. If preaching about love, Christ-centered application may stress the example of Christ. If preaching about sin, Christ-centered application may reveal Christ as the only Savior from sin. Let all applications bring us to the feet of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Let us conclude by returning to Perkins's definition of application as "the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation." Applicatory preaching faithfully connects a sermon with the people who listen to it. It tells them, "God has a Word for you." We must continually show people that the living and active Word speaks to every struggle, circumstance, and situation (Heb 4:12).

Many books on preaching make the process of application so difficult that numerous preachers give up on trying to apply the Word. However, if God gives us scriptural warrant for our methods of application, it really does not matter what academics and professors say in opposition. Let the Word of God free you to apply Scripture with life-changing power to your listeners.

Every Sunday as people file out of church, they go back to a world of danger, temptation, and sin. Lectures that merely inform the mind of God's truths are not sufficient to help people stand in the day of trial. Let us be faithful to our calling in applying God's Word to every person's conscience, feeding them even as our Chief Shepherd feeds us with the nourishment of His Word. ♦



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Moving Beyond One-Dimension Sermon Applications

M I C H A E L J . K R U G E R

Let's just get it out there. Preaching is hard.

In the midst of all the disputes over preaching, this fact remains undisputed. Yes, preaching is wonderful and exhilarating. But, it is also exhausting, frustrating, and difficult. Whether a person has preached one time, or a hundred times, he knows this.

Why is that? What makes preaching so hard?

I suggest that the difficulty has to do with the nature of preaching. Preaching is not just delivering a message, passing along facts, or making a point (though it does include these things). At its core, preaching is something that calls for a *response* in the listener.

Put differently, members of the congregation are not to be just detached observers of a sermon. God always calls His people to respond, in some fashion, to what His Word declares.

But it is precisely this feature that makes preaching so difficult. What are the most effective ways to call for a response? Or, in more common parlance, how do we *apply* God's Word?

When it comes to application, many preachers tend to fall into a bit of a rut. We tend to use the same *type* of application, over and over again.

In order to remedy this, let me suggest three different categories for how to apply God's Word. These three categories are not mutually exclusive (and often overlap), but they can

provide much-needed balance and breadth to our preaching.

APPLICATION TO ACTION

The first type of application is the most obvious. That is the application that calls the congregation to *do* something. This sort of application is calling for a change in *behavior*. As preachers, therefore, we are trying to *motivate*.

Now, these "do" applications have fallen on hard times of late. This is due in large part to the fact that these sort of applications are overused. Preaching becomes this one-dimensional exercise where the preacher tells you do something more (or different). And the congregation never feels like they live up to it.

It's my hope that the other categories below can help us break out of this one-dimensional type of application. That said, we need to remember that action applications are still legitimate. It is not unbiblical, nor is it contrary to the gospel, for a preacher to call members to change their behavior. Indeed, many of the biblical texts we preach are focused on our behavior as Christians!

APPLICATION TO THE MIND

The next category of application is calling for a change in the way we *think* or *reason*. As preachers, therefore, we are trying to *persuade*. I think this is the most overlooked

IN APPLICATIONS TO THE HEART, WE ARE CALLING FOR A CHANGE IN ONE'S AFFECTIONS. AS PREACHERS, THEREFORE, WE ARE TRYING TO STIR UP A PERSON'S HEART...IT'S A CHANCE TO PUT CHRIST AND HIS BEAUTY ON FULL DISPLAY AND TO SHOW PEOPLE HOW WONDERFUL HE REALLY IS. IT'S A CHANCE TO SHOW PEOPLE THAT CHRIST IS WORTHY OF THEIR AFFECTIONS.

form of application. We tend to focus on external behavior, and downplay the role that conviction and belief have on that behavior.

This category reminds us that preaching is a form of *apologetics*. As preachers, we are trying to convince and persuade our congregations that God's ways are the right ways. We want our congregation to hear God's Word and say to themselves, "Yes, that's true!" or "Wow, that really makes sense!" Don't underestimate the power of the mind. Actions often flow directly from what a person believes about the world and about reality.

In our current cultural climate, this second category of application is needed now more than ever. For too long, preachers could get away with just telling their congregations what to do. But now, people are bombarded daily with the opposite message. Mere exhortations to morality rarely work. People need to know more than *what* to do; they need to know *why* to do it. They need to know why it is right and true.

APPLICATION TO THE HEART

In applications to the heart, we are calling for a change in one's

affections. As preachers, therefore, we are trying to *stir up* a person's heart. This final category of application is also critical. It's a chance to put Christ and His beauty on full display and to show people how wonderful He really is. It's a chance to show people that Christ is worthy of their affections.

So, we are looking for responses such as "Yes, Christ is more beautiful than anything else," or, "Yes, my sin is ugly and I hate it." These are the responses of the heart.

In the end, our goal as preachers is not to choose just one of these categories, but to address all three (as appropriate). They all need each other and imply each other. People are multi-dimensional beings, with heart, mind, and body. Thus, we need to continue to look for varied types of applications that hit the whole person. We should also remember that application itself does not elicit the desired response. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. But, He does use preaching (and our applications) to accomplish His purposes. ♦

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Preach to the Ignorant, the Doubtful, and Sinners

M A R K D E V E R

I often hear the question, “How do you *apply* the text in an expositional sermon?”

Behind this question may be many questionable assumptions. The questioner may be remembering “expositional” sermons he has heard (or maybe preached) that were no different from some Bible lectures at seminary—well-structured and accurate but demonstrating little godly urgency or pastoral wisdom. These expositional sermons may have had little if any application. On the other hand, the questioner may simply not know how to recognize application when he hears it.

William Perkins, the great sixteenth-century Puritan theologian in Cambridge, instructed preachers to imagine the various kinds of hearers and to think through applications for each—hardened sinners, questioning doubters, weary saints, young enthusiasts, and so on.

Perkins’s advice is very helpful, but hopefully we already follow it. I want to approach the topic of application slightly differently: not only are there different kinds of hearers; there are also different kinds of application.


As we take a passage of God’s Word and explain it clearly, compellingly, even urgently, there are at least three different kinds of application that reflect three different kinds of problems encountered in the Christian pilgrimage. First, we struggle under the blight of ignorance. Second, we wrestle

with doubt, often more than we at first realize. Third, we still struggle with sin—whether through direct disobedient acts or through sinful negligence. As preachers, we long to see changes in all three areas, both in ourselves and in our hearers, every time we preach God’s Word. And all three problems give rise to a different kind of legitimate application.

IGNORANCE

Ignorance is a fundamental problem in a fallen world. We have alienated ourselves from God. We have cut ourselves off from direct fellowship with our Creator. It is not surprising, then, that *informing* people of the truth about God is itself a powerful type of application—and one that we desperately need.

This is not an excuse for cold or passionless sermons. I can be every bit as excited (and more) by indicative statements as I can be by imperative commands. The commands of the gospel to repent and believe mean nothing apart from the indicative statements concerning God, ourselves, and Christ. Information is vital. We are called to teach the truth and to proclaim a great message about God. We want people who hear our messages to move from being ignorant to being knowledgeable about the truth. Such heartfelt informing is application.



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REFLECT THE HOLINESS OF GOD HIMSELF. SO,
PART OF APPLYING THE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE
IS TO DRAW OUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THAT
PASSAGE FOR OUR ACTIONS THIS WEEK. WE
AS PREACHERS ARE CALLED TO EXHORT GOD'S
PEOPLE TO OBEDIENCE TO HIS WORD.**

DOUBT

Doubt is different from ignorance. In doubt, we take ideas or truths familiar to us and we question them. This kind of questioning is not rare among Christians. In fact, doubt may be one of the most important issues to be thoughtfully explored and thoroughly challenged in our preaching. Addressing doubt is not something a preacher takes up with non-believers for a little pre-conversion apologetics. Some people who sit listening to sermons week after week may well know all the facts that the preacher mentions about Christ, or God, or Onesimus; but they may well have struggled with whether or not they really believe those facts are true. Sometimes people may not even be aware of their doubts, much less be able to articulate them as doubts.

But when we begin to consider Scripture searchingly, we find lingering in the shadows questions, uncertainties, and hesitations, all of which make us sadly aware of that gravitational pull of doubt, which is drawing us away from the faithful pilgrim's path. To such people—perhaps to such parts of our own hearts—we want to argue for and to urge the truthfulness of God's Word and the urgency of believing it. We are called to urge on hearers the truthfulness of God's Word. We

want people who hear our messages to change from doubt to full-hearted belief in the truth. Such urgent, searching preaching of the truth is application.

SIN

Sin, too, is a problem in this fallen world. Ignorance and doubt may themselves be specific sins, the result of specific sins, or neither. But sin is certainly more than neglect or doubt.

Be assured that people listening to your sermons will have struggled with disobeying God in the week just passed, and they will almost certainly struggle with disobeying Him in the week that they are just beginning. The sins will be various. Some will be a disobedience of action; others will be a disobedience of inaction. But whether of commission or omission, sins are disobedience to God.

Part of preaching is to challenge God's people to a holiness of life that will reflect the holiness of God Himself. So, part of applying the passage of Scripture is to draw out the implications of that passage for our actions this week. We as preachers are called to exhort God's people to obedience to His Word. We want our hearers to change from sinful disobedience to joyful, glad obedience to God according to

His will as revealed in His Word. Such exhortation to obedience is certainly application.

THE GOSPEL

The main message that we need to apply every time we preach is the gospel. Some people do not yet know the good news of Jesus Christ. And some of them may have even been sitting under your preaching for a time—distracted or asleep or day-dreaming or otherwise not paying attention. They need to be informed of the gospel. They need to be told.

Others may have heard, understood, and perhaps even accepted the truth, but now find themselves struggling with doubting the very matters you are addressing (or assuming) in your message. Such people need to be urged to believe the truth of the good news of Christ.

Also, people may have heard and understood, but remain slow to repent of their sins. They may even accept the truth of the gospel message, but not want to give up their sins and trust in Christ. For such hearers, the most powerful application you can make is to exhort them to hate their sins and flee to Christ. In all our sermons, we should seek to apply the gospel by informing, urging, and exhorting.

One common challenge we preachers face in applying God's Word in our sermons is that individuals who experience problems in one pronounced area will think that you are not applying Scripture in your preaching because you are not addressing their particular problem. Are they right? Not necessarily. While your preaching might improve if you start addressing every category more often or more thoroughly, it is not wrong for you to preach to those who need to be informed or who need to be exhorted to forsake sin, even if the person talking to you isn't so aware of that need.

One final note. Proverbs 23:12 says, "Apply your heart to discipline and your ears to words of knowledge." In English translations, it seems that the words translated "apply" in the Bible almost always (maybe always?) have reference not to the preacher's work (as homiletics teaches us) nor even to the Holy Spirit's (as systematics rightly teaches us) but to the work of the one who hears the Word. We are called to apply the Word to our own hearts, and to apply ourselves to that work.

That, perhaps, is the single most important application we could make next Sunday for the benefit of all of God's people. ❖



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Preaching Christ in the Old Testament: Interpretation vs. Application

MIKE RIGGARDI

One of the more popular topics of discussion in the world of evangelical preaching is how to faithfully preach Christ from the Old Testament.

On the one hand, every Christian preacher should be concerned to preach the Old Testament in a way that an orthodox Jewish person would be uncomfortable with. Because Judaism rejects Jesus as the Messiah while Christians receive Him, Christian exposition of the Old Testament should exalt Jesus in a way that Jewish exposition would not.

On the other hand, though, every Christian preacher should be an exegete—disciplining himself to preach only what he can read *out* of the text, and not to preach what he believes would be helpful to read *into* the text. We ought to preach the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, but we ought not to reinterpret Old Testament passages in such a way that we insert Christ where He is not.

I believe the key to faithfully solving this conundrum lies in the distinction between interpretation and application.

ME-CENTERED VERSUS CHRIST-CENTERED

One well-known pastor, as he was discussing differing methods of interpreting the Bible, and particularly the stories of the Old Testament, said there are two ways to look at the Bible. The first is to view the Bible as primarily a guide for life. People who read the Bible according to this perspective tend

to read themselves—God’s faithful people—as the heroes of the stories of Scripture. However, he said, the Bible is not ultimately about you and me, but about what God has done in Jesus to reconcile mankind to Himself. The second way of reading the Bible is not fundamentally about God’s people overcoming the challenges of life, but of Jesus overcoming sin on behalf of His people.

The example he gave was from the story of David and Goliath. He said that people who read the Bible in the first way—as if it’s primarily about *them*—tend to read themselves into the story as David and tend to view Goliath as corresponding to whatever opposition they are fighting in their life. Then, as they seek to apply the biblical text to their lives, they will look for their “five stones” by which they can slay the giant of their debt, or the giant of their bad marriage. The problem, though, is that our “stones” often miss. What happens when, despite all our effort, might, and power, we fail to slay the giant of our unfavorable circumstances? We might begin to question the goodness of God and the truthfulness of Scripture. After all, one might think, “Doesn’t the story of David and Goliath teach that God’s people can overcome the giants in their lives?”

As an alternative to that “me-centered” approach to interpretation, this pastor counseled us to take another route. We should read the story of David and Goliath as a picture of

what Colossians 2:17 calls a shadow of what was to come in Christ. Without denying the historicity of David's bout with Goliath, this brother said that the point of the narrative of 1 Samuel 17 was to communicate to the people of God that a greater Savior than David was coming to slay the giant of sin and death once for all. Rather than reading David as ourselves, we ought to read David as Jesus. And rather than reading Goliath as our bad circumstances, we ought to read Goliath as our sin and death, which need to be conquered. If you and I are to be found anywhere in the story, we're Israel, cowering and trembling before the great giant, whom Christ our Champion must come and slay.

I want to be fair in recognizing that this brother's comments were unpublished remarks given in an informal discussion. But I've found his perspective to be quite representative of an exceedingly popular view of Old Testament interpretation, one which I believe misses the mark of exegetical fidelity. And so I want to use this pastor's comments as a springboard to address a troubling broader hermeneutical trend, and to illustrate the necessary distinction between interpretation and application.

Now, I agree wholeheartedly that New Covenant ministers should not preach the Old Testament narratives moralistically. While we should indeed benefit from good and bad examples (1 Cor 10:11), our Old Testament preaching must be more than: "Be steadfast like Daniel. Don't be disobedient like Jonah." I also agree that the Bible is not fundamentally or ultimately about me, but about God and what He is doing in history to manifest the glory of His name. We should not apply 1 Samuel 17 by stirring ourselves up to slay the giant of our difficult circumstances. But "Jesus slays the giant of sin" is just as much of an allegory, just as foreign to the original intent of the author, and, frankly, just as cheesy as me becoming a little David and slaying the giant of my debt or bad marriage. In the name of being "Christ-centered" (which is a great motivation!), it has become popular to read Christ into Old Testament texts where He simply is not.

SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE

As mentioned above, Colossians 2:17 is often marshaled in support of reading and preaching the Old Testament this way. The Law had "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things" (Heb 10:1), and so the story of David and Goliath is the shadow whose substance comes in Christ. But be careful not to miss Paul's point in the context of Colossians 2. He states that believers are united with Christ (Col 2:9–12) and that we now have freedom from the sin-debt that stood against us with its legal demands (Col 2:13–14). Because of this freedom that comes through union with Christ, Paul draws the conclusion that no one can condemn

a Christian on the basis of the demands that belonged to the Mosaic Law (Col 2:16). We no longer worship God via festivals, new moon celebrations, and Sabbath days. We worship Him in spirit and truth through Jesus alone (John 4:21–24; cf. Phil 3:3).

It was these elements of ceremonial worship that were shadows of what has now come in Christ. It is improper to conclude that the Old Testament text itself is nothing but "types and shadows," as if God's revelation in the First Testament was just too hazy and too unclear to be understood on its own terms. The ceremonial laws were a shadow, but the Old Testament was *revelation*—God *speaking* clearly to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways (Heb 1:1). To suggest that the Old Testament text itself was merely a shadow that could not be properly interpreted without the New Testament would be to deny the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture and to give up the Old Testament as hopelessly opaque. Contrast that, however, with the Old Testament's own testimony concerning itself:

The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes (Ps 19:8).

Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path (Ps 119:105).

The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple (Ps 119:130).

For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life (Prov 6:23).

According to the popular method of Old Testament interpretation, the meaning of the Old Testament remains dark and foggy until it is reinterpreted by the New Testament. In that case, these passages lose their meaning entirely. The shadowy Old Testament text didn't communicate; it obscured. It didn't reveal; it concealed. But the four passages above put the lie to that understanding. The ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Covenant may have been shadowy illustrations of what was to come in fullness in Christ. But the text itself was no shadow. It was *light* that illumined the believer's mind and enlightened his path.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Another argument commonly made is that Jesus Himself interpreted the Old Testament as shadowy and dark and unable to be understood apart from the New Testament. Not only that, they say, but Jesus also gave us, His followers, license to

FAR FROM LEADING US TO BELIEVE THAT THE OLD TESTAMENT CAN'T BE RIGHTLY INTERPRETED APART FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT, JESUS' OWN WORDS LEAD US TO PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE CONCLUSION.

do the same when He spoke with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us, “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). So when Jesus got to David and Goliath, what did He tell them, if not that He came and slew the giant of sin as the Son of David?

Well, in the first place, Jesus might not have discussed this text with those two men. The common understanding of this verse is that Jesus took these two men through the entire Old Testament and showed them that He was “lurking in the shadows” behind every verse, paragraph, and pericope. Therefore, the Old Testament interpreter ought to do the same. But Luke says nothing of the sort.

Explaining “the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” doesn’t necessarily mean that there were things concerning Himself in *every* scripture. It simply means that He went to particular texts that did speak of Him and explained how the entirety of the Old Testament—as a whole—looked forward to Him and the work He came to accomplish on behalf of His people. Those who use Luke 24:27 to support the claim that Jesus is in every text of the Old Testament say more than what Luke has said.

Far from leading us to believe that the Old Testament can’t be rightly interpreted apart from the New Testament, Jesus’ own words lead us to precisely the opposite conclusion. On multiple occasions, Jesus indicted the Jews of His day for failing to properly interpret the Old Testament:

Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? (Matt 12:5).

Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning “made them male and female...”? (Matt 19:4).

But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? (Matt 22:31–32).

Have you not even read this Scripture: “The Stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone...”? (Mark 12:10).

Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions? (Luke 6:3–4).

These constant interrogations, “Have you not read?” clearly demonstrate that Jesus expected the Jews of His day to both (a) interpret the Old Testament on its own terms, since there was no New Testament revelation through which to interpret it; and (b) to interpret it properly—that is, to understand its proper intent.

In fact, this was the way in which the first New Testament believers were to examine this new teaching brought by Jesus and His apostles. God, through Luke, commends the Bereans as more noble because they searched the Old Testament Scriptures to examine the truth claims Paul was making (Acts 17:11). Yet how could that be a noble—much less fruitful—endeavor if the true interpretation of the Old Testament couldn’t be understood without the New as an interpretive

JESUS AND PAUL BELIEVED THAT THE TRUE INTENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT COULD BE UNDERSTOOD BY INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT ON ITS OWN TERMS.

grid? How could Paul, in defending himself against the accusations of the Jews, appeal to the fact that he had preached “nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place” (Acts 26:22)? And wouldn’t we have to admit that Jesus was being a bit too hard on the two men on the road to Emmaus when He said, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25)? How could they have understood what the prophets have spoken without the New Testament? Instead, it’s plain that both Jesus and Paul believed that the true intent of the Old Testament could be understood by interpreting the Old Testament on its own terms.

THE POINT OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

But if Jesus did mention 1 Samuel 17 on the road to Emmaus, He would have honored the authorial intent and original context of the passage. From a redemptive-historical perspective, the point of the story of David and Goliath is to bring David onto the scene of prominence. He will be the king of Israel who trusts in Yahweh in ways in which it is clear that Saul did not (1 Sam 13:8–13). He will be the man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14), from the tribe of Judah (1 Sam 17:12; cf. Gen 49:10)—not Benjamin, as Saul was (1 Sam 9:1)—who will rule Israel in righteousness. This sets the stage for Yahweh to make His covenant with David, which promises a righteous ruler in Israel to sit on David’s throne forever and ever (2 Sam 7:12–16). This, of course, finds its fulfillment in Jesus, the Son of David, the Lion of Judah, whose dominion will be everlasting (Dan 7:14; Rev 11:15).

That’s speaking from a redemptive-historical, wide-angled lens. But from a more “zoomed-in” perspective, the text itself makes its own point quite clearly. David says, “This day Yahweh

will deliver you up into my hands . . . that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that Yahweh does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is Yahweh’s” (1 Sam 17:46, 47).

So, when some tell us that in the story of David and Goliath, God was communicating that a Savior was going to come and slay the giant of sin, they are reading into the text something which simply is not there. Instead, the text tells us that God was communicating that His sovereignty is stronger than the greatest human warrior or army, and that He will exercise that sovereignty to protect His people and remain faithful to His covenant promises. God will use the weak who trust in Him to shame the strong who trust in themselves (cf. Isa 31:1–3; Zech 4:6; 1 Cor 1:27). Just as God chose the younger Abel over Cain, the younger Isaac over Ishmael, the younger Jacob over Esau, the younger Moses over Aaron, so He chooses the runt of the litter, the little shepherd boy David, over the head-and-shoulders-taller-than-everybody-else Saul. God chooses the unlikely to be prominent, and, in some cases, to triumph over what would have seemed to be the obvious choice, in order to display His sovereign power in the fulfillment of His promises. And, ultimately, He chooses the manger over the royal palace, humility over pomp and circumstance, the foal of a donkey over an armed chariot, and the cross over the crown—all to ensure that the people of His covenant (this time the New Covenant) would share in the fulfillment of God’s promise of salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

INTERPRETATION VS. APPLICATION: YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE

Now, did you notice how quickly we got to the Gospel?

Even if the Gospel isn't the proper *interpretation* of every individual text, we can get to the Gospel in the *application* of every sermon. And understanding the story in its own context and for its own sake will get us there, authorial intent and context well intact. Not only does this approach have the advantage of being faithful to the text; it actually sheds even more glorious light on the Gospel than by looking at the text, shrugging, and inserting Jesus where He isn't.


So often, proponents of a Christocentric hermeneutic insist that if we don't find Christ in every verse of Scripture, we're reading it in a way that would make a contemporary Jewish person comfortable. But that is simply a false dichotomy. The choice before is not: (a) read Christ into texts He's not in, or (b) fail to read the Old Testament as Christians. No, we must allow the text to speak for itself, in search of what the original author was intending and what the original audience would have understood. Authorial intent is the cornerstone of biblical interpretation. At the same time, we should *also* faithfully make application to Christ and the Gospel. We need contextual, grammatical-historical *interpretation* alongside Christocentric *application*.

We can get to Jesus—the climax of the story of redemption—from any point in the story of redemption. We don't need to insert Him into every phrase of that story, where the biblical authors didn't. We are to preach one scene of the drama of redemption in its own context and for its own sake, and

get to the climax of the story where Jesus appears; we don't pretend that the whole story is the climax repeated over and over again.

That is truly the way to “preach the whole Bible as Christian Scripture.” We must allow Scripture to speak for itself in all its parts. We make interpretive connections to Christ where the text does, and we don't where it doesn't. We don't “reinterpret” the Old Testament, but we apply each scene of the redemptive story in light of its climax: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In this way, we will demonstrate that we believe that the Old Testament already *is* Christian Scripture, and doesn't depend on our interpretive creativity to *make* it Christian Scripture. That doesn't make us any less “Christ-centered.” In fact, honoring the authorial intent of every text is actually more honoring to Christ, because we are submitting ourselves to what He has said. We don't imply that God has failed to speak clearly at some points of His revelation, and we don't read Christ into texts where He is not—as if the Old Testament just needed our homiletical help to make it relevant. No, we respect all of God's Word *as* God's Word, on its own terms: as His clear and illuminating revelation. ✦

This article is adapted from a portion of a book by the same author and is printed with the permission of the publisher. Michael Riccardi, *The Forest and the Trees: The Story of Scripture and Basic Biblical Interpretation* (Sun Valley, CA: Grace Books, 2016), available at www.gracebooks.com.



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