

04 Building an
Expository Sermon
STEVEN J. LAWSON

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of Bible Study
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in Preaching
JOEL R. BEEKE

EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

SUMMER 2024

No. 47

The

EXPOSITORY

SERMON



PREACHING • TEACHING • TRAINING



EXAMPLES OF UNWAVERING FAITH

We remember certain figures from church history as special testaments to the Lord's faithfulness. Their preaching, hymnody, and courageous actions illustrate the grace of God at work as His people submit to Him. Created by series editor Dr. Steven Lawson, the Long Line of Godly Men Profile series introduces us to Christians who used their spiritual gifts, unique personalities, and exceptional abilities to serve Christ, helping us learn from their example and follow in their steps. **Now available in paperback.**



PREPARING *an* EXPOSITORY SERMON

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



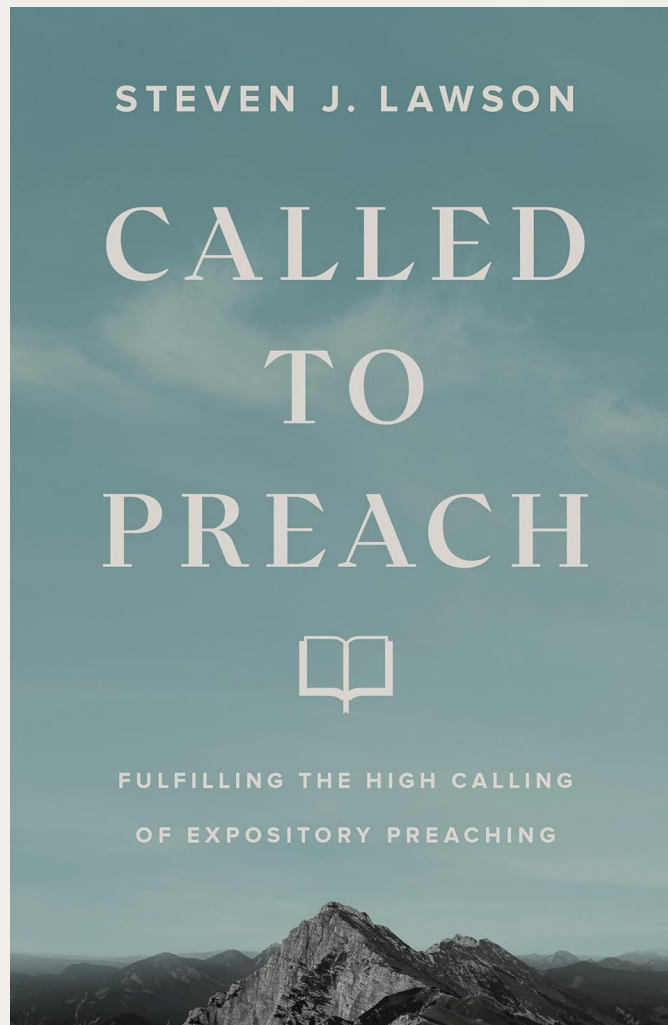
An old adage says, “I cannot see the forest for the trees.” This expression reminds us that it is possible to become so focused upon individual details that we lose sight of the big picture. The same can be true in our preaching.

As expositors, we can become so focused upon the exegesis and interpretation of our passage that we become myopic and inspect a verse with tunnel vision. When this occurs, we forget the overall process of creating a sermon that is well crafted and ready to be preached. In other words, we can look at our passage through a microscope but fail to see the overall steps of sermon preparation.

With this in mind, this issue of *Expositor Magazine* is devoted to surveying the comprehensive strategy of preparing an expository sermon. I trust that you will find

it helpful in thinking through the whole process in how you prepare a message that you can take into the pulpit and preach to your congregation with maximum effect.

It is always helpful to reevaluate what we do as preachers and how we do it. So, let us reconsider the steps that we take in our sermon preparation and examine our footsteps. May you find this review of how to build an expository sermon encouraging and edifying for your pulpit ministry. ♦



When the pulpit is strong, the church is strengthened, and her witness to the world is fortified.

But when the pulpit is weak, the church languishes in spiritual listlessness, and society suffers for it. Nothing must be allowed to supplant the primacy of the pulpit—not if the church is to flourish.

Through in-depth biblical analysis and inspiring examples from church history, Steven J. Lawson paints a picture of God's glory magnified through faithful preaching, reclaiming the high ground of biblical preaching for the future generation.

BAKERBOOKHOUSE.COM

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES
SUMMER 2024

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ONEPASSION



SUMMER 2024 ISSUE 47 © 2024 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES, DALLAS, TEXAS 75382 WEBSITE: ONEPASSION.ORG
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BUILDING *an* EXPOSITORY SERMON

STEVEN J. LAWSON

Expositors are divinely chosen, set apart from the womb to preach the Word. They are gifted by God to carry out this sacred calling with a supernatural enablement that far exceeds their own natural talent and ability. No seminary or Bible college can make a preacher. No church or pastor can produce an expositor. Only God can create and call a preacher. The Spirit alone gives the needed competence to proclaim the Word with precision and power.

At the same time, however, every God-called preacher must be personally trained in the Scripture and well-taught in theology in order to be effective in the pulpit. In preparation for this task, he must devote himself to rigorous study in the Bible and repeated practice in the pulpit. These servants of the Lord must be instructed by

sound teachers of the Word. They must be further influenced by other skilled preachers, whether in person or in print. Wherever this education takes place, whether institutionally in a classroom or individually in a study, they must learn their craft in order to acquire the knowledge needed to preach the Word effectively. If they are to fulfill their calling with excellence, they must be shaped and molded through ongoing, rigorous training.

Whether you have been preaching for only a short period or a lifetime, whether you preach in a country church or a megachurch, you must be always developing your pulpit skills in order to powerfully deliver the Word of God. The day you stop striving to advance to the next level of excellence is the day you begin regressing. Every preacher who is mightily used by God desires

to mature in his ability to expound the Scripture. With this in mind, we want to enhance our giftedness by reminding ourselves of the essential steps of preparing an expository sermon.

STEP #1: PREPARATION

Before you can prepare the sermon, God must first prepare the preacher. If your life is not right, then your sermon will never be right. Therefore, you must always be passionate in your personal pursuit of knowing God.

Never study a passage simply to prepare a sermon. Instead, first and foremost, dig into a biblical text to edify your own soul. You should study to cultivate your own heart to love and follow Christ. You cannot take others spiritually where you have not personally advanced in your walk before Him. You cannot preach well to others what you have not applied and practiced in your own life.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the noted Scottish preacher, said, "The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness." In other words, you must be a man of God marked by godliness. What you say must be the overflow of who you are. Your preaching must be the direct result of your dynamic relationship with God. Always remember, your maturity is more important than your ministry. Who you are is more important than what you do. How you live is more important than how you preach.

Included in this preparation to preach is your mastery of the Bible. To rightly prepare sermons, you must have a strategic grasp of the message of the Scripture. You need to know sound doctrine and the progress of dogma taught throughout the Word. You need to be able to access the original languages of Hebrew and Greek in which the Bible was first written. You need to know the basic laws of interpretation and have a general awareness of the different literary genres of the Bible. You need to have a clear understanding of the language you are preaching in and know what makes for effective communication. All this is essential in properly preparing to rightly handle the word of truth.

How long does it take to prepare a sermon? The answer is not ten to twenty hours. The reality is that it takes ten to twenty years—or even longer, depending upon how long you have been preaching. In reality, each

sermon builds on an entire lifetime of your personal study in the Scripture.

STEP #2: SELECTION

You must decide how to approach the selection of passages to preach. There are a variety of options from which to choose. There is sequential exposition, which is verse-by-verse teaching through an entire book in the Bible. By and large, this is the best path to travel, if for no other reason than that this is how God had the Bible written. In the Scripture, we are not given a topical index arranged by subjects in alphabetical order. We are not even given individual verses per se. Instead, we are given sixty-six books, one at a time, each having its own unique emphasis. The sequential method best ensures that you teach the full counsel of God, as when this approach is taken, no hard truth can be avoided.

Further, there is also sectional exposition, in which you preach consecutively through a portion of a book in the Bible. For example, you might preach the whole Sermon on the Mount verse-by-verse rather than the entire Gospel of Matthew. Moreover, there is biographical exposition, which goes to multiple passages to trace the life and ministry of a biblical figure. In addition, there is doctrinal exposition, which illuminates a theological truth taught through a portion of Scripture or the whole Bible.

Another selected approach chooses certain verses from a book, perhaps related to a specific occasion or circumstance in one's congregation. There is a polemic sermon that refutes a false teaching. And there is an apologetic sermon that supports why we believe a key truth. Through much prayer and counsel, you must select your approach and choose your biblical book and passage as you prepare to preach.

To choose the best method, it is wise to prioritize the sequential approach for most of your preaching. Then you can supplement with these other approaches. In selecting which book in the Bible to preach, you must appraise the spiritual needs of your congregation. Variety is also important, such that you preach from both the Old and New Testaments, and from different sections of each Testament, with regularity. You should seek the insight of other leaders in the church concerning what book would be most helpful as you plan ahead beyond

the current set of sermons. Additionally, attending to the Spirit in prayer is always a need in being directed by God to make the proper choice.

STEP #3: ORIENTATION


Once you have selected your biblical passage or topic, you need to become oriented to the big picture of the book to be preached. You must become familiar with its historical background, central theme, literary genre, and literary structure. It is critically important that you know who the author is, where he was living, why he wrote this book, and what is its primary theme. Likewise, you should determine who were the original recipients and what truth were they establishing or what error the author was correcting. Further, you must know what is the central outline and general flow of the book.

Every book in the Bible has its own main focus. Thus, as a starting point, you must discover the dominant idea of your book. For example, each of the four Gospels has the same focal point in the person and work of Christ.

But each author presents Him from a different perspective. Matthew writes to a Jewish audience, presenting Jesus as the Messiah and King. Mark writes to a Roman audience, showing Jesus as the Servant of the Lord, while Luke appeals to a Greek reader, revealing Him as the perfect Man. John, however, writes with all mankind in mind, displaying Jesus as the Son of God. This focused awareness is foundational in preaching through each of these books.

STEP #4: OBSERVATION

As you begin your study, you must isolate a literary unit or paragraph of thought. Begin to anticipate how many verses you will cover in this sermon. This will come into focus as you study the passage. Over time, you will develop your own style and better be able to estimate the number of verses to be preached. The literary genre will be a determining factor in deciding this. As a general rule, a narrative, psalm, or discourse will require preaching more verses in a single sermon. However, a



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proverb, epistle, or benediction will likely cover fewer verses.

As you begin to investigate the verses to be preached, you should ask yourself several key diagnostic questions: Who is speaking? Who is the original audience? When was this written? What are the circumstances behind this passage? What immediately preceded this passage? What follows these verses? How does this passage fit into the overall theme of the book? Where does it find itself in the flow of the entire Bible?

Next, discover the central idea of the text. This is sometimes known as the big idea, or the main point of the passage. You should ask yourself, what is the core truth the biblical author is communicating? You should become keenly aware of the dominant thrust of the passage. This requires reading the text multiple times with an observant eye. You are to be like a detective diligently investigating for clues. The central idea of the passage

and its subordinate parts must be clearly in mind and dominate your thinking in your preparation.

Because the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, reading and probing the passage in the ancient languages will yield a greater understanding of the text. Conducting word studies, parsing verbs, and analyzing the grammatical syntax will be paramount. A Greek or Hebrew dictionary will more clearly reveal a word's meaning, and a lexicon will trace the word's use in various contexts. As you become proficient in using the original languages, you will notice hidden gems in the passage that are often overlooked in your English translation.

As you pore over the passage, look for progression in the flow of thought. Be observant of transitions, breaks in the action, main verbs, causes and effects, key words, and reoccurring points of emphasis. Drafting a working outline of the passage is important. It will help you to

see the general structure and subordinate truths. Some will want to construct a sentence diagram in order to best grasp what is primary in the verse and what is secondary.

STEP #5: INTERPRETATION

Next, you must interpret the passage. If observation deals with what the passage says, then interpretation concerns itself with “What does the passage mean?” In rightly discerning the meaning of the text, we must use the literal, historical, grammatical approach. By literal, we mean the normal or natural meaning of words. We must be careful never to allegorize or spiritualize the text where it is not warranted. By historical, we mean the author’s intent as he wrote to his original audience. By grammatical, we mean the understanding of the grammar, syntax, and words in the passage. In this process, you will be building a bridge between the ancient world of the Bible and our contemporary culture in which your listeners live.

A tight interpretation requires knowing the precise meaning of original words and verb tenses. It necessitates researching the cultural norms at the time a text was written. It involves analyzing the political scene and international powers that existed when this was recorded. It includes being aware of ancient hunting and shepherding practices. It mandates knowing where your passage fits into the unfolding message of the whole Bible. It demands knowing systematic theology and biblical theology. Further, it requires knowing how to navigate cross-references in order to use the Scripture to interpret Scripture.

The culture of the ancient world was vastly different from today’s society. Thus, you must understand the milieu of Bible times, whether it be the Jewish, Greek, or Roman culture, to grasp the meaning of a given passage. Also, understanding the geography of the Middle East can be helpful in unlocking the meaning of a passage. Along this line, a Bible atlas is often a helpful tool in understanding a text.

We must never look for a hidden meaning in the passage. The most clear meaning is generally the true interpretation. The evident things are the God-intended things. Never over-allegorize a passage of Scripture. Never read into it what is not there. Never twist the

meaning of a text to fit what you want it to say.

Further, the teaching of one passage will never contradict the meaning of another text. The Bible speaks with one voice, teaching only one system of truth. It makes one consistent diagnosis of the human dilemma—namely, sin. It presents only one solution—the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It teaches one path for personal holiness and one plan for the family and the church. Every interpretation must align with and be held accountable to the overall teaching of the Bible.

STEP #6: CONSULTATION

After doing your own in-depth study, you should consult trusted commentaries and other linguistic and theological resources to check your findings. Is your interpretation consistent with other noted teachers? Or is your finding a novelty position? Study tools expose your interpretation to the findings of others who have faithfully wrestled with this particular passage. Compare your findings with these highly respected teachers from both church history and the present day. Likewise, read other expository sermons and listen to messages of other preachers who have expounded the same text.

An expositor’s library is an indispensable asset that should be consulted on a regular basis. At this point, there are a few dangers to avoid. One extreme is to use no commentaries, which leaves you open to a possible misinterpretation that reliable teachers have not found. The other extreme is to use too many commentaries. This practice can make your sermon too academic and tie you in knots as you stand in the pulpit. Remember, you are preaching, not lecturing. You are in a worship center, not a classroom, and you are ministering to a congregation, not to a student body.

Concerning the use of commentaries, you will want a variety. As a carpenter needs different tools to perform different tasks, likewise the expositor needs to use different kinds of commentaries to be effective in the study. Some commentaries are written on a popular level and are intended to give a brief explanation of the basic issues of a passage. Other commentaries are written on a more technical level and give stricter attention to the details of the text. Still other commentaries are expository commentaries, which arise out of the pulpit ministry of another expositor. Different Bible encyclopedias and

theological dictionaries also contain helpful articles on matters of historical and doctrinal significance.

STEP #7: COMPOSITION

Next, take your individual discoveries and key observations and compile them into a written document. You may find that this involves a two-step process. The first step would be the collection of your findings into what could be called a rough draft. The second step would be a sermon manuscript. These are the often-practiced twofold steps to put into writing the explanation of the passage you are preaching. Your initial draft should follow the sequential pattern of the verses you are preaching in keeping with the biblical author's logical flow of thought, moving progressively, phrase by phrase and even word by word, through your passage.

As you write the rough draft, you should give attention to both the near and larger context. You should detect the internal details of the passage. The big picture of your passage is connected to the unfolding theme of the book that precedes and follows these verses. The big picture further includes how this specific passage connects with the whole rest of the Bible. The micro perspective often affects how the exegetical details of the text are seen. But you should look at the passage through both a telescope and a microscope, seeing both the larger context and the specific details of your passage. Your broad and narrow findings should be incorporated into the rough draft. At this point, the goal is not literary beauty, but factual accuracy.

Once the rough draft is completed, you will want to begin the process of rewriting it into the sermon manuscript. You want to restate the passage in understandable words and write out the proper interpretation of what is stated. As you write this, especially in the second stage, you will want to express these ideas as you would anticipate hearing yourself preaching them. The goal is not to develop a dense lecture, but a dynamic sermon. You want your pulpit notes to sound like a preacher speaking, not a professor lecturing. Write as if you are expressing yourself in a conversational manner with your choice of words and manners of expression.

Begin writing the sermon manuscript by placing the first homiletical heading into the document. A good outline is like the skeleton of the human body. It becomes the bones upon which the meat of the sermon

rests. The outline provides your message with a sturdy infrastructure that keeps you on track and helps your listeners follow you. A good outline may alliterate, rhyme, or use parallelism in some way with the cadence of its words. A good rule of thumb is that the shorter the wording of the homiletical point, the stronger it will be.


Make sure that your exegetical findings are lined up under the appropriate headings in your homiletical outline. If you use a computer, this is a simple process of cutting and pasting your findings. If you write your notes by hand, you will need the additional time to rewrite your rough draft into final form. When you place your exegetical findings into manuscript form, reword them into language that is conversational, colloquial, and easily understood. Communicating the truth through the use of analogies, metaphors, and similes will be helpful to the listeners' ears.

STEP #8: IMPLICATION

Next, you will want to write implications to be drawn from your text. An implication addresses what is not directly stated in your passage but can be reasonably inferred either theologically from the rest of the Bible or practically from human experience. Rather than limiting yourself to focus only upon what is explicitly set forth in the verse, the implications of the text add to your sermon notes. An implication can be either doctrinal or practical in nature, and both need to be considered and perhaps prayerfully added.

A doctrinal implication deals with theological truth that is the result of what is stated in the passage. For example, if your text teaches the spiritual death of unbelievers, this suggests certain other truths that are taught elsewhere in Scripture. A spiritual corpse implies that this person is spiritually blind and cannot see the truth about their need for Christ. It implies that they are spiritually deaf and cannot hear with understanding the truth of the gospel. It implies that their will is in spiritual bondage and they cannot believe the gospel. All this is clearly implied, though not explicitly stated.

A practical implication deals with a general truth that affects virtually everyone listening to your sermon. It is a broad statement of truth that is brought to bear upon your listeners in how they should view their life and live accordingly. For example, the miraculous catch of fish in the ministry of Jesus taught that He is Lord over their



Sermon preparation is never complete until the text is applied to the individual lives of your hearers. Great preaching always gets to “you” in the sermon. This makes the sermon distinctly personal and practical for the listener.

ministry and the results of it. However, this truth of the lordship of Christ extends over all of life. It can be noted that it is over marriage and parenting, over career and finances, and over all of life. This is not directly stated in the passage but is obviously true.

STEP #9: APPLICATION

Sermon preparation is never complete until the text is applied to the individual lives of your hearers. Great preaching always gets to “you” in the sermon. This makes the sermon distinctly personal and practical for the listener.

Application answers the question, “So what?” In other words, what does this passage mean for your listeners for going to work on Monday morning? For going to school throughout the week? For spending time with friends on Saturday night?

Always ask yourself: How does the truth of this verse relate to daily life? What does God require of His people from this passage? Basic questions to ask are: Is there a command to obey? An example to imitate? A principle to follow? A sin to avoid? A promise to claim? A truth to teach? An error to correct? These questions and more will help you in applying the passage you are preaching to your congregation.

To help show the relevance of the passage, you may want to think about a cross section of your congregation. Each of these people should represent the population to whom we preach. What does this text have to say to a successful businessman? A single parent? A college student? A retired grandparent? A newly married couple? How does this Scripture impact their lives?

You should write out your application points in order to be most precise in what you say and how you say it. You do not want to ad-lib this part of the sermon any

more than you want to be unprepared with the interpretation. This requires being aware of human nature and life experiences. It requires being in tune with the people to whom you preach. You should know something of the struggles, temptations, and challenges they face. And you should stay up-to-date with the current trends and contemporary tensions of the society.

The best place to position an application is to intersperse it throughout the whole message. Each major movement of the sermon should drip with relevancy. If you regularly save all your application for the end of the sermon, your listeners may learn to tune you out while you are teaching the passage and tune back in for the conclusion with its perceived relevance. To be most effective, you should weave action points throughout the entirety of your sermon.


STEP #10: EXHORTATION

After you state the application, you must exhort the listener to take action regarding what this passage requires of them. You must persuade your hearers to pursue the

right course of action. You must urge your listeners to take decisive steps in the appropriate direction with implementing the application. This involves providing strong motivation and uplifting encouragement in the sermon. This includes appealing to them to implement what must be done. This also requires commanding them, not with your own authority, but with the right of Scripture to rule their lives.

The word *exhortation* means to call the listener to come alongside what the Bible requires. In other words, you must summon them to take action. You must never adopt a take-it-or-leave-it, laissez-faire attitude in preaching. You must compel them to move in what your passage demands of them. You should stress that obedience honors God, and God honors obedience. It also includes instilling the proper fear of Him if obedience is not taken. They must be reminded that painful consequences accompany wrong decisions.

You should give prior thought to how this exhortation will be written into your sermon manuscript. How can you best state this pressing appeal? How can you use the positive motivation of God's grace? How can



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you instill a proper fear of God, taking His Word seriously? How can you urge their immediate response? How can you challenge them not to procrastinate? You must think through making the right appeal to the right attitude needed to produce the right action.

STEP #11: ILLUSTRATION

Sermon illustrations can be added as an important part of your sermon. They are like open windows that allow outside light to shine upon the passage, illuminating its meaning. A good illustration can create interest, capture attention, explain a truth, provide motivation, or ensure that a message is unforgettable. You should prioritize biblical illustrations, because they carry greater authority to reinforce the point being made. In other words, use Scripture to illustrate Scripture. By illustrating from other biblical texts, you can teach Scripture as you illustrate and introduce your congregation to other biblical passages.

At the same time, all knowledge, whether it be from history, medicine, sports, culture, or current events, is available to you as a potential resource with which to illustrate. Likewise, appropriate personal experiences

can help connect with and endear us to our audiences as we illustrate the passage. A good illustration should be appropriate and relevant. Be sure that it does not overshadow the biblical point you are making. A good illustration must support, but never compete with, the truth you are emphasizing.

STEP #12: INTRODUCTION

Now that you have written the main body of the sermon, you are ready to write the introduction. Think of this step as building the front porch of a house. Proportionally, it is smaller than the house itself. A porch should enhance the beauty of the house and provide easy access to enter the main living areas. How strange would a house look if the front porch were larger than the house itself? That would draw too much attention to the porch. Rather, the porch should complement the attractiveness of the house and draw in visitors. So it is with the introduction to the sermon.

The introduction should be well constructed to draw the listener into the sermon. But it should be small enough not to overshadow the main body of the message. This may be done through various means.

You could start the sermon with the use of a relevant illustration. Or begin with a current event or a striking quote. You could raise probing questions that cause the listener to think. You could relate a personal experience or describe a hypothetical situation. You could describe a crisis by addressing a life-related problem. Or you could begin by setting the historical background to the passage. Never forget that recruiting eager listeners is always needed.

Ideally, the introduction should create the listeners' interest, engage their involvement, and cause them to identify personally with the truth being addressed. The opening should be that compelling. You have this initial opportunity to connect with the congregation. It is well said that you never have a second opportunity to make a first impression. So it is with the beginning of your sermon. Start well to preach well.

STEP #13: CONCLUSION

The last part of your sermon preparation is to write the conclusion. Last words should be lasting words. How you end the sermon is very important, because you want to end with strength. The conclusion should serve as a final call to action. Based upon the truth you are proclaiming, you want to plan for the listener to pursue a course of action. What does God want the listener to do? Either the hearer will follow the biblical path you have laid out—or he will neglect or reject it.

An effective conclusion can summarize the main truth that has been presented. You may conclude with a specific application. You may choose to motivate their response. You may want to challenge their will. Or you may want to encourage or comfort them. Think of the conclusion as a pilot landing an airplane. Here is the successful “wheels to the ground” of the sermon. You want to bring it home to the listeners' hearts. Every sermon should conclude with a clear and convincing call to action.

At this point, I most often feel compelled to present the gospel of salvation and call the listeners to come to faith in Jesus Christ. It may be that you have already done this earlier in the sermon. But if you are preaching verse-by-verse through a book in the Bible, the death of Christ is not found in every passage. Therefore, you should consider how you can bring the gospel into the

sermon. We must always be fishing for the souls of men. The conclusion is a great place to point to the cross of Christ.

STEP #14: EVALUATION

At this point, the manuscript should be completed. The introduction, main body, and conclusion have been written. Now you should review your sermon notes to evaluate the quality of your work. Is your preaching manuscript where it needs to be? What edits or adjustments need to be made? How can your preparation be improved? Many times, the difference between a good sermon and a great one is this last review. You may even want to walk away from these notes for a brief period of time before undertaking this evaluation. Survey it a second time with fresh eyes.


Ask yourself a series of diagnostic questions. Are there too many pages in your notes? Too few? Are your notes legible, easy to read, and visibly accessible? Is the introduction too long? Or too short? Will the opening capture the interest and attention of the listeners? Is it tightly worded? Or is it dry? Are there too many homiletical points? Is one more heading needed to divide a single point into two? Is the material under each homiletic point, relatively speaking, equally distributed?

Is the explanation of the passage clear enough? Are you convinced it is accurate? Is there balance and symmetry among the main points? Is a section top-heavy and needs to be redistributed? Do I have too many points? Is the application well placed? Is there both challenge and comfort for the listener? Are there enough illustrations? Do the transitions flow? Does the sermon build to a strong conclusion? Is the gospel present?

STEP #15: INTERNALIZATION

After the sermon manuscript is written, it must also be indelibly imprinted upon your mind and heart. Of course, this internalization has occurred throughout the entire process of developing the sermon. What you have studied and written must be rooted and grounded into your own life. You must become one with your sermon—married to it, if you will.

Regarding the truth of the message, you must know it, feel it, and live it if you are to deliver it effectively.



In the final analysis, the best method of internalizing your sermon notes is to pray through them. You should offer each specific truth to God for His approval and preach the message, as it were, to yourself, asking God to make it real in your own life.

Your entire being—mind, emotion, and will—must be engaged with your sermon. With your mind, you must become well acquainted with your manuscript. You want this review to refresh your memory with the substance of your message. With your emotions, you should feel deeply the truth to be preached. With your will, you should obey the message before you can ask others to act upon it.

In the final analysis, the best method of internalizing your sermon notes is to pray through them. You should offer each specific truth to God for His approval and preach the message, as it were, to yourself, asking God to make it real in your own life.

STEPPING INTO THE PULPIT

The time for preaching the sermon has now come. The

anticipated moment of delivering the message has now arrived as you stand before the congregation and in the presence of God. You will develop your own method of delivery, whether you read your notes or recite them word-for-word from memory. Or you may use a sparse outline as a launching pad in a more spontaneous form of communication. Or you may preach without any notes before you.

Another option is you may want to bring your notes into the pulpit and use them in an extemporaneous fashion. If so, you will be trusting God to enable you to go beyond your notes during the sermon. This allows the Holy Spirit to use all your preparation to the maximum, yet with freedom and liberty as He guides you spontaneously through the sermon and its outline. As the Spirit fills and controls you, your facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact, and voice inflection

will communicate in a natural manner. These external aspects of your delivery should be the dynamic result of God working through your own personality and temperament. But it is never to be anything theatrically rehearsed nor intentionally imitated from another preacher.

How long should the sermon last? By and large, an expository sermon will take longer than a topical message, because more attention will be given to the specifics of the text, such as historical background, word studies, cross-references, flow of thought, and the like. At the same time, you must illustrate and apply the truth. Rarely can you do all this in twenty-five to thirty minutes. This often requires a bare minimum of thirty-five minutes, or otherwise theological fiber and doctrinal clarity may be sacrificed, leaving the congregation deprived of the meat of the Word.


Following each of these essential steps of expository preaching requires the Spirit's illumination to rightly study your passage. You must be taught by God if you are to teach others. This certainly requires a divinely

given education in the Word. This necessitates the internal working of the Spirit to grasp what your text means and how it relates to those who hear you. You also need supernatural energy to persevere in this discipline of sermon preparation and pulpit delivery.

You must be consciously aware that it is ultimately the Spirit of God who equips and empowers you. Apart from Him, you can do nothing of any eternal consequence. Pray for the Spirit's ministry in your life. Ask for His indwelling presence to be manifestly real in your preaching.

Further, know that there are two preachers who step into the pulpit when you preach. You are the visible preacher who is heard. Jesus Christ Himself is the invisible and inaudible preacher. The effectiveness of your pulpit ministry requires the synergistic working of Christ in you, as you yield to Him.

May God raise you up in these days to preach the Word with accuracy and authority—to the church and the unbelieving world. ♦



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THE IMPORTANCE *of* BIBLE STUDY

JOHN MACARTHUR


The Bible is God's complete, inerrant, and authoritative revelation to man. It is the final rule by which all other truth claims must be tested. There is no higher authority or court of appeal. When the Bible speaks, God speaks.

Therefore, the Bible demands our careful, diligent study. Not only must we learn what the Bible says; we must also understand what it means by what it says. Furthermore, the duty of preachers is to proclaim and explain the truth of Scripture clearly and with conviction. Obviously, merely knowing what the Bible says is of little use to those who fail to interpret it properly.

The importance of sound, thorough Bible study might seem to be self-evident, especially for preachers, who are under a divine mandate to preach the Word

of God in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2)—and to be diligent to handle Scripture rightly (2 Tim 2:4). But when we stop and listen to a generous sampling of preaching from a cross section of the world's largest, best-known megachurches and missional church plants, we hear countless expositions of personal anecdotes, popular movies, secular psychology, and a host of other themes—but little or no biblical content. Whatever biblical passages we do hear quoted or referred to will most likely be mangled.

Evangelical pulpits today are filled with preachers who obviously do not study the Bible in earnest. More than any other single factor, neglect of this discipline underlies and explains the deplorable state of preaching today.



The Bible contains truths that are so simple even the youngest Christian can lay hold of them, yet so profound that the most mature believer cannot fully plumb their depths.

WHY STUDY THE BIBLE?

Ours is an entertainment-oriented society. A myriad of distractions compete for our time. Even other “good” things can divert us from the necessary task of Bible study. The average Christian bookstore is stocked with fiction, stories about personal experiences, psychology, self-help manuals, and books about current events. Such works far outnumber the commentaries and books on Bible doctrine.

Some of those books may be helpful. Some are written by godly people and are biblically sound. No doubt God can use them in our lives to promote spiritual growth. But no matter how helpful and biblically sound they might be, they are no substitute for serious study of the Word of God.

Bible Study Is Necessary for Spiritual Growth. First Peter 2:2 says that the Bible is as vital to our spiritual growth as milk is to an infant: “Like newborn babes,

long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.” If we neglect the consistent, serious study of God’s Word, the spiritual growth of both preacher and congregation will be stunted.

In Jeremiah 15:16, the prophet addresses this prayer to God: “Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart.” Jeremiah consumed the Word of God, and, by describing his own study with the metaphor of eating, the prophet suggests that it brought not only joy, but also nourishment—and, ultimately, growth.

Paul employed the same metaphor in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able” (1 Cor 3:1–2). The apostle gave the Corinthians milk, not solid food, due to their immaturity. Nevertheless, he did feed them the Word of God.

Incidentally, the illustrative reference to milk and solid food should not be misunderstood. Paul was not saying that some parts of Scripture are milk, while others are solid food. John 3:16 might be “milk” for a young Christian. For a mature Christian, with a greater understanding of the love of God, John 3:16 is “solid food.” The difference is the depth of our study and understanding. The Bible contains truths that are so simple even the youngest Christian can lay hold of them, yet so profound that the most mature believer cannot fully plumb their depths.

Growth is basic to usefulness. Babies are wonderful to have around, but they’re not much help around the house. Unfortunately, that could also be said of a lot of Christians. Their lack of spiritual maturity greatly reduces their usefulness to the cause of Christ.

Bible Study Is Necessary for Victory over Sin. A sound grasp of Scripture is a wonderful weapon against sin. It is significant that all the armor Paul lists in Ephesians 6 is designed for defensive, protective use—except for one offensive weapon: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17).

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. . . . Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Ps 119:9, 11). The apostle John describes spiritual young men as those who overcome the Evil One through the Word of God that abides within them (1 John 2:14).

The more we affirm biblical truth, the stronger we are against sin. On the other hand, if we fill our minds with things other than God’s Word, the Holy Spirit has nothing of any value to bring to mind when we are tempted.

Proverbs 23:7 puts it this way, “For as [a person] thinks within himself, so he is.” Filling our minds with the truths of God’s Word will result in holiness and godly behavior. Filling our minds with other things will bear corresponding fruit.

Bible Study Is Necessary for Effective Service. A thorough knowledge of the Bible is absolutely essential for effective spiritual service. In Joshua 1:8–9 we see how God prepared Joshua for the formidable task that lay before him: the conquest of the Promised Land.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

How was Joshua to prepare for his task? Did he need to study management and leadership techniques? Did he need to read a book on how to motivate people? No. Joshua’s first and central priority was to study and



meditate on the Word of God. That, the Lord told him, would bring him success in his ministry.

The Apostle Paul, writing to his young protégé Timothy, gave him this wise counsel on how to be a success in the ministry: “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following” (1 Tim 4:6).

What makes a good minister, or servant, of Christ? Constant feeding on the Word of God and sound doctrine. Those who know the Word of God are equipped to be good servants of God.

Bible Study Is Necessary to Make Us Effective Counselors. What is the best way to help a person who is struggling? By showing them God’s solution to their problems. But how can we do that unless we study the Bible? How can we share principles with others that we ourselves haven’t discovered? A prerequisite for helping others is knowing God’s Word.

Paul told the Corinthians that God “comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:4). Certainly, one of the ways God comforted Paul in his trials was through the Scriptures. Paul in turn used what God taught him to minister to others.

Knowledge of Scripture is also essential for discipling others. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul urges Timothy, “The

things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Once again we see the truth that we can’t pass on to others things we haven’t learned ourselves.

If we would be effective in evangelism, we must know the Word. Peter writes, “But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15). There’s nothing more frustrating than not knowing the answers to the questions people ask us, or knowing the answer, but not remembering a verse that supports that answer. Knowing Scripture is crucial to effective evangelism.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Bible study is not to be done perfunctorily. Just before urging us to desire God’s Word in the same way newborn infants crave milk, Peter says we should prepare our hearts by “putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (1 Pet 2:1). James likewise says sin must be put away if the Word is to benefit us: “Putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

What does that tell us? Before we can study the Bible with any spiritual profit, we must deal with sin. An

As you read through the Bible systematically, you will become increasingly familiar with its contents.

excellent way to begin our Bible study is with a time of confession of sin and prayer for God's guidance.

The method of study I prefer is a short series of simple and straightforward exercises.

Read the Bible. Become familiar with what it says. This may seem an obvious step, but it needs to be stressed, because too many people (preachers included) seem to skim lightly over the text. I find it's best to read and re-read, even if it means studying short passages rather than long ones. The point is to become familiar with the text, not to see how much you can get through in the shortest possible time.

I used to struggle with retaining what I read in the Bible. I would read a large portion, and by the next day I'd forget details of the passage. The more of the text I read, the harder it was to retain everything. I was wasting a lot of time and effort and not really accomplishing very much.

I decided that the best way for me to learn the Bible was to read repetitiously. Isaiah said we learn "line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there" (Isa 28:13). It's like studying for a test in school. You don't just read the material once; you go over it repeatedly. (For details on how to do this, see my article "The Preacher and His Bible" in the Jul/Aug 2015 issue of *Expositor Magazine*.)

As you read through the Bible systematically, you will become increasingly familiar with its contents. You will be able to cross-reference passages on your own, without being totally dependent on a concordance. Often, a topic or theme in one passage will remind you of a similar theme in another passage. You will gradually develop a good understanding of what the Bible teaches on various topics.

Reading the Bible is a crucial first step, and we learn much from that step alone. We must not stop there, however.

Study the Bible. We need to dig beneath the surface of Scripture by doing a careful, systematic study of the details in the text—language, grammar, facts, chronologies, cross-references, commands, principles, and a host of other specifics. There are various ways to approach this.

You might, for example, study a Bible topic, trace a character's biography, follow a doctrinal or historical theme, or do a word study.

But the most important and fruitful method for me is


to study a short passage, paragraph, or narrative section intently. I will outline the text and study each section of the outline. My outline of the passage will often be the framework I use to prepare a sermon—helping to insure that my message accurately reflects in a balanced and thorough way what the text actually teaches.

Look for the key concepts in your passage—the main truths it focuses on. Those will become clearer the more you read the passage. Write them down, along with any questions or problems that you come across. Try to learn as much as you can from the passage itself before you turn to outside sources. Finally, put together a preliminary outline of the passage.

The next step is to study the passage verse by verse, using commentaries, word studies, Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias, and any other reference tool that might be helpful. Reading what godly scholars have said about a passage will help keep us from misinterpreting it. Be sure to take notes as you read.

The last step is to prepare a final outline, taking into account all the material you've gathered during your study. If you are going to teach the passage, you will want to find ways to illustrate and apply the truths you have found. I try to use biblical illustrations whenever possible, since Scripture is best explained by other Scripture. A helpful tool in finding other passages with similar themes is *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*. This book contains cross-references for nearly every verse in the Bible. It is similar to the marginal references found in many Bibles, but far more extensive.

Hear the Word taught. I like to listen to gifted Bible expositors (many of them now available at SermonAudio.com) or read the sermons of great preachers of the past to see how they have handled the passage I'm working on. The work of other preachers cannot substitute for your own personal study, but it is a necessary supplement to it.

Meditate on the Word. All of these means are important ways of filling your mind and heart with the truth of God's Word, but don't ever fall into the trap of viewing Bible study or preaching as academic exercises. Having loaded your mind with the language, grammar, history, facts, and commandments of Scripture, meditate on those things. Let the truth of God's Word permeate all your thoughts, and the power of the Word will naturally permeate your preaching as well. 



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PRACTICAL APPLICATION *in* PREACHING

JOEL R. BEEKE

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 thirty 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



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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 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, six of which are published in a volume called *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 seminaries 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 lifeblood 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



You must be a master of the human soul so that your people can trust what you prescribe.

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 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 its final section. 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." Likewise, 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, "[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. In defending such an approach, the preacher may cite 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 in order 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.

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" (Isa 40:1). Others comfort when preaching "Flee the wrath that is to come" (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7). 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



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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 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.

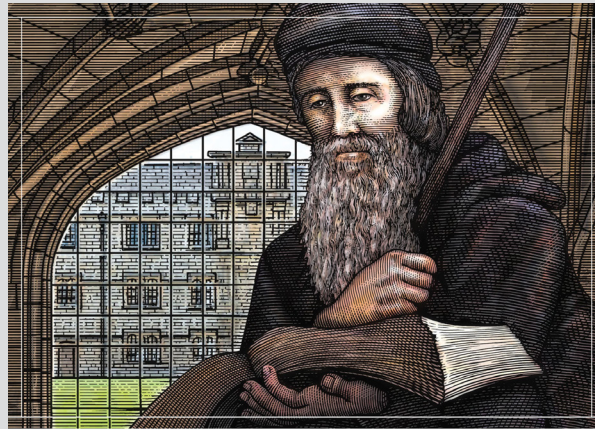
In the same way, if preaching practical duties, Christ-centered application will show how to practice obedience by loving Christ. If preaching Christ’s words, Christ-centered application will show how what we say can magnify Christ. If preaching on suffering, Christ-centered application will show how 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. ♦



The Bible Convictions of

John Wycliffe

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

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am persuaded that no man can persuade me to do anything in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe that I am persuaded to do anything in a corner? Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me this day 'might become such as I am—except for 'these chains.'" ³⁰ Then the king rose, and ^v the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set ^v free if he had not appealed ^z to Caesar."

Paul Sails for Rome

27 And when it was decided ^a that ^b we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan ^c Cohort named Julius. ² And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast

¹ Or In a short time you would persuade me to act like a Christian!

27:2 The ship of Adramyttium was probably a small coasting vessel, not adequate for the open-sea voyage to Rome. Adramyttium was a large port city of Mysia in the province of Asia Minor (opposite the island of Lesbos). Aristarchus. See note on 19:29.

The story is told to indicate how far and difficult the journey to Rome is, the gospel heads toward the ends of the earth.
¹ Note the **we**, indicating Luke's presence with Paul all the way to Rome (the "we" is found at 28:16). For **centurion** and **Cohort**, see note on 10:1.

Paul's Journey to Rome

C. A.D. 60
 Appealing his case to Caesar, Paul was ordered by Festus to be transferred to Rome. Paul's journey was marked by difficult weather, as they had begun their voyage late into the season for sea travel. A bad decision to try to find winter harbor at Phoenix ended with the ship being driven by a storm to the island of Malta, where the ship broke apart. All aboard the ship survived, however, and Paul was soon placed aboard another ship that took him to Puteoli. From there Paul was taken to Rome.



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KNOWING *the* TEXT

KEITH ESSEX

Paul's words to Timothy summarize the expositor's responsibility: "Give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (1 Tim 4:13). The preacher is to publicly read the Bible, then teach, explaining the Scripture read, and exhort, pointing out the significance of the meaning of the scriptural text to his hearers. Paul probably placed exhortation before teaching in this text to emphasize that the expositor's responsibility was not completed until exhortation had been given. The order of explanation before exhortation is evidenced in the New Testament letters, especially Hebrews, which was self-described as a "word of exhortation" (13:22; cf. Acts 13:15 for the pattern of the public reading of Scripture followed by a "word of exhortation," explanation and exhortation, in a Jewish synagogue). Therefore, accurate biblical exposition is founded on accurate biblical

exegesis. An expository preacher must be a precise exegete, a skilled interpreter of the scriptural text.

In this setting, I am using the terms "hermeneutics," "exegesis," and "exposition" in accordance with their traditional meanings. "Hermeneutics" refers to the principles that are applied to a written text and result in interpretation. Interpretation includes discovering the meaning and significance envisioned by the original author with respect to his original audience. "Exegesis" is applied hermeneutics, the practice of interpreting the written text using the principles proposed by hermeneutics. The exegetical conclusions, the original meaning and the original significance of a biblical text, are the basis upon which the expositor builds his sermon.

"Exposition" describes the contemporary oral or written presentation of the original meaning (and possibly also the original significance) and the present

significance of the previously written text. The meaning of the biblical text never changes, but the significant implications of the meaning might be different for a contemporary congregation than for Scripture's first hearers. For example, in the command, "And do not get drunk with wine" (Eph 5:18), the original alcoholic beverage was wine, and Paul's audience at Ephesus was not to drink an excessive amount of wine. However, in a present situation, the significance is a prohibition of drunkenness for the Christian believer, whether the alcoholic beverage is wine, beer, whiskey, vodka, or another one based on one's culture. Thus, the biblical expositor must understand hermeneutics and practice exegesis before he is ready to preach. Preaching is hard work!

The foundational hermeneutical principle of biblical interpretation is context. For instance, the sentence "I was right" can have different meanings; the surrounding words, which show if the subject at hand is logic, politics, driving a car, or golf, will aid the interpreter in knowing what the sentence means in the given context. There are two categories of interpretive context: 1) literary context—what precedes or follows a particular written statement in the text, and 2) historical context—what circumstances surrounded the writing of the text in which the statement is found.

The first activity of biblical exegesis for the expositor is to gain a thorough understanding of the whole of the biblical book from which he will preach. Since every individual passage exegeted and expounded can only be understood in its greater context, the preacher must master the contents, purpose, themes, structure, and background of the book in which the passage is found. There are two steps needed for this mastery of a biblical book.

STEP ONE: READING AND RE-READING THE BIBLICAL BOOK

The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is what we preach. Therefore, priority is given to the literary context. There is no substitute for a thorough knowledge of the Bible on the part of the expositor. This familiarity with the biblical book can only be gained by repeated readings.

The expositor should begin by reading the biblical book quickly in one sitting; this he will do a number

of times (at least three times) in the translation from which he preaches. He should note in writing some of his general impressions from these readings. For instance, in Paul's letter to Philemon, the reader is struck by the warmth of the relationship between the apostle and beloved brother in Christ. Paul prayed for his friend and emphasized the love Philemon had for the saints. Though Paul had apostolic authority to command Philemon to do the right thing, he rather determined to appeal to him instead. He had confidence that Philemon would do the right thing and even more than what he asked. Paul's appeal was for Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who had wronged his master in some way. Paul had led Onesimus to Christ while Paul was a prisoner. It is noteworthy that Paul was a third of the way through this letter before he even mentioned Onesimus to Philemon.

Then, reading more slowly, the preacher should stop and write short chapter (for longer books) or paragraph (for shorter books) titles of four to six words. These titles are designed to help the reader think through the book and also discover the structural units of the book. Using the NASB paragraph divisions, these are suggested paragraph titles for Philemon:

- vv. 1–3 Paul addressed Philemon and others
- vv. 4–7 Paul thanked God for Philemon
- vv. 8–16 Paul appealed to Philemon concerning Onesimus
- vv. 17–20 Paul requested Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus
- v. 21 Paul had confidence in Philemon
- v. 22 Paul requested lodging from Philemon
- vv. 23–24 Greetings from Paul's companions
- v. 25 A short benediction

From these titles, the basic structure is discovered:

- vv. 1–7 Introduction: Paul's address and thanksgiving
- vv. 8–22 Body: Paul's appeal to and requests of Philemon
- vv. 23–25 Conclusion: Final greetings and benediction

The expositor is now prepared to do further reading in the text.

The subsequent readings of the biblical book can be

in different translations, and if possible, from the original language. They can also be in shorter units, using the basic structure that has been discovered; this is especially beneficial in longer books. Expositors of the past have set targets on how many times they read through a book before commencing to preach; each contemporary expositor should set a goal as well.


During these further readings, the interpreter seeks to discover what the author stated about himself and his original audience, what themes he emphasized, and what his purpose was in writing. For example, in Philemon, Paul was a prisoner (1, 9, 10, 13), one with authority (8), an aged man (9), and the spiritual father of both Onesimus (10) and Philemon (19). Philemon was Paul's fellow worker (1) and partner (17), the master of Onesimus (16), and a refresher of the saints (7, 20). The audience also included the church that met in Philemon's house (3, cf. the plural "you" in vv. 3, 22b, 25).

As to themes, though this is a short letter, Jesus Christ was referred to often (1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 16, 20, 23, 25); Paul used his own name three times (1, 9, 19); Paul's coworkers, including Philemon and Onesimus (1, 2, 13, 17, 23, 24) were mentioned; and "love" (5, 7, 9), "beloved" (1,

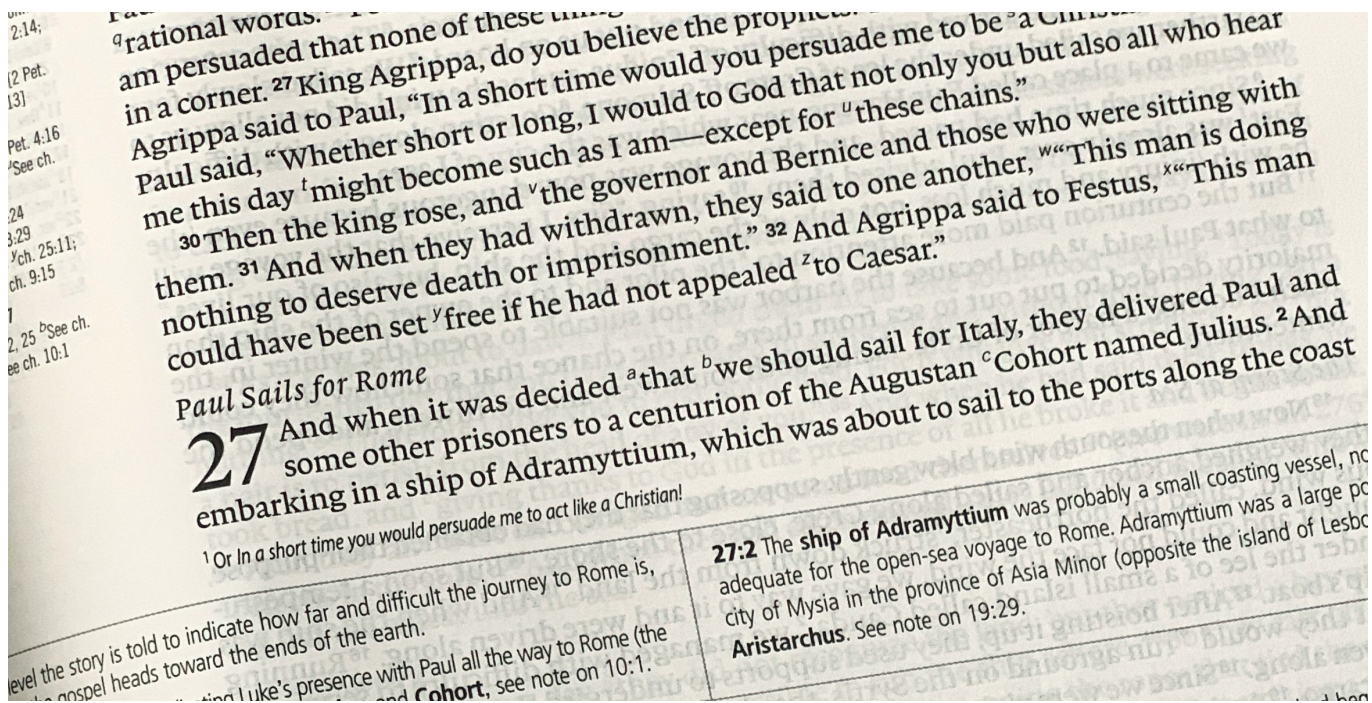
16), "heart" (7, 12, 20), and "refresh" (7, 20) were key terms. A proposed purpose statement is "Paul appealed to his ministry associate Philemon to accept his slave Onesimus as both a fellow believer in Christ and fellow worker in the gospel, confident that Philemon would release Onesimus for further gospel ministry with Paul."

The necessity of this first step of the exegetical process for an accurate and effective expository ministry cannot be emphasized strongly enough. The expositor must be thoroughly acquainted with the biblical book as he embarks upon its exposition. He must know the terrain that lies ahead as he preaches sequentially passage by passage through the book.

Because of the importance of reading and re-reading the whole book, it is vital for the expositor to know that Genesis to Deuteronomy (the Torah or Pentateuch) is one book, as are 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, and Ezra & Nehemiah. Also, what appears as twelve different books in our English Bibles, the Minor Prophets, is considered as one book, "The Twelve," in the Jewish tradition. Thus, each of these should be read first as one book. However, all the books of the New Testament are separate books, though Luke gives



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background to Acts, 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians to 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy to 2 Timothy, and 1 Peter to 2 Peter. However, the relationship of 1, 2, 3 John and the Gospel of John is more complex, and each should be read as an independent writing.

STEP TWO: READING ABOUT THE BIBLICAL BOOK

Though the literary context is preeminent, the exegete also needs to give careful attention to the historical and cultural context of the biblical book. The human writer of the text led by the Holy Spirit assumed rightly that his original audience knew the background of what he was writing. However, the contemporary interpreter of the biblical text is now separated by about 2,000 to 3,500 years from the original texts of Scripture. The present-day exegete has to become a detective to track down this information that lies behind the text and be informed about what is in the text. Therefore, while he is reading and re-reading the biblical text, the expositor must simultaneously be reading all he can about the biblical book with which he is interacting.

A number of essential background questions arise from the reading of Philemon. Where was Paul when he composed and sent this letter? Where was Philemon located? When was this letter sent? How was the letter

conveyed from Paul to Philemon?

Initial detective work finds that some of these questions are answered in Colossians 4:7–9, 17–18. Philemon was in Colossae when Paul sent this letter to him, delivered by Tychicus. With Tychicus was Onesimus, who originally came from Colossae. Paul himself was a prisoner, but many of his coworkers had access to him (Col 4:10–12; cf. Phlm 23–24). However, Paul's location and the date of the letter are not explicitly stated. The exegete will have to search commentary introductions, NT introductions, and Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia articles on Philemon to find possible solutions to these questions. The best case is made for Paul's house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30) as his location and for AD 61 as the year of the letter's writing and delivery.

There are also a number of cultural factors that are crucial to proper interpretation of Philemon. Most vitally, Onesimus was a slave, and Philemon was his human master (16). The exegete must understand how slavery functioned in the Roman Empire in the first century. What exactly Onesimus was guilty of and why and how Paul was intervening have been matters of interpretive discussion. Additionally, Paul was a prisoner of Rome (1, 9); this fact leads the interpreter to investigate the Roman legal system and how prisoners were processed.


The use of family terms throughout the letter (1, 2, 10, 16, 20) demonstrates the need for the exegete to

comprehend the structure of a family in the Roman era and how it functioned. The church met in Philemon's house (2), and Paul anticipated lodging with him (22); a knowledge of the architecture of homes in Colossae, particularly of a man with slaves, would add insight into the statements. Archippus was called "our fellow soldier" (2); a knowledge of the Roman army and the function of a soldier in it can help the interpreter understand the figure of speech being used by Paul. Paul's description of himself as "aged" (9) raises the question of what was considered aged at that time and why he deemed it necessary to so describe himself in this letter. The references to "my account" (18) and "I will repay" (19) lead to an investigation of both finances and interpersonal relationships among the Romans. The best sources to begin to read about these subjects is in Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia articles.

In addition to the historical and cultural backgrounds, the exegete also needs to be aware of the geographical context of a text. Where events were located is interpretively significant. There is no explicit geographical reference in Philemon. However, through implicit evidence, we assume that Paul was in Rome and Philemon was in Colossae. With the aid of a Bible atlas, these two cities can be located. They were separated by approximately 1,100 miles. A combination of sea and

land travel was necessary to journey between the two. Rome was the capital of the empire and was a haven for runaway slaves who wished to avoid capture. Colossae was over 100 miles inland from Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia. It was a small city located in the Lycus valley on the southern bank of the Lycus River at the foot of Mount Cadmus, 11 miles east of Laodicea and 15 miles southeast of Hierapolis. The city was not as prominent or as wealthy as Laodicea in the first century. The distance between Colossae and Rome has played a role in the interpretive discussion about Philemon; why did Onesimus travel so far to escape Philemon? Why did Paul send him personally back again instead of getting Philemon's decision by writing?

Once the exegete/expositor has begun to master the general background, historical, and literary context of a biblical book, he is then, and only then, ready to exegete the particular passages in the book as a preparation for his preaching of the biblical text. More hermeneutical principles will be applied in the exegetical process, but all will be exercised upon the foundational hermeneutical principle of exegesis: context. While it is true that there are many levels of context (the Bible as a whole, the Testament, the writer), for the expositor who primarily preaches sequentially through a biblical book, the most important context is the book as a whole. ⚡



Though the literary context is preeminent, the exegete also needs to give careful attention to the historical and cultural context of the biblical book.



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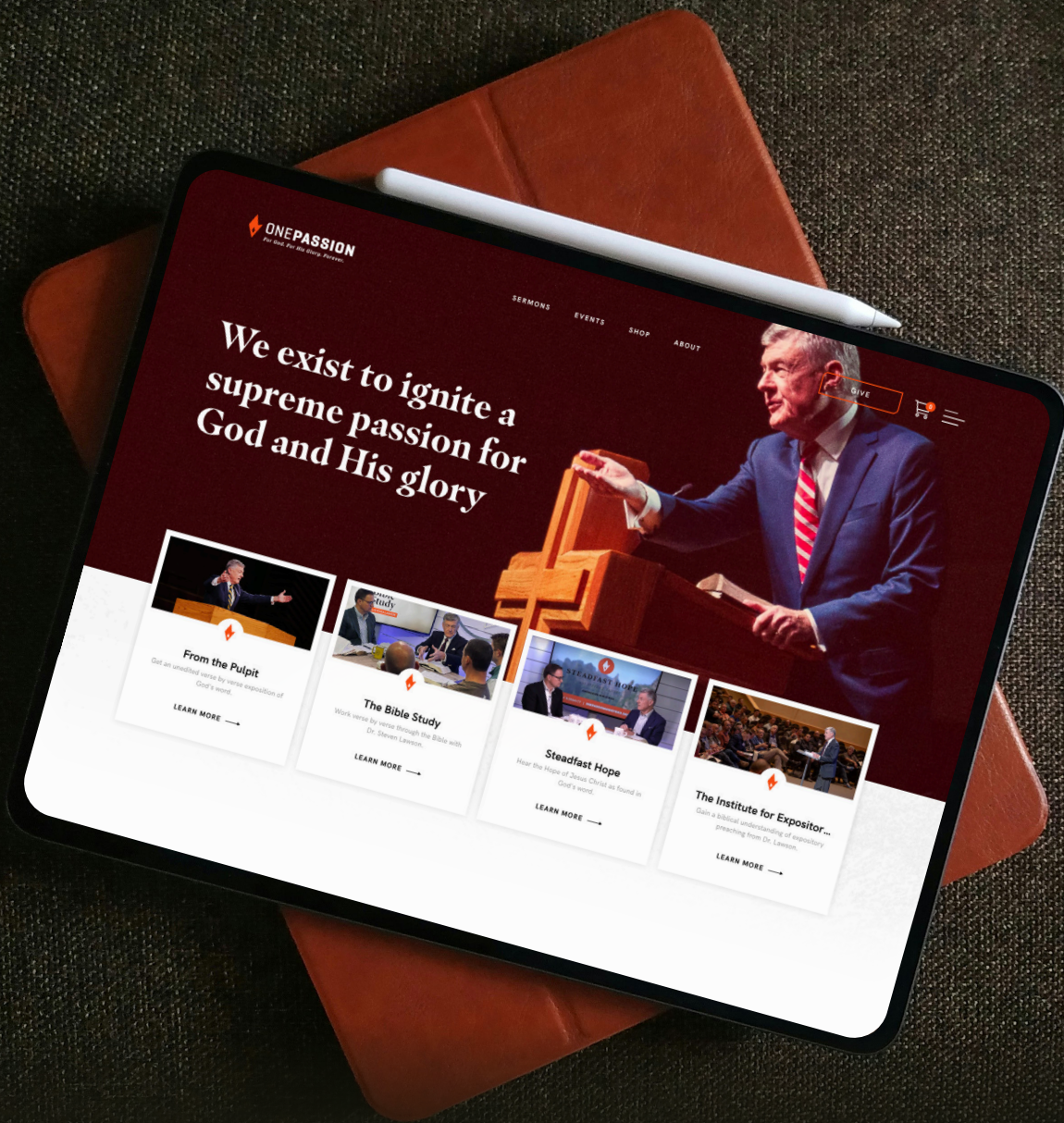
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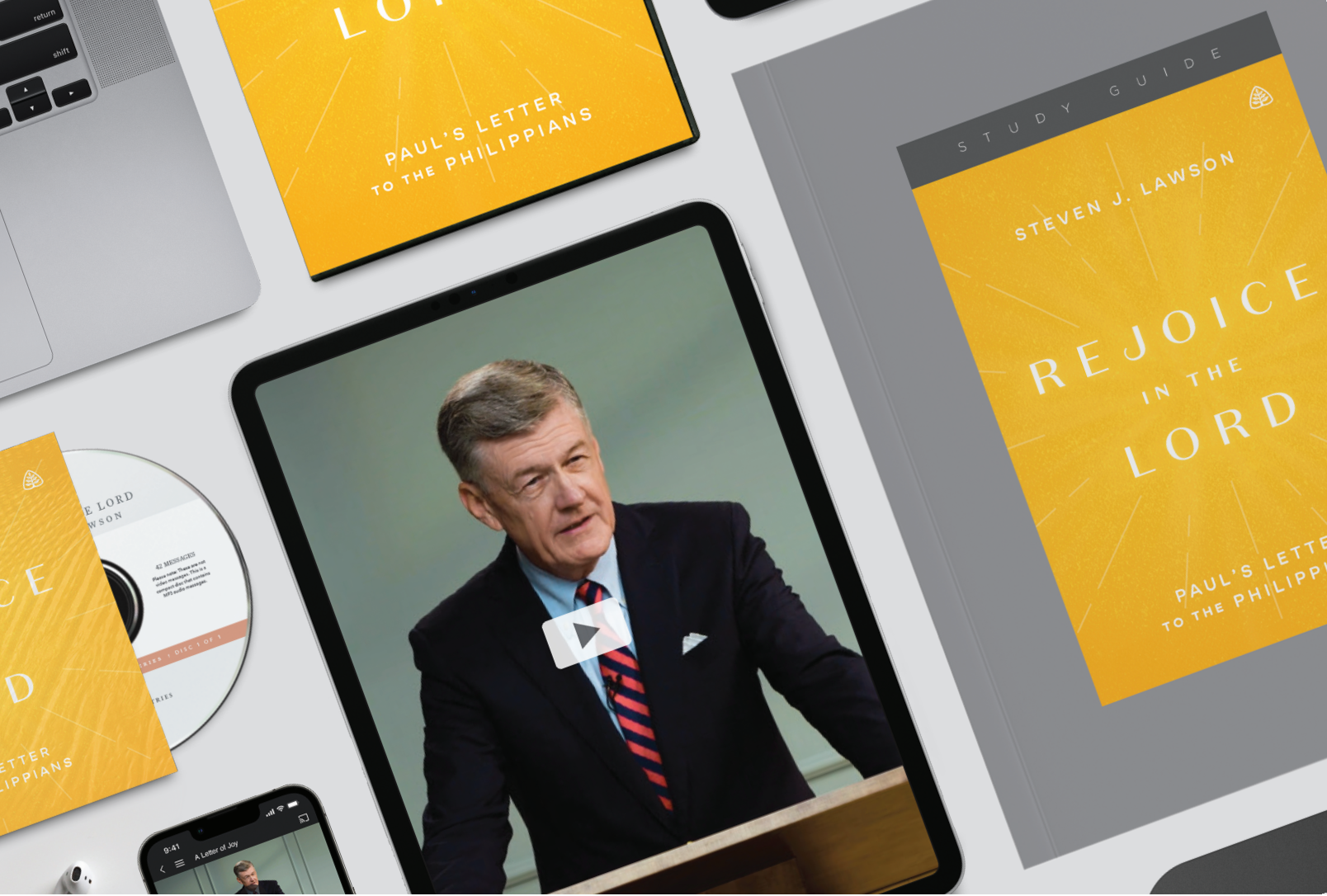
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