

## Putting God's Word to Work: The Task of Application in Preaching

### SGC Pastors Conference – November 6, 2024

#### I. The Dangers of Application (or, “Why I don’t want to teach this Breakout Session”)

- A. Application is a *miracle*.
- B. Dangers in an undue focus on application
  - Trivializing change (superficial application; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18)  
Sight ⇒ Affections ⇒ Faith ⇒ Response
  - Neglecting our pastoral instrumentality (perfunctory application)

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2:8,11-12: “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,<sup>5</sup> because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. . . . So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. . . . For you know how, like a father with his children,<sup>12</sup> we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

- Application void of this kind of embodied, engaged, captivated wonder and urgency will all too often fail to elicit God’s intended response in his people.

#### II. The Obligation of Application

- A. The nature of God’s Word
  - 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”
- B. The examples of biblical writers
- C. The commission of Jesus (Matt 28.18-20)
- D. The nature of the church (Ephesians 4:11-16)
- E. The nature of the pastorate (2 Timothy 4:2)

- On the basis of these realities, preaching will fall short of one of its core intentions when it is void of application.

### III. The Dimensions of Application

#### A. The Task of Application

- We use application in our sermon to call, and enable, people to respond appropriately to God’s Word.
- In application, the preacher discerns and exposes for people a text’s existential implications, so that they might align themselves with God’s will as revealed in that text.

“. . . we want to identify the practical life implications inherent in a proper understanding of the biblical text and then intentionally explain and relate them to our situation today.”<sup>1</sup>

- Crucial assumptions about the nature of Scripture that undergird the applicatory task:
  - God has revealed himself to us through the Scriptures *that we might respond appropriately to him*, as creatures in right relationship to the Creator (the Bible as a covenantal document)
  - In God’s work of redemption, he’s given us the Scriptures as a means of conforming us to the image of Christ (the Bible as a transformational instrument)

Colossians 1:28: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone complete ( $\tau\acute{e}\lambda\epsilon\iota\omega\zeta$ ) in Christ.”

- To determine the “meaning” of a text of Scripture, we must account both for its conceptual content and its authoritative claim.
- God’s Word is asking to be understood as a persuasive document—it is a covenantal act that addresses us in our fallenness, in order to change us.

#### B. The Source of Application: The Text of Scripture

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<sup>1</sup> David Jackman, *Proclaiming the Word: Principles and Practices for Expository Preaching* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 156.

- In our study of a text of Scripture, we seek to determine not only a text's conceptual context, but its divine purpose.
- It is vital to discern not only what God says in a text, but what he's doing with this text.
- When God speaks, he *acts*—he's always at work to accomplish something.

Isaiah 55:11: “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

- “Intended Redemptive Effect” (IRE): “What is the functional, transformative effect this text is intended to have in the believer’s life individually, and/or the church’s life corporately?”
  - ⇒ “What redemptive grace does this text provide?”
  - ⇒ “What aspect of my life is this text addressing in order to align it w/ God’s will?”
  - ⇒ “What transformative effect does the author intend this text to have?”
- The IRE sets the trajectory for the application of your sermon (i.e., the appropriate response to the text)
- Application is not an appendage to your sermon, attached to the end of your exposition. It is the main thing you are doing in your sermon.
- Through the vast trove of Scriptural texts, God places a wide variety of claims upon his people—as varied as our needs for transformation into Christ’s image.
  - Obedience, or repentance
  - Persuasion of the mind
  - Deepening of conviction
  - Strengthening of faith
  - Comfort in trial
  - Assurance amidst doubt
  - Courage amidst fear
  - Perspective: a new (true) way of viewing God, or the world, or ourselves
  - Worship

### C. The Shape of Application: The Congregation

- While the thrust of application comes from our text, the way we bring that thrust to bear will be shaped by the people we are preaching to.

- “Discriminatory Application” (William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecyng*)

	Non-Believer (closed to gospel)	Non-Believer (being drawn; curious about gospel & Xians)	Convicted (humble & desperate)	Young believer (needing grounding in faith)	Mature (needing edification)	Troubled (in error & needing correction; discouraged & needing help)
Mind						
Behavior						
Will						
Motive						
Affections						
Priorities						

- X-Axis: Types of listeners
- Y-Axis: “Centers” of human life (belief, behavior, priorities, affections)
- A suggestion: “Populate” your study with an array of your listeners

## D. The Practice of Application

### A. How & Where to Deploy Application in Your Sermon

- Two primary methods of application:
  1. **Running Application:** Points of application are made along the way under each (or some) main points.

## Proposition/Key Idea

I.

*Appl*

II.

*Appl*

III.

*Appl*

- A caution: Don't allow the subsidiary applications to overtake the main one.
- Don't force applications on parts of the text that shouldn't be applied, or whose applicational "payoff" is very slim.

## 2. Final Application: Application is kept until the end of the message.

I.

II.

III.

*Application*

- Here the application functions on the level of proposition (or key idea)
- A caution: Be directed by your text in how to use application.
- At times "final application" can result in weak (or lazy) exposition: even with application at the end, your exposition should have an existential (not simply a conceptual) thrust such that people sense where you're heading.
- A rule of thumb: the more complex or demanding a text's theme is, the more time you'll spend explaining or justifying it—which can often be conducive to final application
- When a text's claim is straightforward, it is often conducive to running application.

## B. Distinguish between the primary claim of a text and various "significances"

- Every text has a meaning that is objective, determined exegetically. But that meaning (primary claim) will have a range of implications for different people.
- "Significances": various applications and levels of existential significance a text might have for different people based on their particular background, situation, etc.

### C. Seek to situate a text's claim in the specifics of peoples' lives.

- The pastor is called to use his Spirit-given wisdom, discernment, maturity, and experience to consider the variety of implications a text can have for his people.
- “Show people what applying this truth *looks* like (or *doesn't* look like).” Avoid abstraction, push for specificity.
- Abstraction often takes the form of mere exhortation.

Exhortation ≠ Application

- Categories for Concretizing a Text's Claim:
  1. Specific Responses: What might a faithful response look like?
  2. Specific Situations: Where might this truth be applied?
- Caution: Be sure to differentiate between Scriptural obligations and potential applications of biblical principle.

### D. Consider the barriers, blindspots, or temptations that can impede application, or situations that call for the truth of the text.

- Examples:
  - Ignorance of Θ's character can distort our interpretation of circumstances
  - Unbelief can be a hindrance to prayer;
  - Bitterness can be a hindrance to forgiveness;
  - Suffering can be a temptation to complaining or despair;
  - Fear can be a hindrance to faith, or to a step of obedience
- Look for “entrance ramps” into people's daily lives where the truth of a text can gain entry.
- Consider how you can use illustration in your application

### E. Always ensure that the *motivation* for one's response is rooted in God's grace in Christ.

1. Application does more than give instructions and imperatives; it also supplies motivations.

2. The motivation we provide (derived from the text) must always be rooted in God's grace.

- All truly *Christian* obedience is a glad response to God's love and mercy in Christ, which inspires in us love for Him, a desire to please Him, and a longing for Him to be glorified (2 Cor 5:9, 14; 1 Cor 10:31).

"To be motivated by grace is to serve God through a love evoked by his prior love. It is to give to God from the bounty he first gave us."<sup>2</sup>

"Informed expository preaching discloses the grace all passages contain as motivation for the applications they require. . . . there is no more powerful motivation for holiness than loving God in response to the revelation of his redeeming character and eternal promises."<sup>3</sup>

- At some point in your preparation, ask yourself: "As my people depart, what motivation have I provided for their response to this text?" "Have I appropriately located the motivation for my people's response in God's grace in Christ?"

**F. Always locate the *means* of our people's response in Divine enablement.**

- Few things are less biblical--& more deadly--than placing obligations upon people to be fulfilled in their own strength & by their own resources.
- All truly *Christian* obedience is an act of faith that appropriates God's gracious empowerment to walk in his ways (Philippians 2:12-13; cf. Romans 1:5; 1 Timothy 1:5)

"What did Christ do on the cross with regard to the reality of this text? He purchased the Christian life described and commanded in this text. . . . Christ died for this—name, that we, with all our sins forgiven, might enjoy the presence and power of the living Christ as he works in us blood-bought self-control and sober-mindedness and love and hospitality without grumbling. This is the miracle life—the glory of Christ-filled godliness that he died to bring about."<sup>4</sup>

- Whatever obedience or repentance or change a text may call for, we must locate the power for that response in the power of the Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 198-199.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 233-234.

- At some point in your preparation, ask yourself: “As my people depart, what are they depending upon for their response to this text? “Have I appropriately located the source of their ability to respond in God’s gracious empowerment?”

## G. Christ, Our Ultimate Goal

- Beyond all our longings for our people to grow and change, surely our greatest desire is to see them enamored of Christ: loving him, trusting him, resting in him, finding their greatest joy in him.
- The one thing our people need most—what will more inspire application, sustain them as they pursue application, transform them as the fruit of application—is Christ himself.

“. . . the greatest of those blessings is Christ himself in all his glory. Christ in us. Christ over us. Christ before us. Christ behind us. Christ befriending us, sustaining us, and satisfying us with his own glorious presence. The glory of Christ that the cross enabled us to enjoy is the glory of his love in sorrow revealed in the cross, the glory of his justice in mercy revealed in the cross, the glory of his power in weakness revealed in the cross.”<sup>5</sup>

- When we hold forth Christ for our people, we are providing the most important kindling for their transformation by the word of God.

2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

“All of God’s promises and purposes in Scripture come to their fruition and fulfillment in the Lord Jesus. Our application exalts and glorifies him when it shows how dependent we are on him for the outworking of God’s living word in our lives. When God’s truth convicts us of our sin, application sends us to Christ who has carried the guilt and penalty for all who repent and believe. When we are made aware of our weakness and inability, application drives us to Christ, in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge through his Holy Spirit. When we look to the future, applications shows that our hope and perseverance are grounded in the person and work of the Lord Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, now and forever.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Piper, *Expository Exultation*, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Jackman, *Proclaiming the Word*, 162