

Putting the
TRUTH
to Work

**The Theory and Practice of
Biblical Application**

Daniel M. Doriani

R&R

P U B L I S H I N G

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Preface

In my first fifteen years of preaching, I had methods for interpreting the Bible, but none for applying it. I had the unsettling sense that while God might be using my preaching, I hardly knew how. Because I had no method, I never knew why one sermon worked and another failed (though disaster is easier to analyze). Every success seemed accidental, and every failure felt like a harbinger of the great unmasking: “Why, this charlatan has absolutely no idea what he is doing!” I had the discomfiting sense that few pastors were more advanced theoretically than I. The best preachers seemed to rely on raw skill, instinct, and a few heartfelt ideals, but, when asked, they offered little specific guidance.

Two experiences in the 1990s altered my situation and gave impetus to the present project. First, in 1991 I joined the faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary, a community that cultivates the theory and practice of preaching, and I began to hope for some guidance in the area of biblical application. Second, in 1995 I had a sabbatical to complete an earlier book on Bible interpretation. In preparing a chapter on application I found that, compared to the surfeit of excellent readings for prior chapters, the quantity and quality of readings dropped precipitously. Few scholars were writing about application.

Indeed, from 1950 to 1970, scholars such as Berkeley Mickelsen, Bernard Ramm, and Louis Berkhof offered just a few chestnuts on application: avoid legalism, heed the Spirit, find principles, know the culture.¹ In the 1980s, specialized works on poetry, parable, narrative,

1 Very few pages were dedicated to application: e.g., A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 6 of 379 (359–64); Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 0 of

dialogue, and wisdom literature still passed over application.² Recent introductions to interpretation commonly add one chapter on application to their deliberations.³ While popular volumes take more interest in application and serious scholars have begun to consider it, publications on the subject remain rare.⁴

Why this neglect? In an era of specialization, application falls through a crack separating exegesis, ethics, and homiletics. Homileticians stress communication, exegetes discover original meanings, and ethicists typically work with principles (love, justice, wisdom) and dilemmas (Can we “approve aborting the ninth, possibly retarded, child of a woman whose husband has just deserted her?”).⁵ Scholars pause before publishing outside their field, leaving the integration of exegesis, application, and ethics to others.⁶ Critical exegetes hesitate to

290; Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 0 of 166.

- 2 E.g., Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 3 pages of 136; Terence Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 0 of 172; Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), 0 of 332. William Larkin describes the situation in *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 104–13.
- 3 Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 40 pages of 340; Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 25 of 435; William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Waco: Word, 1993), 26 of 400; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint, 1994), 30 of 290; James Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 30 of 365; Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 40 of 334.
- 4 The journals *Interpretation* and *Expository Times* run articles on the topic fairly often. See the latter’s series “New Occasions Teach New Duties?” in 1994–95. Popular works include Jack Kuhatschek, *Taking the Guesswork out of Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990); Jay Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1990); Dave Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1993).
- 5 Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 4–5.
- 6 Theological ethics is an exception, but it has hardly influenced evangelical hermeneutics. Leading writers are ethicists more than exegetes, so the gap between

apply texts whose historicity or veracity they doubt. Perhaps unwittingly, evangelical scholars mimic the critics' model of detached scholarship, possibly hoping an air of objectivity will win them acceptance.

With trepidation, I attempt to fill the gap and to tread the seam between academic and pastoral theology. Because I teach New Testament and hermeneutics and preach or teach in the churches very frequently, I hope to speak to both church and academy. Pastors will be interested to know that I pastored full-time for six years, served as an interim five times, and have been auxiliary staff in my home church for eight years. Scholars should be aware that my conversation partners are listed in the notes.

I gladly confess the core beliefs behind this monograph. I believe Scripture was written by individuals inspired by God. Divine inspiration implies its historical, theological, and ethical veracity. Human authorship implies that Scripture will repay critical investigation of its grammar, history, literature, rhetoric, and society. Thus, I advocate a circumspect use of critical methodologies, especially if we watch for presuppositions antithetical to faith, such as the antisupernaturalism of the historical-critical method,⁷ the historical agnosticism in some literary criticism, and the denial of the human author's capacity to control his text, a denial found in deconstruction and some reader-response criticism.⁸

Theologically, my evangelical, Reformed, grace-oriented tradition

biblical studies and Christian ethics persists. Further, critics such as Bruce Birch, James Gustafson, Richard Hays, Eduard Lohse, Thomas Ogletree, Paul Ramsey, Larry Rasmussen, and Wolfgang Schrage dominate the field, so that influence on evangelicals is slight. John Frame and David Jones represent evangelicals in the discipline.

7 V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 110ff., 123–25, 134.

8 Conservative reader-response criticism explores the responses the author intended to elicit. Radical forms approximate deconstruction by stressing that texts are enigmatic, underdetermined, and “recalcitrant,” so that readers, controlled far more by their community of interpreters than by the author, bring the text to completion. See Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Stephen Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 69–130; Anthony Thistelton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 515–55.

guides me. Linguistically, I believe authors can achieve their goals.⁹ Therefore, I speak of authorial intent, knowing that critics of authorial intent still expect their readers to seek *their* intended meaning.¹⁰ Thus, we rightly explore the significance authors ascribe to their work.¹¹ Valid applications for contemporary audiences will correspond to the applications the authors intended for their original audience.¹²

It is a burden to know that full-length treatments of application are rare. With few predecessors, I hope that friends and critics will stand on my pygmy shoulders, correct my shortcomings, and stride on. To shorten this book, I bypassed both the basic principles for interpretation (treated in the companion volume, *Getting the Message*) and the effects of literary genre on application.

For whatever is good in this volume, I thank teachers past and colleagues present, especially the readers who offered countless beneficial suggestions. I especially thank my colleagues at Covenant, Hans Bayer, David Calhoun, Bryan Chapell, Jack Collins, and Michael Williams. The counsel of Wilson Benton, Donald Carson, John Frame, Mark Futato, Dennis Johnson, Doug Madi, Scotty Smith, Kevin Vanhoozer, James Voelz, Bob Yarbrough, and many students proved invaluable. My able research assistant, Bryan Stewart, tracked down many sources. I thank the board of Covenant Seminary who granted a sabbatical for this project.

I bless my children, Abigail, Sarah, and Beth, who “let Daddy study when the door is shut”—and also knew when to disregard the guideline for a talk or a romp. I dedicate this book to my beloved wife Debbie, who as I wrote, mourned when I mourned and rejoiced when I rejoiced.

- 9 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Thistelton, *New Horizons*, 558–62, 597–602. Stanley Fish argues the contrary in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). See also William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (New York: Noonday, 1954, 1966).
- 10 See D.A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 102–3.
- 11 Nor do we seek meanings hidden in allegedly extraordinary traits of ancient Greek or Hebrew. See Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 87–107.
- 12 I give provisional assent to E. D. Hirsch’s distinction between meaning and significance (*Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967]), but will modify it in the discussion of Krister Stendahl, John Frame and fuzzy boundaries in chap. 1, pp. 22–27.

Introduction

IS THE BIBLE RELEVANT?

Sometimes the seeming mismatch between the hard questions of life and the teachings of Scripture leaves us disappointed. On the one hand, we have clear rules no one seems to need. For example, if we own a bull in the habit of goring, Exodus 21 urges us to find recipes for steak. Or if, as we sit down to a dinner, our host says, “Incidentally, I offered the meat in the main dish to Zeus earlier today,” 1 Corinthians 10 guides us toward the vegetables. But how many of us own cattle or live near a temple of Zeus? On the other hand, rarely does a simple Bible verse answer our pressing ethical questions. For example, no Bible verse tells us what we owe telephone solicitors.

We debate the proper treatment of telephone solicitors at my house. View 1 says they are rude, since they deliberately call at mealtime, and deceitful, for they often conceal their intent. Therefore we owe them nothing. So, if someone calls and, butchering our name, says, “Hello! Is this the Dobraini residence?” we can say, “No, it is not the Dobraini residence. Good-bye.” Or if the caller says, “Hello, Mr. Dorundi, I am calling on behalf of Weed Blaster Fertile World lawn care. We have noticed lots of weeds in your yard recently and wonder if we can help you with that,” I can say, “It may look like weeds to you, but actually we are fostering biodiversity.” View 2 says that solicitors are simply trying to make a living. They may hate it as much as we do. Besides, God made telephone solicitors in his image too. So treat them accordingly.

In a very different vein, does the Bible shed light on contemporary debates about masculinity? Should a man be tough, or should he know how to cry? Does God favor stoicism or expressiveness? And how can younger, expressive men make sense of their stoical fathers? My father belongs to a stoical generation that grew up in the Depression and served in World War II. My father loves me, but I do not remember hearing those words. He is proud of me, but his generation feared spoiling children with praise, so my brothers and I rarely heard any from him when we were growing up. Men who grew up in homes like ours often have an odd blend of self-sufficiency and disdain for flattery on one hand, and a desperate hope that someone loves and accepts them, warts and all, on the other. I tell my children I love them and am proud of them so often that I wonder if I say it too much; perhaps I should dole out the praise at peak moments, like people who for maximum effect wear their best jewelry just twice a year. Which is better, the tough stoicism that girds men to endure poverty and war, or the sensitive expressiveness that gives families two nurturers?

Can we expect the Bible to supply answers to questions about telephones, emotions, and such? Custom teaches us to say no. Men discuss such things, but pastors rarely assess them. To a certain extent, that is right. The Bible is not an answer book where we look up answers to life's riddles. The teaching ministry of the church should focus on God's salvation and kingdom, not our emotions.

Still, pastors can do better at offering practical counsel. In some churches, text after text elicits the same few applications: be holy, be faithful, be committed. Week after week, believers hear that they must serve more, witness more, study the Bible more, support the church more. Worse, some preachers are repetitive *and* shallow, addressing the same few subjects in the same few terms. Even if they avoid the ultimate crime of propagating falsehood, they commit the penultimate crime of making Christianity seem boring and irrelevant.

Both scholars and pastors contribute to the problem. Scholars confess that they give little serious thought to the relevance of Scripture. One remarked that skill in application is more caught than taught, then added, "But sound application often seems hard to find, let alone catch."¹ Another admits that scholars have neglected the field:

1 William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Waco: Word, 1993), 403.

“Discussions on biblical hermeneutics have given us a fair amount of guidance on how to elucidate what the text said—its original meaning and significance for its original readers.” But they have done little to move “from what the text said to what it says” today.²

Pastors bear responsibility too. Some, deceived by the apparent simplicity of application, give it less than their best effort. Gifted pastors, knowing Scripture and human nature, readily develop points from certain passages. But without a method, intelligence and instincts will not carry the difficult texts. Daily crises squeeze out study time and supplant the ministry of the word. Sometimes—for both pastors and professors—busyness masks intellectual laziness; sustained reflection on complex matters is harder work than attending meetings. Exegetical skills erode, but who notices, short-term, if we abbreviate the toil of interpretation?

When sermon preparation does begin, some decide in advance what the church needs to hear, then scan for a text suiting their purpose. Eager to develop *their* message, they pay scant attention to the text. If, on Friday, they find that the text doesn’t “work,” then so much the worse for the text. If the pastors’ ideas remain broadly biblical, if they know their congregations, damage is reduced. Intuition allows even negligent teachers to deliver some valid messages. But what happens when intuition runs dry? Habitual negligence is toxic. Trendy and comfortable themes surface regularly, covered with a veneer of proof-texts. Sermons become repetitive, anthropocentric chats, catering to fallen cravings, ignoring the whole counsel of God.

The church deserves better. But to build afresh, we need better methods, resting on the right starting points or presuppositions. The bulk of this book will describe methods, but first we need to describe the three-faceted foundation upon which our grasp of the Bible’s relevance rests. The three, assumed rather than explained in most of this monograph, are exegesis, covenant, and grace.

THE FOUNDATION FOR THE RELEVANCE OF SCRIPTURE

Exegesis

Skillful application rests upon skillful interpretation. We cannot expect to discover the contemporary meaning of the Bible unless we

2 I. H. Marshall, “The Use of the New Testament in Christian Ethics,” *Expository Times*, 105:5 (Feb. 1994): 136.

know its original meaning. Still, this book does not teach exegetical skills; it presupposes them. It does not perform exegesis or display the full process; it harvests the results. My decision to assume that readers possess exegetical arts and will use them to supplement my explanations does not mean I devalue those arts. By those arts, we move from the original meaning to the contemporary relevance of Scripture. If our quest for the relevance of Scripture leads us to leap to subjective questions—“What does this text say to me?”—we are sure to moralize, sure to find passages saying trendy or self-serving things. If time permitted, we would review all the steps in exegesis to ensure depth and variety in application. Instead, first, I pledge that I have exegeted the passages I cite, often in far more detail than appears on the page. Second, I urge readers who wish to refresh their knowledge of interpretation to turn to my companion volume on interpretation, *Getting the Message*.

Among the facets of exegesis, mastery of contexts is most foundational. “Context” has several meanings. Just now, we need to consider the redemptive–historical context of biblical events and writings. The redemptive–historical context locates word or event within the history of Israel, within the unfolding plan of revelation and salvation. When analyzing an event or a word from God’s spokesmen, we should always ask how the original audience most likely understood it. This entails knowledge of their culture, their language, and their spiritual position. By “spiritual position” I mean, “Where did they stand in covenant history?”

Covenant

To know where people stand in covenant history, we must ascertain the history and texture of the era. What had God said or done recently? How had the people responded? How much revelation did the people have? Did they understand it? Appropriate it? Were they faithful or unfaithful, prosperous or oppressed? What alternative systems of faith and conduct tempted the people? Did they agree with their leaders or oppose them?

There are several ways to use the concept of covenant to classify people. The simplest (not to say least useful) is: (1) prefall; (2) fallen, unredeemed; (3) fallen, redeemed; (4) glorified. Or we can ask if a person lived or an event occurred under the covenant with Adam, Noah,

Abraham, Moses, David, or Christ. Of course, we can seek far more detail. For example, Elijah fits in the Davidic covenant, divided kingdom, northern kingdom, in the early (nonwriting) prophetic movement when Israel had, under Ahab, recently transitioned from false worship ostensibly dedicated to the true God and toward the worship of foreign deities. Pastors should know these things as eleven-year-olds know multiplication tables.

Valuable as it is to use the concept of covenant for historical location, its use for theological location is greater. Do the people in view stand inside or outside God's covenant of grace? If they are outside the covenant, the prime application is, "Repent and believe." If they are within, application begins with a reminder, "God loves you and called you into a relationship with him. His grace empowers you to follow him and motivates you to serve him."

People who are inside the covenant are reminded of the motives for obedience. At Sinai, before declaring the law, God says,

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. . . . I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. (Ex. 19:4–6; 20:2–3)

The apostles use similar language, declaring, "We love because he [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Again, "The love of Christ constrains us . . . that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14–15, my translation). Thus God's grace both enables and impels us to live for him. Yet, there are ways to think about motivation that partially corrupt motives such as covenant and grace.

Grace

If we were to ask an ordinary group of Christians why they obey God, some answers might be: "Because he is God and we owe him obedience." "Because I love him." "Because sin leads to trouble." "Because I fear God's anger." "Because I want God to bless me." Each

of these has the potential to turn in a noble or an ignoble direction. To see this clearly, we may label the motives for obedience as the ways of wisdom, trust, gratitude, merit, fear, and love.

The way of wisdom affirms that it is reasonable to obey God's law because he created all things and knows how they work. We expect God's commands to be effective, to bring us good.

The way of trust believes God loves us and would never mislead us. We behave as God directs, even when it may not make sense, because we trust him to make it work.

The way of gratitude judges that it is fitting to obey God without reserve because God first gave himself to us without reserve when he redeemed us. Because he has done so much for us, we should do much for him, from gratitude and from a sense of obligation to him.

Each of these motives is essentially valid, though each can have a selfish twist. In the first two, we may obey primarily for the benefits we expect to accrue; we may obey more for the gifts than for the giver. In the third, we may obey merely to discharge a duty. All three may share too much with the *way of merit*, where people obey God to compel his favor or avert his anger.

Some believe the *way of fear* is as flawed as the way of merit. As they see it, fear leads people to obey God solely to avert punishment. But in the Bible, fear is more than that. Those who doubt the value of fear rightly say that God often commands us to "fear not." They may also quote John's dictum, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment" (1 John 4:18). But other Scriptures commend the fear of God. Proverbs says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and of wisdom (9:10). The Psalms often bless those who fear the Lord (e.g. Pss. 25:12–14; 33:18; 34:7–9; 112:1). In the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, the author of Hebrews, Peter, and John all command their hearers to fear God (Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:5; Rom. 11:20–21; Eph. 5:21; Heb. 4:1; 12:28; 1 Peter 2:17; Rev. 14:7). Amazingly, Hebrews 5:7 says Jesus' prayers were heard because of his "reverent fear."³

Classically, theologians resolve this riddle—Should we fear God

3 Curiously, the NIV translates all three texts in Hebrews without using the term "fear," although the Greek is clear enough, using *phobeomai* in 4:1, and *eulabeia* (reverent fear or awe) in 5:7 and 12:28.

or not?—by distinguishing servile fear from filial fear. The epitome of servile fear is a servant or slave who cowers before an angry master. Servile fear should be alien to genuine believers, since Jesus has freed us from all punishment.⁴ Filial fear, however, is fear mixed with affection. Filial fear makes respectful children think twice before dishonoring their parents and makes students work harder for esteemed professors. Filial fear produces reverent obedience to God.⁵

The discussion of fear should also clarify the role of wisdom, trust, and gratitude as Christian motives. All four may take a selfish turn and pale next to the way of love. It is noblest to obey God for his sake alone, from love for him. As Bernard of Clairvaux said, we cajole the *unwilling* with promises and rewards, not the willing. Who offers men rewards for doing what they want to do? Do we pay hungry men to eat? So then, if we demand benefits to obey God, perhaps we love the benefits rather than God.⁶ Yet, just as fear has a valid role, when covered by love, so wisdom, trust, and gratitude can be honorable motives for obedience if they are chiefly responses to his loving grace.

The way of merit is the one unredeemable motive for obedience. Take the men mentioned above, raised by fathers who never said, “I love you.” These men hunger for praise from their fathers. They long to be so good or do such good that their fathers have to say, “I love you; I am proud of you.” But perhaps their fathers cannot say those words. Perhaps their fathers are dead. Then no human can satisfy their hunger. Their remedy is in the gospel. It proclaims that their Father in heaven loves them, without conditions. When we alienated ourselves from him, he reconciled us to himself. He adopted us as his children, welcomed us into his family, and now proudly announces, “Here am I and the children God has given me” (Heb. 2:11–13).

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.

4 Of course, unbelievers would be better off if they had such a fear, rather than disdain for God. As Isa. 8 and Heb. 6, 10, and 12 show, those who falsely profess faith should fear God’s wrath.

5 This motif is so strong in the Old Testament that fearing God can be virtually synonymous with obeying him (e.g., Deut. 5:29; 6:2; 10:12; Prov. 3:7; Isa. 8:12–15).

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Brothers, 1973, 1995), 7.17.

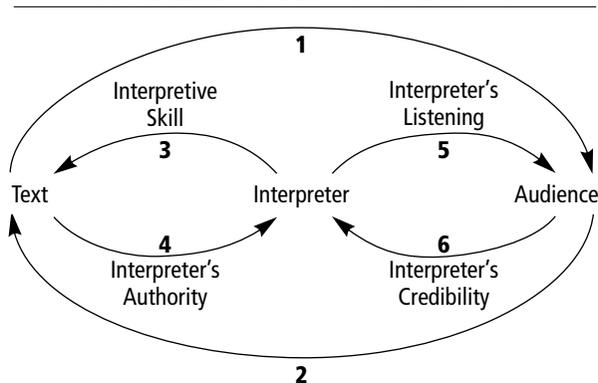
His redemption liberated us from the power of sin. His justification cured the guilt and condemnation of sin. His reconciliation removed the estrangement of sin. His adoption solved the loneliness of sin.

I address the grace motivation for obedience here because it is essential to the proper use of all that follows. This is not a devotional book, yet I cannot submit a text on the relevance of Scripture without starting with grace, for grace is as essential to our sanctification as it is to our justification. Our disobedience condemns us, but without gospel motives, our “righteousness” will too. Salvation is by grace from first to last. We never outgrow our need for the gospel.

A PLAN FOR SHOWING THE RELEVANCE OF SCRIPTURE

The three principal elements in application are the text, the interpreter, and the audience. The interpreter is a mediator, taking the message of the text to the people (fig. 1, arrow 1; see chap. 4), but also taking the questions and real needs of the audience to the text (arrow 2, chaps. 5, 6, 12). The interpreter finds the meaning of the text by drawing on his or her interpretive skill (arrow 3; see Doriani, *Getting the Message*). But the text can operate effectively only when it exercises its authority over the interpreter, who heeds its message, whether it seems pleasant or not (arrow 4, chap. 3). The interpreter brings the message to the audience most effectively when he or she listens to the questions of the audience and distinguishes their real needs from their felt needs (arrow

FIG. 1.
A GENERAL MODEL FOR APPLICATION



5, chaps. 3, 12). Finally, the audience profits most from its teachers when their character grants them spiritual credibility (arrow 6, chap. 3).

Chapters 1 and 2 establish certain theoretical foundations for applying Scripture. Chapter 3 explores the character traits and skills that enable interpreters to hear the Bible, understand the needs of audiences, and receive a good hearing. Chapter 4 explains the seven ways biblical texts generate applications: through moral rules, ethical ideals, doctrinal statements, redemptive acts in narratives, exemplary acts in narratives, symbols and songs and prayers. Chapters 5 and 6 show that sound application will answer the four classes of ethical questions people ask: (1) What should I do? (2) What should I be? (3) Where should we go? and (4) How can I discern right from wrong in a society with competing visions of morality?

Chapters 7–11 present methods for applying narratives, doctrinal passages, and ethical passages, and also establish theoretical foundations for the proposed methods. Those who want to pluck the how-to chapters out of this book will turn to chapters 7 (narrative), 9 (doctrine), 10 (ethics), and 12 (presenting Christ). If exegesis, grace, and covenant are the foundations of this monograph, the presentation of Christ is its capstone. In discussing that subject we will harvest highlights from preceding chapters and apply them to contemporary discussions about the best ways of proclaiming Scripture, to lead people to Christ.

To make the most of the how-to chapters, readers simply must know how to interpret the Bible, beginning with context. Interpretation most often goes awry when teachers wrench biblical teachings out of context to serve perceived needs. Of course, sermons ordinarily begin with illustrations that suggest the link between Scripture's world and ours, and rightly so. Pastors must show how Scripture addresses the fallenness and neediness of humankind. But even if a sermon begins by showing the relevance of its text, teachers must first have studied the text, beginning with its context. Indeed, if we master the several facets of context, we will avoid an array of errors and experience a cascade of interpretive virtues.

The term “context” has two distinct senses, which I call the literary and historical context.⁷ The literary context, or “co-text,” is the

7 Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), 29–59.

set of words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters that precede and follow a text. Investigation of literary context examines the way a passage fits within the purposes of an entire book, how it plays off prior and ensuing sections, and how it amplifies or modifies the book's motifs. It tells us why a passage is here and nowhere else.

The historical context is the setting of a passage in culture, space, and time. The question "Where are we?" encompasses customs, languages, social structures, family patterns, economy, geography, climate, and architecture. It grounds biblical events and teachings in their time and place, showing how the Bible fits into and alters its world. It reminds us that there is no monolithic "biblical culture," for the land and people of Israel changed through history. For example, the population of Palestine increased greatly between Abraham's first sojourn and Joshua's conquest over five hundred years later. Similarly, Jerusalem was an isolated citadel in David's day, but a city with extensive Greco-Roman influences in Jesus' time.

Cultures are complex. It is mistaken, for example, to think that the scribes, Pharisees, priests, and Herodians constitute a monolithic group of Jewish leaders who were opposed to Jesus. There were rifts between groups and fissures within groups. Likewise, to understand 1 Corinthians, we must know the various parties within the church. Books like Numbers, Jeremiah, Galatians, and Corinthians also invite inquiry into the complex relationships between authors and their readers.

Further, God deals with his people through covenants that built upon one another. After the fall, God's promise to redeem humankind developed through God's call of Abraham and the subsequent growth of the Patriarch's clan in Canaan and Egypt. After numerical growth there, God led his people out of Egypt under Moses and constituted them a nation. God intended that Israel become his holy, treasured people—a light to the world. After Israel proved disloyal during the theocracy, God inaugurated a covenant with David: he and his progeny would rule in perpetuity through David's greater Son. But Israel continued to rebel against God. People worshiped idols, kings ruled unjustly, and priests stood by silently. So God chastised them, letting Israel divide into a northern and a southern kingdom. They weakened and sank into further rebellion. Then God punished the north, dissolving it through an Assyrian invasion, and disciplined the south through its exile in Babylon. Later, God restored Israel in part. Under

the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, the people sampled the blessings of a promised new covenant.

Yet when John and Jesus began their ministries, the nation had barely tasted the restoration promised by the prophets. The Jews lived within the structures of the Mosaic covenant during Jesus' ministry, but when Jesus arrived, the new covenant—and the kingdom of God—began to break into this world. The death and resurrection of Jesus, together with Pentecost, constitute a cluster of events that establish a new covenant, a new phase in the life of faith. After them, every revelatory event and word falls within the particular redemptive-historical situation that prevails until the return of Christ.

1

The Nature of Application

Long ago, there was a kingdom called Bible-land. It was a fair country, well populated by kind and industrious people, but a river cut a ragged path through its entire length, dividing the country into two provinces. In some places the river was placid, so that the people crossed it freely and gained much from their conversation and trade. But elsewhere it raged with treacherous currents that carried away even the strongest swimmers and stoutest bridges. In some regions the swirling torrents carved canyons too broad, it seemed, for any span.

In these regions, though the separated people of Bible-land still honored each other, they found it difficult to trade, whether in objects or in wisdom. They did not become poor, precisely, but they were poorer, they knew, than their fellow citizens in places where the river was shallow and safe. Without the exchange of goods or ideas, they developed increasingly different ways of farming and manufacture, until as years passed, they could scarcely comprehend each other's ways on occasions when they did meet. Frustrated, some doubted that they should even attempt to cross the river. But wiser people trusted the reports of fine trade in other places, and they resolved to build bridges across even the broadest, ugliest ditches and deepest waters.¹

This book is for those who want to cross a river representing barriers to the communication of God's word wrought by the passing of

1 From Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), 55.

time and changes in cultures and language. In the language of the allegory, this book is more for builders than for architects, for communicators more than theorists. There will be theory in this book, but it will focus on texts.² But first things first. Let's begin with the God-centered nature of biblical application.

TO KNOW GOD AND CONFORM OURSELVES TO HIM

A God-centered approach to the relevance of Scripture has two foci: knowing the God who redeems and conforming ourselves to him. Jeremiah wrote,

This is what the LORD says:
 “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
 or the strong man boast of his strength
 or the rich man boast of his riches,
 but let him who boasts boast about this:
 that he understands and knows me,
 that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
 justice and righteousness on earth,
 for in these I delight,”
 declares the LORD. (Jer. 9:23–24)

Jesus says, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Paul says, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). The goal is to know God, love him (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37), believe in him (John 20:31), walk faithfully with him (Mic. 6:8), and increase in likeness to him.³ The “old self . . . is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Col. 3:9–10). The goal of our redemption is to make us more and more like God, and ever more like Christ, who is the perfect image of God (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10).⁴

Perhaps this seems obvious. Yet many Christians act as if there were

2 Strong theoretical texts include Roger Lundin, *Disciplining Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

3 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 29–33.

4 Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 28.

another center of application. For some it is law and obedience. But we must remember that the center of the law is God himself. “Love God,” says the first command. “Love others as God loves,” says the second. Even when we fail to obey, the law leads us to him, as we flee to Christ for mercy.

Others concentrate on health, happiness, maturity, or a meaningful life. But we know the futility of dwelling upon health, pleasure, or earth-bound significance. Whoever lives for physical pleasure will eventually agree with Marie Antoinette, “Nothing tastes.” Living for health and existence becomes a tragedy; after a long slow decline, every hero dies at the end of his story. Living for meaning and history reads like theater of the absurd, tales full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

We lose sight of the center of application when we promise happiness and maturity to the lost. Happiness and maturity are common *results* of life with God, but we dare not confuse results with the essence. While believers should expect to enjoy God’s blessings and to find release from the self-entrapping nature of sin, the Prince of Peace also promises opposition and tribulation. He casts fire on the earth (Luke 2:34; 12:4–12, 49–53). True disciples do not seek the life of ease that pagans run after. In Jesus’ day, pagans chased food, drink, clothing, and long life (Matt. 6:25–32). Today, pagans also pursue what is comfortable, popular, profitable, peaceful, and therapeutic. Jesus tells both, “Seek first the kingdom and its righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (v. 33, my translation).

So Bible application promotes a relationship with God and conformity to him. We honor the law because we exalt God, who gave it and reveals himself in it. We honor virtue because virtue is conformity to God’s character (not simply because no one can take it from us). This double goal of knowing God and conforming to him pervades Scripture, from Eden and Sinai to the teaching of Jesus and Paul. When God spoke to Adam and walked with him in the garden before the fall, Adam and Eve needed only to retain their conformity to God’s character, for God created them in his image and likeness, holy, righteous, rulers of the world.⁵ But the fall bespeaks Adam’s failure to know God enough to trust him.

5 Hoekema, *God’s Image*, 11–15, 28–31, 79–83; John Laidlaw, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 182–95; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image*

At Sinai, God established a covenant with the newborn nation of Israel. The covenant begins with Israel's knowledge of her relationship with God: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). The first commands cement their relationship, one marked by love and honor. "You shall have no other gods before me" means Israel owes God exclusive loyalty. Any breach of that loyalty is "in his face," to use today's argot.⁶ "You shall make no idols" means we must not fashion God in images of our choosing. God made one image of himself—humankind. Now he forbids that we make another. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God" means, among other things, that we should never idly claim to worship God or to belong to him.

The later commands instruct the faithful to conform themselves to God's person and pattern of activity. This is clearest in the sixth through tenth commands.

- God says, "You shall not murder" for he is the God who gives life, physical and spiritual.
- He says, "You shall not commit adultery," for he is faithful to his people.
- He commands, "You shall not steal," for he is a giving God, sending sun, rain, and the fecundity of the earth to all.
- God commands, "You shall not give false testimony," for he is truth and his word is truth.
- God says, "You shall not covet," for he is generous, delighting to give gifts to his children.

Even the fourth and fifth commands require that our ways harmonize with his. We labor six days, then rest, because God labored six days and rested. We honor father and mother because God bestowed dignity and honor on humans, especially those who exercise authority for him.

of God, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 88ff., 100. Berkouwer denies that dominion is part of the image, pp. 70–72.

6 See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 193; Godfrey Ashby, *Go Out and Meet God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 88; John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 276, 284.

When Jesus instructed his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, he, like the Father at Sinai, required his followers to conform themselves to him.⁷ This is clearest in the Beatitudes, where Jesus blesses traits that the Gospels later attribute to him.

- Jesus blesses those who mourn. He mourned over Israel, a nation of sheep without a shepherd, a nation that would not let him gather her children under his wings (Matt. 9:36; 23:37).
- Jesus blesses the meek (*praiis*); he says, “I am meek [*praiis*] and humble,” for he lays an easy yoke on his people (Matt. 11:28–30).
- He blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He received baptism, not from need, but to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). He fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, personally and in his disciples, that their righteousness might exceed the scribes’ and Pharisees’ (5:17–20).
- Jesus blesses the merciful. His mercy and compassion (Matt. 14:14; 15:22, 32; 17:15; 20:30–31, 34; Mark 5:19; Luke 7:13; 17:13) moved him to aid the needy.
- He blesses the pure in heart. He was so pure his enemies could find no plausible charge to bring against him at his trial (Matt. 26:59–60), so pure he dared invite his foes to convict him of sin (John 8:46).⁸
- Jesus blesses peacemakers. He healed people and sent them off in peace (Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50). He bestowed peace on his disciples (John 14:27; 16:33; Luke 24:36) and authorized his disciples to bestow peace on Israel (Matt. 10:13), though not at any price (10:34).
- Jesus blesses the persecuted. He was persecuted unto death, despite his innocence.

Jesus only declined to ascribe one beatitude to himself, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” But if (as most interpreters believe) poverty of

7 See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1:467; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 95–96.

8 At his trial the witnesses summoned to accuse Jesus were so unconvincing that the high priest finally had to ask him to incriminate himself (Matt. 26:57–66).

spirit is awareness of one's spiritual neediness, we see why.⁹ For however far we progress toward Jesus, a gap remains between Creator and creature, between Redeemer and redeemed. Yet Jesus bridges that gulf by loving and identifying with the poor in spirit, by teaching, healing, and dining with them—with us.

Paul's letters propound the same ideal of knowledge of God and conforming to him. The Ephesians know the Son of God and become mature by attaining "the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). They have "come to know Christ"; thus they put on the new self, "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:20–24). They are now "imitators of God," loving one another and forgiving one another as Christ did (4:32–5:2). Paul's goal is "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10). Christians must follow Jesus' example and "do nothing out of selfish ambition . . . but in humility consider others better than yourselves"; they must watch out for others' interests, because that is how Christ lived among us (2:1–8). Our original design shall be our final destiny, for we shall be conformed to the likeness of the Son (Rom. 8:29; see also Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). We have begun to progress in this, for we are being transformed into the Lord's likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). The whole of Scripture, then, focuses on a relationship with God and conformity to his character.

The process of becoming more Godlike begins and ends with his grace. By grace God formed Israel to receive the Messiah, who took flesh and offered himself to atone for sin. By grace Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). By grace the apostles witnessed, proclaimed, and recorded his story. By grace God completed the good work he began in us (Phil. 1:6). Whatever we offer God is a response to his mercies (Rom. 12:1). It is all too easy for believers to lose sight of the grace of God in our sanctification. We return to the spirit of the older brother, who bragged and complained, "All these years I am slaving for you" (Luke 15:29, my translation). Like Peter, we ask, "We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27). But bitterness and alienation corrupt any service that

9 Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982), 97–98; John Stott, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 31–32, 38–39.

speaks with pride about years of *slavery* for God. And any time we ask, “What will we get for our service?” we run the risk of elevating the gift above the giver. If nothing else, the Pharisees show how dangerous “religion” and good works can be.

As we explore theories and methods for application, we must not lose sight of the main thing. Whatever else we say, a relationship with God is central. Still, we need theory, beginning with an understanding of what application is. We will proceed dialectically, moving from traditional definitions and views to my own position.

THEORIES OF INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION

1. The Traditional View: First Exegesis, Then Application

The traditional view sees the application of the Bible as the last phase of biblical interpretation. In this view *interpretation* is the process of seeking and re-presenting the complete shareable meaning that authors intend to transmit, especially in difficult cases.¹⁰ In interpretation we first understand a text or an utterance, then elucidate it, whether in words like or unlike the original, to convey its meaning.¹¹ In this view parts of Scripture are clear, but to navigate the world of the biblical history and poetry we also need specialized knowledge, much as ordinary citizens do when navigating the worlds of tort law or cricket. *Hermeneutics* is the theory behind interpretation. It provides strategies for a partial transcendence of our times and a reentry into the world of Scripture. One step removed from the text, it considers how interpretation takes place and establishes principles for proper exegesis and application.¹²

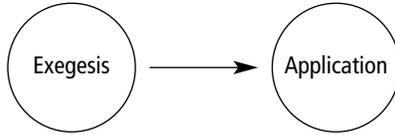
The traditional view says interpretation has two aspects (fig. 2). *Exegesis* is the exposition of Scripture. It discovers the meaning of a

10 The concept of “shareable” meaning excludes things neither print nor speech can fully transmit—the taste of apricots, the vista from a mountaintop, or the wonder of a miracle. See D. P. Fuller, “History of Interpretation,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88), 2:863.

11 From Robert Morgan, *Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–2.

12 Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), 15–20.

FIG. 2.
EXEGESIS PRECEDING APPLICATION



text—the author’s intention—in its original setting.¹³ *Application* rests upon exegesis. If exegesis determines what a text meant, application explores what it means. It articulates the *significance*, the implications, the relevance of biblical truth.¹⁴ It describes the intended *effects* of the truth. If exegesis determines the “what” of a passage, application explores the “so what.” If exegesis describes, application prescribes.

Krister Stendahl epitomized this view when he said, “When the biblical theologian becomes primarily concerned with the present meaning, he implicitly or explicitly loses his enthusiasm . . . for the descriptive task.” Biblical theology can advance only when interpreters retain a sense of “the distance and the strangeness of biblical thought,” and accept, he says, “that our only concern is to find out what these words meant” by using methods agreeable to “believer and agnostic alike.” Only when interpreters refrain from mingling the two phases can “the Bible . . . exert the maximum of influence.”¹⁵ Conservatives will favor the position that we must determine the original meaning before shifting to contemporary uses, yet another view deserves a hearing.

- 13 An excellent defense of authorial competence and the possibility of communication is Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Note that the critics’ act of *writing* that “reliable communication through writing is impossible” is nearly self-contradictory. Even those who deny interest in authorial intent expect *their* readers to take interest in *their* intentions. All writing assumes that at least modestly effective communication is achievable.
- 14 I use “relevance” almost interchangeably with application and simply mean the significance or consequences of biblical truth. My usage is unconnected to the Church Growth Movement, whose legitimate goal of reaching seekers has bred both success and excess.
- 15 Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:419–22.