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## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO APPLICATION

OUR FRIENDLY BEEFEATER knew his stuff. History oozed out of him. He was obviously telling us only a fraction of what he knew and, as we strolled from site to site, questions would extract more information. So he didn't tell us everything, and what he did tell us he mixed with humor, friendly asides, riveting stories, and constant threats to the children about their possible execution if they misbehaved. History came alive.

The preacher's task is not dissimilar. We must seek to bring truth alive. That won't usually happen if the sermon is a massive information dump. We need to speak selectively and engagingly so as to help people grasp what God has said and is saying. This takes great skill. In the chapters that follow, we will look at the skills required for developing engaging and varied application of God's Word. But before we come to that, it is helpful to lay a foundation on which to build. Preachers need a working theology of biblical application. They need a sense of what application is, a picture of how the biblical preachers applied God's Word, convictions concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in application, and a clear grasp of the preacher's task in developing applicatory messages. These things will be the focus of this chapter—a kind of beginner's guide to biblical application.

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO APPLICATION

The word *apply* has many shades of meaning. We speak of applying pressure to get what we want, of suddenly applying the brakes in a car, of applying a coat of varnish to the door, or of applying a principle in a certain situation. We also speak of applying for a job or applying ourselves to our work.<sup>1</sup> The root idea behind these uses of the word is that of putting one thing on or against another or of bringing things close together.<sup>2</sup> Pressure is put on a person, brakes are put on the wheels, varnish is put on the door. The word also carries the meaning of making use of something or putting it into action. The car brakes are put into action; use is made of a principle in a certain situation. In the words of Jay Adams, “To ‘apply’ is to bring one thing into contact with another in such a way that the two adhere, so that what is applied *to* something affects that to which it is applied.”<sup>3</sup>

These shades of meaning make it a valuable term for Bible interpreters and preachers to employ as long as it is understood holistically.<sup>4</sup> Preachers take biblical truth and press it against or put it on the lives of people. But they don't just tell them how to put the truth into action; they actually put it into action in the act of preaching. They must preach so that people experience and appropriate the truth, feeling its sting or tasting its sweetness during the preaching. They need to bring it up close to their hearers so that they are impacted by it. Truth is not handled as something detached and largely irrelevant to those who are listening. It is real and people must sense its import as the preacher consciously presses it against their lives.

## BIBLICAL MODELS

A brief survey of biblical preaching quickly establishes that this pressing of truth against people's lives is a hallmark of true preaching. We

1. These examples are taken from “apply,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed September 27, 2010, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apply>.

2. “Apply” comes from the Latin *applicare*, “to attach to, to devote oneself to,” from *ad-* “to” + *plicare* “fold”. The etymological sense is “to bring things in contact with one another.” See “apply (v.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed September 27, 2010, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=apply>.

3. Jay Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1990), 15.

4. Other terms that have been used by earlier generations have been “improving” and “using” the text.

begin with Moses, who took the law delivered at Sinai and preached it to the people of Israel on the plains of Moab as they were about to enter the Promised Land. He didn't simply repeat the laws verbatim; neither did he merely explain them. He applied them to the lives of those before him. Even though none of them (bar two) had been present forty years earlier when the law was given, he said to them,

The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. (Deut. 5:2–3)

That is a remarkable statement because, on the face of it, it isn't true. The Lord made a covenant with their forefathers, not with them. But as far as Moses was concerned, what God said then he says now, and the covenant he made with their forefathers he made with them, as if they had been there. So on that basis Moses pleads with them, warning and encouraging them. He sets the law in the context of their recent history, recounting their rebellion, their desert wanderings, their victories, and now their new opportunity to enter the Promised Land. He urges them to listen and to obey.

Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you. (Deut. 4:1–2)

In the great conclusion to his address, he exhorts them to “choose life” and he warns them of the dire consequences that will come on them if they don't.<sup>5</sup>

Moses was a passionate, urgent preacher of the Word of God, applying the law powerfully to the situation of his people. And he was not alone in that. All the prophets who followed him did the same.

5. For a helpful treatment of Moses' preaching in Deuteronomy and its import for preachers today, see Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2009).

Old Testament prophetic preaching was marked by its robust, fearless, compelling appeal to God's people. It never presented abstract truth but always applied truth to the lives of God's people—often God's erring people, but sometimes, as for example in Haggai, God's discouraged people; or, in Habakkuk, God's perplexed people; or, in the latter part of Isaiah, God's distressed people. Whatever the situation, the prophets spoke powerfully to the present life situation of their hearers.

Zephaniah affords a compelling example of this. Prophesying to the southern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Josiah, about a hundred years after the northern kingdom was exiled, he warned Judah and Jerusalem that they now faced the same fate. They stood on the precipice of the day of the Lord (1:7, 14), which is the theme tune of Zephaniah's prophecy. He doesn't begin his sermon with a heartwarming illustration but launches straight into a pulpit-thumping warning of universal judgment (1:2–2:3). God will sweep away everything—man and beast, birds and fish. Why? Because of their great sin. Zephaniah exposes the evils of seventh-century Judah: their idolatry, syncretism, and spiritual complacency. He declares that the Lord is angry and is preparing to make war against his people, so it is urgent that they repent. Perhaps they will find mercy (2:3).

In the second section of his message (2:4–3:8) he broadens the scope of the Lord's judgment. He looks west to Philistia, east to Ammon and Moab, south to Egypt and Ethiopia, and north to Assyria and especially Nineveh. To us, they sound like faraway lands. But they weren't for Israel. They were near neighbors. It was like an Australian hearing a message concerning New Zealand and Indonesia, or an American hearing threats made against Mexico and Canada, or perhaps an Englishman hearing of God's judgment coming upon Scotland and Wales or Spain and France. But then, in the same breath, Zephaniah points the finger again at Jerusalem because her sins were no different from those of the surrounding nations. They were all the same—proud and arrogant, mocking God and acting as if they owned the world.

Yet although Zephaniah's words were filled with the most terrible warnings of impending doom, like nearly all the prophets he also brought

a word of hope (3:9–20). There would be a remnant who would be purified by God and would bring to him true worship. So the day of the Lord would be not only a day of judgment but also a day of salvation.

Zephaniah's preaching is undeniably applied preaching. It is direct, pointed, and specific. The "day of the Lord" was not an academic, theological principle that needed to be understood, but a terrible, imminent reality that demanded response. With red-hot zeal, God's prophet warned, pleaded, and comforted.

Turning to the first pages of the New Testament, we find exactly the same kind of preaching. John the Baptist's indictment of sin was specific, his call to repentance was powerful, and his foretelling of One to come was humbly winsome. He spoke to the people of his day, addressing the great needs of the moment, albeit in a somewhat bizarre way. We need not take his dress code, diet, or location as a model for contemporary preaching. Camel-skin suits, locust salads, and desert pulpits have never really been my thing. But we do need to note that his preaching was in line with the tenor of all biblical preaching. It was forcefully applied to the lives of those who listened.

No one demonstrates this more clearly than Jesus himself. The master preacher is the master of living application. Whether you think of the stinging attacks he made on the Pharisees (e.g., Matt. 23), or the brilliant twist in the tail of some of his parables (e.g., Luke 15), or the immensely practical counsel about true righteousness given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6), or the strong warnings given to would-be followers (e.g., Luke 14:26–35), or the gracious comfort ministered to his grieving disciples (John 13–17), the fact is that his preaching always spoke directly and personally to the people to whom he was speaking. It was the scribes and Pharisees who specialized in dull discourses that revolved around quoting dead rabbis and dissecting the minute details of the tradition of the elders. Jesus specialized in cutting to the heart of an issue and speaking to the hearts of his hearers. Little wonder that "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt. 7:28–29). As Michael Quicke has observed, "Jesus Christ seemed to leave no room

for neutrality or boredom whenever he preached. From explosive beginnings in Nazareth, he created impact every time.”<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that the apostles, having been trained by Jesus, followed suit. The book of Acts describes the relentless advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. Despite persecution from without, and times of both division and corruption within, the early church grew and expanded with the public preaching of the gospel driving the mission forward. Luke records speeches to both Jews and Gentiles, in settings as diverse as the temple courts, the courts of the Sanhedrin, synagogues, rural towns, and the Areopagus. Not all would qualify as sermons in the way we currently use the term, but all were a kind of preaching in the sense of being public, verbal proclamations of gospel truth.

As with the preaching of Jesus and the prophets, the sermons and speeches of Acts are always directly and pertinently applied to the audience at hand. They are all *occasional* sermons. The Pentecost sermon, for example, specifically addressed the protest of skeptics who thought that the effect of what was, in reality, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was nothing other than drunken and disorderly behavior. Peter explained that it was not drunkenness but Spirit-fullness as foretold by the prophet Joel. But it was not enough that they understood this as the fulfillment of prophecy. They needed to understand the potentially devastating implications. It meant Jesus, whom they had crucified, was alive. The one they had tried to dispose of was, in fact, reigning as Lord and Christ and had poured out his Spirit as he had promised. There is no doubt that Peter was driving at exactly the Spirit-enabled response that came: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37).

In his address to the Sanhedrin, Stephen similarly drove at heart conviction. Although much of the speech recounted Israel’s history, it did so with an agenda. Stephen was making a case throughout that built to the climax: “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and

6. Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003), 23.

ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51). That’s probably not the best way to win friends and influence people when you’re on trial, but it was the best way to bring God’s Word to bear on an apostate generation facing the imminent wrath of God. They needed to hear that truth stacked up against them and hear that they were guilty before the God of heaven. As far as God was concerned, it was not Stephen who was in the dock, but the Jewish nation.

Paul’s speeches in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, in Lystra, and in the Areopagus also provide fascinating cameos of audience-targeted preaching. Each message was directed to particular people in a particular place with particular spiritual needs. The Jews in Pisidian Antioch needed to be convinced that Jesus was the promised Old Testament Messiah in whom there is forgiveness of sins. Paul directly challenged them to believe in Christ and not to reject what God had done. The pagan crowd in Lystra needed to be persuaded of something very different: that the apostles were not gods. They needed to realize the difference between the Creator and creatures. They needed to turn from worthless idols and acknowledge the living God who had blessed them with crops and food. The educated philosophers of Athens really needed the same message, but they needed it in a very different way. It was essential that they also turn from idolatry, but Paul found a way into their mindset by declaring to them who the “unknown god” was to whom they had erected an altar. With sensitivity to their culture and appreciation of their learning, he appealed to them to repent and acknowledge Christ as judge. Each speech was quite distinct because the audiences were very different. While the gospel remains the same, the messages differ because the intent was never a detached presentation of truth but an application of gospel truth to the lives of those being addressed.

The narrative of Acts highlights that such preaching always provokes a response, which Luke is careful to record.<sup>7</sup> Typically, some

7. Of the thirteen main speeches in Acts (2:15–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 7:1–53; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31; 20:18–35; 22:1–21; 24:10–22; and 26:2–29), Luke records responses for eleven. Only the speeches in Acts 3 and 24 record no immediate response.

are converted, some are incensed, and some are keen to talk further.<sup>8</sup> These responses are not incidental to the narrative but are at the heart of it. Luke is at pains to show that preaching, by its very nature, is designed to elicit a response—very often a dramatic one. The gospel is surging forward and it makes an impact on people's lives. To some it is the fragrance of life and to others the stench of death. It is never merely academic information leaving people untouched.

## GRACE-FILLED APPLICATION

It would be easy to expand this brief survey of biblical preaching, but the same picture is seen wherever we turn. Biblical preaching is always truth applied. More precisely, it is always gospel truth applied to the heart. That leads us to two essential dimensions of holistic, living application: first, it must always reflect the grace of the gospel because biblical preaching is gospel preaching, and second, it must always be heart-oriented because the gospel demands a heart response to God.

First, biblical preaching must be grace-filled as it applies the gospel to people's lives. The preacher is a herald of good news. Isaiah spoke of the “beautiful . . . feet” of messengers who “bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isa. 52:7). Initially referring to the joyful news that Israel was to be brought back from her captivity, Paul quotes this verse for the wider and more glorious work of the gospel preacher who proclaims salvation in Christ (cf. Rom. 10:14–15).

Preaching must, in the first place, help people marvel at the astoundingly good news that we are embraced in God's plan of redemption by grace alone. We do not have to earn our way into his kingdom or merit the forgiveness of our sins by somehow trying to outweigh our bad deeds with good ones. We need only look to Jesus, who has won the prize for us. We simply trust in him and, on the basis of faith alone, we are justified by God.

8. For faith responses, see Acts 2:37, 41; 10:44; 13:48–49; 17:34; 20:37. For further inquiry responses, see 13:42–44; 17:32. For direct opposition, see 4:13, 18, 21; 5:33, 40; 7:54, 57–58; 13:45, 50; 17:32; 22:22–23; 26:24.

Next, preaching must herald the wonderfully good news that we are not only saved by grace but sanctified by grace. Christ now lives in us, empowering and enabling us to obey him and to do the good works that he has prepared in advance for us to do. It is not just that our efforts are a response to God's grace. They are the fruit of Christ now dwelling in us by his Spirit. We do all through Christ who strengthens us. His sap flows through the branches, his power is worked in us, his grace sustains us, his love comforts us, and his glory awaits us. We do not simply look to Christ's example; we depend, day by day, on his inward presence and enabling. That is why Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would "know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph. 1:18–19).

This good news, however, is not limited to God's blessing in our lives as individuals. The proclamation of the gospel preacher is, "Your God reigns," and he reigns over all people and all nations. Christ has come into our world as God's appointed king. With divine power, he has defeated the forces of evil and triumphed over sin and death. The kingdom of darkness is being progressively pushed back as the kingdom of God increasingly invades this world, righting what is wrong and establishing justice and righteousness. Christ is redeeming not only a people, but this whole physical world, for himself. Creation itself will be restored and liberated when the work of redemption is brought to its consummation.

Both personal salvation and creation restoration are works of glorious grace—unsought and undeserved. God is the initiator, and the preacher is the herald of what he is doing. The preacher trumpets his gracious, powerful works so that all may hear and respond. The onus is on the preacher to ensure that the heralding really does exalt God and his grace. Sermons ought to be full of the merits of Christ. They ought to major on what he has done. They ought to declare loudly the victory he has had and the power and authority he presently wields. They ought to send people away with hope and with a vision of the majesty of Christ and the triumph of his kingdom.

Such preaching will enthuse rather than berate; it will excite and not discourage; it will make people look far more to Christ and what he is doing than to themselves and what they are doing; it will build up, not tear down. The gospel does not send people away trying to improve themselves or trying to keep a string of rules. Nor does it leave them feeling burdened and hopeless. It was the message of the Pharisees that heaped heavy burdens on people. The message of Christ is that of rest and hope for the weary.

Of course, preaching the good news demands that we also preach the bad news. We must expose the wickedness of rebellion against God's appointed King. We must speak plainly of the rule of Satan, the power of sin, the destructiveness of evil, the depravity of human nature, the hardness of fallen hearts, and the utter lostness of all people outside of Christ. But these truths are never the bottom line. The bottom line is that Christ has triumphed.

If you go to a jewelry shop to buy a ring, the jeweler may spread out on the counter a black satin cloth on which to display each ring. Against the black, the ring sparkles. But it would be a depressing spectacle if the jeweler laid out black cloth after black cloth without ever producing a ring for you to admire. Sadly, some preaching is like that. It is so intent on making sure the bad news is clear that the good news is scarcely heard. People leave having seen a lot of black but not many sparkling diamonds. Gospel preaching should not be like that. The black cloth will be laid out, but the main focus will be on the beauty of the gospel ring.

## **HEART-ORIENTED APPLICATION**

If the great task of preaching is proclaiming tremendously good news, we must never forget that this news is not to wash over people but to penetrate their hearts. Night after night we may watch the evening news on TV, and we easily become immune to the impact of the mostly bad news we see and hear. We may groan a little in the face of terrible violence, devastating natural disasters, or devious politicians, but then we get up to wash the dishes, largely unaffected by what we've just witnessed. That is never meant to be the case after hearing the

good news of salvation. Preachers must seek to present the gospel in a heart-penetrating way.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was unrelenting in his “heart attack.” Beginning with the character of those to whom God’s kingdom is revealed (the poor in spirit, those hungering and thirsting after righteousness, the pure in heart, and so on), he went on to target the application of the law at the level of heart motives. Adultery is not just the outward act of the flesh but the inner lust of the heart; murder is not just the external act of killing someone but the inward attitude of hating someone. Jesus has not just come to improve people’s behavior; he has come to change their lives from the inside out. The essence of the new covenant is a new heart (cf. Jer. 31:31–34).

It is useful, therefore, to make a distinction between practical application, of which there is plenty in the Sermon on the Mount, and heart application. Practical application addresses how to live for God: how to witness, how to serve, how to lead, how to love, how to pray, and so on. Such application is important and helpful. We ought to be as practical as possible in our preaching. But application to the heart goes deeper. It deals with our underlying attitudes, mind-set, motivations, aspirations, character, and goals. It aims not just at getting us to do the right thing but at acquiring wisdom for life.<sup>9</sup> It tells us not only what to do but who we are, who we should be, and what by God’s grace we can be. It wades more deeply into the soul and is more searching. It may well leave us feeling exposed. But if heart application is filled with grace, then it does not leave us feeling hopeless. We may feel unclean and undone, as Isaiah did (cf. Isa. 6:1–8), but we know, as he also came to know, that cleansing comes from the altar and commissioning from God.

## TWO ESSENTIAL ALLIES

Grace-filled, heart-oriented gospel preaching should lead people to a deep awareness of their need of God and of God’s readiness to meet them

9. Doriani argues for four aspects of application: duty, character, goals, and discernment. The “duty” category matches practical application while the other three are more heart-oriented. See Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), esp. 97–157.

in their need. But it is not only those who hear such preaching who are in great need of God's aid. So is the preacher in the actual act of preaching. It is impossible for any of us to preach effective, grace-filled, heart-oriented sermons in our own strength. Left to ourselves, we cannot make the slightest impact on the human heart, no matter how skillful we might be. In fact, even God's all-powerful Word itself falls on deaf ears and hard hearts if God himself is not actively involved in opening ears and softening hearts.

The preacher, then, can never work alone. He needs help and his help is received from two main sources. First and foremost, his help comes from the Holy Spirit, who empowers and enables preaching and transforms the hearts of the hearers. Secondly, his help comes from the believing church community that provides the God-ordained context for gospel preaching. The story of the early church suggests that these are the two essential partners of biblical preaching. We have seen in Luke's account of the relentless advance of the gospel that preaching leads the way. But the advance is the result not of preaching alone, but of preaching in connection with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and with vibrant spiritual community.

The story of Acts begins with the disciples waiting in expectation for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Without the presence of the Spirit, they dare not begin to preach. Only with the Spirit's power will a man like Peter, who had previously felt such pressure from an unnamed slave girl that he denied his Lord three times, be enabled to speak boldly and courageously to thousands and be useful to God in the salvation of many souls. On the day of Pentecost, it is preaching that brings in the first gospel harvest, but it is Spirit-empowered preaching. The same fruit would have been quite inconceivable just one day earlier.

From that point onward, the Holy Spirit constantly features in the narrative. Although Peter and the believing community have been filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, we are told a little later that they are again filled with the Spirit (4:8, 31). The Spirit gives them special enabling and boldness to speak his Word.<sup>10</sup> The first inward crisis comes to the

10. Luke speaks of the fullness of the Spirit in two senses. One sense is that of an ongoing condition of the Spirit controlling and influencing a person, as seen in Acts 6:3, 5; 11:24;

church when two of its members lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3, 9). When the seven are appointed to help with the daily distribution of food, men known to be full of the Holy Spirit are chosen. It is said of Stephen that his opponents “could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke” (6:10). After his speech, it is expressly noted that he was “full of the Holy Spirit” as he looked into heaven and saw the ascended Christ. The gift of the Spirit was so amazing that Simon the Sorcerer thought that the ability to impart the Spirit would be a great trick to buy (8:18–19). When Paul was converted, the Holy Spirit came on him, as also on the people at Cornelius’s house when he—Cornelius—was converted. It was the Holy Spirit who spoke to the church in Antioch, telling them to set aside Paul and Barnabas for mission work (13:2). Frequently, in the narrative, the Holy Spirit prompts and directs proceedings, sending people here or there, opening or closing doors, and always strengthening and encouraging the churches (see 8:29, 39; 9:31; 10:19; 11:12; 13:4; 15:28; 16:6, 7; 20:22, 23).

There are many other references to the Holy Spirit in Acts, but the point is clear. The Spirit is never far from the action. Or more correctly, the action of Acts is the action of the ascended Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through his people.<sup>11</sup> Just as the advance of the gospel in Acts cannot be understood apart from the central place of preaching, neither can preaching be understood apart from the central role of the Spirit.

This theme stands alongside another prominent emphasis in the narrative. Luke repeatedly stresses the spiritual vibrancy of the early church community. The church is empowered by the Holy Spirit and lives in dependence upon the Spirit. This is seen clearly by the emphasis Luke places on prayer. At the beginning of the story, as they are waiting

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13:52 (cf. Eph. 5:18). The other sense is that of a special equipping for particular tasks. This kind of “filling” leads to boldness, courage, and power. See also Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit in Marriage, Home & Work: An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18–6:9* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 40–54.

11. John Stott’s preferred title for Acts is “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 34.

in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Spirit, they “all joined together constantly in prayer” (1:14). Following the coming of the Spirit, one of the hallmarks of the new church community was its devotion to regular prayer (2:42). In the face of opposition, the people joined together in special prayer (4:24; 12:5), receiving some astounding answers that surpassed their own expectations. The apostles themselves made prayer, along with the ministry of the Word, their foremost priority (6:4) that could not be set aside even by a significant church crisis.

The believing community was also marked by radical love as the believers surrendered their personal property to assist one another. The community spent much time together, publicly and privately, formally and informally. They were devoted to the breaking of bread together, to fellowship with one another, and to the apostles' teaching. It was a Word-shaped, Word-hungry community, as highlighted by the commendation of the Bereans who received the Word eagerly and readily searched the Scriptures to check the accuracy of Paul's preaching (17:11).

It was also a community that was forced to take holiness seriously. The dramatic exposure of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, and the swift judgment brought on them for their deception, served as a sobering warning to the community that they were to be holy before the Lord who sees all. The context of growing persecution also ensured that early Christianity was not for those who wanted a halfhearted allegiance to Christ. The cost was high enough to make one serious about commitment.

Finally, it was a community actively engaged in evangelism. The persecution that drove the believers out of Jerusalem following Stephen's death saw a multiplication of witness among ordinary believers, as those who were scattered spread the gospel wherever they went. The vast impact of such gospel witness is seen in the story of the church in Antioch, which in time proved to be one of the strongest missionary-sending churches of the era. It was established not by the apostles or some planned church-planting program initiated by the church in Jerusalem, but by the spontaneous witness of individuals who then received the support of Barnabas and Paul.

The early church was, then, a spiritually dynamic, prayerful, gospel-hearted community that was both a base from which mission was launched and a loving family into which new converts could be enfolded.

These aspects of the story of the early church are significant for our study of application in preaching. They make clear that a holistic view of application demands a holistic view of preaching, and that, in turn, demands that we are firmly persuaded that preaching can never stand alone. There are circumstances in which preaching flourishes and circumstances in which it withers. Acts describes the former, showing us that preaching is the foremost activity of the church's gospel work, but that ordinarily it is powerfully effective only when it is rooted in and grows out of a loving, holy, evangelistic, prayerful, Spirit-filled community. The Holy Spirit and a healthy church are the indispensable allies of effective preaching. That means that no pastor can afford to major on preaching to the exclusion of all else. Healthy preaching grows out of a healthy church life. Peter Adam rightly says, "Our ministry may be pulpit-centered, but it should not be pulpit-restricted, for such a ministry of the Word will suffer severe limitations."<sup>12</sup>

## RESPONDING TO PENTECOST

There are three ways we can respond to the central themes of the narrative in Acts, and especially to its focus on the Holy Spirit. One way is to continually seek repetitions of the day of Pentecost. Charismatics and Pentecostals treat the events of that day as normative, and so they look for spectacular signs as manifestations of the Spirit's presence today and for the baptism of the Spirit as an experience subsequent to conversion. However, this view flattens out the peaks and troughs of redemptive history, failing to take note of what is unique about the day of Pentecost in the unfolding story of salvation. It marked not so much an event to be repeated as it did the beginning of a new era.

A second response, therefore, is to see Pentecost as unrepeatable but having initiated the last days between Christ's first and second comings. In these last days, the Spirit is always present with his church. The spectacular

12. Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 75.

markers of his arrival have disappeared but the Spirit is still present. All believers possess the Spirit and the church community is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Such a view encourages confidence that God is with us now through his Spirit, so when we preach, witness, or lead in the church we may be sure that the Spirit is present. But while this view accurately reflects the unique redemptive-historical significance of the day of Pentecost, it easily leads to too little expectation of what the Spirit is able to do. The presence of the Spirit is taken as a given, and we now just get on with the work of preaching, knowing that he is with us. The Holy Spirit's presence is assumed, with the result that he often features little in the life or vocabulary of the church.

A third position is possible and desirable. Pentecost can be viewed as a unique and unrepeatable event that ushered in a new era in salvation history. But the era it ushered in is one in which the Holy Spirit, who now dwells in and with his people, is able to bring to individuals, churches, and even nations seasons—long or short—of immense spiritual blessing. Just as Peter, who had been filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, was filled again when he spoke before the Sanhedrin (4:8), and just as the entire community that had received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost received further power and boldness after fervent prayer in the face of persecution (Acts 4:31), and just as the Spirit's power was extended powerfully beyond Jerusalem to the Samaritans and the Gentiles (8:14–16; 10:44–46), so we may reasonably expect today that the Spirit is able to come on us with fresh and even overwhelming power. This is not looking for a “second blessing” experience for individuals, accompanied by speaking in tongues. It is looking for a second, third, fourth, tenth, or hundredth blessing for the church community, as the Spirit works with great gospel power, converting sinners and sanctifying the church.

Sometimes this will be evidenced in a time of revival or spiritual awakening, but it need not take only that form. The Spirit may bring times of refreshing, of power, or of special grace that fall short of what we would call revival and yet do not in any way fall short in generating gospel effectiveness. We should not just wait for the big earthquake. We should respond to all the smaller tremors as well. Preachers and their churches need to be fervent in prayer, asking that God would pour out his Spirit in great measure on

each message and on the church as a whole. We need to be expectant of what God in his power can do. We should be eager to see many conversions. We should have high hopes for what the church can be. We should pray without ceasing and call on God for great spiritual power.<sup>13</sup> Without this, any techniques for holistic application are essentially hollow and vain. The greatest need of the day is Spirit-anointed preaching. Only with the Spirit's power will applications strike home powerfully into people's lives.

## THE PREACHER'S TASK

We can now summarize and clarify the expository preacher's task when it comes to application. The following key points have been made:

- In expository preaching the message of the biblical text is spoken afresh to God's people today by the preacher in such a way that those who hear the message sense that God himself is speaking to them and is dealing with their lives.
- Biblical preaching is, therefore, directly addressed to the hearers today; it is not a lecture or verbalized commentary on the text but a proclamation of the truth of the text applied holistically to the lives of those who hear it.
- Holistic application is concerned with bringing the message as a whole, to the person as a whole, for life as a whole.
- As gospel truth is applied in this way, it must always be preached in a grace-filled, heart-oriented way.
- Such holistic, applicatory preaching never stands alone but is dependent on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the fervent prayers of God's people, and the support and reinforcement of a spiritually dynamic church community.
- The Spirit's power in the church and in preaching is not to be assumed but is to be earnestly sought and expected because the Spirit has been given to the church by the ascended Christ to empower gospel witness.

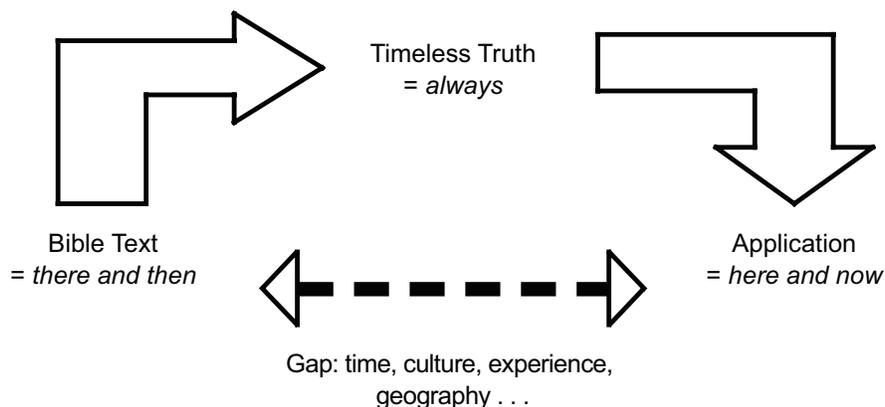
13. See Arturo G. Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: The Vitality of the Holy Spirit in Preaching* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998).

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO APPLICATION

Armed with such convictions, a preacher sits down to start preparing next Sunday's message. What needs to happen? How is he going to approach the task? If he's right-headed and soft-hearted, he'll begin with prayer, asking God for the message he would have him preach, and seeking insight into his Word and into the lives of the people to whom he will be preaching. He will plead that God will give him a word for his people.

Then, in a prayerful spirit, he will begin to chip away at a threefold task, as depicted in diagram 1.<sup>14</sup> The preacher moves from the "there and then" world of the Bible to the "here and now" lives of his people, discerning en route what the timeless truths are that need to be proclaimed afresh today. The first task is to exegete the text. The Bible text is "there and then," set at least 2,000 years ago, written to different people, at a different time, in a different culture from that of the people who will be listening on Sunday. So a key part of the preacher's task is to spend ample time in the "there and then" world of the text, endeavoring to understand it and enter into it.

**Diagram 1: From Then to Now**



The next task is to consider what truth in the text remains true for hearers of the Word today. What are the timeless truths of the passage?

14. A similar process is described more fully in J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 21–25, 203–13.

Timeless truths are the “always” truths of the text. They are the abiding truths that are of enduring relevance. “There and then” truths may sometimes be “always” truths. “You shall not murder” is a command as relevant today as it was in Moses’ day. It is timeless in a way that the command not to “cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard” is not (Lev. 19:27). For texts like this, identifying the timeless truth necessitates moving up one or two levels of abstraction.<sup>15</sup> If you go right up to the highest level of abstraction with each text, then every sermon will be about the glory of God. Ultimately, that’s what the whole of the Bible is about. But while that is a great theme, it ought not be the main theme of every sermon. It’s too broad. We want to go up only the number of levels of abstraction necessary to derive a timeless “always” truth.

Timeless, however, does not mean static. Timeless truths revealed in the past actually come to us with greater force and power because of subsequent redemptive history. Truths that God revealed to Abraham, Moses, or David, for example, come to us via Jesus Christ and the full realization of the gospel in his redeeming work. In handling “always” truths, therefore, we must not leapfrog from the past to the present, ignoring the progress of redemptive history and the climactic work of the Messiah. Rather, we must examine and apply truths revealed at earlier times in the history of God’s people in the light of the finished work of Jesus, our current place in salvation history, and the future that is yet to be fully revealed. They have relevance *always*, but their relevance to us is shaped by the work of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Suppose I am preparing to preach from Haggai 1. I see the “there and then” details of the text: the time of Darius, the governor Zerubbabel, the high priest Joshua, the nation of Israel, the neglect of the rebuilding of the temple, the building of paneled houses, timber up in the mountains, failed crops and poor returns, and, eventually, renewed zeal

15. Haddon Robinson explains the idea of abstraction in “The Heresy of Application,” in Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 308.

16. Chapter 8 explores more fully the importance of a redemptive-historical, christocentric application of biblical truth.

in working on the house of the Lord. I need to explore and understand each detail and come to a sense of what the chapter as a whole is about. In “there and then” terms, it seems that the people of Israel need to stop and think about what is happening to them, and see that they are not being blessed physically by the Lord because they have not prioritized the building of his house, for his glory, as they ought to have.

That theme, however, like the details of the text, is distant from the lives of people in the twenty-first century. So now I need to think about how that message might have a bearing on people today. What is the message of Haggai that people today need to hear? What, out of the specifics of that situation, are “always” truths of enduring importance? And how do those timeless truths come to us in the light of the work of Christ? That is not so easy to answer. Does this apply to the church or to nations today? Is the equivalent of building the temple today building up church ministry, or evangelism, or more generally doing whatever the Lord has called us to do? Does God still discipline us through failed crops, drought, famine, financial crises, and other physical difficulties? Can we expect that when we do what is right before God, material blessing will follow? Is it wrong to put home construction ahead of gospel ministry?

As I reflect on such questions, I become wary of making tight equations: Israel equals the church, temple building equals church ministry, crops equal income, difficulty equals punishment, drought equals God's displeasure. Surveying a wider biblical theology, I see there are too many variables to make simple one-to-one equivalents. Haggai had an advantage. He was giving an inspired interpretation of events that I cannot claim to be able to do. So, instead, I opt to zoom in on the command to “give careful thought to your ways,” found twice in the text (1:5, 7). There may be no tight, clear-cut equations possible, but it is always right and necessary for us to stop, think, and see if perhaps God is speaking to us about our priorities having gone awry. It is a timeless truth that God calls his people to consider their circumstances and to be sure that they are prioritizing the honor of God. More particularly, followers of Christ and churches of the Lord Jesus need to consider whether they are prioritizing the honor of Christ and the work of the gospel as they ought.

That truth sets me on an applicatory track, but it will need to become much more specific and nuanced if it is to be drilled down into people's lives in the *here and now*. I need to find compelling ways of preaching, *here and now*, the main message of the text—namely, *God challenges our priorities because Christ's glory is at stake*. In this way, biblical truth is made as specific as possible for present-day hearers of God's Word. They are left not with something of only historical interest (the "there and then" theme of the text), nor with something general (the timeless "always" truth), but with something pressed against their lives today (the "here and now" message from God).

But even when we have shaped a one-liner that sets the direction for our message, we still have much work to do to develop excellent application. As Haddon Robinson has said, "In application we attempt to take what we believe is the truth of the eternal God, given in a particular time, place, and situation, and apply it to people in the modern world, who live in another time, another place, and a very different situation. That is harder than it appears."<sup>17</sup>

The three distinct and essential tasks the preacher undertakes are not entirely sequential. A conversation needs to be set up between the three, and particularly between the text and today's hearers—between *there and then* and *here and now*. Klaas Runia put it this way:

The secret of relevant preaching is that the message of the gospel and the situation of the listeners are related to each other in such a way that the listeners discover that its message really concerns their life as it is. *Relevance occurs at the intersection of the unique message of the Bible . . . and the unique situation of the people in the pew.*<sup>18</sup>

17. Robinson and Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 307. Daniel Overdorf says, "Effective preaching includes application that, first, allows the Word of God to speak (which requires biblical integrity) and, second, allows the Word of God to speak as explicitly and concretely today as it did originally (which requires contemporary relevance)." Daniel Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon: How to Balance Biblical Integrity and Cultural Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 15.

18. K. Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, The Moore College Lectures (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 75 (italics in original).

Runia, however, does not suggest that this happens by way of one-way traffic, from either text to audience or audience to text. He advocates, instead, a dialogue between the text and the audience. First, since the text has primacy, we start with reading it carefully, getting the “feel” of it and formulating in a preliminary way its basic message. Second, “As soon as we think we have succeeded in this, we reverse the poles and try to look at the text *through the eyes of our listeners*.”<sup>19</sup> We try to see this text as they will see it. How will they react to it? Will they understand it, accept it, resist it, or embrace it? Third, we return to the text for the hard labor of exegesis. We now dig into the text in detail, seeking out its true meaning but doing so with our hearers and their questions in mind. We are mining the text for a message for them. Fourth, we relate the message of the text, once it is fully laid bare, to the reactions of our listeners. The preacher here has a “double task of being representative for both his text and his people.”<sup>20</sup> Fifth, we are in a position, Runia says, to determine the aim of the sermon. The aim is the message of the text in motion, moving toward and into the situation of the hearers. Finally, we are ready to prepare the outline of the sermon.

While taking six distinct steps may not be necessary, the process he describes is instructive. A dialogue is set up between the text and the present-day audience so that in forming the message from the biblical text, the hearers are never forgotten and application is no mere after-thought or add-on. When we exegete, we are digging into God’s Word to discover what God would say to his people today. Our exegetical work is done with a view to discovering a message for today, and the “there and then” truth of the text is explored and understood in terms of what it says to us *here and now*.

Such a dialogue will help us develop holistic application rather than bolt-on applications. But to engage in this dialogue, we need to learn how to ask applicatory as well as exegetical questions of the text, we need to find ways of interfacing the truths of the text with life as it actually is, and we need to have some real understanding of the hearts

19. Ibid., 91.

20. Ibid., 92.

and lives of those to whom we preach. For these things we turn now to a model for developing living application.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read over the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). How prominent is application in Jesus' sermon? Where does the application come in his message? What kinds of applications does he make?
2. Identify in the Sermon on the Mount several very practical applications Jesus makes and several piercing, heart-oriented applications.
3. How can you ensure that your preaching is grace-filled even when it is hard-hitting?
4. How could you express greater dependence on the Holy Spirit in your preaching ministry?
5. Do you tend to spend most of your preparation time on "there and then" matters or on "here and now" ones? Why? Do you spend most of your sermon time on "there and then" or on "here and now"? Why?