

APPLICATION IN BIBLICAL PREACHING

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## APPLICATION IN BIBLICAL PREACHING

### ABSTRACT

This work is a study focused on the problems of applying the Bible to modern life in the context of Biblical Preaching.

A primary premise of this work is that application is difficult due to apparent discontinuities between the ancient and modern world. These discontinuities manifest themselves in the areas of genre, culture, and theology.

The thesis begins with a statement of the problem in chapter 1, followed by an argument that application is a theological necessity in chapter 2. Chapter 3 reviews some relevant literature in the field of hermeneutics, specializing in the realm of application. Chapter 4 outlines the approach advocated in this thesis. It consists of a three-phase approach to applying a Biblical Sermon. The phases are: (1) understand the original application, (2) identify the continuing truth, and (3) state the continuing truth in terms appropriate to modern life. Chapter 5 reports on the author's teaching experience at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in the fall of 2002.

## CHAPTER 1

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the last several decades, evangelicals have produced an extraordinary amount of exegetical work. Exegetical commentaries are more numerous, more comprehensive, and more helpful to pastors, students, and scholars than they have ever been before. Theological seminaries and journals now offer even more tools to students of the Scriptures. Evangelicals have a better understanding of the Bible's teaching than ever before.

The proliferation of exegetical tools has many causes, but one of the most important relates to advances in the field of hermeneutics. Scholars have now come to some basic agreement on the rules of hermeneutics (the rules for interpreting the Bible), and this agreement has freed evangelicals to write and publish as never before. Instead of arguing over how to interpret the text, scholars can now argue over the actual meaning of the text. Since their arguments rise from accepted hermeneutical rules, exegetical disagreements can often be resolved and exegetical progress has been the result.

Along with advances in interpretation, corresponding progress has been made in homiletics as well. Allegorizing, proof-texting, and other illegitimate forms of sermon construction have been discredited, or at least called into question in light of accepted hermeneutical norms. Exposition has become the prized approach to preaching, even if those who claim to do it disagree about methodology.

In the midst of this progress in exegesis and preaching, however, certain

important aspects have been neglected. One of these aspects is the matter of application. Application is the category under which the timeless truth of the Bible is applied to the modern audience. Although evangelicals may agree about how to arrive at the timeless truth, they seem unable to resolve their differences about what should be done with the timeless truth once it has been discovered. Some argue that application is unnecessary. They appeal to the role of the Holy Spirit or the perils of application as reasons not to do it. Others agree that application is necessary, but they disagree about how to do application.

#### *Importance of this Study*

The hermeneutical challenge of application is important because the Scriptures were written to be applied to the lives of people, both ordinary and extraordinary. Thus, the Bible is not merely an interesting gathering of stories and sayings relevant only to the time and place from which they came. Instead, the Bible, being truth from God, has inherent authority over the lives of everyone he created. Furthermore, if the church is going to fulfill the mission Christ left to make disciples of all the nations, it must have an authoritative message that is also relevant to every nation and culture in every time period.

#### *Method for this Study*

This study will commence with a survey of the biblical and theological issues on which application is built. These issues include God as a creator and communicator, people as image-bearers of God who are fallen and thus in need of God's grace in revelation, the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and the use the Bible by other biblical authors. Some relevant biblical texts will be studied such as 1 Corinthians 9:9,

1 Corinthians 10:1–14, and 2 Timothy 3 and 4.

A survey of literature on this topic will follow the biblical and theological study. The literature surveyed will be books and articles discussing the fields of hermeneutics, application, and homiletics.

Next, the issue itself will be treated. This section will demonstrate that application rests on the foundation of solid hermeneutics. Then, some rules for extracting and understanding the transcendent message of Scripture will be examined. Finally, this study will attempt to develop some principles for bringing the transcendent, abstract truth of the Bible into specific application relevant to a particular ministry setting. The focus throughout will be on applying the Bible *in preaching*, not merely as a final step in personal Bible study.

Finally, this study will conclude with a report of the author's course on Biblical Preaching, which took place in the fall of 2002 at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

#### *Audience*

This study is designed and written to assist pastors, aspiring pastors, and other serious biblical students. A familiarity with generally accepted hermeneutical principles is assumed; therefore, the main audience for this thesis is expected to have had some graduate theological training. Because the principles in this thesis grow out of the Bible and common communication principles, it is expected that this study will also offer some help to the wider spectrum of believers who have not had formal theological training

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter will attempt to prove that application is essential to preaching. The goal is to show that preaching without relevant application falls short of God's intentions for preaching. More specifically, the goal of this chapter is to establish a theological basis to prove that application is a priority in preaching, not just a necessary component to preaching. When one reflects on the nature of God as revealed in the Scripture, it becomes clear that God's desire for preachers is not only to explain the Bible, but to apply it to life. This is true because communication is central to the personality of God.

#### *God's Role as Creator Demands Communication*

The opening words of the Bible are, "In the beginning God created..."<sup>1</sup> More than a statement of fact, these words also serve as a description of God's role with relationship to the universe. Since all reality ultimately has its source in God, God always exists as creator in the creator-creation relationship.

#### God Has Authority Over His Creation

Because God always exists as creator in the creator-creation relationship, it follows naturally that God has authority in the creator-creation relationship. The Bible explicitly teaches this conclusion in a number of passages. Colossians 1:15–16 says this

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

about Jesus Christ, who is God the Son: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” The phrase “by him” in verse 16 states twice that God (in Christ) is the source of all created reality. The phrase that states that all things were created “for him” makes the point that all reality exists to serve and please God. He created in order that creation might find ultimate fulfillment in serving him. Because God is the source of all creation, and because all reality exists to fulfill God’s purpose, it follows naturally that God is the ruler (or Lord) of all creation. Verse 15 alludes to this Lordship relationship when it gives Jesus the title “firstborn.” While this word does distinguish Christ as being prior to creation in terms of time, according to O’Brien, “the notion of supremacy or priority of rank tends to dominate.”<sup>2</sup> O’Brien concludes, therefore, that “As πρωτότοκος [firstborn] Christ is unique, being distinguished from all creation.... He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since he is its Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

#### As Creator, God Is Obligated to Communicate

Colossians 1:15–16 and many other Bible passages teach that God has authority over creation because of his role as creator. But what obligations come with this authority? Could God create the universe, the world, and all material and immaterial reality, then watch from afar as his creation struggled to please him without any further instructions? The obvious answer is no, because Colossians 1:16 teaches that God’s purpose for creation was to serve and please him, it follows that he must have obligated

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<sup>2</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

himself to communicate to his creation, if for no other reason than to communicate his expectations. The Scriptures again teach this conclusion; in fact, the Bible teaches that creation itself is revelatory concerning God's character. Psalm 19:1–2 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." It is incorrect to assert, then, that God is a silent, non-responsive being toward his creation. His creation itself communicates his existence and power (Rom 1:20). Yet God has much more to say to his creation than what is revealed in nature. As creator, he wanted his creation to know not only his existence and power but also his design and intentions for his creation. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, God communicated verbally and directly to his creation, using the medium of the written word.

It is clear, then, that God is a communicative being. Because he stands as Lord over creation, he communicated his expectations to his creation. If as Lord he communicates, it follows logically that this communication must be relevant and applicable to his creation. Application, then stems partially from the responsibility of God's role as creator.

### *God As a Social Being*

Application exists as a necessary result of God's role as creator. Fundamentally, however, there is a reason for application that is closer to the essential nature of God. The Bible teaches that God is a social being. Social beings must communicate because social relationships depend on communication. Therefore, because God is a social being, he communicates out of his essential nature. Because God created humanity to have a relationship with him, it is natural for him to communicate with people..

## God Exists Eternally in a Social Relationship

God is one. This is a foundational truth of Scripture. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This truth emphasizes the exclusive nature of God. He is the one and only God, the only appropriate object of worship. Yet as the New Testament opens, another aspect of God’s oneness is revealed. Jesus Christ maintains that he is one with God. In John 10:30, Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” In that simple statement, Jesus revealed both that he is God and that he is distinct from the Father. Jesus also revealed that there is a third person to God—the Holy Spirit. That the Spirit is also God is revealed in many ways in Scripture. One such revelation is when Peter rebuked Ananias for “lying to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3). In the next breath Peter declared, “You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5:4). The Great Commission mentions all three members of God in equality when it says to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Because God is an unchangeable being (Mal 3:6), it is clear that this tri-unity of God is an eternal relationship. Therefore, before God ever decided to create, he existed as a social being in a social relationship. Furthermore, there was communication in this divine relationship. In John 5:20, Jesus said, “the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.” The three persons of God existed together in an eternal relationship, communicating perfectly with one another. Since the Trinity is an aspect of the essential nature of God, communication is therefore fundamental to the personality of God.

## God Created People with the Power of Communication

Because God is by nature a social being, people are also naturally social. This is true because God is the creator of all people and because he created people “in his

image.” Genesis 1:26–27 states, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” While God’s image in humanity has many different aspects, one of them certainly is a capacity for personal relationships. This is why God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18). People live in social relationships and engage in communication because God’s image is reproduced in each person.

Human relationships exist because of the image of God in man, and a human desire for communication with God exists for this same reason. The creation narratives (Gen 1–3) record the existence of perfect communication between God the creator and man and woman the created. The fact that the Creator gave man instructions to carry out shows that God can and will communicate to people. The fact that Adam needed God’s instructions shows that people need to hear truth from God.

### God’s Redemptive Love Requires Communication

Although God and humanity once had a perfect relationship that was marked by pure communication, something happened to destroy the communication link between God and people. According to Genesis 3, man made a decision to disobey God’s communication. He chose to do something that God had told him not to do. The Bible says that this one act of disobedience destroyed the perfect relationship between people and God. Romans 5:12 says, “just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” The “death” spoken about in this verse refers to eternal separation from God. Sin removes people from a perfect relationship with God and makes them his enemies, subject to his

punishment.

God, however, was not content to continue living without a relationship to people, whom he created. Since it was impossible for people to repair the damage of sin, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, came to earth to pay the penalty for human sin. In fact, the act of becoming a man was itself an act of communication. John 1:1, 14 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” By using the designation “the Word” to refer to God the Son, John emphasizes the communicative nature of Christ’s entry into the human race. This is also stated in Hebrews 1:1–2 which says, “God...has spoken to us by his Son.” Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s communication to man.

Jesus communicated much about God in his words and actions. The one thing he communicated of highest priority was how God’s love rescues people from the consequences of their disobedience. John 3:16, 18 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” This is the foundation of all that people need to know about God. They need to know that without his redemptive grace, they cannot ever have a restored relationship with him. When Jesus left this earth, he gave his followers the responsibility to continue spreading this message. Second Corinthians 5:20–21 state, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” From the eternal God to the

modern preacher there stands an unbroken chain of responsibility for communication. Every person who preaches in the name of Jesus Christ does so because God believes in relevant communication.

### *God's Communication Is Application-Oriented*

Having established that God is a communicator, it is important to recognize that God's communication is not trivial. He does not communicate without an end in mind. When God speaks, he expects a response. His communication is always designed to change lives. His communication is oriented toward application.

### God "Wrote It Down"

Until Moses began recording the Pentateuch, the record of God's dealings with people was mostly passed from one person to another through oral history. While this mode of communication is effective, it is always subject to distortion. As each person and generation tells a story, facts may be omitted, added, or embellished. Because God wanted his truth communicated clearly and accurately, he chose Moses and others to record his message in writing. Psalm 19 shows how God's creative acts are themselves communicators of his existence and power. Verses 1–6 of that psalm describe how these basic truths about God are communicated non-verbally so that everyone regardless of language is aware of this information about God. In verse 7, however, the Psalmist turns from general revelation to specific revelation with the words, "the Law of the Lord." This phrase specifies the written, recorded form of God's revelation. The synonyms "precepts" and "commands" (v. 8) along with "fear" and "ordinances" (v. 9) indicate that all God's recorded revelation is in mind, not just the first five books of the Bible. Psalm 19:7–9 continually emphasizes that this recorded revelation is application-oriented. It "revives

the soul” and “makes the simple wise” (v. 7). Likewise, it “gives joy to the heart” and “light to the eyes” (v. 8). These four phrases describe the personal benefits that come to anyone willing to obey God’s recorded revelation. This suggests that one of God’s reasons for recording his words in written form is that they may be known and applied by the individual. The inscripturation of God’s word, therefore, shows that God’s communication is always application-oriented.

The New Testament likewise teaches that God recorded his word for the purpose of application. Theologians say that “the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of inspiration is 2 Timothy 3:16: ‘All Scripture is God-breathed....’ What is divinely spirated or breathed out, according to Paul, is not the human writer, but the written Scripture (*graphie*) itself.... Paul in these few words has propounded the doctrine of plenary inspiration: every portion of Scripture has its origin with God.”<sup>4</sup> Yet Paul’s brief statement about Scripture was more about the application of Scripture than its inspiration. 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches that Scripture “is *useful* for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (emphasis added). The usefulness of Scripture is its life-changing, applicational force, for verse 17 says that the goal of the Bible is “that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

While God is by nature and choice a communicative being, he does not communicate pointlessly. He does not chatter on and on to pass the time; rather, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 states that God communicates to change people. He communicates to take people from their sinful, fallen condition and change them into holy, righteous sons and daughters. The Bible is one of God’s main tools for this life transformation.

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1: 143.

It is important to note also the conclusion drawn from 2 Timothy 3:16–17. After describing the life-transforming power of Scripture, Paul urges Timothy to “Preach the Word... correct, rebuke and encourage” (4:2). Since this thesis is about application in Biblical Preaching, it is important to see not only that the Bible has an application orientation, but also that God expects preachers to have an application orientation in their preaching as well. The terms “correct, rebuke and encourage,” in verse 2 all emphasize the applicational nature of preaching that is based on the Bible. The measure of a preacher’s ministry is the extent to which those who hear his preaching are changed into “thoroughly equipped” believers in Jesus Christ (3:17).

#### The Occasional Nature of the Bible

Every book of the Bible was written to some group of people in order to address some sort of need. This need formed an “occasion” that caused the Holy Spirit to “breathe out” the text of Scripture through the mind and pen of the human author.

Although every book of the Bible was occasional, the occasion for each book is not always readily identified. The writers of the Old Testament historical books, for instance, seem to have chosen what to record based on the conformity of God’s people to the covenants. For example, First and Second Samuel and the Kings record the blessings that come from covenant obedience and the punishment God brings for covenant disobedience. The historical books teach theology implicitly. Though the premise is seldom directly stated, the point is clear: kings and commoners alike should choose to obey God because he blesses those who obey his laws and disciplines those who do not. That the historical books are not merely records of historical facts is shown by the selection of material. History and archeology record Omri as a major king of Israel with

an impressive array of accomplishments; 1 Kings, however, uses only five verses to record Omri's reign as king. The reason, according to Vos, is a theological one. "Because the sacred historian valued Omri as 'worse than all his predecessors' in promoting idolatry (v. 25), he considers him unworthy of much attention."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, even where the Bible states historical facts, these facts were written and arranged to fill a specific purpose.

Some books in the Bible are more clearly occasional than others appear to be. In Jude 1:3, Jude expressed a desire to write about salvation. Yet a more immediate problem changed his goal: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, *I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith* that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (emphasis added). Some threat to the truth of the faith, therefore, prompted him to write and controlled the content and shape of what he wrote. Even books like Romans that seem to be primarily doctrinal always conclude with a call to obedience. Each book of the Bible was written for a reason and each reason is applicational.<sup>6</sup>

### The Redemptive Purpose of the Bible

This chapter has previously demonstrated that God's redemptive love required him to communicate with his creation. As one studies the history and theology of redemption, it becomes clear that redemption by its very nature is application-oriented.

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<sup>5</sup> Howard F. Vos, *1, 2 Kings*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 107–108.

<sup>6</sup> One might note here that the applicational nature of the Bible causes some of the problems for modern application. Since many biblical authors were so specific in their applications, the church must wrestle with which commands are cultural and which evidence a truth that is transcultural. This idea will receive further development in chapter four.

The applicational nature of redemption is required by the sinful condition of people and by God's plan to change sinful people into people whose lives demonstrate the character of Christ. This redemptive plan is accomplished through the application of Scripture.

Although times have changed since the days when the Bible was completed, the nature of people has not changed. People are still every bit as fallen and depraved as any person in the Old or New Testament era. Since every text of Scripture either implicitly or explicitly confronts the fallen nature of the original readers, our expectation is that it confronts the fallen condition of modern readers as well. Bryan Chapell refers to this as the FCF, which stands for "Fallen Condition Focus." *"The FCF is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or for whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage. Because an FCF beckons behind all Scripture, informed preaching strives to unveil this purpose for each passage."*<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the Scriptures continue to confront human sinfulness and the need for God's grace with the same force and urgency that they confronted the original audience. Our fallen condition and desperate need for God's grace makes application in the sermon absolutely necessary.

While it is true that people are sinful, it is also true that God's plan for human redemption involves changing people from fallen into perfect human beings. Since the ultimate goal of perfection is never completed in this life, we know theologically that God is never finished changing us into his image. Romans 8:29 says that "those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." This "conforming to the likeness" of Jesus means something very specific. It is best to

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<sup>7</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 42.

understand the likeness of Jesus as a reference to the moral (or communicable) attributes of God (holiness, righteousness, justice, goodness, love, mercy, etc.). Sanctification is the theological term for the transforming power of God in a person's life. This power gradually, over the course of a person's life, moves him or her from being a habitual breaker of God's law into an obedient reflection of the character of Christ.

Titus 2 explains a necessary component in life-change. In verses 1–10, Paul gives very clear instructions about what Titus is to teach people. Paul breaks it down demographically, telling “older men,” “older women,” “younger women,” “younger men,” and “slaves” how to make the truth of God attractive (v. 10b) by living obedient lives. Then, in verses 11–12, Paul tells us how we have the power to live obediently. It is through the saving grace of God: “For the grace of God that brings salvation...teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” The saving grace of God is what gives people the power to do whatever God requires of them. In Titus specifically, grace is what gives each group (“older men,” “older women,” etc.) the ability to obey the commands given specifically to them. This saving grace of God also energizes personal sanctification.

The Bible repeatedly says that the truth of Scripture is what delivers the life-changing power of saving grace to a person. Romans 10:17 says, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Likewise, 2 Timothy 3:15 says, “the holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Just as the Bible mediates the saving grace of God to an unbeliever, the same Scriptures mediate the sanctifying grace of God to the one who has trusted in Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:16–17, as noted previously, demonstrates this truth.

The implication for preachers, then, is that preaching demands life application,

because the writing of Scripture and God's purposes for the Scriptures all have a bias toward application. This is why the preacher must apply the Bible in his preaching. To do less would be to break the chain of application that flows from the character of God to the actual written product, the Bible.

*The Bible's Use of Itself*

Application has a strong and necessary theological grounding. God's roles as creator, communicator, and redeemer require application. God encoded the Bible through human authors with application at its core (through its occasional nature) and with application as its goal. If this theology of application is correct, it should be evident that the Bible uses itself applicationally. In other words, one should be able to find examples in the Bible where one Bible writer uses a citation from another part of the Bible to apply a truth to the audience. Paul's use of two passages from 1 Corinthians seems to demonstrate this point.

1 Corinthians 9:8–11

First Corinthians is one of the books of the Bible where the author's purpose for writing the letter is most obvious. Paul answers specific questions put to him by people the church. In chapter 9, Paul writes about his rights as an apostle, but he does so in a larger context of treating Christian freedom and the right to forgo one's freedom. In bringing up the issue of his rights as an apostle, he makes an argument by analogy. Just as he has rights as an apostle, believers have rights to certain freedoms in Christ. Just as Paul forgoes his rights as an apostle for the sake of the gospel, Christians must sometimes choose not to exercise their rights.

In the midst of his discussion of apostolic rights, Paul states that he has the right

as an apostle to be paid by those to whom he ministers (vv. 4–6). He supports this assertion in two ways. First, he uses logic to point out that nobody works without expecting compensation (v. 7). Second, he supports his right to pay by *applying* a passage from the Old Testament law. Paul sets up his applicational proof by asking two questions in verse 8: “Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing?” Then, in verse 9, Paul quotes the text from which he draws the truth he is now applying: “For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’” This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4. It is clear that Paul sees his right for compensation as being a valid application of that text. But what relevance does a threshing ox have to a preaching apostle? Until that relevance is seen, one might be tempted to charge Paul with distorting the text of Scripture and extending his application beyond what the original author intended. Paul raises this issues himself when he asks at the end of verse 9, “Is it about oxen that God is concerned?” This question goes to the issue of authorial intent. Chapter four of this thesis will attempt to prove that all biblical application is rooted in and consistent with the intention of the author. One way of discerning authorial intent is by seeking a transcendent truth that is taught by the original author. This transcendent truth must be true to the original application and be a contemporary extension of that application.

In verse 10, Paul asserts that God’s command not to muzzle the ox was not a time-bound, culturally specific command as much as it was a specific application that teaches an implicit truth. Verse 10 says, “Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.” In this statement, Paul justifies his contemporary application of Deuteronomy 25:4. The specific command about oxen had a

divine authorial truth that it taught implicitly. Someone who works is entitled to share the profits that result from his or her labor. First Corinthians 9:9 demonstrates that even a time-sensitive, culture-bound, specific command has continuing relevance and specific application to modern culture. Paul's use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9 indicates that God intended the Bible for specific, relevant, modern application.

#### 1 Corinthians 10:1–14

This passage concludes Paul's defense of his apostolic rights (chapter 9), and returns and refocuses the epistle on the area of idolatry (cf. 8:1ff, 10:14). It concludes the argument about apostolic rights in chapter 9 by explaining why Paul "feared being disqualified for the prize" (9:27). Stated directly, Paul feared the possibility of disqualification based on the example of Israel (10:1ff). If people could have the immense spiritual privileges that Israel had under Moses (10:1–4), and still disobey and be punished by God (10:5), then Paul felt that he (and by extension, the Corinthians), could also suffer the same fate. Paul states that the fate of the Jews served as "examples" (vv. 6, 11). Paul's treatment of this scriptural record is instructive for application.

First, Paul's application here comes not as an application of one text (as in 9:9 above). Rather, Paul summarizes a great deal of material from Exodus in the course of four verses (vv. 1–4). Despite the fact that Paul does not quote or explicitly exegete a word, a phrase, or a verse, his Scripture summary is no less biblical or authoritative than his quotation of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9. The message of Scripture is the authoritative content, whether or not particular words and phrases are quoted. When one has accurately portrayed the message of the Bible, he has the Bible's authority.

The previous discussion of 1 Corinthians 9:9 shows how Paul took a concrete

command, abstracted a continuing truth, and reapplied that truth to a different concrete situation.<sup>8</sup> First Corinthians 10, however, seems to follow a different applicational path.<sup>9</sup> Rather than abstracting up from a concrete command to a transcendent truth, Paul seems to draw immediate and explicit parallels between the ancient situation and the modern (from his point of view) Corinthian situation. To Paul, the Exodus example warns believers to avoid four things: idolatry (v. 7), sexual immorality (v. 8), testing the Lord (v. 9), and grumbling (v. 10). By calling these “evil things” in verse 6, Paul indicates that the four things mentioned in verses 7–10 are universals. That is, they are sins against God regardless of whether or not the person who committed them was an Exodus Jew or a contemporary of Paul. Because they are universal sins, no abstraction is necessary. They come straight over into the modern world with immediate applicational relevance.

The two applicational test cases seen in 1 Corinthians 9 and 1 Corinthians 10 show that the Bible uses itself in the same complex way which will be argued for in chapter 4 of this study. Paul’s approach to application in 1 Corinthians 9:9 shows that when the Bible issues a concrete command that is bound by time, culture, or other factors, such truths can (indeed, must) be abstracted up to something parallel to modern life. First Corinthians 10 shows that when universal sins (or other universal truths) are at

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter four of this thesis explains the concept of abstraction. Abstraction is essential to applying the Bible.

<sup>9</sup> It appears that Paul *is* attempting to draw meaningful abstractions from the Exodus situation to the Corinthians in verses 1–4. His use of the phrases “they were all baptized” (v. 2), and “spiritual food and spiritual drink” (v. 3), seem at first to be a spiritualization of the passage. Upon further reflection, however, it becomes clear that Paul is making a parallel between the spiritual privileges the Exodus Jews enjoyed and the spiritual privileges that the Corinthians (and all believers) enjoy. But his abstraction is not applicational in itself. It is designed to set up the applications made in verses 6–10. Verses 1–4 frame the Exodus situation as a true, spiritual parallel to modern Corinth, which makes it possible for the Jews under Moses to serve as true “examples.” They are examples by analogy.

issue, no abstraction is necessary. Rather, one must verify that the biblical example used is a true parallel (10:1–4), then directly and concretely apply the universals to the modern situation. The Bible's use of itself shows that application is a theological necessity. Indeed, it is a theological priority.

This chapter has attempted to show that biblical application is a theological necessity. It has been argued that God's nature as creator, social being, and redeemer requires him to communicate. Furthermore, a study of God's communication shows that his communication is always invested with applicational relevance. God's methods of inscripturation and the Bible's application of itself demonstrate that when God communicates, he has a purpose and an expectation for his creation to apply that communication to themselves. Application is a theological necessity.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This chapter will review some of the most relevant literature on the subject of application. Because this study is concerned with application *in preaching*, works of hermeneutics and homiletics will be surveyed.

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

This book was written to serve as a textbook for courses on developing and delivering messages. It is an excellent resource on that subject. The book walks readers through the various aspects of preparing and delivering a sermon. The approach is similar to Robinson's *Biblical Preaching*. The distinctive thrust of this book is its concentration on the contribution redemptive theology makes in preaching. The most helpful portion of this book for this thesis is chapter 2, which addresses the "Fallen Condition Focus."

Doriani, Daniel M. *Getting the Message*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996.

Doriani presents an introductory guide to hermeneutics to the average Christian reader. His work is helpful but less thorough than Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. This book has two chapters focused specifically on application. They sketch an approach similar to the one argued in this thesis.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Putting the Truth to Work*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001.

A recent follow-up to his *Getting the Message*. Doriani fleshes out his approach to

application by leading the reader through the principles of application as they relate to various genres of Scripture. While the book is useful, its usefulness is stunted by a lack of specifics in the modern world.

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

The subtitle for this book is “A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible.” This book was explicitly written as a textbook for students at Ouachita Baptist University where the authors teach (p. 13). It is a book that is readable and accessible to the average college student, and it is complete in the sense that it introduces the reader to the issues and principles involved in classic hermeneutics. *Grasping God's Word* has one section devoted to “Meaning and Application.” Three chapters go to meaning, one goes to application; however, the chapters on meaning do introduce and prepare the student for some of the issues involved in application. The most helpful aspect of this book is the idea of “measuring the width of the river to cross.” The authors follow the frequently used bridge metaphor for application. The applicational bridge starts with the specifics of the biblical world, then abstracts up to a universal truth which is then applied specifically to modern life. The authors agree with this approach and use this bridge metaphor, but they add an important element. As every exegete knows, the distance between the biblical world and the modern world varies. Sometimes the biblical truths are so universal that one can easily step over applicationally to modern life. Other times, however, there seems to be no correlation between the biblical world and the modern so that quite a high degree of abstraction is necessary. The authors, therefore, add a step to the bridge metaphor where they seek to expose and address the issue of distance. This is similar to the issues of continuity and discontinuity as they will

be addressed in chapter four of this thesis.

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

This book, although fairly recent, is already a classic work on the issue of hermeneutics. While it requires a degree of sophistication to read this book profitably, the book is accessible to a wide Christian audience. One needs a good knowledge of the Bible to understand and use this book, but he or she need not be a Bible college student or graduate.

While there is no separate chapter or section on application in this work, the authors have written with application in mind. Instead of settling for a separate chapter on application, the authors have addressed the issues of application within the chapters addressing particular genres of the Bible. This is mostly helpful inasmuch as some of the chasms to be crossed in application are genre-related. Still, certain applicational concerns transcend all the genres of Scripture so as to be universals. It would be helpful to address and explain these universals first, then address the particular differences one encounters in another genre.

Greidanus, Sidney. "Application in Preaching Old Testament Texts." In *Reading and Hearing the Word*. Edited by Arie C. Leder. Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary and CRC Publications, 1998.

In this brief essay, Greidanus succinctly introduces the reader to the main aspects of application. Though his focus is on historical texts, the principles also relate to applying other genres. Greidanus shows the reader the problems of application, which he identifies as historical and cultural gaps. He identifies several inadequate approaches to bridging these gaps such as, "direct transference," "universalizing," "individualizing,"

“spiritualizing,” and “moralizing.” The author then offers several principles for properly applying historical texts of the Bible.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.

Greidanus attacks the topic of preaching with special concentration on handling the diverse genres of Scripture. While this book is a bit heavy on the theoretical and interpretive side of sermon preparation, the material in it is valuable. Application does not receive extensive treatment, but some helpful principles of application are suggested.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sola Scriptura*. Toronto, ON., Canada: Wedge Publishing, 1970.

In this work Greidanus looks at the subject of application in preaching from a historical perspective. He demonstrates how two different approaches (“exemplary” vs. “historical-critical”) caused a deep controversy within the Reformed Church of Holland in the 1930’s and 40’s. The book surveys the controversy by presenting both the assertions and objections of each side. The author then critiques the situation and offers in the final chapter some guidance for preaching from historical narratives.

Julian, Ron, J. A. Crabtree, and David Crabtree. *The Language of God*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001.

The subtitle for this book is: “A Common Sense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible.” The majority of the book is weighted toward the “understanding” goal with just one chapter dedicated to application. This book is a helpful introduction to some of the issues involved in hermeneutics. It is not a thorough treatment of hermeneutics and is not as helpful as Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. The chapter on application in *The Language of God* seeks to flesh out a preceding chapter on building a biblical worldview. Application, according to the authors, consists

of making daily life decisions based on one's biblical worldview. Building a biblical worldview is certainly an important part of Bible study and sanctification. It is also important to application, especially in areas where the Bible is silent. However, the chapter on application is incomplete because it does not tell the reader how to move from exegesis to application in a text. Application is a subjective exercise, according to the authors, where the reader of Scripture tries to guess at the right thing to do based on some generalized principles learned from his or her Bible reading.

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*. Dallas, TX: Word, 1993.

An outstanding work on hermeneutics that contains a helpful section on application. The final chapter, which addresses application, advocates the same approach argued in this thesis.

Kuhatschek, Jack. *Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

An excellent approach from one of the editors of the *NIV Application Commentary*. Kuhatschek advocates a common three-step process for application: Comprehend the original context, abstract the truth in the original context to a universal truth, apply the universal truth to the contemporary situation. Most applicational schemes (including the one described in this thesis) follow some variation of this three-stage approach. The advantage of Kuhatschek's book is that it superbly describes the process, using both easy and difficult test passages. After explaining his three-stage approach, the author describes the importance of meditation and applies the three applicational principles to three types of biblical statements: commands, examples, and promises. The audience for this book is unclear. The advice in it is not specifically tailored for

preachers, yet the writing assumes a level of theological sophistication. It seems to have been written for the layperson who is reasonably well-educated in the Bible.

Larkin, William J. *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993.

A technical discussion of the issues of hermeneutics and application. Larkin constructs a theoretical framework explaining how adherents of traditional hermeneutics can do good, relevant application that is consistent with the human author's intention.

McCartney, Dan, and Charles Clayton. *Let the Reader Understand*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002.

This is another hermeneutics text that purports to treat application. The subtitle is "A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible." While the interpretive material is good (including an informative chapter tracing the history of biblical interpretation), less than one page is devoted to the specific mechanics of application. Thus, the book is inferior to other hermeneutics books such as *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth* and *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.

McQuilkin, Robertson. *Understanding and Applying the Bible*. Revised ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992.

McQuilkin's work is intended to be a thorough treatment of the issue of Bible study. The book therefore reads much like the standard works on hermeneutics. It is intended for a fairly sophisticated audience. Someone without any formal Bible training might find this work hard to follow, while an upper level Bible college student or a beginning seminary student might find it to be right on his or her level. The most helpful section in this work to me is the opening section, which deals with the various approaches to biblical interpretation: naturalistic, supernaturalistic, existential, and dogmatic. The

author does a good job of surveying the key hermeneutical issues such as where meaning resides, whether or not the Bible has more than one intended meaning per passage, and the hermeneutical circle.

McQuilkin's two chapters on application discuss the issues of the audience God intended and the response God desires. McQuilkin states that God's intended audience is always universal unless he states otherwise. He then sketches a defense for this assertion. While it is easy to agree with McQuilkin's position as far as it goes, it is almost certainly too simplistic to say that the audience is universal unless God intended it to be otherwise. When one encounters texts that are highly defined by culture, this idea breaks down. When Christ commanded the disciples to wash each other's feet it is clear that Christ did not intend this command to be practiced literally in cultures where this custom would be foreign. McQuilkin attempts to qualify problems like this by addressing the issue of the response God desires. In the footwashing example, for instance, the author would say that God's desired response transcends the actual washing of feet for a more generalized principle of humility and service.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.

A thorough and sophisticated treatment of hermeneutics. While Osborne defends and explains the traditional grammatical-historical approach to hermeneutics, he interacts helpfully with the reader-response approach. This book acknowledges and incorporates one true insight from the reader-response school: that readers bring their worldview and presuppositions to the text. Osborne argues, though, that the text also has the power to shape and change one's worldview so that the hermeneutical process is a "spiral." This spiral starts with biblical content, which challenges and shapes the reader's worldview.

Having a more biblical worldview, in turn, allows the reader to understand the Bible's content better, and so on. Chapters 15 and 16 are relevant to the task of application. In chapter 15, Osborne asserts that the task of application is the same as that of contextualization, which is what missiologists do when planting churches cross-culturally. Osborne states that the task involves distinguishing "cultural and supracultural norms" in Scripture; that is, the preacher must distinguish between culturally-conditioned commands and truths (which must be abstracted) and supracultural commands and truths which are inherently universal and therefore require no abstraction, only concrete application. His approach has much in common with the one advocated in chapter four of this thesis. In chapter 16 of *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Osborne argues that the goal and priority of preaching is application. He goes on to give advice for the preacher on how to methodically prepare the sermon, including preparation for relevant application. Osborne's advice is helpful, but would be more helpful with more specific, detailed examples.

Pratt, Richard L. *He Gave Us Stories*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990.

In this lengthy book, Pratt explains how to interpret and apply Old Testament historical narratives. The book is written for an average Christian reader, but is thorough enough to be useful to people who have formal theological training. Although concerned with issues of exegesis and genre, the author states the importance of systematic theology to his task and attempts to integrate his theology in the text. The book includes several helpful chapters in a section on application.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

A standard in homiletics textbooks. Robinson's recent update gives more

attention to inductive and narrative preaching forms. The first edition succinctly presented the approach to application this thesis attempts to develop. The second edition elaborates a bit more on the subject. This thesis attempts to work out more fully the approach to application Robinson advocates in *Biblical Preaching*.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Heresy of Application." *Leadership Journal* 18 (Fall 1997): 20–27.

This interview with Robinson gives more details on the mechanics of application. The thoughts in this article expand the principles of application introduced in *Biblical Preaching*. The article includes a helpful illustration of the "Abstraction Ladder."

Swartley, Willard M. *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983.

This book looks at four case issues in application. It is a theological approach to application and thus differs from the approach argued in this thesis. Swartley, a Mennonite, argues that the Bible teaches contradictory positions with regard to these issues. Mennonite hermeneutics, which place greater authority in the Gospels, finds resolution on these issues in the teachings of Jesus which silence the contradictory opinions of the apostles and Old Testament Scripture writers. The book is interesting for its detailed historical tracing of both sides of each issue, but the author's conclusions seem to conflict with an inerrantist view of Scripture. Ultimately, this book offers little help for the approach to application taught in this thesis.

Veerman, Dave. *How to Apply the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993.

This book details the applicational approach of the editor of the *Life Application Bible*. Veerman has a five-step process for application that is described using a pyramid and a window. This book identifies some of the problems preachers have doing

application. For instance, Veerman asserts that many preachers associate application with being simplistic. Since college and seminary training typically rails against the simplistic, the average preacher is poor at application. Veerman also believes that preachers place too much faith in the congregation to do application. The preacher brings the truth to a universal level which is close to the modern world, then he expects the congregation to reach up and bring the truth down to their own situation. Veerman disputes the ability of the average layperson to make application on his or her own. Despite these helpful insights, Veerman's book is geared toward the layperson; thus, it seems to be less effective than it would have been had it been written for preachers. Furthermore, there are so many steps to his process—and much overlap between them—that his approach to application becomes confusing.

Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

This book looks at application from a theological perspective. In contrast to this thesis, which comes at application from an exegetical, paragraph-by-paragraph approach, Webb looks at the entirety of Scripture to address an issue such as slavery. He argues that the Bible evidences theological movement in application. Slavery, for instance, is tolerated, then regulated by Scripture, but the Scripture also contains the seeds necessary for the abolition of slavery. Webb argues that the redemptive movement of the Bible should cause one to see that Christianity is opposed to slavery and therefore the Bible indirectly promotes abolition. Webb uses this, then, to argue similarly for egalitarianism. The theologically perceptive reader of the Bible will see that biblical theology moves a person inevitably toward an egalitarian stance, according to the author. But, he argues, a redemptive-historical hermeneutic does not allow for the acceptance of homosexuality

because the Bible has a consistent witness against homosexuality as a sin. While Webb's work is interesting and thought-provoking, it has little to do with this thesis. This author finds Webb's conclusion unconvincing.

## CHAPTER 4

### APPLICATION AND BIBLICAL PREACHING

Eric Brown<sup>10</sup> is the senior pastor of a thriving congregation of 800 in a rural farming community in western Michigan. One weekend in 2000, Pastor Brown had prepared a message on Psalm 121 for his Sunday morning message. At 2 A.M. on Sunday morning, Pastor Brown was awakened by a telephone call telling him that the teenage son of one of his church leaders had been killed in a traffic accident late Saturday night. He rushed to the hospital to comfort the grieving family. When he returned home, Pastor Brown found himself unable to sleep. Entering his study to review and brush up on the message, he realized that he had an applicational problem on his hands. His message was drawn from Psalm 121 which says, “The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life” (v. 7) and contains other statements of confidence in God’s protection. When he had chosen to preach from this passage, he was drawn to these comforting statements. Now, in light of the tragedy he had just witnessed, he found these statements disturbing. The young man who was killed had a solid testimony of faith and was respected by other teens for his godly example. So why would God, who seemed to promise his protection in Psalm 121, allow this tragedy to happen? And how would he, the preacher, be able to answer this question in his morning message?

Pastor Brown’s dilemma confronts every preacher of the Bible from time to time.

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<sup>10</sup> The example stories in this chapter are either true or based on true preaching situations; however, the people and places named are fictional.

Reconciling the Bible's statements with the realities of human life is one of the most difficult interpretive enigmas that preachers face. Until recently, interpretive literature was largely silent on issues of application. As Jack Kuhatschek wrote, "If we turn to the standard books on Bible study, we are given little help with the often thorny problems of application.... Many books on hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) devote hundreds of pages to interpreting the Bible but spend only five or ten on how to apply it."<sup>11</sup> In the twelve years since Kuhatschek's book first appeared, the situation has improved. Many newer works on biblical interpretation have appeared with helpful chapters on application.

While works of interpretation are now taking questions of application more seriously, they do not normally address application in a preaching context. While these works help the preacher think applicational thoughts, they do not necessarily help him communicate the application of the Bible. The preacher of God's Word is faced not only with the task of identifying the contemporary relevance of Scripture, but he is also responsible for making that truth as concrete as possible to a diverse audience. The same truth may apply differently to a middle-aged woman with two teenagers than it would to a single man finishing college. When one considers the various combinations of age, race, sex, class, and income that the average preacher faces, it becomes clear that specificity in application is an area where most preachers would welcome more help.

This chapter will address the issue of application in preaching. It will examine the most common problems of application and attempt to offer a method for properly applying the message of the Bible in preaching.

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Kuhatschek, *Taking the Guesswork Out Of Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 8.

### *Biblical Preaching*

This chapter is not about preaching in general; instead, it is developed according to a method of preaching called “Biblical Preaching.” In his book by that title, Haddon Robinson defines this type of preaching as “the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.”<sup>12</sup> Because so much of this chapter is based on concepts from Robinson’s book, I have chosen to capitalize terms such as “Biblical Preaching,” “Biblical Sermons,” “the Big Idea,” and so forth. These are technical terms drawn directly from Robinson’s work, and I have attempted to use them in the same way that Robinson uses them in his book. Note a few distinctive elements of “Biblical Preaching:”

#### The Big Idea

Robinson’s definition claims that Biblical Preaching is “the communication of a biblical concept.”<sup>13</sup> The singular “concept” is intentional, for Robinson advocates finding what he calls the “Big Idea” of the text. The conviction of Biblical Preaching is that within every paragraph of Scripture there is one single, all-encompassing point that must be discovered. Not only does the passage have a Big Idea, but the Biblical Sermon will have a Big Idea as well. The Big Idea of the sermon states the major applicational thrust of the preacher delivering the message.

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<sup>12</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

### Respect for the Original Intent of the Author

A second distinctive element of Biblical Preaching is a respect for the text of Scripture; specifically, the sermon must teach the passage or passages from which the sermon is drawn. Robinson's definition states that the Biblical Sermon is "derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context."<sup>14</sup> Thus, he argues, the meaning of the Bible is contained in the Bible itself and must be understood using normal hermeneutics. This means that the preacher is constrained to some degree by the passage itself in application.

### Applicational Bias

Unlike many approaches to expository preaching which do little more than teach the passage, Biblical Preaching seeks to apply the passage. Robinson writes that the truth uncovered in Biblical Preaching is that "which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."<sup>15</sup> Note that the preacher goes first. As a mediator of the message of Scripture, the preacher is compelled by God himself to bring his own thinking, feeling, and behavior in line with the truth taught in the passage. After he has made application to himself, he is then to make application to the lives of his congregation. According to Robinson's definition, Biblical Preaching must contain the element of specific application. Any sermon that simply stays in the biblical world may be true and accurate as far as it goes, but unless the truth is applied to modern believers, the preacher has done something less than Biblical Preaching. This is true because God's Word was given to

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

change lives. When a preacher handles the Bible like a historical artifact to be studied with interest but not necessarily obeyed, he fails to give the Bible the authoritative place God intended.

This chapter will attempt to extend and develop the concepts explained in *Biblical Preaching*. The reader of this work will benefit from it most when he has first mastered the concepts taught in *Biblical Preaching*.

Application is usually compared to a bridge that spans a chasm. On the left side of the chasm is the original setting in which the Bible passage was given. The job of the preacher is to understand what the Bible was saying to its original audience. The right side of the chasm is the modern setting where the truth needs to be applied. The chasm itself represents differences from then to now. These differences include anything that makes it difficult for the modern interpreter to see the relevance of the passage to modern life. Using a bridge as a metaphor for application, the preacher takes certain eternal concepts from the text and uses them to show the modern believer the relevance of those concepts to his or her modern life. The procedure for doing application this way can be broken down into three steps: (1) understand the original application, (2) abstract the continuing truth, and (3) state the continuing truth in terms appropriate to modern life.

#### *Step #1: Understand the Original Application*

At the beginning of this chapter, Eric Brown was struggling between a finished sermon and a grieving congregation. While this struggle was especially pronounced on that particular Sunday morning, it was not a new struggle for him. Every preacher of God's Word wrestles weekly with three competing tensions. The first tension is a desire to remain true to the text of Scripture. No preacher wants to be accused of distorting the

message of the Bible. Because evangelicals believe that the Bible is the authoritative message from God, the preacher's most basic commitment is to be faithful to what the Bible says.

Preachers feel tension not only to remain true to the text of Scripture, but also to explain how the passage of Scripture is relevant to the modern audience. While the tension toward faithfulness to the text comes from one's convictions about Scripture, this second tension comes from the congregation. Every congregation wants to "get something out of" the message. Even before the tragic death of the teenager in his church, Pastor Brown knew that people in his audience would be looking for the relevance of Psalm 121 to their lives. Most people come to church asking the unspoken question, "Why is Pastor taking forty minutes to tell me about these verses?"

In addition to the tension caused by the text and the tension caused by the congregation, pastors also feel a sense of tension that comes from their role as shepherds of the flock. This tension is similar to, but not the same as, the tension of relevance. While people come to church looking for a personal message from God, the church's leaders know that the congregation has deeper needs than the ones they feel. While his church wanted comfort from the Bible in their time of grief, Pastor Brown also knew that they needed to be reminded of their faith in God. The church needed to see this tragedy as an opportunity to trust God more rather than turning away from him in unbelief. The pastoral dimension of preaching combined with the audience's cry for relevance and the preacher's desire for faithfulness create a three-way tug of war that the preacher deals with weekly.

The outcome of this "three-way tug" usually causes one's preaching to be imbalanced in one or two directions. When pastoral obligation wins, the message

challenges the listener to look beyond his or her felt needs to the larger issues in the congregation's life. At its best, this kind of preaching confronts people's worldview, asking them to choose the path of selflessness over selfishness. At its worst, this type of preaching degenerates into condemnation. The congregation feels berated for not living up to the pastor's ideals and is urged to "do better." When felt needs win the tug of war, the audience pays close attention as the issues they care most about are surfaced and addressed. This means that Pastor Brown would offer encouragement to the grieving, along with some explanation as to how a good God allows such bad things to happen. When felt needs preaching is at its worst, however, the message of the Bible can be distorted and made to say something that the biblical author never intended. Furthermore, an over emphasis on felt needs can sometimes fail to challenge selfish attitudes that God wants to change. Finally, when the preacher over-emphasizes exegesis, the hearer tends to feel like a student in a classroom, collecting many facts or truths about the Bible. At its best, this emphasis in preaching creates a congregation with extensive Bible knowledge. At its worst, the congregation feels proud of what it has learned about or from the Bible, but obeys little of it. This type of preaching may also leave a congregation in its comfort zone, never challenging it to reach out to the world around.

Biblical Preaching attempts to take these three legitimate tensions and hold them in proper balance. Biblical Preaching is a process; it is a series of steps that, when followed in their proper order, usually yield a sermon that is faithful to the Bible, relevant to the audience, and challenging to the local body.

### The Starting Point

If Biblical Preaching is a process that holds these three tensions in balance, where

does the process begin? According to Robinson, Biblical Preaching begins with “a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, Biblical Preaching begins with the Bible. Before deciding what to say *about* a passage, the preacher must decide first what the passage *said* to the original audience. By insisting on “a historical, grammatical, and literary study” of the Bible, Robinson embraces the classic approach to biblical interpretation, which says that the meaning of the passage lies in the passage itself. It is the job of the reader to put aside as much as possible his or her experiences, preunderstanding, and expectations, and simply attempt to understand what the author intended to convey in the passage of Scripture.

Prior to studying the passage itself, the preacher must choose a passage from which to preach. Given that Biblical Preaching is concerned with the interpretation of a passage first, one might believe that Biblical Preaching is restrictive about how a text is chosen. Many advocates of expository preaching, which Robinson identifies with Biblical Preaching, believe that the only proper way to preach is to go verse by verse through a book of the Bible. Ray Stedman, for instance, wrote, “The expository method of teaching or preaching is to go through a book, or section of a book of the Bible, leaving out nothing, commenting on everything, touching it all.”<sup>17</sup> While preaching consecutively through books of the Bible is a valuable approach, it is not required for Biblical Preaching. Biblical Preaching is concerned that the preacher handle a paragraph or more of the Bible, regardless of how that section is chosen. This gives the preacher the flexibility to tailor his preaching to the specific needs of his audience. He may choose any

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<sup>16</sup> *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1995), 122.

passage as long as he does not impose meaning on the passage; instead, his understanding of the passage's meaning is discerned by proper exegesis.

Consider this example of someone who wishes to do Biblical Preaching, while at the same time choosing texts that fit his audience. Mark Gallagher, a youth pastor in suburban Atlanta, is alarmed at the openly sexual content of movies, TV shows, and songs that were popular among the teens in his youth group. Remembering the kinds of sexual temptations he faced as a teen, he feels it is important to teach the teens in his church what the Bible says about sexuality. Because he had been taught in seminary to do expository preaching that goes verse by verse through a book of Scripture, Pastor Mark might consider starting at 1 Thessalonians 1 and preaching through the entire book until he reached 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "It is God's will for you to be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality." Because he wants to do a series of messages covering a number of passages on sexuality, he has the "whole book" approach. Instead, he is choosing passages that address the need he sees in the congregation. Obviously, he is motivated by the third tension—his desire as a pastoral leader to challenge his audience. Yet his procedure is not at all in conflict with Biblical Preaching. As long as his handling of the text and his application of it is consistent with and informed by the author's intention in writing, Pastor Mark can be confident that he is legitimately practicing Biblical Preaching. Note that his approach allows him to balance all three tensions: He can address the need he sees as a pastor, he can do so from a legitimate study and application of a Bible passage, and, because teens are naturally interested in sex, he also addresses a felt need.

After selecting a passage from which to preach, the preacher must decide how much of the passage to study for his sermon. The principles of hermeneutics are helpful

here. In their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* Fee and Stuart write, “We simply cannot stress enough the importance of your learning to THINK PARAGRAPHS, and not just as natural units of thought, but as the absolutely necessary key to understanding the argument in the various epistles.”<sup>18</sup> Biblical Preaching studies a text at the paragraph level regardless of which genre of Scripture the passage is drawn from.<sup>19</sup> While a Biblical Sermon does not necessarily cover every aspect of a paragraph, the preacher’s commitment to understanding the author’s flow of thought requires him to establish and study the entire unit of thought from which the sermon will be drawn.

While finding and limiting a paragraph is not difficult, it is not always an exact science either. The preacher must look at his text, then look at what precedes and what follows. Is there an obvious turn in the author’s argument? While one paragraph may be built on truth stated in another, the preacher must decide whether a section can stand on its own or not.

As Mark Gallagher works on his message from 1 Thessalonians 4, he starts by establishing the paragraph. Finding the end is simple. Verse 9 begins with, “Now about brotherly love....” This sentence clearly initiates a new thought; therefore, it begins its own paragraph, making verse 8 the end of the preceding paragraph. But where does that paragraph begin? The topic of sexual ethics is first mentioned in verse 3, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.” But verse 1 of

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<sup>18</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 54–55.

<sup>19</sup> Presumably Fee and Stuart believe in the importance of thinking paragraphs in more than just the Epistles. In narrative literature, one may think in terms of “scenes” rather than paragraphs, but the point remains: each writer of Scripture wrote in units of thought, and the Biblical Preacher must begin his study by establishing where the thought unit begins and ends.

chapter 4 begins with, “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God.” It seems to Mark that verse 1 introduces a larger idea (“pleasing God”) of which the other topics in the chapter are parts. Verse 3’s “avoid sexual immorality,” for instance, is part of what it means to please God. The same is true with “brotherly love” (v. 9) and “lead a quiet life” (v. 11). While one could begin his study of the paragraph with verse 3, it would be best for the preacher choosing any section in this 1 Thessalonians 4 passage to understand verses 1–2. Therefore, Pastor Mark begins his study with verse 1, even though he knows it might get only passing mention in his message. The Biblical Preacher studies the Bible paragraph by paragraph in order to understand the author’s thought.

Most exegetical commentaries include an exegetical outline that divides the text into units of thought. The commentary usually follows this outline, commenting on each section of a Bible book as a separate thought unit. These commentaries can help the preacher establish the beginning and ending of his preaching text. Bible translations and a Greek text can also be helpful, though it is often more helpful to look at the section headings rather than the paragraph indentations themselves. This is true because these printed works tend to subdivide a thought unit into smaller paragraphs for readability.

Once he has found a text and established it as a complete unit of thought, the time has come for the preacher to decide what “unity” lies in that “unit” of thought. Haddon Robinson refers to this as the “Big Idea.”<sup>20</sup> The Big Idea is a one-sentence statement of what the paragraph is about. Robinson recommends asking two questions to find the Big Idea. The first question is, “What is this passage talking about?” The second question

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<sup>20</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 33–50; 101–113. Note that Robinson advocates the use of two Big Ideas: one exegetical and one sermonic. This chapter follows that path as well.

answers the first question by asking, “What is the passage saying about what it is talking about?” In order to use these questions most effectively, it is helpful to answer the first question in the form of a question.

As Mark Gallagher looks at 1 Thessalonians 4, he sees two ideas. One idea is larger than and contains the other idea. The larger idea encompasses the first twelve verses of 1 Thessalonians 4. As Mark reads 4:1–12, he asks and answers Robinson’s two Big Idea questions: **What is this passage talking about? and What is it saying about what it is talking about?** Note how Pastor Mark answers these questions:

**What is this passage talking about?**

How does a person “live in order to please God” (v. 1)?<sup>21</sup>

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

A person lives to please God by avoiding sexual immorality (vv. 3–8), by showing brotherly love to other Christians (vv. 9–10), and by leading a quiet life (vv. 11–12).

After writing down his Big Idea, Pastor Mark begins to think about it. Was Paul writing directly to “a person” in general? No, obviously, it was the Thessalonians he had in mind, because verse 1 refers back to how Paul had previously “instructed” them. It seems wise, then, to Pastor Mark to rephrase his Big Idea so that it addresses the original audience. In order to more precisely separate what the passage *said* to the original audience, Pastor Mark might revise his work this way:

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<sup>21</sup> If you look carefully at these examples, the importance of answering the first question in the form of a question becomes clear. If Pastor Mark had answered, “What is this passage talking about” with a simple “pleasing God,” the answer to the second question would be much less clear. By answering the first Big Idea question in the form of a question, one is forced to think about the author’s goal in writing. What was the author trying to do? If he was trying to prove his point or motivate his audience, the first Big Idea question will usually begin with “why?” If the author was attempting to instruct the reader, the first Big Idea question will usually begin with “how?”

**What is this passage talking about?**

How ~~does a person~~ *could the Thessalonian believers* “live in order to please God” (v. 1)?

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

~~A person lives~~ *The Thessalonian believers could live* to please God by avoiding sexual immorality (vv. 3–8), by showing brotherly love to other Christians (vv. 9–10), and by leading a quiet life (vv. 11–12).

Pastor Mark’s modification may seem trivial, especially in a passage such as this. As we will see later, some passages in the Bible speak so clearly to contemporary life that applying them is easy. Many other passages, however, are not quite so immediately clear. It is helpful, therefore, to distinguish between two types of Big Ideas: Exegetical and Sermonic.

The Exegetical Big Idea is an attempt by the preacher to put his ideas about the passage aside in order to let the passage speak for itself. When discovering the Exegetical Big Idea, the preacher should think about the original author and the original audience. To whom was he writing? What was he trying to tell them? By answering the Big Idea questions in terms of the original audience, the preacher saves the question of application for a later stage. These exegetical steps focus on discovering what the text *meant* originally while the homiletical steps will help to decide what the text *means* to us.

Pastor Mark now has an Exegetical Big Idea for the four related units of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12. His goal, however, is to preach from 4:3–8. Because that subsection has its own unity, Pastor Mark will not write out an exegetical Big Idea for that paragraph.

**What is this passage talking about?**

*What is one way that the Thessalonians believers were to be holy?*

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

*The Thessalonian believers were to be holy by maintaining a sexually pure lifestyle.*

Now that Mark has a firm statement of the Exegetical Big Idea, the time has come to turn to his study tools. A study tool is anything that helps the preacher understand the passage. Depending on the preacher's training and ability, a number of study tools can be used. The preacher can make his own translation, use wordbooks to define key words, break down the passage according to its grammatical relationships, and use commentaries. Study tools help the preacher accomplish three goals. First, study tools help the preacher verify that his Exegetical Big Idea correctly reflects the teaching of the text. For example, suppose Pastor Mark, using the New American Standard Bible, fixed on 1 Thessalonians 4:4, which reads, "that each of you should learn how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor" (NASU). Noticing a footnote on the word "vessel," suppose that Pastor Mark looked to the bottom of the page and noticed that the word "vessel" could refer either to one's body or one's wife. Remembering that 1 Peter 3:7 also refers to the wife as a "weaker vessel" (KJV), Pastor Mark comes the conclusion that 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 is about how to find a wife. Putting it in terms of the Big Idea, it would look like this:

**What is this passage talking about?**

*How should a Thessalonian believer find a wife?*

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

*A Thessalonian believer should find a wife in a way that is sexually pure.*

So far, Pastor Mark's work looks good. To be sure that his Exegetical Big Idea is correct, he turns to his study tools to verify his Big Idea. Initially, he is encouraged that

his understanding of the passage is correct when in a wordbook he finds that the word translated “possess” could also be translated “to procure for oneself, acquire, get.”<sup>22</sup> As he begins to look at commentaries on 1 Thessalonians, however, Pastor Mark is will be forced to abandon his exegetical Big Idea and rewrite it. While some commentators hold that verse 4 is describing how to acquire a wife, others such as F. F. Bruce refute that interpretation convincingly.<sup>23</sup> One use of Bible study tools, then, is to verify or correct the Exegetical Big Idea.

In addition to helping the preacher state the Exegetical Big Idea correctly, Bible study tools are useful also for answering questions he has about the text. The meaning of words, the flow of an argument, the historical and cultural background behind the words—these types of questions can usually be answered in wordbooks, Bible translations, commentaries, and other study tools.

Finally, Bible study tools are helpful to preachers in that they answer questions the preacher has not thought to ask on his own. In other words, the tools help the preacher set aside his preunderstanding of the passage, which may be incorrect. Had Pastor Mark not looked at commentaries, he would have proceeded to develop a message based on his own flawed assumption that the passage teaches a man how to find a wife. While such a message may be true, it would not have been an accurate representation of what the biblical author was saying in that particular preaching text. For that reason, Pastor Mark’s message would have been less than Biblical Preaching.

Consider three final thoughts about using commentaries. First, it is important in

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<sup>22</sup> BAGD, 455.

<sup>23</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 83.

the Bible study stage to use exegetical commentaries only. Devotional commentaries (such as Matthew Henry) do not spend enough time breaking down and explaining the text before attempting to apply it. Many seminaries publish a list of recommended exegetical commentaries. These works should be given priority in the preacher's study of a passage. Second, it is helpful to begin with the shortest, most basic exegetical commentaries, then work up to the longer, more complex exegetical commentaries. The shorter commentaries usually introduce and summarize the various interpretive options in a passage. These set up an interpretive framework in a preacher's mind. When the preacher moves on to the larger commentaries, it is easier to understand the longer treatments of these arguments that sometimes span several pages. The final thought about the use of commentaries is that, in the Bible study phase of Biblical Preaching, it is essential for the preacher to follow some kind of system for taking notes on a passage. When writing the sermon, the preacher can refer to these notes rather than searching through the commentaries again when he is trying to remember the meaning of a particular word or phrase. Furthermore, if these notes are filed properly (either on one's computer or in a physical filing cabinet), they can be referenced later when the sermon is revised, preached again, or when the passage comes up in another context.

After the preacher has found his text, established the paragraph he will preach from, written out an Exegetical Big Idea, and studied the passage in commentaries and other Bible study tools, he now has a grasp on what the original meaning of the passage was. At this point, it is helpful to take all the details that have been studied and organize them together into an exegetical outline. Like the exegetical Big Idea, the goal of the exegetical outline is to stay in the biblical world. The exegetical outline is an attempt to discover the structure and hierarchy of ideas in the passage. When Pastor Mark finished

studying 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8, he set up a new document in his computer. At the top, he wrote down the passage: 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8. Underneath the passage, he wrote down his exegetical Big Idea:

**What is this passage talking about?**

*What is one way that the Thessalonians believers were to be holy?*

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

*The Thessalonian believers were to be holy by maintaining a sexually pure lifestyle.*

Beneath the exegetical Big Idea, Pastor Mark wrote the following exegetical outline:

- I. God wanted the Thessalonian believers to live a holy life (vv. 3–6a: “be sanctified”).
  - A. Living a holy life meant refusing inappropriate sexual activity (v. 3b: “avoid sexual immorality”).
  - B. Living a holy life meant learning to control the sexual desires of their bodies (vv. 4a–5).
  - C. Living a holy life meant refusing to commit adultery (v. 6a: “wrong his brother or take advantage of him”).
- II. God would deal with the Thessalonians if they did not live a sexually holy life (vv. 6b–8).
  - A. He would deal with them in order to bring them into line with his will for them, which was holiness (v. 7).
  - B. He would deal with them because disobedience in this area is a rejection of the saving and sanctifying power of God’s grace through the Holy Spirit (v. 8).

Notice a few features about Pastor Mark’s exegetical outline. First, it is stated in terms of the biblical world. It uses the past tense and terms like “the Thessalonians.” In a passage like this, it is tempting to state things in a universally applicable or personally applicable way. In other passages, however, the applicability is not quite as clear;

therefore, it is wise at this stage of the sermon preparation to state everything in terms of the biblical world. The preacher will bring the truths over into the modern world in a separate step.

Notice also that Pastor Mark indicates the verse from which his point is drawn and included words from the text where appropriate. But notice that his points are not stated in the words of the text; instead, he has stated them in terms of what he has learned about the passage. By doing this, Pastor Mark is demonstrating his understanding of the text. This Exegetical Outline and Big Idea show where further study is needed. If someone truly understands the passage, he should be able to restate what it meant to the original audience in his own words.

At this point in the process, Pastor Mark has a good grasp on the meaning of the passage. He knows what the passage meant in its original setting to its original audience. For many preachers, the sermonic process would end here. They might universalize or personalize the outline, add some illustrations, an introduction, and a conclusion. In a passage like this, such an approach might work. But as we dig a bit deeper into the subject of application, it will become clear that more work needs to be done. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to explain a process of generating sermonic application. By moving beyond the exegetical stage of preparation through a matrix of thoughts and questions about applications, every sermon can be more precise and powerful in its application.

As Pastor Mark sits in his study looking over the fruit of his exegetical work, he begins to think about how the passage was originally applied to the Thessalonians. First of all, it occurs to him that many of the Thessalonians were probably already married; therefore, the original audience was already different from Mark's audience. If his teens

were to commit the sins listed in this passage, it might happen in a car on a date, or when a teen's parents left him or her home alone for the evening. What about the Thessalonians? Did they have something akin to hotels where such activity would take place? Was this religious prostitution similar to what went on in Corinth where a visit to the pagan temple would also allow for illicit sexual activity? If not, then where would a married man in Thessalonica find a partner for his adultery? Would it be a woman in the church? Someone who lived nearby?

Pastor Mark has already begun to transition from the exegetical to the application phase of sermon preparation. His questions are important because they surface issues that the preacher must think through if his contemporary applications are to be faithful to the original intent of the author. After thinking about the original situation, Mark decided that it really did not matter. The command to avoid adultery/immorality is the same regardless of where it happened, when it happened, or with whom it happened. This is an easy passage to apply; God's command to the modern reader is the same as his command to the Thessalonians.

Not every passage is applied so easily, however. Consider Galatians 5 as an example. In Galatians 5:2, the Bible says, "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." If a preacher attempts to apply this passage as simply as Pastor Mark applied 1 Thessalonians 4, he might end up saying that any man who is circumcised is unsaved and can never be saved. Since most American men are circumcised, does Galatians 5 exclude them from God's family from infancy? Another example is John 13, at the Last Supper, where Jesus got up and washed the feet of all of the disciples. When he finished

he said this, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). Here is a clear command of Scripture that causes some Christians to practice foot washing as part of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Are they correct? Are the majority of Christians who do not practice foot washing living in disobedience to God’s commands? These kinds of questions call for a careful approach to application. Just as the preacher follows a set of rules for learning what a passage *meant* (hermeneutics), he must also follow an equally precise set of rules for learning and stating what a text *means* today. After completing step one (“understand the original application”), the time has come to move on to step two.

### *Step #2: Abstract the Continuing Truth*

Early on, this chapter described application like a bridge. On the left is the biblical world. On the right is the contemporary world. In the middle is a chasm caused by differences between the ancient world and the modern. This chapter is an attempt to teach the preacher how to cross that chasm. More specifically, this chapter is about building an applicational bridge from the world of the Bible to the world we live in today. At the end of step one (“understand the original application”), the preacher stands on the edge of the biblical world and looks over at the modern world. He also looks across the chasm below. How far is the distance between their world and ours? What can the preacher use to span the gulf so that the Bible applies as concretely and authoritatively to modern Christians as it did to the original recipients? These questions all revolve around the same goal—defining the continuing relevance of the biblical message.

### Judging the Distance Across

When a theologian sits down to write a systematic theology, his goal is to be as

culturally neutral as possible. Full cultural neutrality is impossible—he has to choose a human language in which to write, and this choice is conditioned by his culture. Other cultural factors condition his writing whether he knows it or not. But his intention is to write a book that people can read without becoming experts on his life and cultural background. In theory, most of the paragraphs in a theology book are understandable to anyone who reads them. Even if they are translated into a different language, the reader can understand and benefit from the author's words. If the same author, however, wrote a personal letter to his adult son in the military, it would contain many items that might not make sense to the reader who does not know the man and his culture personally. The Bible is more like the letter than the theology book. While the entire Bible is relevant and authoritative, the relevance is often obscured by the personal relationship between the author and his intended audience.

When the preacher prepares a Biblical Sermon, he confronts a three-part task. He must understand the author's original message, then excavate and isolate the continuing truth, then apply it to modern listeners. In order to accomplish this task, the preacher must think through the applicational aspects of the sermon in his study. The first step is to decide how wide the chasm is between the original situation and modern life. The distance of the chasm is determined by how much the differences between the original situation and contemporary life are reflected in the words of the original passage.

#### *Distance Caused by Genre*

This chapter opened with the story of Pastor Eric Brown, who lost a teenager from his youth group the night before he was to preach on Psalm 121. Pastor Brown struggled between the enigmatic tragedies of life and the absolute statements of Scripture

that God would “keep you from all evil” and “protect your life” based on the fact that God “never slumbers or sleeps.” Where was God when this teenager lost his life? Why would God fail to keep his promise in Psalm 121? How would Pastor Brown explain this passage and apply it meaningfully to the grieving family and congregation? In the darkness of those early Sunday morning hours, the chasm between Psalm 121 and real life was wider than Eric had ever imagined. Although part of his struggle was the shock and sorrow of this unexpected loss, the applicational challenge posed by the passage was no less real.

*Psalms.* To solve this relevance riddle, one needs to understand the nature of Psalms. The Bible contains many types of literature (genres)—stories (narrative), Law, songs, prophecy, gospel, epistles, and Apocalyptic literature. The Psalms are quite literally songs; they were theological poems written to be sung. Like all songs, the Psalms have an emotional quality to them. They express the emotions of the writer and were designed to evoke certain emotions when they were sung. Emotional language works best when it is raw and unnuanced. A love song that proclaims, “I like you more than the last girl I dated,” would not communicate with much power. The language of the Psalms, then, tends to be absolute for emotional affect.

*The Psalms do not guarantee a pleasant life.* It is a misunderstanding—an overliteralization—of the language of the Psalms to infer from some of them that God promises to make his believers happy and their lives trouble-free. David, who expresses in the Psalms God’s blessings in the strongest terms, lived a life that was filled with almost constant tragedy and disappointment.... Yet he praises and thanks God enthusiastically at every turn, even in lament.<sup>24</sup>

Part of the answer to Pastor Eric’s dilemma, then, was to recognize that the author of Psalm 121 never intended to offer an unconditional promise of safety to everyone who

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<sup>24</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 205.

trusts God.

*Narrative (story)*. Much of the material in the Bible is recorded in stories; in fact, the story form appears in most genres of Scripture—Law, prophets, gospels, Revelation, and even some of the wisdom/poetic books (Job, Proverbs) contain narrative material. Given the frequency of narrative in the Bible, one would expect preachers to be experts on preaching and applying the stories of the Bible. In reality, just the opposite is true. Some of the worst examples of preaching and application come from messages on narrative material. It has been argued, for instance, that when a person is trying to make a decision, he or she should “put out a fleece” like Gideon to see what the will of God is. This advice ignores two major principles of interpretation. First, this interpretation ignores the original intention of the author. In the words of Fee and Stuart, a passage “cannot mean what it never meant.”<sup>25</sup> In this case, it is obvious that neither God nor the human author of Judges was recommending Gideon’s method as a technique for discerning the will of God. We learn this from the passage itself, when Gideon says, ““If you will save Israel by my hand *as you have promised* — look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, *as you said*”” (Judg 6:36–37). The words “as you have promised” and “as you said” are italicized to make the point that Gideon’s fleece was an act of unbelief. He was looking for a loophole, an excuse to avoid doing what God had directly told him to do through an angel. Using Gideon as an example of how to discern God’s will misses the point of the narrative because it violates authorial intention.

A second problem with this application of Gideon’s fleece is more directly related

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.

to the distance caused by the narrative genre: narratives exist to describe what happened. Although the stories in Scripture teach theology, they do so implicitly. The authors of the narratives in Scripture demonstrate truth by accurately recording God's work in the lives of people. In order to understand the teaching of a narrative, one must look at the big picture. Not everything the characters did is behavior that believers should model. Instead, the preacher should be looking for what the passage reveals about God, what it reveals about human sinfulness, and how the grace of God intervenes to overcome human failure and faithlessness. It is the overall thrust of a narrative that gives it applicational power.

*Gospels.* The gospels are largely composed of narrative material; therefore, many of the interpretive principles of narrative also apply to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Unlike other narrative sections of the Bible, however, the gospels focus directly on the human life of the Lord Jesus Christ. The life and teachings of Jesus are woven together by the gospel writers to prove the thesis that Jesus was the special person known as Messiah (or Christ). The desired response is to believe in Jesus for eternal life. John specifically claimed that goal when he wrote, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Before preaching in the gospels, the preacher must think carefully about the author's intention in recording an act or saying of Jesus. Jesus' well-known act of calming the storm makes this point clear. In Matthew 8, the disciples find themselves boating across the Sea of Galilee in obedience to Jesus' suggestion (v. 22). Though some of the disciples were experienced fishermen who knew the Sea of Galilee, they found

themselves helpless in a dangerous storm that threatened to destroy the ship and doom everyone on it (v. 23). Their response to this threat was to rouse a sleeping Jesus and alert him of the imminent danger. Jesus spoke a few words that neutralized the storm and returned the sea to a state of calm (v. 24).

A common preaching strategy for this text is to compare the peril of the disciples to the trials that people face in life. Preachers then apply the passage by saying that Jesus will calm the storms of life if he is in your life (the “boat” being a symbol of one’s life). While it is true that believers in Jesus sometimes face life threatening problems and that faith in Christ is essential to navigating life’s problems, that is not the point that the gospel writers were attempting to record. Their goal was to demonstrate the unique nature of Jesus. He is God and he is man; therefore he can serve as redeemer and Lord in this world.

The point of this section is not to discover and treat every applicational problem that rises from genre; instead, my desire is to remind the preacher that some of the distance that application must cross is due to the forms and genres of Scripture. Recent books on hermeneutics have begun to explain the major complexities caused by the various literary forms in the Bible. When preparing a message or series from a particular genre, preachers will find it helpful to review the characteristics of that literary form. The literary genres and forms found in Scripture were chosen by God and the human authors to convey truth in the best possible way. Preachers must learn to look at these literary conventions to see how the chosen form expresses the author’s intention.

#### *Distance Caused by Culture*

Westerners who read the Bible perceptively realize that the Bible writers lived in

a different world. They spoke a different language, lived in another part of the world, had their own customs and styles of dress, and lacked many technological advances we enjoy. These and other differences can be grouped under the heading of “culture.” The distance between the culture of the biblical world and the culture of the modern world creates another challenge for applying the Bible.

For instance, the Old Testament Law required the Jews to build a parapet around the roof of their homes. Deuteronomy 22:8 says, “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.” The parapet, therefore, is a wall or fence that would allow someone to walk safely on the roof. Despite this biblical command, few suburban American houses have walled-in roofs. Have these homeowners failed to obey this command? In order to answer that question, one has to dig into the culture of the ancient Hebrews. Unlike many American homes, the homes with the parapets on them had flat roofs. These flat roofs were used like a modern American family would use their living room or basement. At the end of the day, when the sun was going down, the Jews would gather on their flat roofs to enjoy each other’s company in the cooler evening weather.<sup>26</sup> Because Americans do not use their roofs for entertaining, it is unnecessary to build a home with a parapet around the roof. The cultural distance between then and now makes the original application pointless for the modern audience. This does not mean, however, that there is no truth to be applied in Deuteronomy 22:8. A return to this passage later in the chapter will show the preacher how to apply this passage with contemporary relevance. At this point, however, it is important to know that culture creates the gap

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 242.

between the original application and modern life.

Some debate whether or not true cultural distance exists in certain passages of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul argues that women should only participate in public worship if they have on a headcovering. Most modern Christians believe that culture renders the headcovering itself unnecessary. Some, however, believe that the issue is not cultural; therefore, women must wear headcoverings in worship today. Likewise, the current debate about the role of women in the church is often waged on a cultural level. The Bible's prohibitions on homosexuality are sometimes argued to be cultural as well. Recent exegetical commentaries offer detailed analysis of the biblical culture; they are an important resource for preachers when struggling with whether or not a particular application is cultural or absolute.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Distance Caused by Theology*

The Bible is often hard to understand and apply because of the form of the text (genre), because of the distance between the biblical world and the contemporary world (culture), and because God's revelation has been spread out over time (theology). Attempts by theologians to explain the progress of revelation has sparked fervent debate about whether there is continuity or discontinuity between the various ages of biblical revelation. Theonomists believe that there is strong continuity between the various stages of God's revelation in the Bible. They believe that the New Testament Christian and the Old Testament believer basically believed the same things and had the same basic responsibilities before God. Older dispensationalists (e.g. C. I. Scofield) emphasized

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<sup>27</sup> For a thorough treatment of the issues of culture and application, see William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993).

basic *discontinuity* between the Old Testament believer and the New Testament Christian. In between these two poles exist Covenant theologians, who tend to emphasize continuity and modern Dispensationalists who see both continuity and discontinuity. Whether or not one is a Covenant Theologian or a Dispensationalist, there are theological differences in the Bible that make application a challenge. Tremper Longman III makes this point when he writes, “As we read the New Testament, there is neither strict continuity (as theologians would insist) nor discontinuity (as some dispensationalists would have it), but rather both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>28</sup>

Consider 2 Samuel 6 as one example of theological distance. David (a king and a Jew) attempts to bring the ark of the covenant to his royal city of Jerusalem. Instead of following God’s command to carry the ark on special poles, David and the priests put the ark on a cart and allow it to be towed by oxen. In verse 6, the oxen stumbled, causing the ark to pitch violently toward the ground. Uzzah, a priestly guardian of the ark, reached out and touched the ark to steady it. Verse 7 says that “God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God,” because by touching the ark he had committed an “irreverent act.” This passage is difficult to apply to a modern setting because of theological distance. Within the passage there is continuity—God is holy, therefore he must be treated with reverence. That truth is eternal; it transcends and applies in every era of revelation history. But there are many elements in the passage that are theologically distant from the modern world. The ark, for instance, was a visible, tangible symbol of God’s presence. God commanded that no one touch it because God is holy. There is

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<sup>28</sup> Tremper Longman, III, *Daniel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 25.

nothing in Christian worship that corresponds even remotely to the ark of the covenant. A pastor who spills communion juice has not committed the sin of Uzzah. Another theological discontinuity is seen in God's judgment on Uzzah. When God killed Uzzah, that was an expression of his justice. God is still just, but he does not ordinarily express his justice so swiftly and dramatically. To properly apply 2 Samuel 6, the preacher must overcome the obvious theological distance between that era and today.

Even the dispensationalist, who identifies strongly with the New Testament believer, has to overcome items of theological distance in the New Testament era. God demonstrated swift, Uzzah-like judgment on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 4), which he ordinarily does not do today. Those who hold to the cessation of tongues and miraculous gifts have to contend with that as an expression of theological discontinuity. One of the ways preachers misunderstand and misapply the Bible is to assume that God acts today in exactly the same way as he acted in the Old or New Testament. That may or may not be true.

When building a Biblical Sermon, the preacher must understand his text, including how it applied to the original audience who received it. When the preacher has understood what the passage meant to the original audience, he stands on the edge of a chasm looking over to the modern world. The distance across that chasm is determined by differences between the world of that Bible passage and the world in which the preacher lives. When a preacher fails to understand differences of genre, culture, or theology, he is in danger of falling into the chasm and leading his congregation there too. If he fails to see that the narrative of Gideon's fleece is not about finding God's will, he may choose that point as an application. If he fails to see that the headcovering Paul required women to wear in 1 Corinthians was a culturally accepted symbol of a woman's

submission to her husband, the preacher may misapply that passage by mandating headcoverings to modern women. If the preacher cannot see that God seldom, if ever, strikes a disobedient person dead anymore, he may misapply the Uzzah or Ananias narratives. Differences of genre, culture, and theology all present temptations for the preacher to misapply the text of Scripture. Instead of serving as bridges to cross the chasm between the Bible and contemporary life, these differences cause many preachers to “walk the plank” into error.

If the differences of genre, culture, and theology make it difficult for the preacher to properly apply the Bible, how can one learn how to properly apply the Bible? The answer lies in learning how to see the truth that continues from the biblical world to today. When the preacher sees the continuing truth of a passage, he can then use that truth to build an applicational bridge that effectively reaches the modern world.

#### How to Abstract the Continuing Truth

The Bible states that it was “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16). On that basis, it is useful for growth in godliness and authoritative over the life of the believer and the church (2 Tim 3:17). Despite the potential pitfalls of application that each preacher faces, these truths give him the conviction that the Bible does have continuing relevance to today’s men and women. After a preacher studies the passage, writes an Exegetical Big Idea and an exegetical outline of the passage, he must then reflect on the passage and look for discontinuities caused by genre, culture, and theology. These discontinuities are pitfalls in the sense that they are ways in which the Bible does not apply to the modern believer. How can a preacher find valid application in the midst of these discontinuities? Two metaphors drawn from travel are useful for answering this question.

### *The Sidewalk and the Bridge*

Having understood the ways in which the Bible does not apply to the modern believer, the preacher now must look for ways in which it does apply to the modern believer. Two images are useful for explaining the continuing relevance of any Bible passage. They are the sidewalk and the bridge.<sup>29</sup>

#### The Sidewalk

Many passages of Scripture address issues that are timelessly relevant. When preparing a message on a timeless passage, it is easy to see how it applies to the preacher and to his audience. There appears to be no chasm at all between the biblical world and the modern world in these cases. Genre, culture, and theology do not seem to cause problems. Stepping over from the biblical world to the modern world is as easy as stepping over a puddle on the sidewalk. These passages are easier to apply because they parallel contemporary life in the most important ways. According to Fee and Stuart:

Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them. It is this rule that causes most of the theological texts and the community-directed ethical imperatives in the Epistles to give modern-day Christians a sense of immediacy with the first century.... The great caution here is that we do our exegesis well, so that we have confidence that our situations and particulars are genuinely comparable to theirs.<sup>30</sup>

Sidewalk passages move us easily from the biblical world to the modern world.

This is true because the major ideas of the text are universals. There may be discontinuity

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<sup>29</sup> The bridge is a common image for describing application. I am indebted to Daniel Doriani, however, for the sidewalk image, even though he does not develop the image much. See Daniel Doriani, *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 143.

<sup>30</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 65.

in the passage, but it is too minor to obscure the relevance. Pastor Mark Gallagher, the youth pastor referenced earlier in this chapter, found such a “sidewalk” passage in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8. Taking a passage that commands the believer to avoid sexual sin and applying that passage to a group of teenagers is easy. What makes a sidewalk passage different from other passages in the Bible that seem so hard to apply?

*Sidewalk Passages Address Universal Sins.* When Pastor Mark decided to preach on the issue of sexuality, he was addressing a universal concern. The Bible repeatedly addresses this sin, warning of the consequences of immorality and urging sexual purity and faithfulness. From the fall of humanity to the present, people have consistently struggled with sexual temptation—both premarital and extramarital. Therefore, any man or woman can immediately identify with someone in Scripture who faced sexual temptation or the consequences of sexual sin. The universality of the temptation transcends time, culture, theology, and genre.

*Sidewalk Passages Reveal Universal Theology.* It should also be noted that the theological basis for avoiding sexual sin is also universal. When 1 Thessalonians 3:4 says, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified,” the word “sanctified” (holy) describes a character trait that mirrors the character of God, who is holy. Becoming like God is God’s goal for every believer; it is also the desire of every true believer. Therefore the holy character of God provides a universal truth that also transcends distances of genre, culture, and theology. Sidewalk passages have immediately identifiable relevance because they address a universal sin problem and reveal universal truths about God.

It is important to remember that God never changes. Although societies and cultures change, God remains the same. His character remains constant. Yet God has

communicated Himself in different ways throughout the history of revelation. God's self expressions can often be identified and understood universally, but sometimes they are couched in cultural forms that must be understood before the universal truth can be seen. In a sidewalk passage, the preacher (and reader) can normally see the universal nature of God's self-expression easily.

*Sidewalk Passages Have Immediate Cultural Parallels.* This chapter asserted that cultural distance creates one of the biggest problems of application. While cultures differ in many areas, they also remain the same in many areas. All cultures have human relationships and those human relationships have common, universal problems such as murder, adultery, or theft. These problems are universal because, as was noted earlier, they are universal expressions of a sin nature that all humans, with the exception of Jesus, share. In a sidewalk passage, however, not only is the sin universal, but the particulars about how that sin is practiced are basically universal also. It does not matter, for instance, that the Corinthians practiced sexual immorality with shrine prostitutes in the temple of a false god. First Corinthians 6:16–18 condemns the sin of immorality in general. The place and the person are inconsequential, applicationally speaking. A preacher or believer reading 1 Corinthians 6 can see that the command applies whether one is engaging in sex with a temple prostitute, a high-priced call girl, or the girl next door. In a sidewalk passage, it is easy to see past the cultural details to the larger, universal sin problem.

*Identifying a Sidewalk Passage.* After a preacher has finished his exegesis, written an Exegetical Big Idea and exegetical outline, it is important to allow some time to reflect on the significance of the passage for the modern audience. Three questions help the

preacher to decide whether his passage is a sidewalk or not. (1) Does it reveal truth about God in ways that are immediately parallel to modern life? (2) Does it expose human sinfulness in the original audience that still exists *in the same way* in the preacher's life and the lives of people in his church? (3) Does the author communicate in terms that are appropriate only for his culture or for every culture? These questions help the preacher decide if his passage is a sidewalk from the ancient world to the modern world. If the preacher has done his exegesis thoroughly, the answer to these questions are usually obvious. When the original situation is truly parallel in all three ways, then the preacher can move right into the modern world and easily prepare the message.

When a passage evidences discontinuity in any of the three areas (God, sin, or culture), the preacher is facing a genuine exegetical and applicational chasm. The distance across is determined by the number of discontinuities in the passage. One discontinuity is easier to handle than two, and two discontinuities are easier to handle than three. To handle any discontinuity in the passage, the preacher must build a bridge from the ancient world to the modern. Just as the sidewalk describes a passage that has strong parallels to modern life, so the bridge describes a method for spanning the chasm between the ancient and modern worlds.

### The Bridge

The bridge is an image that describes a manmade method for applying a passage where any kind of distance makes it difficult for one to see the application in the passage. The bridge is "manmade" in the sense that it is something constructed by the preacher from the raw materials in the text. Because the bridge is manmade, it may be correct or incorrect; it does not necessarily have the infallible force of Scripture behind it. Every

preacher has had the experience of preaching one application that he later abandons as false. This is not a flaw in Scripture; rather it demonstrates that the preacher's application of Scripture was incorrect. Because the bridge is a manmade construct, it is important for the preacher to exercise humility in application, realizing that he may later come to find that his bridge was incomplete, inadequate, or completely false. The greater the discontinuities, the more subjective the preacher's application becomes.

Despite the potential problems of the manmade bridge, the fact that it is manmade does not necessarily mean that bridge applications lack truth or authority. A bridge may be very authoritative and strong; it all depends on how the preacher builds it. A strong applicational bridge is one that is (1) built on the truth(s) of the text, (2) consistent with the human author's intention, and (3) appropriate to the genre of the passage. Consider each of these aspects.

First, a good applicational bridge is built on the truth(s) of the text. Because Biblical Preaching is built on good exegesis, that exegesis forms the basis for the application of that text as well. While there may be discontinuity in one or more ways in a passage, the inspiration of the Bible gives the preacher confidence that the truth of the text can be understood and applied to modern life. This chapter will shortly demonstrate how to find a truth parallel in a passage when it is not readily apparent. For the moment, it is simply important to realize that the truth applied in any sermon should come from the passage, not from the preacher's imagination. When the preacher imposes meaning on a passage in order to make the passage apply, he fails to do Biblical Preaching and good application. Although the preacher builds the applicational bridge, he is not the source of the applicational material. Since good application comes from the text, careful study and reflection are necessary. They uncover the meaning of the passage which can then be

abstracted and applied.

A second characteristic of good application is that it is consistent with the human author's intention. This principle returns us to the Exegetical Big Idea. Since it answers the questions, "What is this passage talking about?" and "What is it saying about what it is talking about?" the Exegetical Big Idea should be a precise statement of what the author intended to communicate.

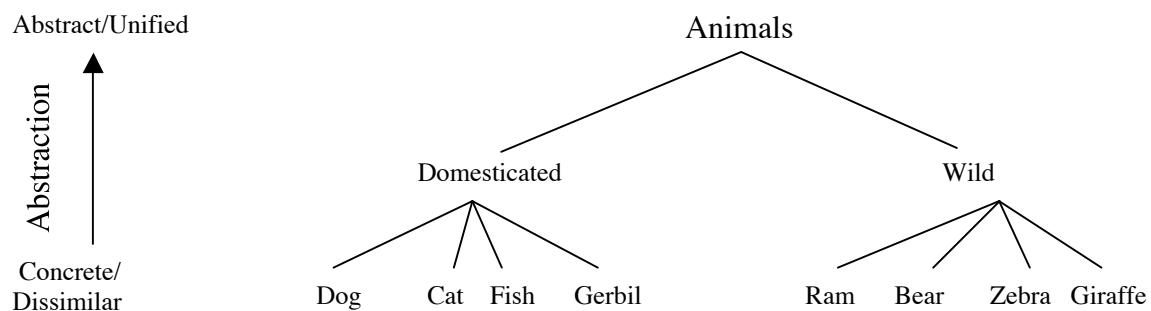
Finally, a strong applicational bridge is appropriate to the genre of the passage. This author once heard a message on Ruth 1 and 2a. In this message, every proper name (Elimelech, Mahlon, Kilion, Orpah, Ruth, and Boaz) were said to reveal the causes and cure of bitterness. The idea of bitterness was derived from the name "Mara," which means "bitter," that Naomi gave herself. By looking to the names of the characters as the source of meaning, the preacher found applicational significance in a way that violated the narrative genre of the passage. This sometimes happens in Acts when preachers insist that the modern church slavishly follow everything the early church supposedly did.

*Building the Bridge.* Whenever there is one or more areas of discontinuity between a Bible passage and modern life, the preacher must decide what the message of the passage is so that he can apply it to modern life. Using the meaning of the passage, the preacher finds and develops parallels between the Bible passage and contemporary life. Finding these parallels begins with understanding a concept called "abstraction."

Abstraction is a method of finding similarity between two apparently dissimilar items. It requires thinking about a higher level of unity between two or more dissimilar concrete things. For instance, cats and dogs have very little in common. Dogs can be trained to do tricks and obey orders; cats usually will not succumb to such training. Dogs

are heavy (most 50 lbs. or more); cats are light (usually under 10 lbs.). Dogs enjoy being walked by humans; cats do not. Cats use a litter box; dogs must go outside. Cats and dogs generally do not get along with each other. There seems to be very little unity between cats and dogs. When one observes the behavior of a cat and a dog, he or she will see that dogs and cats are not similar in their nature or actions.

However, when one steps back from a particular dog and cat and thinks about them in a higher, more abstract way, he or she will see that there is unity between dogs and cats. Both are animals. Both are household pets. Both have four feet and a tail. Abstraction takes two concrete items that seem dissimilar (like dogs and cats), and looks for similarities that unify them on a higher conceptual level. To visualize this unity, it is helpful to think in terms of a ladder or bridge:



Using abstraction, one can see the overarching unity that brings together apparently dissimilar things. Abstraction demonstrates true parallelism that transcends the real discontinuity that exists between dissimilar items.

Just as one finds unity between dogs and cats by using abstraction, a preacher can use abstraction to find unity between the biblical world and the modern world. By abstracting a truth from the text of Scripture that is applicable to modern life, the preacher uses the material in the text to build a bridge of application. There are three items of

continuity in a Scripture passage that have continuing relevance. They are (1) the character of God, (2) the sinfulness of people, and (3) the grace of God that rescues people from their sinfulness. When a preacher can find these three items in a Scripture passage, he can use them as the raw materials to construct an application bridge in the sermon to the modern listener. Lets consider each of these ideas.

*The character of God.* The Bible is a book about God. The books of the Bible come together using various genres, authors, and literary techniques to record what God revealed about himself to the world which he created. Every paragraph of Scripture, therefore, states or implies some truth about God's character. Whether in the Ten Commandments, the parables of Jesus, the thundering sermons of the prophets, the songs of the Psalmist, the stories of the narrative sections, or the prophecies about the end times, some aspect of God's character is stated or implied in every preachable unit of Scripture. Since God's character never changes, whatever is revealed about him (his holiness, righteousness, justice, love, eternity, omniscience, etc.) in any Scripture passage is equally relevant now as when the Bible passage was recorded. One of the keys to application in a Biblical Sermon, then, is to find the revelation of God's character in the preaching unit.

Earlier in this chapter we met Mark Gallagher, a youth pastor from Atlanta. Mark was preparing a message for the teens in his youth group. He chose for 1 Thessalonians 4:3ff for his text. We called this a "sidewalk" passage, meaning that the contemporary relevance was so clear that Pastor Mark could easily demonstrate the contemporary relevance of his passage without having to build an applicational bridge. It is easy to apply, in part, because the revelation of God is readily identified. When verse 3 says, "It

is God's will that you be sanctified (holy)," one immediately remembers that God wants people to be holy because God himself is holy. No abstraction is necessary because the passage reveals an eternal truth about God. He is holy.

Second Samuel 6 is not a sidewalk passage. In 2 Samuel 6, God supernaturally kills Uzzah for touching the ark of the covenant. In the contemporary world, however, God does not ordinarily act that way toward people. People seem to get away unscathed when they curse and blaspheme God. God's revelation about himself does not have an apparent, clear parallel to modern life. This is an example of theological distance. The theological distance, however, does not stem from a change in the character of God. God is the same God today as he was in the time of Uzzah and David. No, it is the *expression* of truth about God in 2 Samuel 6 that creates theological distance between the ancient world and modern life. The preacher who chooses to preach from 2 Samuel 6 will have to construct an applicational bridge. He does this by abstracting the truth about God (God's holiness) from the passage and looking for a contemporary expression of that truth. The holiness of God is an abstract truth about God that transcends human culture and therefore applies (in some way) equally to Uzzah and the contemporary believer. Preachers begin to build an applicational bridge when they abstract the eternal truth about God that is revealed in a preaching passage.

*The sinfulness of people.* God's nature is unchanging; the same is true of human nature. People still continue to have mixed motives and do evil things. The Bible maintains that this is an effect of the fall of man into sin. Although the Bible is a book about God, it reveals God in the context of human life. The people recorded in the Bible wrestled with temptation, sin, and sin's consequences. The Bible records their struggles

and how God addressed them in their sin. Since human nature is the same today as when Paul, David, Moses, and Adam lived, we can be confident that their sin struggles are basically the same as ours. While time may have changed the way we practice sin, our common humanity assures that the sin issues we have directly parallel those of God's people in revelation history.

Just as preachers can find applicational relevance in the unchanging character of God, the sinful practices of people in the Bible also have ongoing relevance. We transcend the discontinuities of genre, culture, and theology by finding the revelation of God and the expression of fallen humanity. Bryan Chapell calls this the "Fallen Condition Focus (FCF)."

The corrupted state of our world and our being cry out for God's aid. He responds with his Word, focusing on some facet of our need in every portion. Our hope resides in the assurance that all Scripture has a Fallen Condition Focus (FCF)... *The FCF is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or for whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage.* Because an FCF beacons behind all Scripture, informed preaching strives to unveil this purpose for each passage.<sup>31</sup>

When we say that the paragraphs of the Bible record some aspect of human sinfulness, this usually means some expression of sinfulness, such as an act or a thought. But the human sinfulness addressed in a passage can mean more than just an expression of sinfulness. It can also refer to the consequences of sin such as the pain and misery that results from sin. Or it can refer to other human needs that result (either directly or by extension) from sin, such as sickness or death. Chapell explains that

a sin does not always have to be the FCF of a sermon. Grief, illness, longing for the Lord's return, the need to know how to share the gospel, and the desire to be a better parent are not sins, but they are needs that our fallen condition imposes and that the Scriptures address.... An FCF need not be something for which we are culpable. It simply needs to be an aspect of the human condition that requires the instruction,

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<sup>31</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 41–42.

admonition, and/or comfort of Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

In a sidewalk passage like 1 Thessalonians 4:3, the expression of human sinfulness is a universal problem that is universally expressed. The statement that God wants believers to “avoid sexual immorality,” is one that immediately transcends the biblical world and the modern world with equal relevance to both. No abstraction is needed in such a passage. The Uzzah narrative in 2 Samuel 6, on the other hand, details expressions and consequences of sinfulness that do not have obvious parallels to modern life. Uzzah’s act of touching the ark is described by the writer as an “irreverent act” (v. 7). There appears to be no parallel to that in modern life. The consequence of Uzzah’s sin (being “struck down” [v. 7] by God), likewise appears to be unparalleled. David’s anger and fear (vv. 8–9) are emotions we can identify with, but we do not feel them for the same reasons David did. Therefore, each of these ideas needs to be abstracted to a more general truth that still has validity today.

It is important to realize that the expression of sinfulness may change from one culture to another. Take idolatry as an example. In the Ten Commandments God said, “You shall have no other gods before me (Exod 20:3).” In Scripture this was frequently applied to worshipping an idol which was a false god made by human hands. Since few modern people in the Western world worship idols, it would be easy to dismiss this command as irrelevant to today. When one considers the false gods offered by world religions and the false god of materialism that moderns constantly serve (see Col 3:5), it is easy to see that the command is not irrelevant; rather, its cultural *expression* may be irrelevant. The preacher needs to abstract the continuing truth that the one true God of the Bible must be worshipped alone. Anything that attempts to remove God from the ultimate

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 43.

place of worship in one's life is an idol.

When preachers see the awesomeness of God and the wickedness of people displayed together in a passage of Scripture, the character mismatch can be overwhelming. There is a human tendency to begin confronting the sinfulness of people. Unfortunately, people have no ability on their own to change their sinful state. This brings us to the third concept the preacher must find in order to build an applicational bridge: the grace of God.

*The grace of God.* If every paragraph of Scripture reveals the character of God and the fallen nature of people, then every paragraph of Scripture confronts a theological problem. The problem is that a holy God cannot have a close relationship with sinful people. Likewise, sinful people do not want to worship and serve a holy God. Part of human depravity is the inability of people to be righteous on their own merits. We cannot earn God's favor; therefore, God must initiate and secure the possibility that sinful people may have a relationship with him. Theologically, we call this "grace." Grace not only brings a person into a relationship with God (salvation), but it also gives believers in Jesus both the desire and the ability to grow in their faith (sanctification). Titus 2:11–12 says that "the grace of God that brings salvation...teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives." The Bible's focus on grace saves the preacher from the tendency to emphasize human effort. Bryan Chapell put it this way:

Messages that are not Christ-centered (i.e., not redemptively focused) inevitably become human-centered even though the drift most frequently occurs unintentionally among evangelical preachers.... They present godliness as a product of human endeavor. Although they mean well, this focus on actuating divine blessing through human works carries the message, Doing these things will get you right with God

and/or your neighbor. No message is more damaging to true faith.<sup>33</sup>

Someone who has experience in preaching and teaching the Bible may wonder if it is true that *every* passage of Scripture contains some expression of God's grace, mediating the revelation of God and the sinfulness of people. Some passages promise to judge human sinfulness in the harshest possible way as a revelation of God's justice. Such passages seem to be exceptions, and they occur frequently enough to make one question if they disprove the rule altogether. It is important to realize, however, that even prophecies of judgment have an implied escape clause within them. When God originally determined to judge the Assyrians, he sent Jonah to Nineveh. Jonah's message was all judgment. "He proclaimed: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned'" (Jonah 3:4). Although there was no direct statement of grace in Jonah's message, the people of Nineveh turned and begged for God's mercy. Consequently "when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (Jonah 3:10). They found the grace implied in the prophecy of judgment.

When Nahum prophesied to Nineveh years after Jonah, he predicted that God's judgment would fall on Nineveh with fierce intensity: "His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.... With an overwhelming flood he will make an end of [Nineveh]; he will pursue his foes into darkness" (Nah 1:6, 8). Yet imbedded in that judgment is the promise that "the LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him" (Nah 1:7). While this verse promises protection to Israel, it also invites the objects of God's anger to find protection in him. Application is possible in part because God's grace is either stated or implied in every paragraph of scripture.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 280–81.

## An Example of Bridge-Building: Ruth 1

The book of Ruth is an example of a story whose discontinuities have spawned more than one poor attempt at application. One preacher exegeted the proper names (e.g. Boaz, Mahlon, Kilion, etc.) and find in their meanings the “causes and cure of bitterness.” While it is true that Naomi called herself “Bitter” (Mara, Ruth 1:20), and that her bitterness was ultimately removed, the author’s point was much larger than bitterness itself. The distance created by genre may lead the preacher to make an invalid attempt at application. A better approach is to find the three redemptive truths in the passage and build a bridge from them. They are (1) the character of God, (2) the sinfulness of people, and (3) the grace of God reconciling God and sinful people. We begin first by finding the Exegetical Big Idea and creating an exegetical outline:

### **Big Idea:**

What is this passage talking about?

*Why was Naomi so bitterly depressed about her life?*

What is it saying about what it is talking about?

*...because she felt that God had removed everything she valued from her life.*

- I. Elimelech and his family temporarily left Bethlehem for Moab (vv. 1–2).
  - A. They fled Bethlehem for Moab because of the famine in Bethlehem (v. 1).
  - B. They intended only to stay for a short time in Moab (v. 1).
  
- II. Elimelech and his family suffered misfortune in Moab (vv. 3–5).
  - A. Elimelech died in Moab (v. 3).
  - B. Naomi’s sons married Moabite women (v. 4).
  - C. Naomi’s sons died without bearing any children (v. 5).
  
- III. Naomi and her daughters-in-law planned to return to Bethlehem (vv. 6–18).
  - A. Naomi heard that God had removed the famine in Bethlehem (v. 6a).
  - B. The widows all planned to return, but Naomi tried to talk her daughters-in-law out of going with her (vv. 6b–9).
  - C. Orpah decided to remain in Moab, but Ruth decided to remain with Naomi (vv. 14–18)
  - D. Naomi stopped trying to persuade Ruth from going (v. 18).

IV. Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem (vv. 19–22).

- A. They were greeted warmly by Naomi’s long-time friends and neighbors (v. 19).
- B. Naomi rebuffed their warm reception with bitter words (vv. 20–21).
- C. Despite Naomi’s bitterness, there were reasons to hope for a better future (v. 22).

At this point in the process, the preacher has studied the text using the appropriate tools and has a firm grasp on what the passage meant to the original audience. Since this is not a sidewalk passage, the preacher must next construct an applicational bridge by finding the three applicational aspects and abstracting where necessary to build a parallel to modern life. Consider these questions:

**What is revealed about God?** God is stated to be a powerful God who exerts control over the lives of people on earth. He sends food (v. 6) and he sends misfortune (vv. 20–21).

**What is revealed about human sinfulness?** There are several points of human sinfulness revealed in the passage, but the most central one resides in the attitude of Naomi. Naomi is bitter against God for the disappointments she experienced in life (vv. 20–21). Her bitterness is an expression of unbelief in God’s goodness and provision. While God gives to others, Naomi feels that he has robbed her of everything meaningful in life.

**Where is the grace of God?** Despite Naomi’s unbelief, God has provided her a faithful daughter-in-law who will become a source of God’s blessing (grace) in Naomi’s life. Ruth’s faith is evidence of God’s grace drawing her to faith in him despite the negative circumstances of Naomi’s life.

Ruth 1 addresses a struggle that transcends the distance of genre and culture. This transcendent struggle is the temptation of unbelief when God’s sovereign actions create a painful situation in the life of someone who trusts him. The challenge for Naomi is to see the evidence of God’s goodness (in providing food and Ruth) and trust him to care for her. The skillful preacher will use the abstract concept of God’s “bitter” providence to address the wavering faith of a believer and encourage him or her to trust God’s provision in life. The concrete contemporary applications will look very different (as we

will see); nonetheless, they will share strong parallels to the ancient text through the bridge created by the revelation of God, the expression of depravity, and the provision of God's grace.

The goal of this chapter is to show preachers how to apply the Bible in a Biblical Sermon. Our method has three steps: (1) understand the original application, (2) abstract the continuing truth, and (3) state the continuing truth in terms appropriate to modern life. The first step, understanding the original application, involves the normal process of exegesis which yields an Exegetical Big Idea and exegetical outline. The second step, abstract the continuing truth, requires the preacher to take a break in his sermon preparation to think about the distance between the original audience and the modern audience and how that distance may be bridged. We spent considerable time explaining that the distance between the biblical world and the modern comes in the form of discontinuity in expressions of genre, culture and some aspects of theology. Whenever one or more of these discontinuities obscures the relevance of the passage, it is the preacher's job to discover and explain to the audience how one or more continuing truths in the passage transcend the discontinuities, making the passage relevant and applicable to modern life.

Many sermons get this far. The preacher understands the passage and explains a few of the continuing truths in the passage. This is what passes for application in most sermons. The preacher believes that because he has begun explaining the parallel between the text and the modern Christian, he has done relevant application. Unfortunately, this is like a bridge that is half-built. It holds out the promise of relevance, but falls short of really showing the relevance. Dave Veerman describes this phenomenon when he writes:

Many preachers and teachers assume that the congregation, class, or study group will make the connection between the lesson and their lives by themselves. This is a common assumption. Not wishing to insult the intelligence of their listeners, they lay out the Bible story, the theological insights, or the timeless truths and leave the rest to the audience to figure out (like the pastor I knew who would end sermons with, “And you?”). But most people can’t make the mental jump—they don’t have the innate ability. Believers don’t have to be spoon-fed, but they do need to be led.<sup>34</sup>

Our approach to application in Biblical Preaching therefore does not see step #2 as application itself, but as a reflection point in the process of building the Biblical Sermon. The preacher in step #1 finishes his exegesis and takes some time to reflect on the passage. This brings us to the third and final stage of application in Biblical Preaching: state the continuing truth in terms appropriate to modern life.

### *Step #3: State the Continuing Truth in Modern Terms*

At this point, the preacher is ready to resume preparing the sermon. Having found and stated the three continuing truths from the passage, he will now use them to guide the construction of the message itself.

### The Priority of the Modern Audience

As the preacher begins to construct the sermon, he must have his priorities straight if he is going to achieve maximum effectiveness in applying the message. In step #1, the priority was on understanding the text. Here in step #3, the focus shifts to making the text understandable.

To make the text understandable, the preacher must focus on his audience. Everything he does from this point forward will be done with them in mind. By giving the audience priority, the preacher follows the pattern of the writers of Scripture. The

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<sup>34</sup> Dave Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 23.

Bible's authors consciously selected and organized the material they presented in order to accomplish the goals they had for their original audiences. The modern preacher will do the same by allowing his knowledge of the audience and his goal for the sermon to be the controlling factors in how he develops the sermon. How does the priority of the audience influence the preparation of the message?

### The Priority of the Audience Guides the Preparation

There are a number of ways in which the priority of the audience shapes the final outcome of the message.

#### *Choose a Title with the Audience in Mind*

One way the preacher brings an application focus to the message is to choose a title that sparks the interest of the audience. Homiletics texts unanimously assert that a good sermon begins by gaining the interest of the audience. That statement is made in the context of writing the sermon's introduction. Although the introduction should gain attention, it is possible to gain attention for the sermon long before the preacher stands up to speak. By choosing a title that is interesting to the audience and connected to the application point of the message, the preacher can increase the power of the sermon. For instance, some churches use direct mail to generate new growth prospects. Among those who use direct mail, it is well known that the best responses correspond to a well-chosen series title. By investing time and energy in titles that stimulate the hearer's interest, the preacher can gain more people to hear the life-changing message of God's word and prepare them in advance for the application of the passage.

The book of Ruth, as we have seen, details how a sovereign God will provide for those who trust him even when trusting him means enduring bitter providence. A series

on Ruth that is titled with the application and the audience in mind can heighten the effectiveness of each message in the series. Instead of promoting a message on “The Story of Ruth,” one might preach an entire series with the title “U-Turns: Navigating Life’s Reversals and Setbacks.” Though the content of the message may be the same, the “U-Turns” title is more effective. It gives the audience an image to remember and it addresses a felt need of security.

*Word the Big Idea with the Audience in Mind*

A second way to honor the priority of the audience is to write a sermonic Big Idea that communicates best with the audience. The major distinctive of *Biblical Preaching* is the “Big Idea.” As previously noted, the Big Idea states that every passage is about one thing and that one thing can be found by asking two questions: “What is this passage talking about?” and “What is it saying about what it is talking about?” The Big Idea is a useful tool for understanding the Bible. It is also an essential tool for preaching a message that communicates clearly. A message that is organized around a good Big Idea will have a sense of flow, unity, and power to it. A good Big Idea is one that is tied to the one of the universal truths abstracted from the passage. As Robinson put it, “The homiletical idea is simply the biblical truth applied to life.”<sup>35</sup>

Using Ruth 1 as an example again, the Exegetical Big Idea states that: “Naomi was bitterly depressed about life because she felt that God had removed everything she valued from her life.” While that Big Idea accurately reflects the content of Ruth 1, it is not particularly interesting as an idea. It also fails to focus on the application of the message. A better Big Idea for a sermon on Ruth 1 would be, “Trust God’s controlling

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<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 105.

plan when you face a U-Turn in life.” Naomi and Ruth were learning to trust God despite the emotional setbacks they faced. This statement brings together two of the three applicational abstractions: the revelation of God and the challenge of human sinfulness. It combines these transcendent truths with a sharp image (U-Turns) that captures the attention and imagination of the audience.

*Develop the Sermon’s Purpose with the Audience in Mind.*

The purpose of the sermon answers the question, “Why am I preaching this message on this day to this group of people?” Many preachers do not think explicitly about a sermon’s purpose. They answer the question, “Why am I preaching this message on this day?” with the unconscious answer, “Because it is Sunday and I am required by my church to give a message.” Or, “Last week I finished Romans chapter 12, so this week I’ll start in on Romans 13.” In contrast, preachers who are most effective in applying the Bible decide exactly what they wish to accomplish in the message. They make this decision as soon as the exegetical phase of preparation is complete. Once the preacher understands what a passage means, he should begin thinking about what he wants to accomplish in the message on this passage. This involves thinking about his audience and how the Bible’s truth from the passage should be lived out in the lives of the people in his congregation.

Sermons can be grouped by purpose into one of three categories. The sermon’s purpose may be to inform, to convince, or to persuade.

**Purpose: To Inform**

When a preacher’s purpose is to inform, he seeks to give information where it is lacking. Imagine a pastor in Omaha, Nebraska named Rick Nelson. Pastor Rick is a

newcomer to Omaha having been called to serve his church just over one year ago. As he got to know the people of his church, he learned that not a single adult has been saved, baptized, and added to the church in over ten years. Digging deeper, Pastor Rick learned that most people in the church do not know how to lead a person to Christ. Faced with this reality, he began planning a series called “How to Introduce People to God.” One of the messages in the series was designed to teach people the basic facts that a believer needs to know in order to share the gospel. The Big Idea for this message is:

**What is this message talking about?**

*What does a believer need to know to introduce someone else to Jesus?*

**What is it saying about what it is talking about?**

*He or she needs to know that everyone has sinned, that God punishes sin with death, that Jesus died as a substitute for sinners, and that God will forgive a sinner who trusts in Jesus.*

Note how the Big Idea in this message contains all the basic facts of the gospel. Pastor Nelson’s purpose produces a Big Idea that fulfills the purpose.

It is important to realize that lack of information can sometimes be the only obstacle to application. Someone in Pastor Nelson’s congregation may have wanted to be a witness for Christ, but he or she did not know where to begin or what to say. For someone who is ignorant, a message designed to inform carries implicit applicational content. As Haddon Robinson put it:

Imagine, for example, that you borrow my car and it has a flat. You call me up and say, ‘I’ve never changed a tire on a car like this. What do I do? I tell you how to find the spare, how to use the jack, where find the key that unlocks the wire rim. Once I give you all the instructions, then do I say, ‘Now, I exhort you: change the tire’? No, you already want to get the car going. Because you already sense the need, you don’t need exhortation. You simply need clear explanation. Some sermons are like that. Your people are wrestling with a certain passage of Scripture. They want to know what it means. Unless they understand the text, it’s useless to apply it. They don’t

need exhortation; they need explanation.<sup>36</sup>

By constructing his message with his listeners in mind, Pastor Nelson was able to speak directly to their needs. By preaching with a purpose in mind, he successfully applied the Bible by giving people knowledge they needed.

Purpose: To Convince

A second purpose for preaching is the need to convince. This type of message is designed win over a person's mind to a new way of thinking. As he prepared his series on "How to Introduce People to God," Pastor Nelson learned that his church had previously been taught not to associate with lost people. They believed that personal holiness meant avoiding anybody who did not know Christ. In contrast, Pastor Nelson knew that personal evangelism depends on personal friendships between believers and unbelievers. His goal of teaching his church to become evangelistic would never succeed if the people of the church continued with a mindset that ran from contact with unbelievers. Since his congregation held a contrary, erroneous view, Pastor Nelson knew that he would need to convince them that making friends with lost people was essential to obeying God's command to evangelize. Application, in this case, was blocked by a fallacy that needed to be removed.

In order to convince his flock to develop redemptive friendships, Pastor Nelson turned to Luke 5:29–32. In that passage Matthew, a new disciple of Jesus, brings Jesus to a party full of sinners. When the Pharisees attack Jesus for associating with the unholy, Jesus responds by stating that it was necessary for his mission: "It is not the healthy who

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<sup>36</sup> Haddon Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application" in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching* by Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1989), 59.

need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31–32). His purpose was to convince, meaning that he wanted to change their minds about associating with lost people. Again, this purpose comes embedded with an applicational thrust. When someone is convinced of his or her need to change, an obstacle to obedience is removed. The sermon designed to convince gives people reasons for obedience.

#### Purpose: To Persuade

Sometimes we refuse to obey a certain truth because we do not really feel that truth is important. When a preacher designs his sermon to persuade, he hopes to cause the listener to act. In Pastor Nelson’s case, some believers in his church may know how to present the gospel and they may be convinced intellectually that developing redemptive relationships is important. Yet, they still do not obey Jesus’ command to evangelize because evangelism seems less important than other things they do with their time. To overcome this obstacle, Pastor Nelson must design his message to confront misplaced priorities. If the Word of God can penetrate the heart and instill a deep conviction about the importance of evangelism, an obstacle to application will be removed. When a sermon is designed to persuade, it does not tell people how to apply the Bible; it persuades them as to why they must change their behavior.

Preaching that is designed with a purpose in mind is a powerful means of applying the Bible. Instead of always approaching application as a set of activities that someone must do, purposeful preaching confronts barriers to application and seeks to remove them. Whenever a preacher develops a message, he should think about his purpose in giving the message. Even if one is preaching through a book of the Bible, it is

possible to preach with a purpose, because the human author of every book of the Bible had a purpose. The preacher who brings his sermonic purpose into line with the purpose of the Bible writer will be more effective in applying the Bible.

### *Choose the Form of the Sermon with the Audience in Mind*

A sermon's form is closely related to its purpose. After deciding on a purpose for his sermon, the preacher should choose the sermon form that will best accomplish that purpose. A full discussion of sermon forms is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, it is important to realize that the preacher can best apply a message when the structure of that message lends itself to the application that needs to be made. The following is a brief review of the three types of sermon forms.

#### Understand The Various Forms Sermons Can Take

Sermons generally take three different shapes, and these shapes differ from each other based on where the Big Idea is placed. The first shape a sermon can take is called the Deductive Shape. A deductive shape places the Big Idea at the beginning of the sermon, either in the introduction or as the first main idea of the outline. In a deductive sermon, each transition usually restates the Big Idea. This restatement makes the flow of the sermon clear. Thus, the deductive form is usually the best form for a teaching-oriented sermon. Although deductive sermons tend to be clear, they can also be predictable. If a deductive sermon is done poorly, it can be dry, didactic, and boring.

The second shape sermons can take is the Inductive Shape. The inductive form places the Big Idea at the end of the sermon, usually as the final point in the outline. The inductive shape, when done properly, builds tension and suspense with each point in the outline. Thus, it sustains and heightens the listener's interest until the end of the sermon.

This form can make a sermon persuasive and memorable. There is a potential disadvantage to the inductive sermon. Because the Big Idea is not revealed until the end, it is possible that the listener may get lost. When done improperly, the inductive sermon form can leave people frustrated wondering, “What is the point?”

A third potential sermon shape is the Semi-Inductive Shape. One type of semi-inductive shape, called the inductive-deductive shape, places the Big Idea somewhere in the middle of the sermon, often as one of the latter points in the outline. The inductive-deductive shape attempts to combine the best elements of the inductive form (suspense, persuasion) with the best elements of the deductive form (clarity). The inductive-deductive shape is often used to persuade an audience, then show them how to apply a principle. A second type of semi-inductive shape is the subject completed shape. The subject completed shape introduces a question or problem which is the subject of the Big Idea. The sermon outline then fills in the complement of the Big Idea.

Since a complementary sermon form serves good application, one should choose the form of the sermon based on the purpose he is trying to achieve. If the preacher’s purpose is to inform, then the deductive form will ordinarily be the most useful. If the preacher’s purpose is to persuade, he should use the inductive form, which tends to be more emotional and persuasive. When attempting to convince and change the mind of the congregation, the preacher may choose any of the three sermon forms, though the semi-inductive and inductive sermon forms tend to be more useful for convincing a person who has a contrary point of view.

A preacher who desires to change lives will design his sermon for maximum applicational power. This means that the sermon will be written with the modern audience in mind. The preacher will select a title that engages the contemporary mind, he

will make the major transcendent truth of the passage his Big Idea for the sermon. He will state that Big Idea in contemporary language. Furthermore, he will attempt to fulfill one of the three purposes of the sermon and will choose a sermon shape that will best accomplish that purpose. Consider again the example from Ruth.

A message from Ruth 1 has as its goal to convince people to trust God despite the bitter circumstances God may bring into someone's life. Using the image of a U-Turn, the message is designed inductively to maximize its applicational thrust:

- I. U-Turns change the entire direction of our lives (vv. 1–5)
  - A. U-Turns happen when we choose to change our situation (vv. 1–2).
  - B. U-Turns happen when life unexpectedly changes our situation (vv. 2–5).
  
- II. Life's U-Turns may tempt us to change our beliefs about God (vv. 6–18).
  - A. Our religion tells us to trust God (vv. 6–9).
  - B. But our experience may tempt us to doubt God (vv. 10–13).
  - C. We must choose whether or not to follow God's U-Turn or take our own path (vv. 14–18).
  
- III. We need to learn to trust God when our life takes a U-Turn (vv. 19–22).
  - A. God is the one who causes U-Turns to happen in life (vv. 19–21).
  - B. God has a plan behind every U-Turn in life.
  - C. Look for the signs of God in the U-Turns of your life (v. 22).

**Take Home Truth:** “Trust God's controlling plan when you face a U-Turn in life.”

This example shows the power of a sermon designed to emphasize application. The ideas reflected in the major and minor points are all modern language parallels to the original text. These parallels are drawn from the three applicational truths: the revelation of God, the expression of human sinfulness, and the grace of God that reconciles fallen humanity to a holy God. The Big Idea is stated twice: once in movement III, and again as the “Take Home Truth” for the message. The modern audience is given priority throughout in order to state the continuing truth in terms that are appropriate to the contemporary world. This approach does everything possible to aid application.

While good sermon mechanics can be a helpful aid to application, a sermon's application will succeed or fail based on the sermon's discussion. Specificity is the key to good application in Biblical Preaching.

### Speaking Specifically to the Modern Audience

No matter how purposeful and well-constructed the message is, the preacher will not successfully apply it unless he learns to be specific. Specificity states the continuing truth of the passage in concrete terms. Haddon Robinson illustrates the power of specificity with a story from early America.

In our American frontier days, there was a settlement in the west whose citizens were engaged in the lumber business. The town felt they wanted a church. They built a building and called a minister. The preacher moved into the settlement and initially was well received. Then one afternoon he happened to see some of his parishioners dragging some logs, which had been floated down the river from another village upstream, onto the bank. Each log was marked with the owner's stamp on one end. To his great distress, the minister saw his members pulling in the logs and sawing off the end where the telltale stamp appeared. The following Sunday he preached a strong sermon on the commandment "Thou shalt not steal." At the close of the service, his people lined up and offered enthusiastic congratulations. "Wonderful message, Pastor." "Mighty fine preaching." The response bothered him a great deal. So he went home to prepare his sermon for the following Sunday. He preached the same sermon but gave it a different ending: "And thou shalt not cut off the end of thy neighbor's logs." When he got through, the congregation ran him out of town.<sup>37</sup>

The difference between the preacher's first message and his second was specificity. But how would that message in today's world be applied specifically? In order to truly address the modern audience, the preacher must understand how people steal today. Most Christians would nod heartily to a message on stealing that confronted shoplifters, carjackers, and common burglars. Everyone knows these people are stealing. For most American preachers to properly apply the sin of stealing, they would need to understand how teenagers and some adults download songs illegally from the internet,

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<sup>37</sup> Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application," 63–64.

make illegal copies of rented videos and DVD's, install software on several computers when they only have one license, and so on.

Earlier in this chapter we looked at the cultural discontinuity in a passage like Deuteronomy 22:8, which says, "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof." To be specific with this passage, one has to first abstract the issue of human sinfulness in the passage. The expression of fallen humanity seems to be that people need to provide basic protection for the carelessness of others. In the modern world, a Minnesotan would need to shovel the snow off his sidewalk, a dog owner should keep his dog on a leash, and everyone with stairs in their homes should install handrails. These kinds of specific applications make the abstract, universal truth of the text come alive concretely in the modern world.

### Developing the Ability to Be More Specific

Robinson uses what might be called an imaginary ad hoc committee to develop specificity in application.

We tend to apply a passage to people like ourselves. If you're 35 and you associate with young professionals in the church, you'll tend to keep those people in mind. It's helpful to make a grid of the people in your church in terms of things like age, marital status, housing situation, net worth, education. After you determine the principle in a passage, you look at the grid and ask, "What does this say to a single person in her fifties who works in a grocery store and lives with her parents?" It may not say anything, but you continue asking that question for each grouping. When I prepare, I imagine about eight people standing around my desk. One is my wife's mother, who is a true believer. In my mind, I also picture a friend who is a cynic, and sometimes I can hear him saying, "Oh, yeah, sure" I picture a business executive who thinks bottom line. I have in my mind a teenager, whom I can occasionally hear saying, "This is boring." I look at these folks in my mind and think, *What does this have to say to them?*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 25.

The preacher who desires to apply the Bible powerfully must learn how to be specific. Forming an imaginary committee on application is one helpful method. In addition, the preacher needs to be curious about the world around him. He should read as widely as possible in areas of interest to his people. A pastor in Detroit should be aware of what is going on in the auto industry. One in rural Iowa should become acquainted with farming. Only by projecting ourselves into the lives of God's people can we truly learn to apply the Bible.

This chapter attempted to look at the issues involved in applying a Biblical Sermon. Good application begins with good exegesis: the preacher must fully understand the original application of the Bible. From there, we learned what makes application so difficult; namely, discontinuity between the Bible and modern life in genre, culture, and theology. Passages that have no discontinuity in these areas are as easy to apply as it is to walk down the sidewalk; passages where there is discontinuity must be abstracted to a general principle. Next we learned how to construct the sermon for maximum applicational impact and how to develop the arguments of the sermon to make specific applications to modern life. By following this approach, Biblical Preachers can do a more effective job of preaching relevantly to the modern world.

## CHAPTER 5

### REPORT OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Homiletics exists in a strangely undeveloped state as an academic discipline.

While most areas of ministry studies have gotten more specialized, homiletics has been more and more relegated to the periphery of the academic world. This is strange because one of the central tasks of pastors is teaching and preaching. Bible colleges and seminaries offer courses in hermeneutics, Old and New Testament Exegesis courses in part to develop ministerial students into competent handlers of the Bible's contents. Yet when it comes to teaching those same students how to pass on what they've learned to their congregations in a way that is interesting and relevant, too often colleges and seminaries draft a professor from another discipline into teaching the homiletics courses.

Gordon-Conwell's Doctor of Ministry program in Biblical Preaching is designed to offset this problem in academia. In order to graduate from the D.Min. program, students must teach what we have learned in some form. I completed this requirement in the fall of 2002.

#### *Setting*

My teaching experience took place at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (DBTS), which is located in Allen Park, Michigan. DBTS is an independent, fundamental Baptist seminary. It is dispensational and Calvinistic in its theological orientation. I graduated twice from this school: first in 1999 (M.Div.) and again in 2002

(Th.M.). In addition I worked on the seminary staff from 1997 through 2001.

### Description and Challenges of Setting

Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary matriculated 104 students in the fall of 2002. It has four full-time professors, three part-time professors, and four full-time administrative staff members. Like many schools of its size, DBTS does not have a full-time homiletics professor, nor does the part-time homiletics professor have advanced training in homiletics. The homiletics professor is a church history teacher who has some training in public speaking. He also has the lightest teaching load of all the full-time professors; therefore, it is unlikely that DBTS will be hiring a full-time homiletics professor in the future. This is unfortunate because, although DBTS is outstanding at training pastors in exegesis and theology, it is widely known that many DBTS graduates are inadequately equipped to prepare and deliver effective Biblical Sermons.

Furthermore, the recent growth of the student population at DBTS has further diminished the value of the homiletics courses DBTS offers. In the class I taught, for instance, there were fifteen students. A class of this size allowed the students only one in-class preaching opportunity. When a student has only one opportunity to display what he has learned, it is difficult to measure his growth and refinement as a preacher. Ideally, the class should have been limited to seven students or fewer to allow each student a minimum of two or more in-class preaching assignments. Without more help in the homiletics department, it seems inevitable that fewer and fewer DBTS graduates will be well-prepared for the preaching aspect of pastoral ministry.

### Approach Based on This Setting

Given my history with DBTS, I felt that I could use my training at Gordon-

Conwell to help address some of the weaknesses I felt in my own training at DBTS. My assumption in developing my course at DBTS was that my students would be well-prepared exegetically, but would need help seeing how exegetical methods should be brought to bear on sermon preparation. More importantly, the students would need to be taught that homiletics was not a matter of following certain forms and conventions, but the art of learning how to communicate the Word of God in ways that were faithful to Scripture, but also interesting, memorable, and relevant to the audience. With these concerns in mind, I developed a ten-step process of sermon development that systematically moves the student from selecting a text through writing the manuscript.

### *Methodology*

Given the time available and the goals of the course, I adopted the following methodology for this class.

### Use of Class Time

The course I taught met on Thursdays from 9:25 A.M. to 12:00 noon. From 10:30 to 11:15 there was a mandatory break for chapel. This broke the class into two sections: one one-hour block (9:25 to 10:25) and one forty-minute block (11:20 to 12:00). The class met from August 29, 2002, through December 19, 2002. Three class sessions were cancelled due to other calendar matters, which left the instructor with fourteen class sessions totaling twenty-three and one-half hours of class time. Since I needed to cover the essential elements of Biblical Preaching and allow each student the opportunity to preach, I chose to set up the following class schedule:

8/29 Course Introduction; Course Overview  
 What is Biblical Preaching & Why Is It Important?  
 Step 1: Find and limit the text

- 9/5 Step 2: Understand the passage in its original setting  
Step 3: Write an exegetical outline and exegetical big idea.
- 9/12 Step 4: Apply the truth of the passage to the modern audience  
Step 5: Determine sermon's big idea & outline the sermon
- 9/19 Step 6: Develop the body of the sermon
- 9/26 Step #7: Prepare the Application and Conclusion  
Step #8: Prepare the Introduction
- 10/3 Step #9: Write the Sermon Manuscript  
Step #10: Preach the Message
- 10/10 No Lecture: **ALL SERMON MANUSCRIPTS DUE TODAY by 4:00 P.M.** Put these manuscripts in my box in the copier room.
- 10/17 No Class: Mid-America Conference on Preaching
- 10/24 Preaching & Critique: Bender, Brock
- 10/31 Preaching & Critique: Campbell, Esse
- 11/7 Preaching & Critique: Gilbert, Hammermeister
- 11/14 Preaching & Critique: Hendrickson, Howell
- 11/21 Preaching & Critique: Jungels, Kypros
- 11/28 **No Class: Thanksgiving**
- 12/5 Preaching & Critique: May, McFadden
- 12/12 Preaching & Critique: Parker, Perry
- 12/19 Preaching & Critique: Winnberg

### Assignments

There were three purposes to the assignments given in class. First, the assignments were designed to aid the student in mastering the concepts taught in the course. Second, the instructor's feedback on each assignment was designed to show the

student where he needed improvement in his mastery of the concept addressed by the assignment. Third, the assignment was designed to aid the instructor in fairly grading each student's mastery of the concepts taught in class. With these goals in mind, the following assignments were given:

**Course Textbooks:**

**Required:**

McDill, Wayne V. *The Moment of Truth: A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999.

Smith, Donald K. *Creating Understanding*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.

**Recommended:**

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

**Assignments:** There will be no exams or quizzes in this course. Your acquisition of the skills discussed in class and in the reading will be measured by the weekly projects and final sermon you produce. There are three categories of assignment:

1. *Weekly Reading:* You will be required to read the assigned pages from our required textbooks and any related articles I hand out to you in class. This reading is to be done in accordance with the reading schedule I give you and should be finished before class begins each week. We will discuss in class the material you read, so please read carefully and thoughtfully. Take notes, if that helps you, on what you read and be sure to bring your book to class with you. If you do not complete the reading on time, you may turn it in up to one week later and receive a 10-point penalty for lateness. After one week, no late work will be accepted.
2. *Weekly Assignment:* Each week, you will be expected to complete the assignment handed out in class. This assignment will help you practice the skills we discussed in class for that week. It will also help you complete each step of the process toward your final sermon. Your grade will be determined by how well you implement the skill discussed in class that week. Late assignments

may be handed in up to one week later with a 10-point penalty for lateness.

3. *Final Sermon:* On October 10, you will place in my box, before the end of the day, the written sermon manuscript for your sermon. The sermon manuscript must have the following components:
  1. Statement of the Big Idea
  2. Full sentence outline
  3. A full manuscript of the sermon, including appropriate discussion of the text, illustrations, applications, transitions, and conclusion. See the enclosed example for exactly what I want. LATE WORK WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED FOR ANY REASON ON THIS ASSIGNMENT.
  4. This sermon must be developed from scratch. That is, no previous sermon (prepared either by you or others) may be used to satisfy the class requirement. If you have done exegetical work on the passage you've chosen to preach from, I expect you to supplement that exegetical work with new work based on the things you learn in this course.
  5. Your message must be from the New Testament Epistles Only. You may preach on any passage from Romans through Jude. I would counsel you to stay away from the prayers/thanksgiving reports of Paul as they are notoriously difficult, but I will not forbid you from preaching from those passages.

**Grading:** Your final grade will be computed as follows:

25%	Assigned Reading
25%	Weekly Assignment
30%	Sermon Manuscript
20%	Sermon Delivery

#### Explanation of Assignments

A few points of explanation need to be made about these assignments. First, the textbook by McDill had already been chosen by the usual professor. Because the bookstore had purchased copies already for the students, the selection could not be

changed. I added the book by Smith in order to give a communications angle to the material. This had mixed results. The bookstore had difficulty locating copies of Smith and the students were forced to pay a high price for them. These problems were unknown to me. On the student evaluation forms, many students stated their appreciation for Smith's book; one or two disliked it.

The final sermon required a deductive message from the New Testament Epistles only. I did this in order to focus the course. While I introduced the students to the inductive and semi-inductive sermon forms, I wanted them to master the deductive form first. Also, it is my conviction that different genres of Scripture demand different preparation approaches. Since I did not have time in class to deal with the genre consideration, I chose to focus on the New Testament epistles since they are the ones most often preached in evangelical churches. If I were a full-time homiletics teacher, I would focus a second class on the genre considerations and the inductive and semi-inductive sermon forms. A few of my students chose passages from the New Testament epistles that had an inductive structure. I allowed them to develop their sermons inductively, since one of my goals was to teach them that the construction of their messages should often reflect the construction of the text.

### *Evaluation*

This section details both the students' evaluation of the class and my own personal reflection on it.

### Student Evaluations

On the final day of the course, I asked each student to answer an eight-question survey about the course. The lines in **bold type** are the questions from the survey. My

report of their answers comes below each question. One student left early, so I received fourteen replies out of the fifteen students in the class.

- 1. Overall, what was your impression of this course? Circle the term that best describes your answer:**

*Excellent*      *Good*      *Average*      *Fair*      *Poor*

Four students circled excellent. Four students indicated that they thought it was between excellent and good. The remaining six circled good. There were no scores below good.

- 2. Based on your answer above, please tell me what was best about the course or what was lacking in it. Use 1 to 3 sentences only:**

A variety of answers were given here, all of them positive. The most common response seemed to focus on the Big Idea. The students felt as though they understood the need for the Big Idea and how to find and state it. Another common response was that they learned how to outline a sermon more effectively. Several students mentioned that they felt I was well-prepared to teach during each class period. The only negative note was sounded by a student who felt that the grading was inconsistent. I sympathize with that student's criticism. I tried to give enough weight to the reading assignments to offset some of the subjectivity in grading. Perhaps adding an exam would help to counter the inherent subjectivity in grading.

- 3. Looking back at the lecture portion of this class, what was the most important lesson you learned, stated in 1 to 3 sentences?**

Several students mentioned the lectures on application or Bryan Chapell's

“Fallen Condition Focus” which was part of the application lectures. I was gratified by these responses since application is the focus of this thesis. Other responses focused on the Big Idea, the step-by-step methodology advanced in the lectures, and the focus on communication rather than simply declamation.

**4. What would you change about the lecture portion of the class?**

The most consistent response by far was that the students wanted more lecture. I take this to mean that they wanted more in-depth discussion and more interaction in class in order to help them assimilate the material. I do not think more lecture time is actually needed, just more classes with the same emphasis. Many of the same students who asked for more lectures also said that they learned the most from the preaching critiques. I think the students would like a series of homiletics classes that consistently emphasize the “Biblical Preaching” distinctives. One student wrote, “This was the third preaching course I’ve had that used Robinson’s text, but the emphasis was very different.”

**5. Reflecting on the critique of your preaching and that of your classmates, what was the most important lesson you learned?**

The consensus among students was that clarity in stating the Big Idea and reinforcing the Big Idea in the body of the message was the most important lesson learned.

**6. What would you change about the sermon critique aspect of this class?**

Most students said they would not change anything. The second most common answer was that the students should preach a second message with critique to measure their progress. I agree with this statement, but it cannot be done without much smaller class sizes.

**7. Evaluate the reading assignments and written assignments for this class. Were they helpful or not? Why or why not?**

Everyone said they were helped by the assignments, though they criticized me for not handing them back soon enough. That is a valid complaint. The reviews of the reading were mixed. Very little was said about McDill's book, but the students had sharp opinions about Smith's *Creating Understanding*. Many thought it was helpful, but more thought that it was too disconnected from what we were studying in class. I was disappointed by these responses. Smith's book had a profound impact on me and I wanted my students to have the same experience. Originally, my intention was to discuss the reading in class each week, but we always ran out of time. Had we taken time to discuss the reading, my hope is that the students would have found the book more beneficial.

**8. If given the opportunity to take another course in preaching from Brian, would you do it? Why or why not?**

Only one student said "no" to this question. He wrote, "Probably not, but there are very few people in this world that I would want to take repeatedly on this topic." I am not sure what to take away from this statement. Perhaps the student felt he had learned all he could from me. Another student wrote that he learned a lot in the class and would

probably take another with me; however, he took exception with my style of teaching on some matters. He wrote, “the biggest thing with me is watching how you come across as a teacher. Sometimes we lose credibility with things (little things) we say.”

### Personal Evaluation

Teaching this course was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life. I enjoyed preparing for the class and the students. Having said that, I must say that I was disappointed with the written manuscripts that were handed in at the end of the lecture portion of the class. Much of what I had tried to communicate was not reflected in those manuscripts. This differs significantly from my experience teaching a similar course to undergraduates two years earlier. I felt the sermon manuscripts from the undergraduates better reflected what I had been teaching. A few items may account for this discrepancy. First, the undergraduate class had fifty-six students in it, which made preaching the sermon impossible. Since fifty percent of their grades were determined by that manuscript, the undergraduates may have worked harder on the written manuscripts than the seminarians did on their manuscripts. Second, it is my belief that seminarians have been hardened in their habits more than undergraduates. By the time a student reaches this level, he has had some college training and some experience in a formal preaching setting. Perhaps the seminarians had already formed solid opinions and habits that they needed to unlearn. Third, I think Detroit Baptist Seminary’s distinctives played a role in this as well. At DBTS, exegesis is prized much more than communication. Yet it was the lack of clarity and creativity in communication that disturbed me about the student’s manuscripts. As a DBTS graduate myself, I am certain that this course ran counter to

many of the expectations and assumptions the students had about preaching before taking the class.

Although I was initially disappointed with the manuscripts, I was very encouraged by the oral presentation of the sermons. My students did a very good job of incorporating the comments I made on their manuscripts into the message. Also, I believe most students learned and benefited from the critiques I gave of the other students. Overall, then, I was quite pleased with the results of my teaching experience. To a man, I believe each is significantly better at communicating the Word of God than he was before taking the course.

### *Conclusion*

As a result of teaching this course, I have renewed interest in teaching as a future ministry. Consequently, I am considering whether or not teaching is the means by which I can best serve the Body of Christ. Should I continue to pastor instead of becoming a full-time teacher, I am certain that one aspect of my pastorate will be training others to preach in some capacity. To that end, this D.Min. program has prepared me well.

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## VITA

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