

# Teaching Students The Applicational Power Of The Big Idea

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**Abstract:** Expository messages sometimes seem irrelevant. Often the reason is that the big idea is stated in exegetical, rather than applicational terms. This paper discusses how to teach students to use the big idea as the applicational core of the message.

Everyone who believes in the inspiration of the Bible also believes in the life-changing power of the Bible. As 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “Scripture is God-breathed and is useful” (NIV). The preacher’s response to this truth is proclamation, for if God’s word is life-changing, then we need to offer it to as many people as possible. The Scriptures anticipate this response in 2 Timothy 4:2. Four verses after telling us that the Bible is “God breathed and useful,” we are commanded to “preach the Word.” We preach because we believe that proclaiming God’s word is the only effective means for permanently changing people’s lives. Yet, despite our best efforts to explain the sermon text, sometimes the life-changing power seems to be missing from our expository sermons. This happens frequently enough that “expository preaching” is, in the minds of many people, a precise synonym for “irrelevant and boring.”

It is my belief that exposition can be the best and worst of preaching. Done properly, exposition has the power to inform the listener’s mind about what God’s word says and challenge his or her heart to obey it. Done improperly, exposition can have the opposite effect. There are many aspects of exposition that need to be mastered in order for the expositor to do an effective job in application. This paper will deal with one of them—the big idea.

In his book *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson stresses the need for the expositor to understand the overarching unity in a paragraph of Scripture. He writes, “Because each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, we do not understand a passage until we can state its subject and complement” (Robinson, 2001, p. 42). Biblical preaching, then, begins with understanding the big idea of the preaching text using the technique of finding the “subject” and “complement.” Every paragraph of Scripture has a big idea; therefore, the preacher’s main task in exegesis is to find and state the big idea as the original author intended it.

The big idea concept extends beyond merely identifying the central idea of the preaching text. In addition to finding the big idea of the biblical author, Robinson also instructs preachers to build their sermons around a big idea. “Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a *single dominant idea* supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages” (Ibid, p. 35, emphasis added). So, in addition to finding the big idea of the preaching text, effective preachers should also, according to Robinson, focus their messages on a big idea. This suggests that the exegetical big idea and the sermonic big idea, while linked, are not the same. Robinson indicates this when he writes, “state the essence of your exegetical idea in a sentence that communicates to your listeners. This sentence is your homiletical idea” (Ibid, p. 104).

I believe the expository sermons often seem irrelevant because preachers do not recognize and

exploit the difference between big idea statements that are exegetical and big idea statements that are applicational. In order to promote accuracy, we need to teach our students how to find and state the exegetical big idea. In order to promote relevance, however, we must also teach our students how to state the sermonic big idea in terms that are applicable to modern life. This paper will focus on explaining the difference between exegetical and homiletical big ideas. It will also offer some suggestions for teaching students to state their homiletical big idea in applicational terms. Finally, this paper will deal briefly with the question of why preachers tend to state sermonic big ideas in language more appropriate for an exegetical big idea.

### **The Difference**

It is crucial to realize that the big idea of an expository sermon must be in concert with the exegetical big idea of a passage. Just as a chef cannot make mashed potatoes out of glue, so the preacher cannot justifiably preach that “God wants you to have a new boat this summer” from the Noah narrative. There must be a foundational correspondence between the exegetical big idea of the passage and the homiletical big idea of one’s sermon.

Despite their linkage, there are important differences between the exegetical big idea and the sermonic big idea. Understanding these differences is the first step to crafting a big idea that can serve as the applicational core of the message.

### *Terminology*

When stating the exegetical big idea, the preacher’s goal is to restate the truth of the Bible as accurately as possible in the ancient context. Thus, the exegetical big idea is best presented using terms such as “David,” “Paul,” “the Ephesians,” “the Israelites,” and so forth. Too often, however, exegetical wording makes its way into the big idea of the message. Consider this example:

**Text:** 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

**Subject: What is this passage talking about?** Why did Paul suppress the human elements of preaching when he came to Corinth?

**Complement: What is it saying about what it is talking about?** ...so that the Corinthians would believe based on God’s power, not persuasive techniques.

**Big Idea:** Paul suppressed the human elements of preaching so that the Corinthians would believe based on God’s power, not persuasive techniques.

This big idea is an acceptable statement of the exegetical idea of the passage. It is a complete sentence, it summarizes the major idea of the passage, and it tells us who is the subject and who is the object in the passage. Although it works as an exegetical big idea, it fails as the big idea of the sermon because the terminology is exegetical rather than applicational.

Too many expository sermons state the big idea in exegetical terms. Preachers identify the major thrust of the passage, and then they begin to build messages around that idea. While it is certainly possible that the body of such a message might include some application, the wording of the big idea points away from application. Because the big idea is the focus of the message, it shapes the language of the outline and the paragraphs of the message. When the big idea points toward the biblical text, the gravitational pull of the message is toward the biblical text also. This means that the outline tends to use exegetical terms, and most of the discussion paragraphs do so as well. If any application is done in such a message, it usually feels like it was tacked on late, like a tail pinned on the donkey at a children's birthday party. A simple change in the terms of the big idea can dramatically affect the applicational thrust of a message because the wording for the outline follows the wording of the big idea and this sets a pattern for how the rest of the message will be developed. We can help our students harness the applicational power of the big idea by insisting that they use terms that are contemporary and applicational rather than exegetical.

### *Specificity*

Exegetical big ideas differ from homiletical ones not only in the terms used, but also in the degree of specificity. Exegetical big ideas tend to be general; homiletical big ideas ought to be specific.

To illustrate how exegetical big ideas tend to be general, let's return to our example. The exegetical big idea from 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 was, "Paul suppressed the human elements of preaching so that the Corinthians would believe based on God's power, not persuasive techniques." The words "human elements" represent a generalization. They were chosen in an attempt to sum up the words "eloquence and superior wisdom" (v. 1), and "wise and persuasive words" (v. 4). Whenever you take a paragraph of thought and attempt to sum it up in one sentence, you will almost inevitably choose words that are more abstract and general.

Generalizing your way to an exegetical big idea is necessary and appropriate. But, if we try to build a message around the idea "Paul suppressed the human elements of preaching so that the Corinthians would believe based on God's power, not persuasive techniques," we quickly run into problems. The first problem is that our modern audience will not readily identify either with Paul or with the Corinthians. This is the problem of terminology, which I have previously addressed.

Early in my theological education, I was taught to solve this terminology problem by universalizing the exegetical big idea. The universalized big idea then served as the big idea for my message. Instead of preaching that "Paul suppressed the human elements of preaching so that the Corinthians would believe based on God's power, not persuasive techniques," I was told to preach, "We must suppress the human elements of evangelism so that people will believe based

on God's power, not persuasive techniques." This latter statement is universalized in three ways. First, it is future tense instead of past tense. Second, it is hortatory instead of factual. Third, the word "evangelism" replaces the word "preaching," because Christians in general do not see themselves as preachers, especially not in the same way as Paul thought of himself as a preacher. This universalized big idea alleviates some of the applicational tension caused by preaching the exegetical big idea. And, for some Bible passages, universalizing the exegetical big idea will work. It works when the specific sin in the passage is one that we continue to struggle with in the same way today. "Do not commit adultery," for example, works as an exegetical and homiletical big idea, because it is an idea that is both universal and specific.

Most passages in the Bible are not both universal and specific; therefore, universalizing the exegetical big idea is not an effective way to find a big idea for the sermon. Consider the case of Exodus 32:26b: "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." Here is a very specific command, one as easy to understand as "Do not commit adultery." An exegetical big idea for this command might be, "God, through Moses, commanded the Israelites not to boil goats in their mothers' milk." Universalizing this big idea will not work for a sermon, for "We must not cook goats in the milk of their mothers" is more likely to elicit confused laughter than wholehearted obedience. To understand the application of this passage, preachers generally look for a larger principle that transcends the original situation. In an interview with *Leadership*, Robinson has correctly stated the larger principle of this passage as "You should not associate yourself with idolatrous worship, even in ways that do not seem to have direct association with physically going to the idol" (Robinson, 1997, p. 23). This is a statement that can be applied effectively if the expositor states it in more specific language; however, I find that students tend to stay in generalities. They will take the abstract statement and use that as the sermon's big idea, rather than stating that abstract truth in a specific way. This lack of specificity is an exegetical element that sometimes makes expository sermons seem irrelevant to real life.

Bryan Chapell has addressed this problem of specificity in his discussion of the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF). "The more specific the statement of the FCF early in the sermon, the more powerful and poignant will be the message. An FCF of 'Not Being Faithful to God' is not nearly so riveting as 'How Can I Maintain My Integrity When My Boss Has None?' Generic statements of the FCF give the preacher little guidance for the organization of the sermon, and the congregation little reason for listening. Specificity tends to breed interest and power by demonstrating that the Scriptures speak to real concerns" (Chapell, 1994, pp. 42-3).

I have attempted in this section to explain the differences between exegetical and homiletical big ideas, as I see them. These differences are differences in terminology and specificity. Our students fail the test of relevance in their expository messages because their big ideas (and therefore, their sermons) are too exegetical. Being "too exegetical" means that students use biblical rather than applicational terms, and that they word their big ideas in terms of generalizations rather than specifics. The problem of terminology is an easy one to solve. Instead of using terms from the biblical world, we should require our students to word their big ideas in modern terms. Helping students get more specific in their big idea statements is more difficult; therefore, the next section will focus exclusively on finding specific application in the text and designing the sermon's big idea around that specific application.

## Solving the Problem of Specifics

In my experience, seminary graduates tend to develop sermons that are high in explanation (the results of exegesis), but low (or inconsistent) in application. By insisting that our students write big ideas (and, therefore, outlines) that are application-oriented, we will help them balance their exegetical tendencies with specifics in dealing with life change. Teaching our students to organize their sermons around a specific, applicational big idea will set them apart as preachers who are both informative and practical. To help our students do this, we need to teach our students at least three things: the hermeneutics of application, the importance of concrete language, and the priority of the modern audience.

### *Teach Students the Hermeneutics of Application*

In order to write sermonic big ideas that are applicationally specific, students need to understand the hermeneutics of application. The hermeneutics of application is a big topic, and this paper will only be able to touch lightly on it.

Duane Litfin encourages expositors “to compare the original situation with your audience’s situation to discover commonalities and differences” (Litfin, 1992, p. 345). This statement by Litfin summarizes the task of application. We cannot apply the Bible unless we see what we have in common with the original situation in the biblical text.

Some texts of the Bible speak directly to situations that are as common to us as they were to the original audience. “Do not steal,” “do not commit adultery,” “avoid sexual immorality,” are all examples of this. Other texts in the Bible address situations that seem to have nothing in common with a modern world. Consider these examples:

“Do not boil a goat in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 32:26b).

“The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God” (2 Samuel 6:7).

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5a).

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (Galatians 5:2).

Here are four examples, two from each testament, where it is difficult to see what a modern audience has in common with the original audience. In cases like these, application comes to us through abstraction. That is, we think about what higher principle the human author of Scripture had in mind when giving these commands or statements.

My students used to get frustrated when I insisted on concrete application. Their frustration came

from the fact that nobody ever taught them how to abstract principles from the text properly. They were never given the mental tools to see past the differences in the text to the things we hold in common with the original audience. If we want our students to preach messages that are biblical and relevant, we must take it on ourselves to teach them the mechanics of how to apply the Bible.

Fortunately, some books on hermeneutics and homiletics are now addressing the “how to” aspects of application. Because college and seminary courses in hermeneutics and exegesis do not typically talk about application, our classes in homiletics must spend considerable time teaching students how to find and apply the eternal, transcendent truths of Scripture. Teaching students the hermeneutics of application is the first step toward relevant biblical preaching.

*Teach Students to Replace Abstract Language with Concrete Language*

Even when students see the applicational relevance of their text, they tend to speak in principles rather than in specifics. In fact, many students seem to think that abstract principles are applications. They exhort their audience to “trust God when life gives you a setback,” but never seem to grapple with what “trusting God” might look like to a mother who lost her son in a car crash, or a family whose breadwinner was recently laid off. Because expository sermons stay at the level of abstraction, they often fail to connect vitally with life.

Earlier I attempted to demonstrate that the exegetical big idea was a generalization that the preacher takes away from the specifics in the text. Many expository sermons take this generalized idea, universalize it, and use it as the big idea for their messages. As an example of this approach, take a look at the following sermon text, big idea, and outline:

**Titus 3:12-15:** “As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there. Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need. Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives. Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.”

**Big Idea:** We must pursue vital relationships to encourage and participate in vital ministry.

- I. We must fellowship with passionate people to encourage our heart for ministry (v. 12).
- II. We must serve passionate people to help the ministry (v. 13-14)
  - A. When we meet needs of those committed to ministry, we help the spread of the gospel (v. 13).
  - B. When we help to meet the needs of committed ministers, we show spiritual growth (v. 14).

A pastor friend of mine who attended seminary with me sent this example to me. In seminary, he was a top student academically, excelling in exegesis. He maintains a strong exegetical edge by translating his sermon text every week from the Hebrew or Greek text. His big idea and outline reflect his careful exegesis, yet he was struggling with how to communicate the truth to his audience. He contacted me for advice and gave me permission to use this as an example.

Because the structure and approach to his message was sound, the only suggestion I gave him was to be more concrete and specific in the words he used. I urged him to use everyday language that would directly instruct his congregation in their own modern context. Look at the following contrast between his approach and the one I recommended to him:

| <i>EXAMPLE A</i>  | <i>EXAMPLE B</i>  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Titus 3:12-15</b></p> <p><b>Big Idea:</b> We must pursue vital relationships to encourage and participate in vital ministry.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. We must fellowship with passionate people to encourage our heart for ministry (v. 12).</li> <li>II. We must serve passionate people to help the ministry (v. 13-14)               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. When we meet needs of those committed to ministry, we help the spread of the gospel (v. 13).</li> <li>B. When we help to meet the needs of committed ministers, we show spiritual growth (v. 14).</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p>[This sermon form follows Robinson's deductive "Idea Explained" format.]</p> | <p><b>Titus 3:12-15</b></p> <p><b>Introduction:</b> What kind of relationship does God want us to have with people on the front lines of Christian ministry?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. God wants us to spend time with them (v. 12)</li> <li>II. God wants us to provide what they need (vv. 13-14).</li> <li>III. God wants us talk with and about them (v. 15).               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. God wants us to talk with them (v. 15a)</li> <li>B. God wants us to talk about them to each other (v. 15b).</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>Big Idea:</b> God wants us to relate to those who serve him by spending time with them, by providing what they need, and by talking to them and about them.</p> <p>[This sermon form follows Robinson's inductive "Subject Completed" format.]</p> |

The ideas in example B are the same as those in example A, yet example B communicates better by using straightforward, specific language. The wording of the big idea and outline in example A lends itself more toward exegesis; therefore, the expositor who excels in exegesis will likely spend a lot of time explaining the nuances of the text. The example A preacher might have several paragraphs of application, but the audience is much less likely to grasp the applicational specifics because the framework of the sermon (i.e., its big idea and outline) is all stated in abstract principles.

By contrast, example B tells the listener in specific language how he or she should apply the truth of Titus 3:12-15. Each movement in the message is oriented toward application; therefore the expositor is likely to fill in illustrations and other supporting material that is applicational.

The example B preacher can still explain the text, but the big idea and outline create a center of gravity in the message that is applicational. Thus, the preacher will be drawn toward relevance naturally, based on the structure of the message.

If your students are like mine, they tend to submit sermon manuscripts that look more like example A than example B. As teachers, we need to encourage them to be more direct, more specific, and more conversational in the way they word their outlines and big ideas. Because seminary papers are written in formal, academic language, our students need our permission (indeed, our encouragement) to break from exegetical, abstract, academic language and embrace straightforward conversational English as they structure their messages.

The difference between these two approaches to Titus 3 seems small. It looks like a matter of semantics. Yet, because the wording of the big idea and outline sets the tone for all the paragraphs in the message, this seemingly minor change of wording can mean the difference between an expository sermon that is contemporary and relevant and an expository sermon that is as cold and dry as stone.

### *Teach Students the Priority of the Modern Audience*

Because we believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible, we insist in our preaching that Christians bow to the teaching of the Bible. We would never change the Bible's truth to make it conform to the way people today want to live; instead, we show people from the Bible how God's grace enables them to conform their lives to His word. Sometimes, however, our zeal to be faithful to the text eclipses the needs of our modern audience. This happens when we fail to consider how the truths exposed in our messages speak to contemporary problems, needs, and situations.

When we fail to prepare with the modern audience in mind, we ignore the pattern set for us by the writers of Scripture. The human authors of the Bible always had a purpose in writing that addressed specifics in the lives of their intended audiences. We should encourage our students to do the same. Think about what would have happened if the letter to the Galatians had been delivered to the Corinthians and vice versa. The Galatians would wonder who in their church was sleeping with his father's wife, who was attending the idol feasts, which women were not covering their heads, and so on. The Corinthians would be equally confused, wondering who was insisting on circumcision. The theology of Paul was the same, yet it was personalized and made specific to the audience he addressed.

Our students need to learn this lesson through us. How would Paul have structured his message if he were speaking directly to your congregation rather than the Corinthians? In some passages, his approach might be the same; in most other passages, however, the audience would dictate how the passage was structured and what specifics were addressed. By encouraging our students to think this way before writing their sermonic big ideas and outlines, we can help them solve the relevance riddle without skimping on their expositional commitments.

Robinson gives us an excellent illustration of how the needs of the modern audience should be

factored into the big idea statement of the message. “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” (Robinson, 1989, pp. 63–64).

This story illustrates how wording the big idea with the preacher’s specific audience in mind can increase the perceived relevance of the message. As an exercise, you might try giving your class an abstract big idea, then asking them to write a sermonic big idea that specifically addresses a particular audience (e.g. eighth grade girls, married men age 25-40, etc.).

### **Application: The Missing Link**

This paper has addressed one narrow aspect of application in preaching—the big idea. I have encouraged us to teach our students to word the big idea of their messages applicationally, not exegetically. Before leaving this discussion, however, I want to address application at a more foundational level. Expository sermons tend toward irrelevance because preachers are left alone when it comes to applying the Bible. We have an abundance of information about exegesis, but very little about application.

#### *Our Training is Exegetical, Not Applicational*

Attending seminary was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life. In seminary, a lot of the questions I had about the Bible were answered. I also learned how to think with theological and exegetical rigor, so that I was able to discover the Bible’s truth for myself. I do not believe that seminary training needs to be changed fundamentally, because in adding things that are missing, we would inevitably impoverish students in other areas by taking away courses they need.

That said, I believe that our courses on hermeneutics, exegesis, and especially homiletics need to instruct students about the mechanics of application. Just as we teach them how to uncover what the text said, we also need to teach them how to discover what the text means to us. Application proceeds from the text of Scripture. It is the extension and goal of ideas such as authorial intent, continuing implications, and systematic theology. Yet, the procedures for doing application are largely ignored in such classes. We show students in precise detail how to study the Bible, but give them almost no advice for how to apply it.

Because we teach students a lot about exegesis and hermeneutics, we should not be surprised that

their sermons come out with heavy emphasis on exegesis. They teach their congregation the same way that they were taught—lots of information about what the Bible said, but precious little about what the Bible is saying. This is why sermons have such an exegetical sound to them, and it is also why many sermons seem irrelevant to the audience.

It is my conviction that every hermeneutics course and every homiletics course ought to give prominent attention to the hermeneutics of application. If we set the tone, perhaps the Old and New Testament faculty will eventually follow along. It is encouraging that recent textbooks in hermeneutics now include at least a chapter about application. We need to build on this foundation.

### *Our Tools are Exegetical, Not Applicational*

If preachers do not learn how to apply the Bible in seminary, where will they find the help they need to preach relevantly? Not in commentaries, because they are written by the very professors of exegesis who do not teach application in their classes. We have an abundance of excellent commentaries and other exegetical tools, but very few of these tools help preachers with the task of application. Even commentaries that are basically transcripts of sermons do not offer much help in thinking through the implications of a text. Rather than replacing exegetical commentaries with more “practical” ones, it is my belief that we need a new type of tool, one that helps preachers identify the big idea and think about its implications for the modern congregation.

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