

Theology: A Master Key for Unlocking Application in Biblical Preaching

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Abstract: Application is missing from many biblical sermons because preachers do not see a common link between the original audience and people hearing God’s word today. This paper explains how the theology of the biblical text links the modern audience to the original audience.

A number of years ago, I watched a few minutes of a message delivered by a TV evangelist. His text was 2 Kings 6:1-7, where the associates of Elisha built a home for themselves. As one man chopped wood, the head of an ax he had borrowed flew off the handle and landed in the Jordan River. Elisha saved the man considerable embarrassment by performing a miracle to cause the axhead to float. The preacher in question used this miracle to talk about the power of God and, in the course of his message, said, “The axhead in Scripture always represents the anointing.”

You don’t have to be a Bible scholar to know that there are at least two problems with that statement. First, the term “axhead” is only used once in Scripture—right here in 2 Kings 6.¹ Second, there is no evidence, here or anywhere else in Scripture, that the axhead in this story is metaphorical. The plain reading of the text makes the axhead a normal, literal object. The passage describes a common human problem that is solved by uncommon divine power.

Though this example is extreme, it demonstrates a problem most preachers have—the problem of relevance. That is, how does this text speak to our generation? How do we apply a passage like this to daily life today where such miracles are far less likely to happen?

Application is Missing from many Biblical Sermons

Spiritualizing a narrative passage such as this one from 2 Kings used to be a common way that preachers would apply a difficult text. Because Bible colleges and seminaries emphasize the role of authorial intent in interpretation, such examples are thankfully becoming rare. Biblical preaching, with its emphasis on preaching the text, has stamped out the more extreme tendencies to allegorize and spiritualize a passage. Likewise, biblical preaching and normal evangelical hermeneutics often aid the preacher in doing good application. Since relevant application must be built on a solid exegesis of the text, such exegesis often leads preachers toward valid application for their audiences. Sometimes, however, proper interpretation of a text does not lead the preacher very close to application. In fact, I find that the more adept a preacher is in doing interpretation, the less confident that preacher will be when it comes to applying that text in the sermon. There are two reasons why application is either weak or absent for biblical sermons.

Fear of Distorting God's Word

Application is missing from biblical sermons first of all because preachers fear distorting the message of Scripture. Although better training may have curbed the use of spiritualization in application, I fear that it has also curbed application itself. Having a high regard for the text, biblical preachers do not want to be guilty of trying to make the text say what it does not say. This is healthy and good; however, this fear goes too far if it leads preachers away from applying the text to the modern audience. It is a subconscious fallacy that says, “If incorrect application leads to heresy, then avoiding application will keep my preaching orthodox.” While such

conservatism is attractive, it is ultimately harmful to the church in a different way. Instead of leading people into error, the preacher may leave them in disobedience. Preaching without application accomplishes less than what God wants, for 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that God gave us his word to change lives. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”² Since God invested “all Scripture” with timeless relevance, it is safe to say that God wants all preaching of Scripture to expose that relevance to the modern audience. Preachers who avoid application in order to remain orthodox are like people who avoid eating food because they fear being poisoned by pesticides. You may not die from poisoning, but starvation will eventually kill you instead. Likewise, the church that is fed a steady diet of exegetical insights without application will slowly starve spiritually.

Lack of Skill in Applying the Bible

One of the most helpful classes I had in seminary was a basic first-year course in hermeneutics. The concepts I learned in that class gave me confidence that, with more training, I could learn how to accurately interpret the Bible. Toward the end of the course, another student in my class asked the professor when we were going to learn how to apply the Bible. The professor responded, “Oh, that’s something that should be covered in practical theology courses—something like your homiletics classes.” In homiletics, of course, we learned all about outlining sermons and making good gestures, but nothing about application. Though my seminary training served me well in most areas of ministry, lack of training in application was a major gap that I had to fill in myself.

I believe that many—perhaps even most—seminary graduates have a similar story to tell. Application does not receive much attention in the academy; consequently, today’s pastors feel a

lack of confidence applying the passage in a message. Since Bible commentaries also tend to forgo discussion of application, little help is available to preachers struggling to apply God's Word. Sadly, therefore, sermons tend to be exegetically sound, but applicationally weak. In my experience there is often an inverse correlation between the quality of interpretation and application in a message. The better a message interprets a passage, the less likely it is to apply it in any helpful way to the modern world.

Application is missing from many biblical sermons because doing good application is difficult. We have seen this difficulty from the perspective of preachers through their fear of distorting the truth and their lack of training and tools to do application. But additional barriers to application can be found in the text itself.

Application is Difficult Because of Discontinuities in the Text

It is common to speak of preaching in terms of two separate worlds: the biblical world and the modern world. When preachers speak, their task is to take the truth transmitted in the biblical world and show its timeless relevance to inhabitants of the modern world. This task is sometimes referred to as building a bridge from then to now. This bridge building metaphor is useful, but before we learn how to build an applicational bridge, we must learn why we who live in the modern world feel a sense of distance when we read the Bible. Within the text of Scripture itself, there are three elements that cause us to feel distance from the ancient world. They are culture, genre, and theology.

Distance Caused by Culture

Romans 16:16 says "Greet one another with a holy kiss." This inspired command gives its recipients no choice but obedience. The command is repeated again three more times in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, and 1 Peter 5:14. By most hermeneutical

standards, a NT command that was given four times should be carefully obeyed, yet the Western church today ignores the specifics of this command. Western believers are more likely to substitute a firm handshake or, at most, a warm embrace. We intuitively take the specific action in the command as a cultural expression that can be translated into an appropriate cultural parallel in our world. Unfortunately, much of the Bible's teaching is wrapped in cultural expressions that are not so easily translated into modern equivalents. What is the modern equivalent, for example, of the headcovering that is commanded for women who pray or prophesy in public (1 Cor 11:5-10)? Some believers see no cultural distance here and practice this headcovering even today. Others interpret nearly all the Bible's instructions about women's role in the church as ancient cultural norms that are irrelevant today. Because the Bible's teaching comes to us through the culture of the Old and New Testament writers, modern preachers must make difficult decisions about which commands are universal, which are cultural, and how culturally conditioned passages can be translated appropriately to modern life. We feel disconnected from the biblical world because of differences between their culture and ours. This disconnection makes application difficult.

Distance Caused by Genre

Sometimes the literary form chosen by the author complicates the task of application. Imprecatory psalms, for instance, seem out of character with Jesus command to "love your enemies..., pray for those who use and persecute you." The legal sections of the Pentateuch require us to decide which commands are ceremonial, which are civil, and which are moral. As we saw previously with Elisha and the axhead, narrative passages challenge us to decide what in the text is merely descriptive and what was intended by God to be prescriptive. While the

diversity of literature in the Bible makes it a rich and powerful form of revelation, it also adds to the complexity of application.

Distance Caused by Theology

Like most Bible-believers, I affirm a consistent, non-contradictory system of truth that is presented in Scripture from start to finish. The progress of revelation unfolds an intricate tapestry of truth that we call “theology.” But elements of this theology create applicational problems for preachers. For instance, the NT tells us that Christ is the end of the law, that believers are not under law, and that trying to keep the law to earn merit with God is antithetical to following Christ. But we know that the Law is revelatory, and “good” (1 Tim 1:8), so how do we preach and apply God’s law without falling into anti-Christian legalism? The theological distance here creates applicational complexity for us.

False theologies confronted in Scripture also create a sense of distance from the biblical world. As Christianity emerged from its Jewish roots, its leaders faced off against those who wanted mix Christ with a works-based understanding of Judaism. Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews address these Judaistic tendencies, but because they are not present threats to Christianity today, we feel distance when we attempt to apply these passages.

Throughout biblical history, idolatry was an attractive alternative to Christianity. The Bible, by contrast, exalts the God’s power over the impotence of idols and warns people not to be seduced by idol worship. Although some still worship idols in parts of our world, in developed countries we scoff at praying to carvings of wood or stone. While we are still susceptible to the soft idolatry of greed (Col 3:5), most of the Bible’s treatment of idolatry confronts a theology that is cold to us.

When we try to apply the Bible in our preaching, we are challenged by the distance between the text of Scripture and modern life. This distance is caused by differences in culture, genre, and theology. In some texts, these differences are so minor that we can cross them easily and see immediately how the Bible's teaching applies to our lives. In other cases, differences in these three categories combine to make the distance obvious and hard to cross. Effective biblical preachers need a strategy for crossing the divide to apply the passage to believers living today.

Theology: A Master Key for Unlocking Application in Biblical Preaching

As I stated previously, the Bible presents a consistent, non-contradictory system of truth developed historically through the books of the Bible. Through inspiration, God guided the authors through their cultures and diverse genres to present a unified picture of God and his truth. It is through this unified picture of God—theology—that we find the means to apply the Bible. Theology helps us to bridge the gaps created by foreign cultures, unfamiliar genres, and false theologies. There are three interrelated theological concepts that are essential for proper application—theology proper, hamartiology, and soteriology.

Theology Proper

The Bible is a book about God. The books of the Bible come together to record what God revealed about himself to us, his creation. Every paragraph of Scripture, therefore, reveals 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.

Hamartiology

Here we explore the sinfulness of humanity. Just as God's nature is unchanging, human nature is also cannot be changed apart from the grace of God. People today have mixed motives and do evil things, just as they did in the Bible days. This is a result of the fall. Although the Bible is a book about God, it reveals him in the context of human life. The Bible records the struggles of people with temptation, sin, and sin's consequences. It shows us how God addressed people 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 our sin issues directly parallel those of 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.³

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, thought, or attitude. But the human sinfulness addressed in a passage can also refer to the consequences of sin such as the pain and misery that results from it.⁴

When preachers see the awesomeness of God and the wickedness of people displayed together in a passage of Scripture, there is a human tendency to begin castigating people for their sinfulness. Unfortunately, we have no ability on our own to change our sinful natures. This brings us to the third concept the preacher must find in order to build an applicational bridge: the grace of God.

Soteriology

Soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, has at its heart the grace of God. God's undeserved favor is what makes people right with him. If every paragraph of Scripture reveals the character of God and the fallen nature of people, then every paragraph confronts a theological problem because 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 basis on which we 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). The Bible's revelation of 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.⁵

Conclusion

This paper is only a brief introduction to this topic. In my session at the EHS meeting, I will treat these concepts again, giving some examples from the biblical text. I will take you through

various passages and demonstrate specifically how theology guides the biblical preacher in the practice of application.

Notes

¹ See also Deuteronomy 19:5 where Moses explains the cities of refuge by talking hypothetically about a man who “swings his ax to fell a tree” and “the head” flies off and kills his neighbor. Surely, this does not describe “the anointing.”

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*.

³ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 41–42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 280–81.