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GROWTH IN SERMON APPLICATION SKILLS

BY

GARY W. BONEBRAKE

A DISSERTATION SUMBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF
COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of preachers' growth in sermon application skills. It has been my personal experience that preparation and delivery of sermons has changed significantly through my years in ministry. As I began preaching just after seminary, my sermons were intellectual and text-centered, but not adequately focused on the lives of my listeners. My preaching lacked balance. The people I served patiently listened, and helped me grow. It was through relating to the people God had called me to serve that I learned how to preach God's word in a way that helped them follow Christ. To this day I am still growing in this essential ministry skill.

Sermon application is the process of making plain to listeners the relevance of the biblical text to their lives—so they *understand* its significance, *feel* its force, and are challenged to *believe* and *obey*. Practitioners and preaching instructors alike agree that sermon application is hard work, but it is no ancillary part of a sermon. Application is in fact the goal of preaching: to convince listeners of the importance of the text for their lives and to persuade them to surrender to God's authority. The work is difficult, requiring the preacher to exegete not only the biblical text, but also the listeners to whom he speaks. He must understand the text and his congregation as well.

This study first examines the biblical and theological basis for application in preaching, and then explores a range of issues: the importance of and difficulty of application; various approaches to applying God's word; the place of deduction and induction in preaching; the central role of ethos; the value of orality for sermon application; and the relationship between illustration and application in preaching. Since listeners are affected by the culture in which they live, the impact of postmodernism for

sermon application is explored. Since the Bible presents the crucified and risen Christ as the Savior of the world and Lord of all, the importance of the redemptive-historical method, and the centrality of grace are emphasized in the study. God's people are commanded to obey—but find the strength to do so through the grace of God and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Faith itself is the gift of God, and no one can boast, except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do preachers grow in sermon application skills? In addition to surveying homiletical literature on issues affecting sermon application, I interviewed experienced preachers about their own growth in this dimension of their preaching ministry. Interviewing experienced preachers about their approach to sermon application has real value. They speak from years of experience and offer a wealth of insight. For the purpose of this study, an experienced preacher is one who has been preaching for at least ten years and who has acquired recognized preaching skills. Some have gained renown as preachers, and have published books or articles on preaching. Others labor away in small churches and have not written about their ministries at all. Yet all have given serious attention to applying sermons to listeners and have demonstrated skill in doing so. What has helped them grow? What motivates growth in sermon application skills? How do they evaluate whether they have effectively applied God's word to his people in their sermons? These and other questions are explored.

The study concludes with a summary and evaluation of the findings as well as recommendations for further research in this important task of preaching Christ and bringing God's word to people today.

To Barbara

"Glorify the LORD with me,
let us exalt his name together."

Psalm 34:3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many as I complete this study. When I was in seminary, I was inspired and challenged by the preaching of Vernon Grounds. He had a winsome way of burning a text into the lives of his listeners. Time seemed to stop as he spoke. But little did I know, when I graduated from seminary, how much I had to learn about preaching. So I am very grateful for the patience of the people of the first church I served, the Wells Bridge Baptist Church in Upstate New York, who listened patiently and helped me grow as a preacher. They were most gracious. I am grateful to God's people at the Riverside Baptist Church in Buffalo for helping me grow as a preacher and as a pastor. I have profited immensely from preachers who have labored long to preach Christ and taken time to write about their approach to preaching; my indebtedness to them is documented in what follows. I am especially indebted to Dr. Bryan Chapell, President and Professor of Practical Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, whose teaching greatly clarified issues relating to preaching for me. I am thankful to Dr. Zack Eswine, for his encouragement, grace, and help as I worked on this project.

I want to acknowledge the pastors and preachers who took time from their busy schedules and permitted me to interview them for this study. Their varied experiences and insights have been most helpful.

I am especially thankful for the elders and the people of the church I now serve, the Main Street Baptist Church in Oneonta, New York, for their patient support of this project. I could never have completed it without them. The elders, who have been aware of the process, have been most supportive.

Most of all, I am grateful to my wife, Barbara, for her support, encouragement, prayers, and patience as I have worked toward completing this study. It would have been impossible without her.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century people need God. They may imagine they need the latest psychological insights, but in fact they need the sovereign God of the Scriptures, whose majesty, glory, power, and purpose will save them from sin, protect them from evil, and guide them in life. The pastor's calling is to proclaim Christ by preaching the word of God.[1] Paul crystallized the importance of preaching in his exhortation to Timothy:

> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.
> (1 Timothy 4:13, 15-16)[2]

The church needs the redeeming news of the gospel. Paul calls for earnestness and diligence. Persevering in the gospel—believing it and proclaiming it, trusting in the Savior—saves both the preacher and his congregation. Eternal issues are at stake.

God calls us to preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). We must glory in the cross alone, and must depend on the power of the Holy Spirit both in preparation and proclamation (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). While recognizing the importance of complete dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit, preachers also realize the importance of bringing the authority of the text to bear on listeners' lives. The Spirit uses means, including preachers, to accomplish his purposes.

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[1] John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 9-11.
[2] Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the *New International Version* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984).

But what does the biblical text mean to God's people today? How does God expect them to respond? As Christians, we assume the Bible speaks to us today. But how can we know the significance of God's word for belief and behavior in a world so different from the world addressed by the biblical authors? In the blunt words of a young soldier, "What do a bunch of camel drivers have to say to me in a jet age?"[3] How can preachers apply the Bible's teaching to people's needs today so they clearly understand what God expects of them?

Biblical application is a topic of concern to Christians. The popularity of the *Life Application Bible*, published by Tyndale House, demonstrates this.[4] In addition, Zondervan is publishing the *NIV Application Commentary*, a series of commentaries designed to assist expositors in bridging "from biblical text to contemporary life." The contributors analyze each paragraph of the biblical text under three headings: (1) original meaning, (2) bridging contexts, and (3) contemporary significance. The premise of the series is that too many biblical commentaries explain the meaning of the text, but leave the interpreter in the past, when the text addressed its original hearers. Convinced this leaves the task unfinished, these commentators then concentrate on timeless principles in the text that speak to both the ancient as well as to the contemporary world. Finally, in the third stage, the significance of the text's message is brought to bear on contemporary concerns.

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[3] Roy L. Honeycutt, *Crisis and Response* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1965), 105, quoted in Merrill Abbey, *The Word Interprets Us* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1967), 13.

[4] Tyndale claims the *Life Application Bible* is the most popular of the study Bibles available. According to *Christian Retailing*, June 1, 2004, the *NIV Study Bible* was ranked first in April 2004 sales in Christian retail stores in the USA and Canada, followed by the *Life Application Bible* (NIV) (2nd) and the *Life Application Bible* (NLT) (3rd). The *Life Application Bible* is available in several translations; therefore its total sales surpass those of the *NIV Study Bible*.

But many preachers today labor long to get sermon application right.[5] Tim Timmons laments, "After all is said and done, more is said than done. Our task as pastors is to close that gap between talking and walking."[6] John Stott, well-known Anglican pastor and author, calls preachers to bridge building. The effective preacher must build bridges between the ancient, biblical world and our modern world. Stott warns preachers against two dangers. One is to be so immersed in the world of the Bible, its teaching, ethics, mores, and practices that preachers never connect to the modern world. Such preaching stays in the past with the text. The other error is to become so enamored of modern culture and its values that preachers leave the Bible behind as irrelevant. But to leave the Bible behind is to rob preaching of God's authority. No, the calling of the preacher, admittedly difficult, is to be thoroughly immersed in both worlds—the biblical and the modern—to show modern people the Christ who speaks to their needs.

> We should be praying that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to bridge the chasm; who struggle to relate God's unchanging Word to our ever-changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture and pertinent to today.[7]

Yet the need for preachers to bridge between Scripture and life is an insight Stott had to learn firsthand; he admits to earlier error in his own preaching methodology:

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[5] Some theologians think "practical application" is a misguided distraction from truly preaching God's word. Dr. James T. Dennison, Professor of Church History and Biblical Theology at Northwest Theological Seminary, laments that much preaching in America today is unbiblical, moralistic, trivial and banal. James T. Dennison, Jr., "Building the Biblical Theological Sermon, Part I: Perspective:" 8, *Kerux.* http://kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N3A3.asp. This critique of sermon application is addressed in Appendix 1. For a helpful critique of going too far in the emphasis on the history of redemption in preaching, see John M. Frame, "Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology," http://frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1999Ethics.htm.

[6] Tim Timmons, "Why Should They Listen to Me?" in *Preaching to Convince,* ed. James D. Berkley (Carol Stream, IL: Word, 1986), 25.

[7] John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 144.

". . . [P]reviously both my theory and my practice were to expound the biblical text and leave the application largely to the Holy Spirit."[8]

Stott had a startling experience that helped him grasp the importance of showing the relevance of the biblical text to his listeners. He spoke to two brothers who had grown up in Christian homes, but who both had deserted the Christian faith.

> What had happened? I asked. Was it that they no longer believed Christianity to be true? 'No,' they replied, 'that's not our problem. We're not really interested to know whether Christianity is true. And if you were able to convince us that it is, we're not at all sure we would embrace it.' 'What *is* your problem, then?' I asked with some astonishment. 'What we want to know,' they went on, 'is not whether Christianity is *true*, but whether it's *relevant*. And frankly we don't see how it can be. Christianity was born two millennia ago in a first-century Palestinian culture. What can an ancient religion of the Middle East say to us who live in the exciting, kaleidoscopic world of the end of the twentieth century? We have men on the moon in the seventies, and shall have men on Mars in the eighties, transplant surgery today and genetic engineering tomorrow. What possible relevance can a primitive Palestinian religion have for us?' I have often thanked God for that conversation. Nothing has brought home to me more forcefully the gulf which people perceive between the Bible and themselves, and so the challenge which confronts Christian preachers today.[9]

This is precisely the preacher's challenge—to demonstrate to modern people the truth and the relevance of the Christian message. This is the task of sermon application. In sermon application the preacher presses home the immediate authority and relevance of the text to the hearers. Stott urges preachers not to overestimate the congregation's intellectual capacity—but not to underestimate it either:

> My plea is that we treat them as real people with real questions; that we grapple in our sermons with real issues; and that we build bridges into the real world in which they live and love, work and play, laugh and weep, struggle and suffer, grow old and die. We have to provoke them to think about their life in all its moods, to challenge them to make Jesus Christ the Lord of every area of it, and to demonstrate his contemporary relevance.[10]

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[8] Ibid., 141.
[9] Ibid., 138-39.
[10] Ibid., 147.

Stott urges preachers to be immersed in modern culture and in the needs of their particular congregations in order to effectively apply Scripture. He encourages participation in a study group to help preachers grapple with literature, plays, cinema, and cultural questions they might not otherwise encounter. He insists the best preachers are diligent pastors, who are carefully listening to the needs of the people they serve.[11]

Jay Adams, who did his Ph.D. in speech and communications, has written a book on sermon application. Adams insists that the Scripture text is to be preached as God's present word to his people.

> The herald preaches the Bible, not as a book describing what God did or said in time past, but as God's present Word to the people of God gathered before him. Having studied with a contemporary perspective, the herald comes to God's flock with a message fresh from God. His whole sermon, therefore, is application.[12]

Adams argues that the entire sermon—introduction, main points, and conclusion—must be personal and applicable. Thus, the main points of the sermon should be phrased in an "applicatory way," addressing the truth of the text to the listeners. For example, Adams takes an outline of a sermon on love from 1 Corinthians 13:

I. Its Ministry of Healing
II. Its Simplicity of Language
III. Its Competency for Problem Solving
IV. Its Superiority of Value

Adams then rephrases these points directly to the listeners as follows:

I. Your Love Can Heal
II. Your Love Can Speak
III. Your Love Can Solve Problems
IV. Your Love is Important[13]

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[11] Ibid., 192, 194-95.
[12] Jay Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 27.
[13] Ibid., 88.

This format points the message directly toward the congregation. Preachers must not hold lectures on the Bible; they must speak to the congregants about their own lives from the Bible.[14] Adams emphasizes telic preaching: analysis of the preaching text should uncover the purpose of the passage—what the Holy Spirit intends to accomplish in the reader through the text. When the preacher builds his sermon, he should make the sermonic purpose identical to the Spirit's purpose in the pericope. This method leads naturally to applicatory sermons.[15] The whole sermon, introduction, and main divisions should apply the truth of the text, leading to the conclusion where all the "tributaries" of the message unite to the "river" and forcefully sweep home the truth to be obeyed.[16]

Bryan Chapell, President and Professor of Practical Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, emphasizes sermon application. For Chapell, preachers must in fact begin sermon preparation with application. They must have application in mind before constructing the sermon; otherwise, they will be designing a highway without knowing the destination.[17] In this sense, application focuses the explanation of the text. No sermon can be exhaustive in explaining the text; *explanation* that builds a basis for the *application* gives the sermon clear focus. Chapell gets at the purpose of the text with the concept of the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF).[18] Knowing the fallen condition of the original hearers addressed by the Holy Spirit in the text enables the preacher to shape the sermon in cooperation with the Spirit; modern listeners share the same need.[19] So that the biblical authority of the application will be clear, the preacher must allow key terms used

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[14] Ibid., 12.
[15] Ibid., 36-39.
[16] Ibid., 41-42.
[17] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 202, 332.
[18] This is defined: "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 this passage." Ibid., 42.

in the *explanation* and *illustration* of the text to flow into the *application* as well. In this way the authority of the application is brought home to the congregation. They can see this application is what *God*, not the preacher, requires.[20] And responsible sermonic application must address four questions: *What* does God require? *Where*? *Why* must I do it? *How* can I obey God? The *what* question gives concrete specificity to the application (which may have to roll over into other situations to make the application clear in different circumstances). The other questions may be addressed in the explanation or illustration of the text, but must be handled. Answering the *how* question is essential; to avoid moralism, it must be made plain that *all* God requires, *he* enables in his grace by his Spirit. This emphasis on grace is essential if the sermon is to be truly Christian.[21]

The question is, *how* do modern ministers of the word effectively bridge the gap between the ancient text and modern life?

Statement of the Problem and Purpose

How do pastors become skilled in sermon application? I certainly have struggled to get sermon application right. In seminary I was immersed in Hebrew verbs, systematic theology, proper hermeneutics, and good logic. And in seminary, aptitude in these disciplines was highly valued. But the people in the first church I served had little interest in such matters. They were concerned about paying bills, surviving at work, keeping their marriages strong, or dealing with a cancer diagnosis. They were not concerned with current issues in theology, however compelling they were to me. I had to learn—my people had to patiently teach me—to get into their world and understand their needs, so I

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[19] Ibid., 42. This is Chapell's approach to what Adams calls the *telos* or purpose of the text.
[20] Ibid., 205, 212-213.

could show them how the Bible spoke to their lives. Of course, background in Hebrew and Greek, theology, hermeneutics, and logic remain essential—but understanding the needs of the listeners is just as essential. I am still working on applying sermons well.

Skillful preachers emphasize that sermons must be prepared with their people's needs in mind. Thus, Haddon Robinson writes: "Another way effective preachers connect with the audience is to sit six or seven specific flesh-and blood people around their desks as they prepare. I have assembled such a committee in my mind as real to me as if they were there."[22] The text is studied and preached not in dialog with "the human situation" in general but with the issues facing the particular congregation that is addressed. The sermon grows out of a dialogue between a particular text and a particular congregation.[23] The best preacher is a caring pastor, whose heart is filled with the text of Scripture and the burdens of his people as well.

How are such skills acquired? The purpose of this study is to explore the development of sermon application skills in experienced preachers in the context of congregational ministry. Research questions include the following:

1. What has stimulated growth in sermon application skills? (Has it been books? Experiences in church life? Insights from other preachers?)
2. What has motivated growth in sermon application?
3. How have experienced preachers learned to evaluate sermon application?

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[21] Ibid., 204-210.
[22] Haddon Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 32.

Significance of the Study

I hope this study will have significance for seminary students learning to preach. A gap yawns between the biblical world of tents, camels, and nomads and the modern world of jets, cell phones, and broadband. And often, a gap may loom between the seminary and the church. Thus, Haddon Robinson laments:

> Many homileticians have not given accurate application the attention it deserves. No book has been published devoted exclusively, or even primarily, to the knotty problems raised by application. As a result many church members, having listened to orthodox sermons all their lives, may be practicing heretics. Our creeds affirm the central doctrines of the faith and remind us what Christians should believe. Regrettably our creeds cannot tell us how belief in these doctrines should make us behave. That is part of a preacher's responsibility, and he must give to it diligent attention.[24]

The seminary student studies systematic theology, church history, and denominational distinctives—all of which are important. But his people are asking questions about paying bills, raising children, handling stress, and dealing with unfair bosses. They may not care whether the pastor can read the biblical languages (even though this is an important skill for his being a faithful pastor). The study will assist seminary students, who are preparing for the ministry, to understand the importance of sermon application, methods of sermon application, and how experienced preachers have grown in sermon application skills.

I hope this study will also help pastors seeking to sharpen sermon application skills. Interacting with the literature on sermon application and learning about how other experienced pastors have improved their sermon application will help them in this

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[23] Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 129-30.

[24] Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 89-90. Jay Adams quoted this challenge in the introduction of his book, *Truth Applied*, published ten years later, in 1990. Since Robinson penned these words, homiletics

important task. Pastors are busy with many tasks in ministry; they need methods and approaches to assist them in developing sermon applications that are biblical, varied, personal, and pointed. This study has significance for pastors who are in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, comforting, confronting, and leading the people of God.

This study may also have significance for lay leaders teaching Sunday School or leading Bible studies in homes. Even though they are not preparing sermons, they may gain insight into the dynamics of proper biblical application from this study. And since all serious Christians are concerned with properly applying the Bible to their lives, this study, hopefully, can assist all followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Definition of Terms

Terms that need to be defined for the purpose of this study include the following:

1. **Sermon application**. Sermon application means *the process of making plain to listeners the relevance of the biblical text to their lives—so they understand its significance, feel its force, and are challenged to obey*. Bryan Chapell emphasizes that a sermon should include *explanation* of the text, *illustration* of the meaning, and *application* of the meaning to the listeners.[25] Often, illustration is already applicational. That is, if the meaning of the text is illustrated with a modern human interest story, the application is taking shape in the illustration itself. In effect, the illustration shows what the meaning of the text looks like in modern dress. But application goes beyond

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professors in some seminaries have given more attention to the important skill of sermon application; this will become clear in the literature review in chapter two.

[25] Chapell, 212.

illustration to press home the authority of the text directly to the listener. Illustrations have validity as indirect application—but direct application is also essential.[26]

2. **Experienced preacher**. For the purpose of this study, an experienced preacher is one who has been preaching for at least ten years and who has acquired preaching skills. Some have gained renown as preachers and have published books or articles on preaching. But most important, an experienced preacher is also a man who has given serious attention to applying sermons to listeners and who has demonstrated skill in doing so, even though he may labor away in a small pastorate and may not have written about his ministry at all.

3. **Congregational ministry**. For the purpose of this study, congregational ministry means preaching in the context of a local church. Some preachers may no longer be serving a local church at this time, but they will have had experience in local church ministry. Others are serving now in the local church, and share out of the context of living and working in the church.

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[26] For a treatment of direct and indirect application, see Daniel J. Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 245-250.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biblical-Theological Framework

Is sermon application biblical? What biblical precedent may be found for what we term "sermon application?" Bringing God's word home to listeners' lives is one of the preacher's highest priorities. We see this in the work of biblical preachers.

Moses preached to God's people east of the Jordan before they entered Canaan. In Deuteronomy 1:5-3:29, he rehearsed events in Israel's history after the nation's departure from Egypt. After revealing his covenant law to Israel at Sinai, God commanded his people to take possession of the Promised Land. Spies had been sent to the land, but after hearing their report, Israel rebelled against God. So God decreed that they not enter the land; they had to wander in the desert for forty years. At the end of that wandering, they came to the Transjordan, and defeated Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan. In Deuteronomy 4, Moses' sermon continues. He applied God's law and called the people to obedience. He exhorted them: obey God's commands, without adding to, or subtracting from them. Observe God's laws carefully. Watch yourselves so that you do not forget what you have experienced in your history with God! Teach God's law to your children. Remember the Ten Commandments, which God gave you from the fire and smoke of Mount Sinai! The LORD is God, and there is no other. Fear and obey him alone! (Deuteronomy 4:1-40).

So Moses first reviewed Israel's history and her experiences with her God, then he exhorted the people to remember all they had learned, to give careful attention to

obeying God, and to passing on his Torah to their children. Moses urged obedience to God. This is sermon application.

Joshua provides another instructive study in sermon application. The setting in Joshua 24 was solemn. Joshua had led Israel to possess the Promised Land. With his service now over and his death at hand, Joshua called the tribal elders of Israel together at Shechem, and he led them in covenant renewal. Joshua reminded them of the grace of God. God had called Terah and Abraham out of idolatry. God gave Abraham many descendants. When these descendants were enslaved in Egypt, God raised up Moses and Aaron and by his own great power, redeemed his people. He saved them out of bondage in Egypt and delivered them at the Red Sea. He brought them into the Promised Land and defeated their foes before them. Joshua began his covenant renewal message by rehearsing the great acts of God's grace. Then he called for a response: "Now fear the LORD, and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your fathers worshiped . . . and serve the LORD. Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." The verbs are clear; they are in the imperative. Joshua's sermon application is unambiguous.

The elders[1] responded by insisting, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God" (vv. 16,18). This is the response that preachers dream of! Joshua rehearsed the great acts of God, called for a response of renewed commitment, and his hearers believed and obeyed. But to our surprise, Joshua only renewed the call: "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake

[1] The tribal elders represent the nation in this covenant renewal. In v. 1 those assembled are called "the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel." In v. 16 we read, "Then the people answered."

the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you" (vv. 19-20). Joshua was insisting on the seriousness of the commitment he was calling for; mere words would not suffice. Again the people averred, "No! We will serve the LORD." Joshua then confirmed the response, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD" (v. 22). They agreed. Then Joshua required them to show the reality of their commitment by throwing away their idols—and then he led the people into a renewal of the covenant. This is serious attention to sermon application!

Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah rebuked Judah for its rebellion. He censured the people, calling them "a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption." The prophet continued, "They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel, and turned their backs on him" (1:3-4). The nation was sick, injured, afflicted. In a stinging rebuke, Isaiah called Israel's leaders, "rulers of Sodom" and the people, the "people of Gomorrah" (v. 10). After a message of warning and rebuke, Isaiah issued the call:

> Stop doing wrong,
> learn to do right!
> Seek justice,
> encourage the oppressed.
> Defend the cause of the fatherless,
> plead the case of the widow.
> "Come now, let us reason together,"says the LORD.
> "Though your sins are like scarlet,
> they shall be as white as snow;
> though they are red as crimson,
> they shall be like wool.
> If you are willing and obedient,
> you will eat the best from the land;
> But if you resist and rebel,
> you will be devoured by the sword."
> For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (1:16-20)

This concluding call, invitation, and warning pointedly applied the message to the listeners. Judah's failure to take Isaiah's (and the other prophets') warnings to heart ultimately led to disaster; the judgment of God engulfed the nation. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were exiled to Babylon. They had rejected the word of the Lord proclaimed by his prophets. The prophets had applied the message to their lives; the people disobeyed, and the consequences were tragic.

We also see the Lord Jesus applying God's word directly to people. He told the story of the merciful Samaritan and concluded with a simple imperative: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37), applying his parable to the questioner. During his Galilean ministry Jesus called Israel to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). This was an urgent call for a specific response to his ministry. Then the people gathered on a hill to listen to Jesus instruct them in the law of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said repeatedly, "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you." Jesus himself was the bridge between the ancient text and the persons to whom he spoke. He fulfilled the law, embodied its righteousness, and explained its meaning. The people needed to understand the true meaning of the law in order to understand their need to repent. He spoke with authority, declaring the original intent and the depth of the meaning of God's law. He concluded the sermon with an applicatory parable. Paraphrased, he said, "The one who hears my message and obeys it is like a wise man who built his house on a rock that was stable and secure. The one who hears my words and disregards them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. When the rains came, it fell with a great crash." The application was in itself parabolic, and it called for obedience! To disobey was—and is—to imperil oneself (Matthew 7:24-27).

Jesus was very concrete in application. On one occasion, he reminded listeners of a recent tragedy: "Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:4-5). Jesus took note of a current event, drew his listeners' attention to it, and applied a lesson directly to their lives. These victims did not die because they were more guilty than others. *You* are guilty of rebellion against God. *You* need to repent.

We see diligent attention to application in the apostle Paul. Paul's epistles are not sermons—but they are letters of instruction aimed at the people of God, covenanted together as a church in a given location. As such, they can serve as a guide to the importance of sermon application. In the epistle to the Ephesians, for example, Paul explained the theology of our great salvation—accomplished by the election of the Father, the atoning sacrifice of the Son, and the sealing of the Spirit. God's great saving purpose in Christ has created a new body, the church, composed of Jew and Gentile, united as one in faith. This church is God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Having explained theology in chapters 1-3, Paul moved to the implications and application of that theology in chapters 4-6, calling the believers to "live a life worthy of the calling they have received" (4:1). In Ephesians 4:1-6:20, Paul applied theology in practical exhortations to godly living.[2] These applications are direct and clear: live in unity with one another (4:1-6), accept instruction from pastors and teachers to become mature (4:7-

[2] Jay Adams writes, "The apostles did not preach doctrine as a system but to convey God's saving and sanctifying grace in Christ. When you preach truth the way it was revealed, the entire sermon will be applicatory in its effect." *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 39-40.

13), and use your own spiritual gift in kingdom ministry (4:7,16). Do not live like unbelievers (4:17)! Put away old patterns of living; be made new in your attitudes, growing in righteousness and holiness (4:20-24). Stop all lying and speak the truth to one another. Do not give the devil a foothold in the church by holding on to anger. Stop stealing; labor instead with your hands so that you may share with others in need (4:25-28). Nothing should come from your mouths except what is helpful and edifying to your brothers and sisters (4:29). Bitterness, brawling, slander, anger, and rage have no place among you. Instead, your kindness, your compassionate and forgiving spirit should imitate Christ himself (4:31-32). And this is only chapter four! Paul continues his applications and exhortations to Christian living in chapters five and six. His application of his teaching was lengthy and specific.

So sermon application is biblical and necessary. Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul applied God's word to their hearers. They called for response. To be effective, modern preachers must also apply God's truth to their listeners.

Sermon application raises a host of issues to be considered—deductive application, inductive application, ethos and orality, redemptive-historical preaching, speaking to people influenced by modernity and postmodernity, and many other issues. This chapter will survey some of the work of authors wrestling with these questions.

The Importance of Sermon Application

Sermon application is important. Many preachers today, however, responding to the cry for "relevance" and "sermons that touch life," neglect the Bible and preach a form of popular psychology. To succumb to this temptation denies orthodox theology. Paul

wrote, "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 Timothy 3:16-17). It is the living God, speaking to broken human beings in their need through his inspired word, who truly makes them whole. People need God's word. The preacher must indeed give careful attention to applying the truth—but it is *the truth* that he must apply—truth that comes from God. So, first, good exegetical work must be done, so that God's voice is genuinely heard in the sermon. Unless a passage is properly interpreted, the sermon lacks God's authority; the pastor is preaching on his own. The word of God must be heard in the church today. Only in this way does the preacher have authority as he stands behind the pulpit. *God's truth is relevant to twenty-first century life.*

Assuming that good exegetical work has been done, nothing is more important in preaching than application. John Broadus, sometimes called the father of modern expository preaching, wrote: "The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is *the main thing to be done.*"[3] The famous British Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, said, "Where application begins, there the sermon begins." Michael Quicke, Professor of Preaching and Communication at Northern Seminary, has written: "You can argue that there is nothing more important in preaching than application. Any sermon without application isn't. Sermons without application just make noise."[4]

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[3] John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4th ed., rev. by Vernon L. Stanfield (San Francisco: Harper, 1979), 165. Italics mine.
[4] Michael Quicke, "Applying God's Word in a Secular Culture," *Preaching* 17 (Jan.-Feb., 2002): 7.

As he prepares his sermon, the preacher must constantly keep three questions before him—the SW, NW, and YBH questions. His listeners will be asking, "So what?" or, "Now what?" And they will be wondering, "Yes, but how?" So to be complete, the sermon needs to address these questions.

A personal experience will illustrate. Recently my wife and I visited a young couple in a distant city. We worshiped together at a good, Christ-preaching church. The preacher developed his message from 2 Corinthians 4:18 and 5:7. His theme was that we need to fix our minds and our hearts on heaven. We need to be less earthly-minded, more heavenly-minded. After church, as we drove to Pizza Hut (our treat), the young woman's questions started. We evaluated the message together. The pastor's sermon was biblical, the exegesis sound. His illustrations were good, but all were from the Bible itself—nothing after the introduction was from current life. But the most telling question was the young woman's comment: "I feel his sermon needed one more point. *How* do I become more heavenly-minded?" She continued, "I've been thinking about this very thing in my own life. I really want to be more focused on Christ in my daily life. He didn't tell me *how*." What struck me about this conversation was the motivation of the listener. This young woman did not have to be persuaded or cajoled; she sincerely wants to be less focused on this world, more on the next. The sermon was striking a personal chord—but left her disappointed.[5] She looks to her pastor, who is older and more experienced, to give her guidance. Since she said she frequently feels this way about his messages, I

[5] "Preaching that faithfully explains the text yet fails to apply it will only frustrate listeners. The inherent power of the Word makes them want to respond, but they are not sure how to do so because they have not been told. No preacher should want merely to fill the minds of his hearers, but to change their behavior." Hershael W. York and Scott A. Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 (Summer 1999): 78, http://sbts.edu/resources/sbjt/1999/1999Summer7.pdf.

encouraged her to talk to the pastor about it. It was an excellent sermon, but lacking in practical application. The question, "Yes, but how?" was left unanswered.

Serious preachers of the gospel fear the thoughtful listener sitting in the pew, listening to the sermon, then asking, "So what?" "What difference does it make?" The preacher fears that such a listener, leaving church, might think he would have used his time better had he gone for a walk in the park. The pastor fears it more when that listener continues to come, week by week, and listens half-heartedly, not *expecting anything significant* for life to emerge from the sermon. Sermons that do not touch life may contribute to believers' faith growing cold and stale. Serious attention to sermon application prevents this. Sermon application is important!

The Difficulty of Sermon Application

Sermon application is important; it is also difficult. David Veerman, senior editor of the *Life Application Bible*, asks why application is so often lacking in sermons. He suggests several reasons: (1) *application is hard work.* It demands time and effort. It is far easier to offer exegetical insights, top it off quoting a hymn, and let it go at that. (2) *Preachers make wrong assumptions*. They too often assume listeners will make connections between the biblical text and their lives. So they explain the biblical story, theological claims, and timeless truths, and leave it there. But many people don't make the necessary mental jump to "real" life next Tuesday. This may have been the mistake of the preacher in the young woman's church. It has been a mistake I have made more often than I like to think about. (3) *Preachers are afraid.* They fear being "too simplistic." They want to display complex, general principles; they want to proclaim deep theology.

Too often they fail to move to life-changing challenge, bringing the text's meaning to daily life. (4) *Preachers lack training*. Veerman relates conversations with many preachers who have had intensive training in Bible, homiletics and theology, but feel inadequate in bridging the gap between biblical text and real life.[6]

Interestingly, in another, later work, Veerman wrote of two types of people, who score differently on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. One of the categories in this personality profiling tool is the "intuition" vs. "sensing" spectrum. Intuitive people tend to think with an apparent sixth sense. When it comes to application, those who score more highly on the "intuitive" end of the spectrum tend to find application easy. For them it seems to come naturally; it seems to be self-evident. Veerman warns, "many pastors and Bible teachers are in this group."[7] But the danger would be that such preachers would assume that the personal application, so patent to them, is equally clear to listeners. But the connection to daily life may not be evident to them at all.

Veerman asks us to think about what sermon application *is not*. Application is not additional information—giving more historical background or more facts. Application is not merely correct understanding. One may understand a text's message, but still not appropriate it. Application is not only seeing the text's relevance. Relevance shows that what happened in biblical times can repeat itself today. As the rich young ruler walked away from Jesus for wealth, so may we today. This is moving toward application, but still falls short.[8]

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[6] David Veerman, "Sermons: Apply Within," *Leadership* 11 (Spring 1990): 121.
[7] David Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible: Proven Techniques for Discovering the Truths of Scripture and Putting them into Practice Today* (Beverly, MA: Quarry Publishing, 1993), 131-132.
[8] Veerman, "Sermons: Apply Within," 122.

Sermon application shows what the biblical text means to us today, how God calls us to respond, and what God expects us to do. (Not all biblical texts call for concrete action. Sometimes the text calls for a change in belief—which will affect attitudes *and* action.) Application is the answer to three questions: "So what?" "Now what?" and "Yes, but how?" Application emphasizes God's authority directing us to personally respond in the concreteness of life, in both belief and behavior. Application brings God's word to bear on both faith and life.

Veerman says that illustration does not qualify as application—since illustration merely reports how someone else handled the situation.[9] But it depends on the illustration. A good human interest story can embody the response the text calls for—showing listeners exactly what God wants them to do. Since a good human interest story catches people's attention, and, if offered at the conclusion, will be the thing best remembered by the audience, an appropriate illustration may indeed qualify as application, if it embodies and exemplifies the response the text calls for.[10]

The difficulty of application is highlighted by errors preachers make. Haddon Robinson warns of the danger of misapplication of Scripture in sermons. Errors are less likely in the area of the exposition of Scripture than in application. This is because in seminary pastors have been trained to do careful exegesis. But in the church, when they learn that the real question is application, they may stretch the text and misapply it in the name of relevance. When the preacher explains how to deal with in-laws from the book

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[9] Ibid.

[10] This question will be addressed more fully below.

of Ruth, for example, he has missed the intent of the text.[11] The book of Ruth was not written to solve problems with in-laws.

When Scripture is wrongly applied, believers cling to promises that they think are God's word, when in fact, they are not. One example cited by Robinson is of a young woman, abandoned by her husband, who was puzzled because the Bible promised that if she submitted to her husband, she would have a happy and successful marriage. The Bible makes no such promise—even though the young woman had heard such promises made at seminars she had attended.[12] She had false hopes, thinking she was trusting in God's word, when in fact she was not. Another example is the parent perplexed by the wandering child. Doesn't the Bible promise that if we raise a child in the way he should go he will not depart from it? Some Christian parents interpret Proverbs 22:6 to make such a promise. But, in this case, the genre of Proverbs has not been taken into account, and therefore, the text wrongly understood. Proverbs 22:6 is a proverbial statement, stating what is generally true; it makes no promise to parents.

Robinson offers guidance. "A text cannot mean what it has not meant. . . . I cannot make [a] passage mean something today that it did not mean in principle in the ancient world."[13] Proper application is based on good exegesis—proper interpretation. To correctly apply Scripture, there must be sufficient similarity in the biblical situation and the current one. Sometimes Scripture can be directly applied. Jesus said, "Love your enemy." The preacher applies directly: "Do you have enemies? Love them." For other texts, the preacher must move up what Robinson calls the "abstraction ladder." Some texts must be abstracted to their original intent in order to be properly applied.

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[11] Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 21.
[12] Ibid., 22.

> Leviticus [sic][14] says, 'Don't boil a kid in its mother's milk.' . . . But we now know the pagans did that when they worshiped their idolatrous gods. Therefore what you have here is not a prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk, but against being involved in the idolatry that surrounded God's people or bringing its practices into their religion.
>
> If that's the case, it does no good for the preacher to bring this text straight over. You must climb the ladder of abstraction a couple of levels until you reach the principle: 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.[15]

We can always abstract the passage up to God, Creator and Sustainer. And every passage can be abstracted to humanity and the depravity factor. God remains the same, and human depravity remains the same.

Robinson continues to explore dimensions of application. We cannot always claim biblical authority for implications we derive from the text. Implications may be "*necessary*, *probable*, *possible*, *improbable*, or *impossible*." The seventh commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery." A *necessary* implication is you cannot have sex with a person who is not your spouse. A *probable* implication is you ought to be careful about strong bonding friendships with a person of the opposite sex. A *possible* implication is you ought not travel regularly to conventions with a person who is not your spouse. An *improbable* conclusion is you ought never have lunch with someone who is not your spouse. An *impossible* implication is you should never have dinner with another couple because you are at the same table with a person who is not your spouse.[16] Robinson advises that preachers can only claim "thus says the Lord" authority for necessary implications.[17]

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[13] Ibid., 23.
[14] Actually this prohibition appears in Exodus 23:19; 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:21.
[15] Ibid., 23.
[16] Ibid., 25-26.
[17] Ibid., 26.

Robinson points out that some preachers have excellent skills in exposition, but need to spend more time in preparing application in order to preach well. Conversely, other preachers are always relevant—but need to give more careful attention to biblical exegesis, so that they are really communicating God's word.[18] Both are essential to good preaching.

Approaches to Sermon Application

Many preachers and homileticians have given attention to application in preaching. This dissertation will interact with some of their work, and look for concrete help in this, the most important task of preaching. Remember the young soldier's question: "What do a bunch of camel drivers have to say to me in a jet age?"[19]

One approach to sermon application is a direct, deductive approach. One might see this method directly in Paul's letters. In Ephesians 1-3, Paul develops the theology of God's sovereign grace in calling Jews and Gentiles to create one body, the church, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. It is profound theology. In chapters 4-6, he applies his theology to life. First he treats the indicative, then the imperative which flows from it. One can scarcely miss the move in Paul's thinking. Ephesians 4:1, the turning point, makes it clear: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." The "calling we have received" is developed at length in chs. 1-3; now Paul calls his readers to live a live worthy of it. The ESV makes this transition clearer: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to

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[18] Ibid., 27.
[19] Quoted in Merrill Abbey, *The Word Interprets Us*, 13.

which you have been called, . . ." The *therefore* in the text shows Paul's thinking. I've explained the eternal, saving grace of God in Christ purchasing salvation for his people, bringing Jew and Gentile together in one body, the church. Now I want to make clear how you should live this salvation out each day. This exemplifies a deductive approach to applying God's truth to life.

In classical Puritan preaching, sermons followed the same deductive pattern. Sermons were long; they might last two hours. William Perkins, who wrote the standard Puritan statement of homiletical method in England, *The Arte of Prophesying*, presented the following method:

> 1. To read the Text distinctly out of the canonicall scripture.
> 2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read by the scripture itself.
> 3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the naturall sense.
> 4. To applie (if he have the gift) the doctrine rightly collected to the manners of men in a simple and plain speech.[20]

The basic sermon outline was Understanding, Doctrines and Uses.[21] "Doctrine" referred to the meaning of the text, and "Uses" to the application. Applications would be spelled out at length. Since logic is a gift of God, the sermons had to be consistent with human reason; sermons could also be passionate, and could include emotional appeals. But Puritan theology despised the notion that the goal of preaching, the salvation of souls, could ever be accomplished by human reasoning or emotional manipulation; salvation was the work of God alone. Still, God uses means to accomplish his purposes—and one of his means is preaching.[22] The basic approach to sermon application in Puritan preaching was deductive—explaining the text, then deriving logical inferences for life.

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[20] O.C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 362.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 364.

Many contemporary preachers continue in a deductive method. It is logical to explain a text's meaning, then draw out its significance for life, and urge listeners to respond accordingly. Thus, Bryan Chapell presents the basic, "generic" approach to expository preaching involving *explanation*, *illustration*, and *application*. Normally, each of these elements is to be in each main point of the sermon—"because it makes no sense to explain something that can be neither demonstrated nor applied."[23] This is deductive—moving from explaining the text, to illustrating it, to applying it to life. Yet Chapell suggests that this tri-fold division must not become too rigid:

> The more you preach, the more you will discover that this unfolding makes the components of exposition interdependent, and, at times, indistinguishable. Illustration sometimes offers the best explanation; explanation focused on an FCF may sound much like application; and application may offer the opportunity for both illustration and explanation. As your expertise grows, the components of exposition will blend and bond to drive the truths of God's Word deep into the hearts of his people.[24]

Chapell underscores the importance of sermon application. "Preachers make a fundamental mistake when they assume that by providing parishioners with biblical information the people will automatically make the connection between scriptural truth and their everyday lives."[25] Chapell summarizes the function of application in the sermon as follows. First, application fulfills the obligations of exposition. Scriptural exposition is incomplete until the preacher explains the duty required of listeners. Second, application justifies the exposition. Listeners give attention to the explanation and exposition of the text in order to understand what the text will mean to them personally. Third, application focuses the exposition. The preacher cannot say everything about a passage of Scripture. There are many historical, exegetical, and lexical details—things that could be included

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[23] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 84.
[24] Ibid.

in the sermon. The application, however, serves as an expositional target, guiding the preacher in selecting what he should include in the message. Fourth, application gives ultimate meaning to the exposition. Application makes "the meaning of the text concrete for contemporary people in contemporary situations."[26] People understand more fully what they actually implement in their lives.

All this means that sermon preparation actually begins with application. Since application is the goal, the preacher must know where he is going before he starts building the road.

> Accurate exposition requires us to complete our sermon research by identifying appropriate applications that will focus the exposition according to the text's priorities. Therefore, though preachers determine application at the end of the sermon research stage (do not say what the text requires before determining what it means), they should have application in mind before beginning sermon construction. Do not start writing out the message before determining what the sermon seeks to accomplish. Application must precede final decisions about structure, wording, and even the tone of the message or else the preacher will be designing a highway without knowing its destination.[27]

Chapell emphasizes specificity in application. The questions, "What? Where? Why? and How?" must be addressed.[28] *What* exactly does God require? Specificity is essential; the demand of the text must be focused.[29] *Where* in real life do the biblical principles apply? The preacher can identify types of people (students, stay-at-home moms, tired Christians, sales representatives, business executives) to assist in showing where the text finds relevance. "The aptness, relevance, and realism of this situational specificity is frequently a distinguishing mark of mature preaching."[30]

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[25] Ibid., 199.
[26] Ibid., 199-204.
[27] Ibid., 202.
[28] Ibid., 204-211.
[29] See Broadus, 166.
[30] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 206.

Why should God's people follow through in living out the text's teaching? Believers should be motivated by the *grace of God*, not guilt. If Christ has borne our guilt, preachers must never seek to motivate through the load he has already borne. Redemptive grace must remain the defining context of a sermon, if it is to be Christian. Similarly the *how* question, which addresses the means of obedience, focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit. Only through dependence on the Spirit's power can biblical teaching be fleshed out in Christian discipleship.[31] Dealing with detail and specificity demonstrates the preacher's expectation that the text will be lived out. Such attention to application rests on the conviction that *God* speaks through Scripture, and it has the weight of *his* authority.

Chapell urges us to show listeners the connection between the text and the application to their lives. "The goal of the text's explanation should be to establish the validity of the principles on which the application must be based."[32] In other words, preachers demonstrate that the facts of the text support biblical principles, principles which in turn, become the basis for application. Connection between the text and concrete application is further clarified by repeating key terms of the explanation in the application. In this way, the biblical authority of the application of the text is made explicit.[33] The pastor must have God's authority for requiring the people to obey.

David Veerman, in his book on biblical application, also takes a fundamentally deductive approach. The first tool he offers for biblical application is what he calls the pyramid. The general approach is: (1) read the text in its particular time and place, (2)

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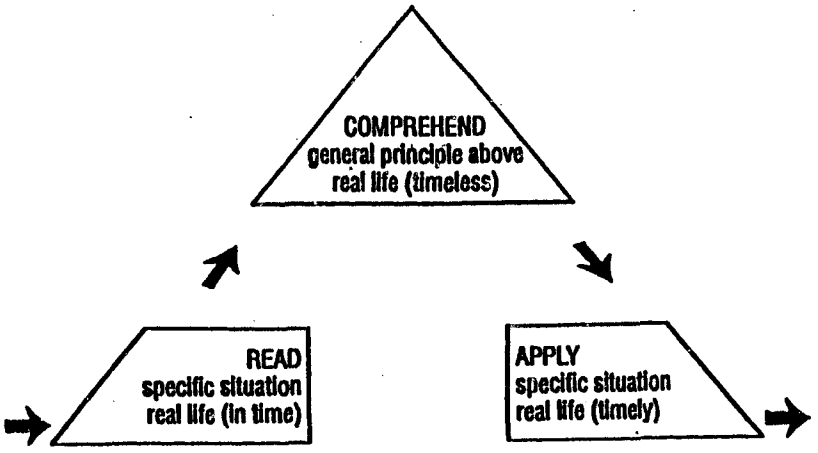
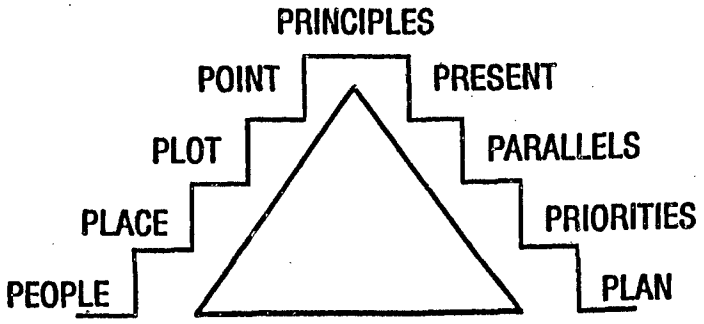
[31] Ibid., 204-211.
[32] Ibid., 205.
[33] Ibid., 212-213.

comprehend the general principles, and then (3) apply those principles to modern life.[34] He offers the following simple diagram:[35]



But Veerman recognizes these steps are too large to take. The pyramid process has to be broken down and made more concrete:[36]



Going up the application pyramid involves observing and interpreting the text. **People** is the first step. Simply list the people mentioned in the text; identify them. (This includes the author of the text). The reader must also identify with the people of the text. Would I have responded differently? Similarly? The next step is **place**. Consult a Bible

[34] This can also be described as explanation, bridge and application. Explanation makes clear what the text says. Bridge extracts a relevant biblical principle, application challenges the reader / listener to take action. Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible*, 145.
[35] Ibid., 38.

dictionary in helping to understand the geography and location. Knowing something about Corinth, for example, helps in understanding the Corinthian correspondence. The third step is **plot**. "What is happening? What is the conflict? What would I have done in this situation?" The fourth step is called the **point**. This is the meaning for the original audience. In effect, the point is the application for the original audience. "What was the intended message for the original audience? What did the people in the passage need to learn? What did God want them to do? What was God's solution for their need?"

After finding the point of the passage, the interpreter determines transferable **principles** embedded in the passage. The principles usually connect with the point—and may be identical to the point for the original hearers or readers.

The first step on the downward side is **present**. Questions like "What does this principle mean today—for my culture, my society? What situations today are similar to those back then?" The interpreter can think about possible implications in many areas of life—home, school, work, church, neighborhood, and society. This results in general applications.

Then come **parallels**. This is identifying personal application areas. The interpreter can ask, "What does this truth mean for me? Where are my areas of need, conviction, and opportunity? Where in my life might this have relevance?" Then follows priorities. "How should I adjust my priorities? What should I change about my beliefs, attitudes, or character? What about my thoughts and motives ought to change?" Finally comes the **plan**. This is a concrete plan of action in response to the text. "What does God want me to do? What steps are necessary to accomplish it? What should my first step be? How can I get started?" Plans can be of two types: intentional and conditional. The

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[36] Ibid., 39.

intentional plan is a step-by-step action plan to accomplish the change required by the text. A conditional plan is in the form of "If . . . then." "If I am offered a drink, then I will limit myself to one." "If Ed indicates interest in spiritual things, then I will share my testimony with him."[37]

Going up the application pyramid is the interpretive process; coming down the pyramid is the application process. Veerman's book is helpful and specific. Too often, however, he fails to recognize that not all biblical teaching calls for the Christian to do something. Sometimes the disciple is to respond to the text of Scripture by changing his beliefs and his attitudes. The text may instruct him to have faith in the sovereignty of God in all of life, to trust God with his needs. He may need to respond to a passage on the Trinitarian character of God by confirming his commitment to trinitarianism, etc. Generally speaking, however, Veerman's book is helpful.

Harold Freeman, Professor of Preaching at Southwestern Seminary, finds the roots for a deductive approach to sermon application in intertestamental synagogue worship and in the Bible itself. Before the New Testament period, Jews in exile worshiped together on the Sabbath, but the central dimension of worship, the sacrificial system, was absent. Over time, a pattern developed. First, the leader read from the law and prophets, and then offered an explanation, a rather informal lecture. Thus the talk, or sermon had an "exegetical element" (the reading), and a "prophetic element," in which the relevance of the Scripture for the current time was explained. This pattern of reading / explaining and then exhorting—and thus deducing the relevance of the text to the present listeners—continued into the New Testament period. For example, Jesus opened the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, read from chapter 61, sat down, and said to those

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[37] Ibid., 39-57.

assembled, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Similarly, Peter, in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, quoted Joel 2:28-31, and found it fulfilled in the dramatic descent of the Spirit on that day. In the same message, Peter quoted Psalm 16, and Psalm 110, and found the resurrection of Jesus, which he was proclaiming, predicted there. Likewise, Paul, in his missionary journeys, went first to the synagogues. He addressed the gathered worshipers, and presented Jesus as the culmination of biblical prophecy. Thus, the picture emerges from the Bible itself, of what Freeman calls a "bi-polar construct of biblical preaching."[38] Biblical preaching has a reference point, on the one hand, in biblical revelation, on the other, a reference point in the current situation of the hearer. The "preaching arc" fuses together the prior biblical revelation and the hearer's present situation.

But how does the modern preacher today create the connection? The preacher must discover the original meaning of the text and discern the significance of that meaning for the present. He calls this process "managing the middle," moving from biblical text to current life.[39] The steps required to manage the middle responsibly are: "*eternalize*" the text by asking, "What in this text is always true? "*Universalize* the text by asking, "What is this text is true for all people?" "*Principlize*" the text by asking, "Is there a principle behind the particular statement within this text?" These steps move the preacher toward application—but he is not there yet. Answering these question results in abstract ideas, which do not communicate well. He must also take steps on the "life side" of the message. "*Contemporize*" the text by pointing out the ideas in it that are true now.

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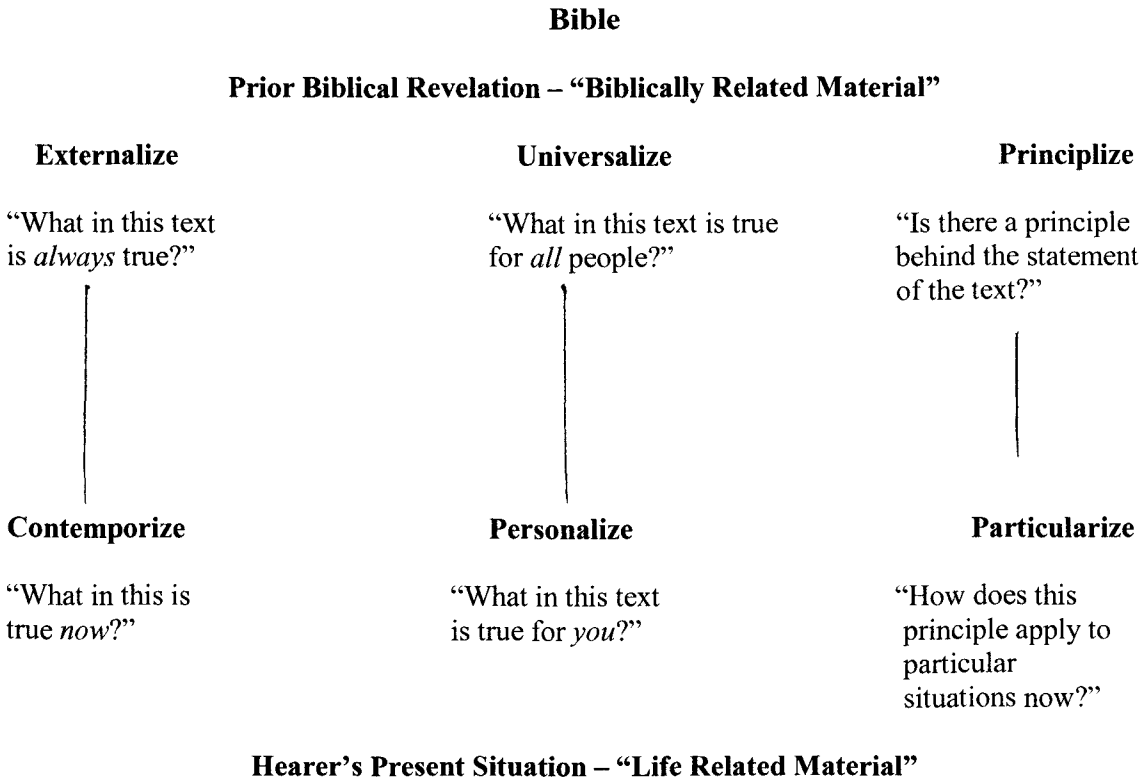
[38] Harold Freeman, "Making the Sermon Matter: The Use of Application in the Sermon," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 27:2 (Spring 1985): 32-33.
[39] Ibid., 34.

"*Personalize*" the message by underscoring what is true for the listeners. "*Particularize*" the message by suggesting specific ways in which the text's meaning may be applicable to the congregation. Freeman offers this diagram of the process:



In actual fact, Freeman points out, only the last step of each side of the equation (on the right in the figure above) is needed. The preacher must first "principlize," then "particularize" the text.[41] This is a useful summary of the process involved in a deductive

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[40] Ibid.

[41] "The other categories of eternalizing, universalizing, contemporizing, and personalizing are only components of the larger categories of 'principlizing' and 'particularizing.' It is helpful for clarification, however, to break down these large categories into component parts." Ibid., 34.

approach to sermon application. The text must be principlized[42] and then sermonically personalized to the needs of the congregation.

Jay Adams also offers a deductive approach to sermon application. God intends the sermon to be a life-transforming experience instead of merely a lecture.[43] Adams argues that the entire sermon—introduction, main points, and conclusion—must be personal and applicational. The preacher is to adopt the viewpoint of God as God's spokesman, or herald, and to address the congregation in the second person, "you," instead of adopting the inappropriate humility of "we."[44] Of the "we" posture, Adams writes: "Thus, by their extreme reticence, [these preachers] dull whatever application they may make." He decries the preacher who thus "shares" with the congregation instead of declaring and proclaiming God's truth.[45] "It is not arrogant for God's appointed servant to proclaim God's Word directly, even pointedly, to those to whom He addresses it."[46]

Adams emphasizes telic preaching. Analysis of the preaching text should uncover the purpose of the passage—what the Holy Spirit intends to accomplish in the reader through the text. When the preacher builds his sermon, he should make the sermonic purpose identical to the Spirit's purpose in the pericope. This leads naturally to applicatory sermons.[47] "Purpose is what defines a preaching unit. If the Holy Spirit has determined to do something specific by means of a unit of material devoted to that particular purpose, then it is clear that it may (must) be preached in order to achieve that

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[42] Others have used this term. See William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 407.
[43] Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 2.
[44] Jay Adams, *Truth Applied*, 24-28.
[45] Ibid., 24. This is also emphasized in *Preaching with Purpose.*
[46] Ibid., 25.
[47] Ibid., 36-39.

very purpose."[48] The entire sermon, introduction and main divisions should apply the truth of the text—leading to the conclusion where all the "tributaries" of the message unite to the "river" and forcefully sweeps home the truth to be obeyed.[49]

John Stott, Pastor Emeritus of All Souls' Church in London and prolific author, begins with the text of Scripture. He calls preachers to bridge building; it is the task of the preacher to build bridges between the ancient, biblical world and the modern world in which we live. Stott admits to earlier error in his own preaching: ". . . previously both my theory and my practice were to expound the biblical text and leave the application largely to the Holy Spirit."[50] So he warns preachers against two errors. One is to be so immersed in the world of the Bible, its teaching, ethics, mores and practices that one never connects to the modern world. Such preaching stays in the past with the text. The other mistake is to be so enamored of modern culture, its practices and values that one leaves the Bible behind as irrelevant. No—the call of the preacher is to be thoroughly immersed in both worlds—the biblical and the modern—so as to show modern people the Contemporary Christ.

Stott urges preachers not to over-estimate the congregation's intellectual capacity—but not to underestimate it either. His words bear repeating:

> My plea is that we treat them as real people with real questions; that we grapple in our sermons with real issues; and that we build bridges into the real world in which they live and love, work and play, laugh and weep, struggle and suffer, grow old and die. We have to provoke them to think about their life in all its moods, to challenge them to make Jesus Christ the Lord of every area of it, and to demonstrate his contemporary relevance.[51]

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[48] Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 26.
[49] Adams, *Application in Preaching*, 41-42.
[50] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 141.
[51] Ibid., 147.

Thus Stott urges preachers to be thoroughly immersed both in modern culture, as well as in the needs of their congregations in order to effectively apply Scripture. He recommends participation in a study group to help preachers grapple with literature, plays, cinema, and cultural questions they might not otherwise encounter. He insists the best preachers are always diligent pastors, who are listening carefully to the needs of the people they serve.[52]

John Taylor, in a doctoral dissertation on sermon application, examines fifty sermons each from Stuart Briscoe, Charles Swindoll, and Rick Warren to compare their approach to sermon application. He attempts to develop a model for sermon application for modern preaching from the practice of these well-known preachers.

Taylor reports that all three preachers give a great deal of attention to application. All three include application in the introduction, body, and conclusion of their messages. Swindoll and Warren typically apply the text in the second person, "You ought to love your neighbor." Briscoe, on the other hand, adopts the posture of the "recipient preacher."[53] Briscoe usually speaks in the first person, "*We* recognize what this text says to *us*." Swindoll and Warren adopt the "herald" posture, using Adams' terminology. All three employ questions as a means of applying the truths found in the text. "Do you see what this means? Do you understand? What are you going to do about it?" Swindoll uses what he calls "lessons" from the text to derive principles that apply to us today. Warren is the only one of the three to use testimonies, or "stories" to apply the text. About thirty percent of the time Warren invites someone to come forward to share a testimony that illustrates the truth being presented in the message. All three employ illustrations in

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[52] Ibid., 192; 194-195.
[53] This is the terminology used by Jay Adams in *Truth Applied*, 24.

almost every message; illustrations that are current human interest stories are by their very nature a means of connecting ancient truth to modern audiences. Such illustrations put a current face on the principles being presented. Overall, these preachers employ both direct and indirect (or implied) applications in their preaching styles. Taylor's work is a helpful study of application approaches taken by three prominent preachers today.[54]

Michael Quicke, Professor of Preaching and Communication at Northern Seminary, likewise begins with Scripture,[55] but questions the adequacy of Stott's bridge model. For Quicke, preaching is much more than an arc between Scripture and listener, with the preacher in the middle. This places too great a responsibility on the preacher. Preaching flows from God, who speaks to us in Christ and in Scripture, through the preacher to God's people, and then from people it is offered back to God in the form of obedience—worship, witness, and service. In that it originates in God and flows back to God, it is what Quicke calls a 360-degree event. God *speaks* through his word; he *empowers* the preacher and *convicts* the listener. In the process, he *transforms* the lives of both preacher and listeners. The Father as Source, the Son as Word, and the Spirit as witness are all essential to this process. Preaching is therefore a divine event![56] The preaching event

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[54] John F. Taylor, "Toward the Development of a Model of Application for Contemporary Preaching" (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001). While books by both Sidney Greidanus and Bryan Chapell are listed in the bibliography of this work, they are neglected in the literature review and in the conclusions drawn. Greidanus' emphasis on theocentric interpretation is missing. The result is inclusion of moralistic application from narrative passages as appropriate application. Greidanus, in emphasizing *God's* work in the world, and the purpose of the biblical authors in emphasizing what *God* is doing, protects us from inappropriate moralizing. Just because Abraham did it does not mean we should—and it is not the author's intention that we read Genesis this way! And Bryan Chapell's significant work on biblical application is completely neglected. This neglect compromises the value of the work.

[55] "Biblical preaching always gives Scripture first place as God's prime way of evoking his alternative reality. God-breathed Scripture, within the 360-degree model, initiates effective preaching." Michael Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 140.

[56] Ibid., 48-49.

involves revealing, preaching, listening, and responsive living. Quicke points to the words of Isaiah:

> As the rain and the snow
> come down from heaven,
> and do not return to it
> without watering the earth
> and making it bud and flourish,
> so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
> It will not return to me empty,
> but will accomplish what I desire
> and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (55:10-11)

This passage compares God's word to the cycle of rain and snow falling from heaven and returning after they have watered the earth and made it fruitful. So God's word proceeds from God, accomplishes his purpose, and returns to him.[57]

Quicke emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is at work in the preaching event from beginning to end. The Spirit who gave the word guides the preacher as he studies and meditates. The Scripture must be prayerfully read and considered. As he designs the message, the pastor must listen—listen to the congregation, listen to the cultural environment, and listen to the Spirit. The Spirit internalizes the message for the preacher. "Nothing substitutes for this personal experience of God's Word that makes it urgent within. Preaching should burn in the preacher's bones first."[58] This personal encounter with God gives birth to conviction and immediacy in the sermon. The Holy Spirit is the sermon designer par excellence.[59] Quicke's book offers a high vision of the ministry of preaching.

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[57] Ibid., 49.
[58] Ibid., 164.
[59] Ibid.

Dan Doriani, formerly Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, now Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, has written a book on biblical application. He laments the boring repetition, week after week, of the preacher's same few applications: be holy, be faithful, be committed, witness more, read your Bible more, etc.[60] He recognizes the need for attention to application, lamenting: "In my first fifteen years of preaching, I had methods for interpreting the Bible, but none for applying it."[61] Seeing the task in general terms first, Doriani advocates a God-centered approach to reading Scripture. The Bible teaches us and leads us to know the God who redeems us and to become like him, to conform ourselves to him.[62] Doriani finds the traditional pattern, first exegesis, then application, to be over-simplified.

> The boundary between exegesis and relevance is permeable. In the Bible's conceptual world, failure to apply usually includes a failure to understand *fully*. That includes a failure to respond to God, who represents himself in Scripture. If we cannot understand or heed *it*, we do not understand or heed *him*.[63]

Doriani sees the preacher / interpreter as a mediator between the text and the audience. He must listen to the text, and be immersed in the biblical world, and listen to the audience. He must bring the text to his congregation and bring his listeners' questions to the text as well.[64]

> Some interpreters think their task is one-directional, moving only from a text to an audience. But wise interpreters move the other way too, mediating the questions of their audience to the Bible. They know that most hearers approach the Bible with existential questions in hand. Thus interpreters can begin either with points the text generates, or with the questions people bring to it.[65]

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[60] Dan Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001), 2, 97.
[61] Ibid., vii.
[62] Ibid., 13-18.
[63] Ibid., 22.
[64] Ibid., 8, 97.
[65] Ibid., 82.

Beginning with biblical text, Doriani offers seven ways that biblical texts instruct us: through rules, ideals, doctrines, redemptive acts in narratives, exemplary acts of characters in narratives, biblical images, and songs and prayers.[66] Turning to the questions people bring to the Bible, Doriani classifies them into four categories: (1) What should I do? What is my *duty*? (2) Who should I be? How can I develop the *character* that enables me to walk with God? (3) What *goals* should I pursue? To what causes should I devote my life? (4) How can we distinguish truth from error? How can we gain *discernment*?[67] Each question is significant. Thus, with the seven ways texts instruct and the four types of questions people bring to the Bible, Doriani finds twenty-eight options for finding relevance of biblical texts to disciples' lives.[68]

Doriani says the preacher needs imagination, immersion in the biblical text, immersion in the culture and in the needs of his people, and courage to preach. He warns that preachers need to reckon with the reality that the culture affects Christians more than they realize—squeezing them into its mold.[69] It is the task of preachers to sit under the authority of the biblical text, to allow it to speak its divine word, and to have the courage to proclaim what it teaches, even when it is unpopular. Cultural values in areas such as feminist claims, abortion rights, homosexual lifestyle, and religious pluralism will encroach into the church unless the pastor has the courage to proclaim God's word fearlessly. "Preachers need courage—courage to let the Bible say what it means, courage to see the world as it is, and courage to address the difference between the two. The

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[66] Ibid., 82-92. Doriani concedes on p. 92: "Indeed, one could subordinate the last two categories to the first five; in fact, only the first five get full development in this volume."
[67] Ibid., 97-116.
[68] Ibid., 94-96.
[69] Ibid., 60.

temptation to cowardly silence assails us week by week."[70] To be faithful to their divine calling, preachers must resist that temptation.

Similarly, Michael Quicke writes that God calls pastors to be faithful mouthpieces for his truth, but at the same time, to maintain a humble posture. It is God's truth that is proclaimed, not our own. Preachers must never "lord it over the flock" (1 Peter 5:3), but submit themselves to the same text they preach. The pastor's first step in preparing to preach is to immerse himself in the text.[71] The pastor must combine study with prayer. To encourage this personal meeting with God, Quicke recommends *lectio divina* (literally "divine reading"), which involves four steps: (1) slowly reading the text aloud several times. Hearing the word reaches the person more than simply reading it. He must savor the word. (2) Meditation. The pastor turns its words over in his mind. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the text, is speaking still. (3) Prayer. The pastor converses with God about the text. (4) Contemplation. Contemplation is the willingness to wait and open the mind and heart to experience God's word and God's grace as expressed in this passage.[72] The pastor must hear God's word himself before he can bring God's word to the church. The fact that God has spoken to him first will come through in his preaching.

But while the pastor listens to the text himself, he must also be sure to think of congregation and its varied needs as he crafts his sermon. Too easily the preacher may construct applications that in some respects are projections of his own station in life. The preacher must therefore ask questions: "How does the text apply to teen-agers? How does

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[70] Ibid., 61-62.
[71] Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching*, 140.
[72] Ibid., 143.

this text come to store owners? What does it mean to laborers? What about the people working in City Hall? What does this passage mean to stay-at-home moms?

Is the pastor framing his message in a way that may leave out singles? Susan Maycinik warns against this danger. Singles make up forty percent of the adult population of the United States.[73] The language of the message can make clear that singles are not forgotten. Maycinik suggests pastors refer to "roommates and friends" as well as "spouses and children." When speaking about households in the church, she reminds pastors to speak of "families and individuals" instead of just "families." The church bulletin can announce an "all-church picnic" instead of a "family picnic." The pastor can also vary illustrations that validate singles as part of the congregation who are receiving the word of God. And pastors must avoid communicating the unbiblical notion that singleness is second rate. Certainly the Scriptures honor marriage, but Paul spoke highly also of the single state (1 Corinthians 7).[74]

And pastors dare not forget that, in most churches, the majority of their listeners are women. Alice Mathews presents six questions to help preachers relate to their female listeners more effectively.

(1) *Do we typecast men and women in traditional stereotyped roles?* When a couple joins the church, do we consider him for a leadership role, and assign her to the hospitality team?

(2) *Do we represent both men and women as whole human beings?* That is, do we permit men to be emotional, and praise men when they are gentle? Do we value a woman's directness, and recognize she may be logical? She warns, "If we find ourselves

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[73] Susan Maycinik, "Creating a Singles-Friendly Sermon," *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 65.
[74] Ibid., 66-67.

praising a certain characteristic in a man, but looking down on that same characteristic in a woman, we have probably fallen into a form of stereotyping."[75]

(3) *Do we accord men and women the same level of respect?* Vocabulary often reveals the way we perceive and value people. Women may be referred to as "girls" or "women's libbers." If a preacher refers to men as "men," but to women, regardless of their age, as "girls," he is communicating disrespect that damages women. And this is not uncommon in churches.

(4) *Do we recognize both men and women for their own achievements?* Statistically, women suffer from depression more than men.[76] Reasons for this are complex, but churches should not contribute to it! Many women have been stereotyped, ignored, and made the butt of jokes too often in churches. Ultimately, many just leave. "Many of the problems of self-esteem and depression with which women struggle can be traced directly to the assumption that women do not merit their own place in the sun."[77] Pastors need to be sensitive to the women in the congregation.

(5) *Does our language exclude women when we talk about humanity as a whole?* If the pastor wants to be heard by women, he needs to be sensitive to changes in language. Rightly or wrongly, many women do not hear "man" as a generic term referring to humanity. The pastor can avoid exclusively male language in his sermon. He can speak of "brothers and sisters" in the church. He can use language that does not stereotype men as doctors, women as nurses; he can speak of firefighters instead of firemen, etc.

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[75] Alice P. Mathews, *Preaching that Speaks to Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Books, 2003), 158-159.
[76] Ibid., 52-54.
[77] Ibid., 160.

(6) *Do we use language that designates and describes men and women on equal terms?* After a marriage ceremony, we do not designate the couple "husband and woman." If we do not, we should not call them "man and wife." We can simply speak of them as "husband and wife." Thinking through these issues and being careful to communicate respect and status to women is important.[78]

One strategy for helping pastors be sensitive to women is to ask their wives to review their notes as they prepare their message. This is something I have been doing in recent months, and it has been very helpful. Often my wife presents a different point of view, warns against a misunderstanding, or points out another angle that brings better balance to the sermon.

As preachers move deductively from text to life and make applications to the people, they must shape their messages in such a way as to be sensitive to youth, singles, women, and men in the particularities of their lives. The Bible is the word of God to the church—to *all* the people of the church.

Inductive or Deductive Preaching?

In reaction to deductive preaching, some homileticians have highlighted the value of induction in preaching. Fred Craddock, Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Candler School of Theology, critiques the traditional deductive approach. It is too predictable and too preacher-centered. Deduction requires passive listeners, he warns, who accept the authority of the speaker to state conclusions and to apply those conclusions to their lives. Whether this authority is understood to be in the church, in the

[78] Ibid., 158-162. This raises a number of issues, including the question of gender neutral translations. In our church, we use the *New International Version*, which is not a gender neutral translation. Nevertheless,

Scriptures, or in ordination of clergy, traditional preaching centers in the preacher.[79] Since deduction focuses on general ideas and principles, it can be too abstract and therefore removed from the stuff of real life.

Craddock argues for induction—weaving through the particulars of text and life and working toward a conclusion. Particular, concrete experiences are the "stuff of the sermon," the content of the message itself—not merely the content of the introduction or illustrations. Induction communicates respect to the hearer, and gives him the right to come to his own conclusions. The listener, in Craddock's model, completes the sermon.[80] In the sermon, the preacher retraces the steps of his own inductive study of the text—and gives listeners opportunity to come to their own conclusions. Emphasis on the concrete and specific keeps preaching tied to life and makes it believable and understandable.

For Craddock, the Word of God is to be found, not in the Bible alone, but in the Bible in conversation with the church. He points to the work of Ernst Fuchs who noted that Jesus wrote nothing and Paul wrote only with reluctance. And when Paul wrote, he wrote as a speaker rather than a writer.[81] Thus, Craddock emphasizes the role of the listening church:

> To say that the Scripture is the Word of God (orthodox) or that it contains the Word of God (liberal) is to identify the Word of God with one partner in the dialogue. Word is properly understood as communication—and it is meaningless to discuss word in terms of one person. Just as sound is vibration received, so word is a spoken-heard phenomenon. The Word of God is Word in movement, in conversation between Scripture and church. In the absence of that community it is only potentially the Word of God. And this is affirmed in spite of the strong tradition that refuses to see the Word of God as contingent upon the situation of the congregation.[82]

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in the language of his preaching, the pastor can seek to be sensitive to his female listeners.

[79] Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 54-55.

[80] Ibid., 61-64.

[81] Ibid., 44-45.

[82] Ibid., 133-134.

When inductive preaching is done well, Craddock insists, the preacher need not make applications. If the hearers have made the exploration of the text with the preacher, they come to their own conclusions—and it is their conclusion for their lives and so the application is clear and inescapable.[83]

Inductive preaching thus makes preaching more dialogical than a preacher's monolog. Craddock states:

> In the present atmosphere of open-ended dialogue, sermons in the classical tradition will less and less be accepted. This fact is unsettling to many preachers, of course, because in the traditional method, the preacher was safe, free from all the contingencies and threats of dialogue. Now to be effective, a preacher must expose himself to all the dangers of the speaking (rather than the speech) situation. He not only trusts his words to the hearers but he opens himself to their response. He believes the sermon needs the hearers to be complete. Conversation is not an individual production. The event of the Word of God needs the ear, for faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17).[84]

There is much of value in Craddock's advocacy of induction. Preachers must avoid abstraction, and employ crisp, concrete language; such concreteness is the "stuff" of induction. Craddock's emphasis on knowing and understanding the world of the listener is very important. He highlights the importance of knowing the congregation. But understanding the word of God as a dynamic experience between Scripture and congregation makes him Barthian in his approach. He identifies the content of the sermon, not as an authoritative word from our Creator, but as concrete events, shared experiences, and imaginative analogies. The danger is that there are as many "truths" as there are listeners. Inductive preaching, as Craddock conceives it, makes the word of God, in some measure, dependent on the listener. The word of God is no longer

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[83] Ibid., 57-58.
[84] Ibid., 30-31.

objectively in the Scripture, apart from the response given it.[85] Yet Craddock is saying something important—something that needs to be heard.

Ralph Lewis also argues for inductive preaching, and he finds biblical basis for the inductive approach. Questions, Lewis points out, are everywhere in the Bible, beginning with God's query in the Garden of Eden, "Where are you?" The psalmist cries out, "How long, Lord?" Jesus silences his critics, not with dogmatic defenses, but with questions: "Whose likeness and inscription is this? What do you think? What did David do? What did Moses say? Who do you say that I am?" etc. Through questions, Jesus engages his listeners. Dialogue is another tool of instruction in the Bible; imagery is everywhere, as are parables and analogy.[86] Like Craddock, Lewis complains that the preacher comes to Sunday with the conclusions it took him all week to reach—and he preaches them. But God doesn't start with the answer. In the Bible, the concrete comes before the abstract, the particular before the general.

Lewis finds biblical precedent for induction. He points to Ecclesiastes. Koheleth, the preacher, recounts one experience after another, drawn from his own life, and his own observation of life, to show the futility of life "under the sun." He examines human life from birth to burial, from the womb to the worms. His approach is not deductive, but inductive. Lewis offers an outline of the book of Ecclesiastes:

> See vanity and folly.
> Where *is* meaning?
> not in wisdom
> not in withdrawal
> not in weeping
> not in wine
> not in wind (14 times)
> not in works

[85] Ibid., 69-71.
[86] Ralph Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), 58-59.

not in words
not in worship without obedience
not in wickedness
not in weapons of war
not in writing.
But walk uprightly
Conclusion (12:13, 14)
Fear God.
Keep his commands.
All the duty of man.
God will judge—
nothing hidden.[87]

This is induction. The author of Ecclesiastes moves from the particular to the general, from the grit of life to the glory of walking with God.

Lewis emphasizes the inductive method as the key to anchoring sermons in daily life, holding listeners' attention, and avoiding inappropriate authoritarianism. The key to effective preaching, he argues, is *getting people involved*—and inductive preaching insures this. Lewis calls for preachers to lead the sheep, rather than push them.[88] Lewis cannot concur with Craddock's approach to inductive preaching, which yields uncertain conclusions, that is, preaching without an authoritative "thus says the Lord."[89] Lewis seeks to combine the strengths of induction and deduction and advocates combining induction and deduction in a single process he terms "full-orbed induction."[90] Full-orbed inductive sermons begin with induction—with particulars, questions, and concrete situations in life—then move toward a conclusion centered in the biblical text. The questions lead to an answer in the Scripture. From there the sermon moves deductively

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[87] Ibid., 64-65.
[88] Ibid., 32.
[89] Ibid., 35.
[90] Ibid., 107-111.

to application and exhortation.[91] The truth presented in the biblical text, shown to be the answers to the questions raised by the inductive quest, becomes the basis for an authoritative word from God applied to life. In some situations, Lewis suggests, the implications of the inductively discovered truth are so clear the preacher can stop the sermon at midpoint and allow the Holy Spirit to apply the text.[92]

Lewis underscores application. Preachers must prepare sermons for people, not about subjects; the sermon must be prepared with the congregation in mind.[93] He writes:

> . . . The easiest way to be truly inductive in our preaching is to start with a need of our people and take that need to the Scripture for God's help and response. The inductive structures we've talked about just naturally start with the particulars, the problems and the questions that lead to the biblical conclusions and their application.[94]

He suggests that preachers begin with a careful study of the passage, then ask themselves, "What problem do my people face, what need do they have, what issue do they wrestle with? What question do they ask that this passage deals with?" Relying on God's Spirit for guidance, the preacher must ask a second question, "What is the truth God has in this passage to help my people with their problem, need, issue or question?" The answer to the second question may become the conclusion or the central concept the preacher reaches at the mid-point of a full-orbed inductive sermon.[95]

There is great value in the emphasis on induction in preaching. Preachers must focus on the particular, on imagery, concrete language, analogy, and on questions that engage the listener. Even in sermons where the overall approach is deductive, there can

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[91] Ibid., 111-115. See the diagram, taken from Lewis, in illustration 1.
[92] Ibid., 116. This is more like Craddock.
[93] Ibid., 140-41.
[94] Ibid., 130.
[95] Ibid.

be inductive moves.[96] Particular sections can begin with particulars that move to conclusions. This increases interest, "tension," and helps keep listeners engaged.

Calvin Miller, an experienced pastor, and now Professor of Communication and Homiletics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, also advocates induction. He calls for "marketplace preaching," or speaking in the "vulgate," the language of the people. Miller complains that the preaching of the church has moved from the agora, the marketplace, into stained-glass sanctuaries. Miller calls for it to return to the streets (not literally, but it its style of communication). Sermons must speak to the world in language it understands, must speak honestly, must care about sociological data, must be open to change,[97] and must cope with great cultural diversity—all without compromising the distinctive Christian message.[98] The marketplace preaching Miller advocates speaks in tones of love, not condemnation, and speaks with respect for those with whom we disagree. In today's world, preachers must drop words like "heathen," and "lost" from their vocabulary. While they do not forsake their theology in these matters—they can avoid unnecessary offense by not using this vocabulary.[99] For Miller, the single word that best describes the marketplace sermon is the word *casual.*[100] In contrast to Jay Adams, Miller also calls for a first person style ("we must") instead of a more authoritative

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[96] "Moves" is the terminology of David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 23. He seeks to modify homiletical terminology, replacing "points" of a sermon with "moves." He speaks of "moves," emphasizing the movement of language.
[97] By this he means changing the packaging and appeal of the gospel without altering its content. Calvin Miller, *Marketplace Preaching: How to Return the Sermon to Where it Belongs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 28.
[98] Ibid., 27-31.
[99] Ibid., 29.
[100] Ibid., 124.

second person ("you must") approach.[101] Today, Miller argues, sermons must be indicative and inductive, as opposed to imperative and deductive.

The sermon must be "tightly prepared but lightly delivered."[102] That is, Miller calls for writing out the sermon in manuscript form, carefully reasoned, polished as well as possible—every word carefully crafted. But then the preacher should master it and deliver it as naturally and conversationally as possible.[103] Preachers must understand the culture and people to whom they speak—and he appeals to the emphasis of John Stott's bridge building in that regard. Miller also appeals approvingly to Karl Barth's maxim—the preacher must prepare with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other.[104]

Miller offers four principles for what he calls keeping the "homily" in homiletics:

1. *Take only your natural self into the pulpit.* When "Pastor Joey" becomes "Dr. Joseph" and he adopts the style of a formal lecturer, his effectiveness is lost. Preachers cannot adopt a forced formality in preaching; they must be themselves!

2. *Preach only with indicative induction.* Avoid the imperatives "you musts" and "you shoulds." This is the preaching of another day, not our day.

3. *Make your sermons "pulpit journalism," not creative writing.* Speak with nouns and verbs, not a lot of adjectives and adverbs. Be clear and plain. Long Shakespeare quotations take the sermon away from the people!

4. *Minimize the furniture of authority.* By this, Miller means do away with the pulpit. Preach without it.[105]

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[101] Ibid., 114.
[102] Ibid., 96.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 134.
[105] Ibid., 55-58.

Miller explains how preachers can effectively bridge the gap between the ancient text and modern life. He offers suggestions from his own experience under the heading, "Thinking with a Corporate Mind."

> I recommend three ways to work at such understanding. First, live with your congregation in their world. When I began pastoring in my small Oklahoma parish in the middle 1950s, I found I could lead them into deeper levels of spirituality merely by being with them in their world. I would often go into the fields, get on their John Deere tractors, and ride around with them as they plowed. As I showed interest in their work, they got interested in the God of homiletics.
>
> Years later in a very urban, baby boomer parish, I met with the CEOs of our community for lunch, downtown. I didn't much care for downtown. It was uncomfortably far from suburbia, and it was a long traffic fight to get there. But living in their world taught me their needs and interests and indeed the language of the marketplace. By living in their world, I could preach more relevantly when they came to my world.
>
> Second, all pastors who serve marketplace congregations should read those books that people in the corporations are reading. Promotional, business, and leadership titles are the books that feed corporate America. These books can help us learn to think with a corporate mind.
>
> A third step of learning to think with the corporate mind is to understand that people who work in corporations have a traditional way of relating, a whole glossary of unique terms, and particular ways they use their free time.[106]

So Miller has learned, in the context of congregational life, how to effectively apply the biblical text to his hearers' lives.

Miller believes that in our day, sermons must be like bill-boards, packing maximal information into small messages. Long sermons and long series are passé in his view.[107] In a day when time is at a premium, worship should be fast-paced and so should the sermon itself. People should feel that time in church is time well-spent.[108] Marketplace worship should be relational, casual, colloquial, and relevant to worshipers'

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[106] Ibid., 58-59.
[107] Anything beyond 8-10 sermons is considered long. Miller recommends series of between two and five sermons. Ibid., 101.
[108] Ibid., 71-82.

lives.[109] This is what Miller calls "vulgate worship," worship "that exists for, and is understood by, the person on the street."[110]

Miller states that in modern America, sermons must include the gospel, as well as an apologetic element, since many worshipers have questions and doubts that cannot be ignored.[111] He also believes that sermons must include "the altar"—that is, a call to respond, to come forward, to encounter God and deal with him directly in response to what he has said.[112]

Miller is calling for preaching that is relevant to life and connects meaningfully with people of our day. At times he seems more concerned with the audience, (people of our day) than with what *God* has to say—or with the God-centered character of worship. He seldom offers solid biblical basis for what he advocates. But he believes that what he is promoting is indeed what the apostles practiced, and what we see, for example, in Paul's ministry in Athens (Acts 17), where the apostle crafted his presentation of the gospel in a way that was sensitive to his hearers.

Application, Ethos, and Orality

In ancient times, Aristotle analyzed persuasive speech into three essential elements: *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. *Logos* is the verbal content of the speech, including its logic; *pathos* is the passion of the speaker, his fervor; *ethos* is the perceived character of the speaker, including his concern for his listeners.

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[109] Ibid., 72-73.
[110] Ibid., 73.
[111] Ibid., 130-132.
[112] Ibid., 141-143.

Ethos is critical to powerful preaching. Ethos, the perceived character of the preacher, is determined by the speaker's concern for the listeners.[113] Two elements that comprise ethos are credibility and compassion. Preachers who are perceived by their listeners as believable and caring have high ethos. This is essential to effective sermon application. The preacher must show that he is knowledgeable, not only about the Bible, but also about the world people live in. If the pastor says, "If you're going to walk with God, you need to learn Hebrew," he might as well sit down. He has lost credibility.[114] So ethos relates to the character, trustworthiness, and believability of the speaker. Aristotle believed it was the most important element of persuasion.

One element that can enhance the preacher's ethos is orality: speaking without notes, or with little reference to notes. Comparing delivery methods, Gerald Kennedy wrote, "Other things being equal, the man who stands without written support finds his way to the wills of his hearers with more directness and welcome than any of the others."[115]

Wilbur Ellsworth recommends the power of speaking God's word orally, without manuscripts or dependence on notes. Preaching is an oral act, and orality has special power and importance.[116] Sermons, like other forms of communication, can be oral or written. Ellsworth points out the following qualities of orality as opposed to written communication:

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[113] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 26.
[114] Bryan Chapell, "Application Without Moralism: How to show the relevance of the text in a redemptive manner," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching,* ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 289.
[115] Gerald Kennedy, *His Word through Preaching* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 88 quoted in Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 274.
[116] Wilbur Ellsworth, *The Power of Speaking God's Word: How to Preach Memorable Sermons* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 9.

1. *Orality is dialogical.* The preacher, as he delivers his message, is in dialog with the listeners. He notes their response and responds to his audience. To puzzled looks he may respond with further clarification. He pauses to note attentiveness. He may even ask, "Am I making sense?" and note listener response. The dialogical quality of preaching is lost to the one who reads a manuscript.[117]

2. *Orality is communal.* Writing requires withdrawal. The author must be alone. "Quiet please" is the motto for the library, where the writer does his work. Speaking, by contrast, is inherently communal. The speaker must be with people; to speak he must have an audience. The dynamic of speaking is fundamentally different than that of writing.[118]

3. *Orality is formulaic.* Our culture is very literate, and so has an aversion to clichés. Words must be fresh and new. But in pre-literate culture, if communication was to be passed on, it had to be framed in ways easily remembered. So clear structures, set phrases, aphorisms, set forms, etc., were widely employed in speeches. This is still largely true today; speech takes a different form and operates on different principles than a written essay.[119]

4. *Orality is concrete and descriptive.* People cannot follow abstract definitions. Oral communication is concrete, oriented to a specific situations, practical, and relies on description rather than definition. Importantly, seminary education is often characterized by abstraction, definition, and extensive attention to written materials. Seminary

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[117] Ibid., 19-21. Joseph Webb calls this "maximizing connectedness." "The first reason for preaching without notes is because it makes possible the fullest and most intense bonding between the preacher and those who share the preaching." *Preaching Without Notes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 25.
[118] Ibid., 21-24.
[119] Ibid., 23-27.

curriculum is highly literate, abstract, and focused on careful definition. Unquestionably, such study is essential—but the pastor's weekly task is different; it is oral in nature.[120] The current emphasis on narrative preaching and storytelling reflects a response to the needs of listeners.[121] "Even though the technology of literacy has deeply impacted the human mind, the essential nature both of the human mind and spirit still retains strong ties with the values of orality."[122] Human beings are hard-wired for oral communication; they do it every day!

5. *Orality is situational.* A speaker has to sense and be sensitive to the mood of the audience and must orient listeners to see why this subject is significant for them now. The listener wants to know, "So—why are we talking about this now?" The preacher must relate to this need for immediacy in oral communication.[123]

6. *Orality is acoustic.* Clearly, orality deals with sound; it is designed for the ear, not the eye. A reader can come back at his leisure to check the words; the hearer must catch them as they are given, in the moment. Spoken style must be instantly intelligible. There must be more "mental space" given in orality; speech cannot be as densely packed as what is written. By its very nature, orality requires illustration, figurative language, and concreteness to be effective.[124] "Orality, face-to-face spoken words, stands at the heart of inter-personal communication."[125]

Understanding the dynamics of speech is essential for the preacher; the sermon is an oral event! Ellsworth warns that failing to appreciate the distinctive nature of oral communication diminishes the power of preaching. Preachers have learned to "write

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[120] Ibid., 27-30.
[121] Ibid., 30.
[122] Ibid., 31.
[123] Ibid., 32-33.

sermons," and then to deliver them from a manuscript or an outline that distills the manuscript. But writing and speaking are different forms of communication, and preparation for each must be handled differently. Preachers who write sermons sacrifice some of the power of the spoken word.[126]

Ellsworth concedes that the word of God comes to us in written form and that Scripture is the fountainhead of preaching. But behind Scripture stands God, speaking in his living voice. God speaks through Scripture. Preachers must read, think, meditate, and personally encounter God's living voice, his personal communication, in the text. Key to this process is *meditation* and *obedience*. The preacher listens to God's voice in the text in a personal way; he submits himself and obeys. He prays his response back to God. He thinks about its meaning, application, and significance as he prepares to preach. The preacher who has encountered God in the text is prepared to preach.

Ellsworth directs attention to Eugene Peterson, who points out that God's communication has four dimensions: *speaking*, *writing*, *reading*, *listening*. God *speaks* to his chosen prophets and apostles; they *write* down the words of Scripture. Preachers then *read* Scripture—and *listen* intently to the voice of God. Listening actively and intently includes submission or obedience.[127] "The essential power of the sermon is found in the preacher's having deeply heard the word of God in the reading of the biblical text."[128] The "dynamic encounter of the person of the preacher with the conscience of the listener seems to stand at the core of biblical preaching."[129] This personal, spiritual dynamic

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[124] Ibid., 33-35.
[125] Ibid., 41.
[126] Ibid., 36-38.
[127] Ibid., 47-48.
[128] Ibid., 49.
[129] Ibid., 52.

stands at the heart of orality. For Ellsworth, orality is more than a matter of delivery style; it is an intrinsic extension of the command to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2).[130]

When the preacher rises to speak on Sunday, it is a time for talk—direct talk, that comes from the core of the preacher seeking entry to the core of the hearer. In preaching, the word of God takes on a personal and relational form. It is immediate, coming from God through the heart and mouth of the speaker. Here, the dynamic of ethos is essential.

> The kind of preaching that gives hearers a sense that they are hearing a person speak with the authenticity of having stood in the presence of God requires an openness and transparency that freely flows from the mouth and life of one preacher standing alone before a gathering of people.[131]

Oral delivery—apart from dependence on written notes—results in greater eye contact, and aids in listener retention. The language used naturally takes on a more oral character—sentences are shorter and less complex; vocabulary is more earthy and concrete.[132] Oral delivery is more dialogical and more persuasive. In actual fact, "orality in preaching touches the core of Christian biblical and theological values."[133] Such preaching comes across to listeners as "from the heart."[134] It is life-changing work, both for preachers and listeners. Paul wrote:

> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.
> (1 Timothy 4:13, 15-16)

Ellsworth's book is a powerful apologetic for orality in preaching. Orality enhances ethos and thus adds to the effectiveness of sermon application.

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[130] Ibid., 53.
[131] Ibid., 59.
[132] Ibid., 61.
[133] Ibid., 67.

Redemptive-historical Preaching

For preaching to be Christian and sermon application appropriate, preachers must present the text in its biblical-redemptive context, emphasize the grace of God, and proclaim Christ. Peter Adam makes this point:

> We must be absolutely committed to teaching and preaching the Bible, but to describe our ministry as 'teaching and preaching the Bible' is to describe it in terms of its means, not its end. The purpose of our teaching and preaching the Bible is to explain and commend the good news of God, . . . the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . We teach and preach Christ by means of teaching and preaching the Bible.[135]

The preacher's task is to preach Christ.[136] The ever-present danger for preachers is "moralism"—the notion that we earn God's favor by our obedience. Moralism replaces the work of Christ with self-help and ignores the grace of God.[137] Thus, to preach biblically, the preacher must exposit every text in its redemptive context.

One way to underscore this is to apply the "synagogue test." Jay Adams explains:

> If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the members of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is distinctive. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach.
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> However, edificational preaching always must be evangelical; that is what makes it moral rather than moralistic, and what causes it to be unacceptable in a synagogue, in a mosque, or to a Unitarian congregation. By evangelical, I mean that the import of Christ's death and resurrection—His substitutionary, penal death and bodily resurrection—on the subject under consideration is made clear in the

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[134] Ibid., 59. Joseph Webb, *Preaching Without Notes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 30, concurs. "In order for one's Christian witness to be as moving as it can possibly be, that witness must appear to those who receive it to come 'from the preacher's heart' and 'not from a page of the preacher's sermon.'"

[135] Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 89.

[136] Donald Bloesch complains: "The surest evidence that Protestantism has abandoned its glorious heritage—of being not only a reformed church but a constantly reforming church—is the demise of kerygmatic preaching, preaching that consists in retelling the story of God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Ministers may preach from the Bible, but this does not guarantee they are preaching the Word of God. Their sermons are didactic more than kerygmatic, more centered on moral concerns than on the gospel." "Whatever Happened to God?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 5, 2001, 54.

[137] Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 146.

> sermon. You must not exhort your congregation to do whatever the Bible requires of them as though they could fulfill those requirements on their own, but only as a consequence of the saving power of the cross and the indwelling, sanctifying power and presence of Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit. All edificational preaching, to be Christian, must fully take into consideration God's grace in salvation and in sanctification.[138]

Many Reformed authors emphasize redemptive-historical preaching. Sidney Greidanus, prolific author on interpretation and preaching, champions this approach, focusing particularly on preaching narrative passages. The Bible is a book with a single message; it is about what God has done to redeem the world through his Son, Jesus Christ. All biblical narratives must be understood and preached in light of their coherence with the central figure of redemptive history—Jesus Christ. This is the program of the redemptive-historical school of preaching.[139] Greidanus objects to the "exemplary approach" to preaching narrative passages—i.e., finding an example to emulate in the behavior of biblical characters—like David in his battle with Goliath, or Mary in her obedience to Gabriel. Such texts are not about what David did and what Mary did—but about what God was doing. Such texts must be interpreted and preached in light of God's overall redemptive work. To preach the acts of these persons as examples to emulate is to violate the intent of the texts.[140] It is acceptable to employ such narrative reports as illustrations, but incorrect to preach "lessons" from the lives of biblical characters. Such preaching is (1) man-centered instead of Christocentric. Greidanus quotes T. Hoekstra, "Our preaching may not be preaching of Peter or Mary but must be preaching of Christ."[141] Greidanus repeatedly rejects a man-centered moralizing of the

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[138] Ibid., 147.
[139] Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970), 41.
[140] Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 58.
[141] T. Hoekstra, *De Tegenwoordige Critiek op onze Preeken* (Kampen: Kok, 1918), 16, quoted in Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 65-66.

text.[142] Such preaching (2) makes Scripture optional in the sense that such lessons may be gained from biographies quite apart from the Bible. In the Scripture, the chief message is Christ. Such preaching (3) draws parallels between ancient people and modern, and is therefore historically questionable. Such preaching is (4) psychologizing, (5) spiritualizing, and (6) moralizing.[143] Our preaching must always be the proclamation of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Greidanus emphasizes listening to the text for its original message. What is God saying in the text? How did its original audience understand it? He emphasizes theocentric and Christocentric interpretation—the Bible is the story of the coming of God's kingdom, God's acts, and God's redemptive purpose accomplished in Jesus Christ, his Son.

> When one asks about the purpose of the canon, the thrust of the Bible as a whole, the answer seems quite obvious: the canon intends to tell us about God—not God in the abstract, but God in relationship to his creation and his people, God's actions in the world, God's coming kingdom. This theocentric purpose can be attributed also to the individual authors. . . . Thus the major clue we receive regarding God's purpose in the canon as a whole as well as in its individual passages is that God intends to tell us about *himself*: his person, his actions, his will, etc. Hence one of the most important questions we can ask in interpreting a passage is, What does this passage tell us about God and his coming kingdom?[144]

Greidanus warns repeatedly against anthropocentric interpretation, which replaces the centrality of God in the biblical literature with the centrality of man in the sermon. Moralizing undercuts the Bible's purpose, minimizes grace, and focuses attention on man instead of God.[145] The preacher must bridge the gap (which is considerable) between the

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[142] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 116ff; 161ff.
[143] Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 65-82.
[144] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 113-114. See also Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 164.
[145] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 114-118.

biblical text and the modern congregation. *But to be valid, the application must be based on proper interpretation.* The only way we can preach what the text means for hearers today is to understand what it meant to its original audience.[146]

Greidanus, like Chapell,[147] cautions against illegitimate application from Old Testament texts. A narrative passage may be "generalized" or "universalized" to make the experience of a believer in the biblical text normative for believers today. But Greidanus expresses concern that this commits the error of moralizing.[148] Given the backdrop of the grand redemptive history presented in the Bible—creation, fall, redemption, new creation—the preacher recognizes that all the great themes of the Old Testament ultimately converge in Christ, who inaugurated the Messianic fulfillment.[149] Old Testament texts fit into this great redemptive plan of God.

Old Testament texts must first be interpreted in their own historical setting. To guard against error and misusing the text, the interpreter must ask *how the text functioned for its original hearers*. How did Israel hear this text, and what was the author's intention for the original audience?[150] Once the text has been correctly interpreted in its original historical and literary setting, the pastor must inquire about how it points to Christ. The sermon must show how the text brings listeners to Christ. Greidanus suggests seven potential paths from an Old Testament text to Christ:

1. The way of redemptive-historical progression
2. The way of promise-fulfillment
3. The way of typology
4. The way of analogy

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[146] Ibid., 166.
[147] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 292f, warns against "imaginative leapfrogging" from Old Testament texts to Christ.
[148] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 293.
[149] Ibid., 191-195.
[150] Ibid., 284-287.

5. The way of longitudinal themes
6. The way of New Testament references
7. The way of contrast[151]

Old Testament texts must first be heard as Israel heard them, and then the themes of the text can follow one of the suggested paths to converge in Christ. The text speaks, through Christ, to his people today.

Greidanus' work is very helpful, but is perhaps too cautious. Greidanus warns against drawing lessons from biblical characters at all. But the author of Hebrews draws lessons, from the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and speaks of many more who are not cited by name (Hebrews 11). In urging his readers to faith and perseverance, the author of Hebrews calls their attention to the examples set by this "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). He speaks of them, not merely as illustrations of his point, but as examples to emulate. Thus such lessons of faith are not wrong in themselves, but they are wrong by themselves. So sermons may draw such lessons, but should put the lessons in a proper framework of preaching Christ, his death and resurrection, his exaltation as Lord and consequent gift of the Holy Spirit, through whose power we may walk with God.

Dan Doriani also disagrees with Greidanus at this point. Doriani sees exemplary acts in narrative passages as one legitimate source of application for sermons.[152] Scripture explicitly instructs readers to find moral guidance in narrative. For example, in Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus tells the Pharisees that they should know from David's eating of the tabernacle bread when he fled from Saul that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. In

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[151] Ibid., 203-226.
[152] Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 88, 188.

1 Corinthians 10:1-10, Paul draws lessons from Old Testament narratives for the people of God. In Hebrews 11, the author draws lessons from Old Testament accounts of exemplary men and women of faith.[153] This corrective offers balance to Greidanus.

Preachers, to be faithful to God, must always preach in the framework of God's redemptive purposes in Christ. Bryan Chapell emphasizes this. Every sermon, built on the "Fallen Condition Focus" of the text, adopts a purpose that meets the need of fallen people, who are like the fallen people the text originally addressed. But many texts do not mention the atoning work of Christ, his resurrection, and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit directly. Yet "context is part of text."[154] The expositor must present every text in the context of the wider biblical message of God's redemptive message of grace. Pastors can never present "be good, do better" exhortations and call it Christian preaching. Adams emphatically agrees: "Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach."[155] The progressive disclosure of God's truth explained by Gerhardus Vos in his *Biblical Theology* helps preachers explain texts in the unfolding of God's redemptive purpose. This emphasis on preaching Christ is precisely what Paul did: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). All redemptive preaching centers in the work of the redeemer God has provided. Christ's work provides the only basis of God's acceptance; Christ's strength, rather than our own, provides the only hope for obedience to his commands.[156] *Thus the grace of God revealed in Christ forms the framework for all responsible exposition and application.* This can scarcely be over-emphasized. Chapell quotes Spurgeon:

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[153] Ibid., 199.
[154] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 269.
[155] Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147.
[156] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 289.

> Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? . . . So from every text in Scripture there is a road towards the great metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now what is the road to Christ? . . . I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one . . . I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savour of Christ in it.[157]

Many writers on preaching emphasize that preaching must be Christ-centered to be Christian preaching.[158] This emphasis on Christ, and God's gracious redemption in his work on the cross, stems from the apostles (1 Corinthians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 4:5) and ultimately from Christ himself, who taught his followers to find him, his death, and his resurrection in all of Scripture (John 5:39; Luke 24:27, 44-47).

Daniel Doriani also emphasizes the centrality of preaching Christ. Doriani employs the concept of the "fallen-condition focus" and the "redemptive-historical focus." The fallen condition is any aspect of human nature that requires God's grace. The message of the Bible is that Christ alone meets human need. To be Christian, every sermon must bring its particular truth as part of this overall redemptive whole.[159] In constructing application, Doriani advocates an audience sensitivity that governs the approach taken to the sermon. Thus, the theme of the sermon may not be identical to the theme of the passage. A preacher may focus on a major secondary idea of the text, if the secondary idea is the one that addresses the particular needs of the congregation.[160] In a given passage, there may be one main point—but different applications derived from secondary emphases in the passage. For example, the theme of Luke 5:17-26 could be

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[157] Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Christ Precious to Believers," in the *New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 5 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1860), 140 quoted in Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 280.
[158] See Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 128; Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147; Stott, *Between two Worlds*, 108, 151; Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 89; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 263-286.
[159] Daniel Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996), 170-75.

stated: "By healing the paralytic, Jesus proved that he is the Messiah who has authority to forgive sins." But the sermon proposition could be stated in different ways, depending on how the preacher applies the theme. The preacher's audience may need to see the passage in a certain way, depending on whom in the story they most resemble. Is the audience like the *Pharisees*, who need to recognize that Jesus exercises the prerogatives belonging to God alone, and that he is God who can heal? Many skeptics today need to hear the passage this way. Is the audience more like the *paralytic* himself, needing to recognize, even today, the potential connection between sin and suffering? Does the application of the text need to resemble the action of the *friends*, who boldly tore open a roof to bring a friend to Jesus? Perhaps the audience needs to imitate such boldness in bringing others to Jesus.[161] Thus the pastor may tailor the sermon and its application to the known needs of the audience.

Doriani's approach offers helpful flexibility in application. However, Doriani cautions: "faithful teachers stick close to the main theme of the passage." The text functions as a control to keep the message from becoming a pretext for the preacher's own ideas. But as the pastor studies the text and prays for insight in bringing the message to his people, he may be led to focus on an aspect of the passage that particularly addresses their needs.[162]

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[160] Ibid., 167.
[161] Ibid., 164-165.

Illustration and Application

Preachers cannot ignore the role of illustration as a means of application.[163] Every preacher knows the value of human interest stories. Every listener, regardless of age, appreciates a good, well-told story. But sermon illustrations are not entertainment. They are, in fact, important means of concretizing the meaning of the text. They may also epitomize the application of the text to life. Bryan Chapell makes this point when he concurs with Dawson Bryan about the motivational powers of illustrations. "Illustrations do more than simply adorn thought. They persuade, they motivate, they stir the will, they touch the heart, they explain and they cause decision-making."[164] Indeed, if congregations remember best the illustrations used in a sermon—and if the thing best remembered is the *last* illustration of the message, one effective way of concluding a sermon is with a good human interest story, well-told, that *embodies the truth of the text lived out*. In effect, this shows the congregation what the biblical text looks like in flesh. Such a conclusion should not typically be the story of a famous Christian, but of a common one; not of someone from a different century, but from the present. It should be a current story of a person with whom many in the congregation may identify. This brings the point home. Thus, David Veerman, senior editor of the *Life Application Bible*, overstates the distinction between application and illustration.[165]

For example, in Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus teaches, "You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world." In a sermon on this text, the question asked in the

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[162] Ibid., 167.
[163] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 349.
[164] Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 66.
[165] David Veerman, "Sermons: Apply Within," *Leadership* 11 (Spring 1990): 122. See above, 22.

introduction was, *Is God sitting on his throne in heaven, indifferent to people in their need?* The question was answered with: *No! God is active, revealing himself to the world—in flesh—in you and me!* In the body of the message, the thesis was developed that Christ is living in his disciples and impacting the world as salt and light. The concluding illustration was the following story.

A young man, in his freshman year in college, agreed to do inner-city ministry in Philadelphia. In June, he met with a hundred other students in a Baptist church in Philadelphia. Tony Compolo preached for about an hour. When he was finished, the kids were shouting, standing on the pews, clapping, ready to go.

"OK, gang, you ready to go out there and tell them about Jesus?" Compolo asked. "Yeah, let's go!" they shouted back.

They piled into buses—singing and clapping, going into the city. As the bus drove deeper into the city, their singing stopped. The college students were looking out the windows. They were scared.

The bus pulled up in front of a tough-looking housing project in the heart of the city. Compolo jumped on the bus, and said, "Alright gang, get out there and tell 'em about Jesus. I'll be back at 5:00."

They got off the bus and stood on the corner. They grouped up for prayer, and then spread out. This young man walked down the sidewalk and stopped in front of a tenement house. He prayed—and went inside. It smelled terrible. Windows were broken. There were no lights in the hall. He walked up one flight of stairs, heard a baby crying inside, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" called a loud voice inside. The door cracked open, and a woman holding a naked baby looked at him. "What do you want?" she asked impatiently. "I want to tell you about Jesus," he said.

She swung the door open and cussed him out. She continued to curse as he backed away. She cursed him all the way down the hall, down the flight of steps, and out to the sidewalk. Outside, with her stinging words all over him, he looked back—and felt terrible. "Some witness I am. How in the world could somebody like me tell her about Jesus?" He sat down on the curb and cried.

Then he looked up and noticed a store on the corner with bars on the windows. He walked into the store and he recalled that the baby had no diapers. And the mother was smoking. So he bought a box of disposable diapers and a pack of cigarettes.

He prayed and then walked back to the tenement house, up the stairs, stood at the same door, and knocked.

"Who is it?" she yelled. When she opened the door, he slid the box of diapers and the cigarettes in. She looked down at them, looked at him, and said, "Come in."

He stepped into the dingy apartment. "Sit down," she commanded. He sat down on an old sofa, and started playing with the baby. He put a diaper on the baby, though he had never put a diaper on a baby in his life. The woman offered him a cigarette and even though he did not smoke, he took it. He stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, listening to the woman.

After several hours, the woman asked, "What is a nice college boy like you doing in a place like this?" He told her about Jesus. He told her everything he knew about Jesus—in about five minutes.

She listened, and said, "Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive." He prayed. And then he left.

That evening, when they were all back on the bus, Campolo asked, "Well, gang, did any of you tell them about Jesus?" The young man spoke up, "I not only got to tell them about Jesus, I met Jesus. I went out there to save somebody, and I ended up getting saved. I became a disciple of Jesus today."[166]

Such a human interest story grabs attention and enables people to identify—since they too, want to reach out but feel ill-equipped to witness. It helps them see that genuine love paves the way for talking about the good news of Christ; it helps them understand how they can be salt and light in the world in which they live day by day. So illustration can be an effective means of application.

But we must also remember the relative place of illustrations. We are proclaimers of God's word. We tell life-illustrations in order to make plain the application of God's truth to life. We are not people for whom stories and illustrations are primary. God's word is primary.

Bryan Chapell warns about inappropriate illustrations. It is important to think carefully about the way listeners will hear what we relate. If we make stories out of experiences with counselees, we prove ourselves untrustworthy and no one will come to us for counsel. We must also avoid stories that makes our wives, family members, or congregants look bad. We must avoid making fun of groups of people—whether young, old, single, married, women, ethnic groups, whatever. It is important to remember that if

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[166] Craig A. Loscalzo, *Evangelistic Preaching that Connects: Guidance in Shaping Fresh and Appealing Sermons* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 148-150, quoting William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 74-77.

anyone is the butt of a joke, it should be the preacher himself. These warnings are important to make explicit.[167]

Illustrations "do more than simply adorn thought. They persuade, they motivate, they stir the will, they touch the heart, they explain, and they cause decision-making."[168] Illustrations help hearers relate God's truth to their lives.

Cultural Change and Sermon Application

Does sermon application need to take postmodernism into account? A number of scholars tackle the complex issues involved in preaching in a twenty-first century postmodern world. David Henderson, pastor and conference speaker, wants to help Christians communicate the gospel to our changing culture. He distinguishes between *actual relevance* and *functional relevance*. Actual relevance is whether the message has anything to do with life; functional relevance is whether the listener is able to see the connection between the message and life.[169] Certainly the gospel has actual relevance; nothing has more to do with life than the message of Christ. But *functional relevance* is the concern, i.e., communicating the message in a way so people today see the gospel's relevance. In the attempt to make clear the relevance of the Christian message, two dangers must be avoided. First, preachers may adjust the message to fit the audience. This is achieving relevance by changing the message itself, which is what theological liberalism has done. This is always wrong.

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[167] Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 153-155.
[168] Ibid., 66.
[169] David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 24.

But evangelicals may commit the same error if they snatch texts from the pages of the Bible, ignore the context and authorial intent, with the sole goal of attracting an audience. Henderson calls for the term *biblical* to be defined to mean "in keeping with what the Bible is about."[170] A sermon cannot be called "biblical" simply because the message uses some phrases from Scripture. It can be called biblical only if it truly reflects the great themes of Scripture.

The second danger: the message may be biblical, but preached with no regard for the audience and functional relevance. This too is wrong. Preachers must remain true to the message of Christ *and* actively engaged in a translation process, helping hearers to understand its immediate relevance to their lives. Preachers must be committed to biblical authority (actual relevance) and audience sensitivity (functional relevance) as well.[171]

Henderson urges pastors to be careful students of modern life—reading, watching television, viewing films, observing others, listening when others speak. We must understand the culture in which we live. Henderson summarizes modern American culture under six descriptors.

1) *We are consumers*, living in a commercial, acquiring world. We are incessantly bombarded by commercials. "Shopaholism" is now an official psychological malady.[172]

2) *We are spectators*, entertained by music, television, and computer games. Television particularly, "chewing gum for the eyes," marks modern life, conditioning people to expect entertainment, distracting them from the deeper issues of life.[173]

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[170] Ibid., 27.
[171] Ibid., 34.
[172] Ibid., 48-49.
[173] Ibid., 70-82.

3) *We are self-absorbed individualists*. The self has gotten bigger and bigger, and God smaller and smaller. We live in a world of self-expression, self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. Rights have replaced responsibilities. God is considered absent.[174]

4) *We think beyond God*. God plays no significant role in people's lives. God is irrelevant, superfluous. The world is secular; there is no room for the sacred. Science explains how the world works. We can get along without God.[175]

5) *We think beyond right and wrong*; morality is private. What we want determines what is right. "What feels good," "what looks good," and "what benefits me," define our morality.[176]

6) *We think beyond meaning and purpose*. Western civilization has moved from the premodern, God-centered worldview where revelation was paramount, to the modern man-centered worldview, where reason was supreme, to the postmodern worldview, where only personal experience is left. People do not know where they come from, why they are here, or where they are going. Meaning is left behind; nihilism reigns.[177]

Henderson urges communicators of the gospel to be listeners. They must listen to people, ask questions, and help them give expression to their worldview—their views of God, the world, morality, the future. Then Christians can ask questions to show the inadequacies of their worldview. We may then gently suggest they read the Bible, and we can talk about it. In each chapter, Henderson gives helpful ideas for preachers, for

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[174] Ibid., 96-107.
[175] Ibid., 122-134.
[176] Ibid., 158.
[177] Ibid., 184-199.

evangelism, and for the content of what needs to be emphasized as preachers bring the good news to today's world. Such insights are important for sermon application.

Graham Johnston has also interacted with postmodern literature and culture. He thinks postmodernism can be better described than defined.[178] He suggests ten distinctives which characterize postmodern people:

1. They are reacting to modernity and all its tenets. Postmodernism is a bitter backlash against the Enlightenment optimism, confidence in reason and certainty of design in the world.[179] Postmodern people reject metanarratives in favor of small, personal stories.

2. They reject objective truth. Everything is subjective. All knowledge involves a knower and the knower cannot be divorced from his own bias, presuppositions and perceptions. "Postmodernity, when taken to its logical conclusion, can create a kind of solipsism in which the only world one can ever know is one's own private existence."[180]

3. They are skeptical and suspicious of authority. They are wary of anyone who claims to have the truth. Metanarratives are inherently oppressive and may be violently so. People who claim to have the truth are like the wizard in the Wizard of Oz—very impressive until Toto pulls the curtain back to reveal an ordinary human being making grandiose claims.[181]

4. They are like "missing persons" in search of personal identity. This is deconstructionism applied to the self. No one can really know who he or she is.

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[178] Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 24.
[179] Ibid., 25-26.
[180] Ibid., 38.
[181] Ibid., 31.

5. They have blurred morality and accept whatever is expedient. Since "good" and "bad" are merely social constructions, each individual must come up with his own morality. No one else may say what is "right" for me. "Right" and "wrong" are categories with no universal meaning.

6. They continue to search for the transcendent—but postmoderns may believe in anything—crystals, psychics, etc. For modernism, the issue of faith was credibility; one believed what stood up to empirical investigation. For postmodernism, the key issue is desirability. One accepts what one wants to believe. It is no wonder that belief in hell is in massive decline!

7. They are living in a media world in an unprecedented way. If Gutenberg's invention of the printing press paved the way for the Enlightenment and modernism, television ushered in postmodernism. Media remains the single most influential force in the twenty-first century.

8. They will engage in the "knowing smirk." Postmodernism is the age of irony. Mocking parody of institutions, metanarratives, and authorities is common.

9. They are on a quest for community. The Enlightenment exalted the status of the individual. But many postmoderns have grown up in broken homes, and feel betrayed by civic and church leaders. They long for genuine community.

10. They live in a world that is very material. This earthly existence is all there is. Hedonism, "living large," is all people have left. People have to get all they can out of life; there is nothing more.[182]

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[182] Ibid., 23-59.

Johnston's analysis, well-illustrated from literature, art, and film, shows that postmodernity has its roots deep in modernism. Postmodernity goes back to Rene Descartes and his radical questioning of all knowledge. Descartes' questioning of all authority paved the way for modernism placing reason over revelation, and now paves the way today for rejecting reason and metanarrative as well.[183]

Christian communicators face many challenges. They must know God, they must know the message, and they must know the listeners—the ones to whom the message comes.[184] Before a Christian communicator can bring the *logos* (the message) to postmoderns, he must gain entry to their "sphere of understanding." In other words, ministry must be incarnational. Christian preachers must enter into the postmodern world to communicate effectively.[185] Effective communication will be conditioned upon ethos, the trustworthiness of the speaker.[186] For Johnston, the biblical communicator must begin with the experience of the listener, not with the authority of God's word, because people only process information they can apply immediately. If they can't see its relevance to their lives, they will tune out.[187] To be effective, preachers today must focus their efforts in four ways:

1. Become more relational. Relationships are significant to postmoderns.

2. Tune in to the secular. They must read, watch television, and understand the culture.

3. Be more apologetic. This means biblical preaching must grapple with doubt, explain Christian assumptions, contemplate the unbelief of the skeptic, and invite dialog. The preacher cannot assume that listeners accept the Bible's authority.

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[183] Ibid., 24-25.
[184] Ibid., 64.
[185] Ibid., 68.
[186] Ibid., 69.

4. Encourage accountability. Preaching needs to move people to a point of decision and action.[188]

Johnston emphasizes the importance of preaching grace and avoiding legalism. The reality of church community is essential, as is the integrity and credibility in the preacher (ethos). Preachers cannot give great attention to the text and ignore the listeners. To do this is to guarantee failure.[189] Johnston suggests that preachers need to take a dialogical approach, be more inductive, make use of storytelling (with specifics, suspense and drama), and include audiovisuals, drama, art and humor. Preachers must be good listeners, responding to cues from the audience as they speak. The delivery must be crisp and clear.[190]

Scott Gibson, Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, has edited a book with contributions from twelve authors, primarily seminary professors, the majority of whom teach at Gordon-Conwell. The authors emphasize the authority and relevance of preaching the word. Jeffrey Arthurs writes a helpful chapter entitled "The Postmodern Mind and Preaching." He points out that postmodern people have more in common with previous generations than they have differences. The essential qualities of humans have not changed: they are created in God's image, yet fallen, and in need of a relationship with God. They try to fill the God-shaped vacuum with idols; all need to repent and trust in Jesus Christ, the only Savior, the only hope.[191] Having emphasized this commonality, Arthurs goes on to point out the importance of preaching the timeless message in the

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[187] Ibid., 74.
[188] Ibid., 77-85.
[189] Ibid., 149.
[190] Ibid., 149-172.
[191] Jeffrey Arthurs, "The Post-Modern Mind and Preaching," in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, ed. Scott M. Gibson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 177-178.

language of people today. Just as a missionary sent to a foreign country must learn the language and culture of the society, so preachers must understand the speech and values of the people to whom they preach. Arthurs summarizes the postmodern mind under three headings.

The Knowing Smirk: Epistemological Relativism. Truth and knowledge are really not possible. Truth claims are really meaningless and arbitrary. Knowledge is only a social construction. Truth is socially constructed based on individual perspectives. The notion of universal truth or a valid metanarrative is dismissed with a shrug and a smirk.[192]

"Whatever:" Moral Relativism. Just as people cannot know the truth, they cannot know what is right and wrong. Each person becomes the arbiter to answer any moral question. Epistemological and moral relativism dictate that the absolute value for postmoderns is tolerance (even though they deny the validity of absolute values).[193]

Language Games: Rhetoric and Politics and Power. Rhetoric in its classical sense referred simply to the "art of persuasion." Today the word is mostly pejorative and connotes manipulation and prevarication.[194] Language has no referential function; it is influential—a means of maintaining power or persuading others.

Arthurs recommends several strategies for those who preach to postmoderns. (1) Preachers must patiently instruct. They must explain that we are talking about real truth, objective events in time and space, real guilt (not just guilt feelings) and real forgiveness through the death of Jesus, the Son of God, under Pontius Pilate. Preachers must help postmoderns see that they cannot live in a way consistent with what they say they believe. For example, the insistence on tolerance as a universal good belies the

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[192] Ibid., 180.
[193] Ibid., 183-184.

postmodern belief that there are no universal goods. Postmoderns use the categories of rationality (like the law of non-contradiction) to argue for irrationality, and so forth.[195] (2) In terms of the form of the message, Arthurs urges that communication be more personal, more genuine (calling for pastoral vulnerability, self-disclosure), and more interactive. Pastoral care is significant; ethos is essential. Listeners will receive what the speaker says if they know, respect, and like him.[196]

Art Lindsley, Senior Fellow at the C.S. Lewis Institute, also interacts with postmodern relativism. He insists that we may preach absolutes without absolutism. In fact, Christian faith provides an antidote (one that relativism lacks) against oppression, arrogance, intolerance, self-righteousness and closed-mindedness.[197] Preachers must remember that in any communication, there are at least three messages: (1) what we intend to say, (2) what we actually say and (3) what others hear.

In the twenty-first century culture of relativism, the most important issue for the culture and for the church is the issue of truth.[198] Those who believe in absolute truth can be tolerant, when tolerance is rightly understood. *Legal tolerance* extends freedom for diverse religious beliefs and *social tolerance* offers freedom for people who are different from themselves. But tolerance is wrongly defined if it is thought to be "religious and moral equivalence of all views." One can believe in absolute truth, and be tolerant, when tolerance is rightly defined.[199] Christians affirm truth, but need not be arrogant; preachers must proclaim the truth, yet remain humble. "Receiving truth when we do find it is

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[194] Ibid., 186.
[195] Ibid., 189.
[196] Ibid., 193-196.
[197] Art Lindsley, *True Truth: Defending Absolute Truth in a Relativistic World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVaristy Press, 2004), 14.
[198] Ibid., 14-15. He defines truth as that which corresponds with reality, as perceived by God, 19.
[199] Ibid., 24-29.

humility. Pride or arrogance, on the other hand, involves thinking that we are better, wiser or more knowledgeable than we are in fact."[200]

Since all truth is God's truth, Lindsley finds a number of emphases in postmodernism that are true. Christians can agree on many points:

1. There are limits to knowledge.

2. Our perspective does affect what we see.

3. Our perspective affects the way we view history.

4. Our ideas of God and reality are too small.

5. Culture can blind us to some aspects of who we are.[201]

Yet the Christian preacher must disagree with other elements commonly found in postmodern thought:

1. Many postmodern claims are self-contradictory. "There are no objective truths"—but is that statement itself objectively true? "Reason is not valid"—but do you employ reason to establish that conclusion? "All perspectives are culturally determined"—but is this statement itself culturally determined?

2. Skepticism can work both ways. "Christianity is a crutch" might be countered with "atheism is a crutch" or "postmodernism is an opiate of the conscience," etc.

3. Postmodern ethical views raise questions. Any view which suggests there can be no objective condemnation of the Holocaust arouses suspicion. (A position which says cross-cultural value judgments are not possible creates this nightmarish anomaly.)

4. The contention that cultures differ so widely that there is no common moral ground is simply false.

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[200] Ibid., 45.
[201] Ibid., 62-64.

5. Christians must disagree with the manner in which deconstructionists approach an author's work, ignoring authorial intent.[202]

Admitting that argument is not in fashion today, Lindsley points out that unbelief is often more a matter of the will than of the mind.[203] He suggests several strategies for a more indirect approach in presenting Christian claims to postmoderns. (1) When criticism of hypocrisy in the church is voiced, empathy is the best response. Christians can agree with criticism of hypocrisy.[204] Christian communicators can often make better headway avoiding confrontational, direct argumentation. (2) Use *questions* instead.[205] Jesus often employed questions. Provoke thought through questions. (3) Use *quotations*. Such statements can be brief, effective defenses when more complex development might not be possible. Examples are: "People have given up on the idea of original sin when it's the only doctrine of Christianity that can be empirically proven." (G.K. Chesterton) "An argument against abuse is not an argument against use." "I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." (G.K. Chesterton)[206] (4) Use *imagination*, taking the lead of C.S. Lewis, who argued that while reason is the natural organ of truth, "imagination is the organ of meaning." Often a picture, an image, or an analogy can reach the will better than reason. (5) Employ *irony* to turn the criticism and skepticism of postmodernism on its head. (6) Above all, *love* is the most powerful apologetic, the ultimate defense of the faith.[207]

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[202] Ibid., 64-66.
[203] "Here is a general rule to go by: the more open a person is, the more direct arguments can be used; the more closed a person is, the more an indirect approach is needed." Ibid., 86.
[204] Ibid., 86. Yet, "the very criticism of hypocrisy contains the moral judgment that hypocrisy is bad." Ibid., 87.
[205] Ibid., 86-90.
[206] Ibid., 92.
[207] Ibid., 99-102.

Nancy Pearcey also interacts extensively with the modern and postmodern worldviews, calling for Christians to recover a truly Christian worldview, based on the redemptive story of the Bible: creation, fall, redemption. She traces the history of the development of the modern dichotomy between secular and sacred, public truth and private truth, fact and value. People today see truth in two stories, or tiers. The most common terminology today is fact vs. value.

VALUE
Socially constructed meanings

FACT
Publicly verifiable truth[208]

Modernity privatized the Christian faith.[209] Scientific knowledge claims to be objective, universal truth. Religion, like "values," is considered personal, and ought to be kept to oneself. Pearcey shows how the modern origins theory, Darwinism, claims to be public, scientific truth for all to believe, and has become imperialistic, invading all fields of human knowledge and endeavor.[210] "Naturalism is spilling over the banks and making

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[208] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 106.

[209] Ibid., 113. Cf. Lesslie Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

[210] Pearcey documents this. "If you are interested in politics, there are books like *Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom*. For economists, there's *Economics as an Evolutionary Science*. Lawyers may want to consult *Evolutionary Jurisprudence* or *Law, Biology and Culture: The Evolution of Law*. For educators, there's *Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity*. The book defines intelligence as a Darwinian process of generating a variety of ideas, then selecting those that are 'fittest.' There are even books targeted specifically to English teachers, like *Evolution and Literary Theory*. If you work in medicine, a slew of new books have come out, such as *Evolutionary Medicine* and *Why We Get Sick: The New Science of Darwinian Medicine*. Mental health workers can choose either *Darwinian Psychiatry* or *Genes on the Couch: Explorations in Evolutionary Psychology*. If you're a woman, there's *Divided Labors: An Evolutionary View of Women at Work*. For parents, there's *The Truth About Cinderella: A Darwinian View of Parental Love*. If you're a businessman, there's even something for you: *Executive Instinct: Managing the Human Animal in the Information Age*. The author asks, How do we manage people whose

deep inroads into the rest of culture."[211] Tracing recent developments in physics, microbiology, and genetic studies, and showing the failure of Darwinism to pass the test of the fossil record, Pearcey argues that Darwinism is a failed system.[212] Intelligent Design is a more plausible scientific alternative. She calls Christians to be faithful to the great claims of their faith, and to refuse to acquiesce to Christianity's being relegated to the "values" sphere of personal views. Christians must affirm that Christianity is "total truth," that the biblical teaching on creation is objectively true, public, and factual knowledge. Such rigorous interaction with the cultural climate is essential for the pastor who wants to communicate effectively with today's listeners.

Douglas Groothuis, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary, is concerned that "truth decay" has already begun to invade churches and seminaries, and it is caused by the influence of postmodern thought. In *Truth Decay*, Groothuis argues that the Bible presents a unified perspective on truth and falsehood that is diametrically opposed to that of postmodernism. He outlines the Bible's teaching about the nature of truth.[213]

1. *Truth is revealed by God.* Truth is not constructed by individuals or communities. God has created the world and reveals himself to all through both creation and conscience—so that all people know of his existence and his righteous requirements. More completely, God has revealed himself in the history of the people of God, in the

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brains were hardwired in the Stone Age? Of course, to really sell books you have to talk about the racier topics, and scientists have not been shy about doing so. A sampling of recent titles includes *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* and *Ever Since Adam and Eve: The Evolution of Human Sexuality.* Science seems to be descending to the level of soap opera." Ibid., 209.

[211] Ibid., 205.

[212] Ibid., 179-206.

[213] Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 60-81.

Bible, and supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, his Son. Furthermore, language is not a merely human self-referential system of symbols, but is a gift of God to men and women, created in his image.

2. *Objective truth exists and is knowable.* Truth is personal in the sense that it issues ultimately from a personal God, but it is also objective, external to human experience. Truth is not dependent on people's experiences within a culture. Biblical faith entails both assent and personal commitment to God and his revelation of himself.

3. *Truth is absolute.* God's truth is constant, and is true without exception or exemption. Even though insisting on absolute truth is a stumbling block for postmoderns, Christian preachers cannot compromise this; it is clearly taught in the Bible. This does not mean that Christians claim to have perfect knowledge about God, humanity, or anything else. It simply means that since God has revealed himself perfectly in the Lord Jesus Christ, those who confess him as Lord confess his absoluteness—not their own.

4. *Truth is universal.* The law of God and the gospel message apply everywhere to all people. God's revelation is not restricted by cultural conditions. "God's truth is not provincial, parochial or partial; it is universal in scope and application. Yet it also allows for unique cultural expression and the creative individuality of people made in the divine image and redeemed through the Lamb."[214]

5. *The truth of God is eternally engaging and momentous, not trendy or superficial.* For many postmoderns, saturated with images, blaring sounds, and catchy fads, spirituality is like a hobby or an amusement. Very different is the Rock of Ages. "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of God stands forever" (Isaiah

[214] Ibid., 73.

40:8). "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89). God's revelation reflects God himself; it is weighty and momentous. People ignore it to their own peril. Followers of Christ are therefore engaged in conversation with people, who are in fact eternal beings created in God's image. The truth does not die, but eternal death awaits those who spurn it (Revelation 21:8). "Hell is nothing less than the truth known too late."[215]

6. *Truth is exclusive, specific and antithetical.* What is true excludes what opposes or contradicts it. Truth involves the law of non-contradiction. One cannot both affirm and deny the same thing at the same time and in the same respect. The postmodern preference for a smorgasbord of individual truths is antithetical to the biblical view. This means that truth, by its very nature, is confrontational. Christians who follow Christ cannot avoid this. The Christian cannot rest happy and content "in a world oozing with error."[216] Like Paul, distressed at the idolatry in Athens, Christians must be distraught at the idolatry of our day.

7. *Truth, Christianly understood, is systematic and unified.* Since God is one, truth is one. All truths cohere. "There is only one world, God's world; it is a uni-verse, not a multi-verse."[217]

8. *Christian truth is an end, not a means to any other end.* Truth is to be desired and sought for its own value, contrary to postmodern pragmatism, which reduces truth to a personal preference or a social function. Postmoderns think in terms of one's personal "God concept" or "personal spirituality," or "what works for me." This concept of truth is

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[215] Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture—and a Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 362.
[216] Ibid, 77.
[217] Ibid., 79.

contrary to biblical revelation, and is false. Preachers must grasp this biblical conception of truth as revealed, objective, absolute, universal, eternally engaging, antithetical and exclusive, unified and systematic, and as an end it itself. They must hold to it unflinchingly and engage postmodern people in earnest dialog.[218]

In other words, a biblical concept of truth is "that which corresponds to reality." A true statement is one which connects with the reality it describes.[219] "The correspondence view of truth, held by the vast majority of philosophers and theologians throughout history until recently, holds that any statement is true if and only if it corresponds to, or agrees with factual reality."[220] This understanding necessarily involves Christians in making propositions, that is, declarative statements about reality. God has revealed himself in this way. Statements like "there is one God;" "God does not change;" "God is good;" and "Jesus is the mediator between God and man" are propositional statements that involve Christian disciples in language and in logic that reflects the image of God in man.[221] Preachers who make statements like "Jesus is Lord, Lord alone" and "Jesus is the Christ, risen from the dead" are making claims about space-time history that can be investigated by examining evidence available to all. These declarations are subject to verification or falsification. The biblical view of truth cannot be compromised in preaching to postmodern people.[222] Postmodernist philosophy has not deconstructed the basic truths of logic, the credibility of objective truth, or the ability of rationality to

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[218] Ibid., 81-82.
[219] Ibid., 83.
[220] Ibid., 88.
[221] Ibid., 87-89.
[222] Ibid., 109-110.

discern truth. Postmodernism has not triumphed—and Christians must not yield ground to it as if it has![223]

Groothuis' analysis of postmodernism and his interaction with evangelical authors who have been negatively impacted by postmodern thought is invaluable for preachers. Every twenty-first century preacher needs to study Groothuis' work carefully.

Michael Quicke also insists that today's preachers must understand popular culture. He laments that too often preachers are perceived as clueless about popular tastes in television, film, video, music, and web sites.[224] If preachers are clueless about the world listeners live in, they will not want to listen to what preachers have to say. Ethos and credibility are essential for preaching to be effective! Preachers must be aware of the paradigm shift between modernism and postmodernism. Quicke agrees with the consensus in the literature on postmodernity, suggesting that people yearn for experience, authenticity, genuine relationships, holism in worship and life, mystery, wonder and awe in spirituality, and stories that help them understand their own story.[225] What Quicke calls "stereo preaching" appeals to head *and* heart, both right *and* left brain, using both word *and* image. Multisensory language, which appeals to all five senses, and storytelling are essential to effective communication in today's pulpits. Preachers today are confused as they straddle the shift between modernism and postmodernism, between the age of print (introduced by the invention of the printing press) and the age of "secondary orality" (introduced by the electronics revolution).[226] Quicke calls for "incarnational preaching." "Incarnational preaching requires boldness in the twenty-first century as preachers stand

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[223] Ibid, 133.
[224] Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching*, 66.
[225] Ibid., 73.
[226] Ibid., 79-84.

under Scripture and the Lordship of Christ and in the contemporary, transitioning world to embody God's Word in their words and persons."[227]

Groothuis agrees that effective preaching must include story and image—but he emphasizes the word over image. Preachers must labor to communicate to postmodern people without becoming postmodern themselves.

> Preaching and teaching in the church should concentrate on great (but presently neglected) Christian truths of divine authority, God's holiness and law, our sinfulness, the fear of God, the eternal realities of hell and heaven, Christ's supremacy and lordship, godly repentance and the responsibilities of Christian character and community in a compromised world. Public communication must also target apologetics and ethics in order to reverse truth decay in the pews. . . . [P]reaching should be word-oriented as opposed to image-oriented, rational as opposed to merely emotional, transformational as opposed to trivial and intellectually stimulating as opposed to merely entertaining or amusing. In other words, it must be countercultural and must not bow to postmodernist trends. The God of Scripture, not the trends of Postmodernity, must set the agenda of the church. Rather than focusing on being relevant to a culture that has largely lost the very concept of truth, we must engage the culture truthfully.[228]

Groothuis is wary of the impact of "truth decay" on Christian worship and warns that Christians have been impacted by television, which is in itself an agent of truth decay. Television is image-driven, image-saturated, and image-controlled. Groothuis is concerned that "when image dominates the word, rational discourse ebbs."[229] When image dominates the word, and subjugates the verbal, the ability to think and to communicate in linear and logical fashion is undermined. Groothuis reminds us, "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), not the image. "God gave us a book, not a video." Television presents a pseudo-world of discontinuity and fragmentation. Therefore the uncritical use of videos in Christian worship is misguided. Rather than ministering

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[227] Ibid., 85.
[228] Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 269-270.
[229] Ibid., 284.

effectively to postmoderns, such worship may actually reflect the impact of postmodernism on Christian leaders.[230]

I agree with Quicke in the sense that Jesus spoke both in propositions and in images. "Look at the birds; consider the flowers of the field." Jesus often told stories as a way of engaging his listeners and making God's truth accessible. So imagery, particularity, concreteness, and narrative are important. But Groothuis' warning is pertinent for today's preachers. Pastors must labor long to extricate themselves from the culture, look at it critically, and avoid compromise. As Francis Schaeffer wrote, "Truth demands confrontation; loving confrontation, but confrontation nevertheless."[231] As those called to proclaim God's truth, preachers must "become all things to all men so that by all possible means [they] might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22), but they need not become postmoderns to preach to postmoderns.

In fact, the Christian communicator's stance is neither modern nor postmodern, but premodern. Modernism was born in the Enlightenment, when human reason became autonomous and stood over revelation as its judge. In this sense, the "Enlightenment" was in fact an "Endarkment."[232] Unaided human reason can never achieve the mastery of the world, science, morality and religion that the Enlightenment agenda boldly set out to accomplish. The defiance of objective truth, the despair, deconstructionism, denial of metanarratives and of personal identity that characterize postmodernity is the tragic result. The Christian preacher resists both modernity and postmodernity, under God, and

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[230] Ibid., 271.
[231] Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 64.
[232] Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Absolutist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 43.

proclaims Christ. Christ is the revelation of God to all people. All are commanded to repent of their idols and turn to Christ for forgiveness and life. There is no other hope.

Bringing Our Questions to the Bible

The questions God's people bring to the Bible provide a source for application. Daniel Doriani reminds us that wise preachers know that many hearers approach the Scriptures with existential questions in mind.[233] The questions can be biblical / theological: "What will happen to people in New Guinea who die without ever hearing of Christ?" "Will God accept my baby, who died in infancy, into the eternal kingdom?" "Can I date an unbeliever in hopes of bringing him to Christ?" "Are Christians really being intolerant when they continue to insist that Jesus is the only way?" "Is the Bible sexist?" "If homosexuals are born that way, are we not wrong in denying them equal rights? Doesn't the Bible need to be updated in this?" "How can I be expected to tithe? The church has plenty of money, and I have a lot of credit card debt to pay." "Should I continue to tithe, even though my husband has lost his job, and we cannot meet our bills?"

Questions emerge from daily life: "How is a Christian to respond to telemarketers?" "I know it's silly, but how can I deal with my fear of the dark?" "Should a Christian watch television? What are the guidelines for what I may watch and what I may not watch?" "How should a Christian use his time? Is a follower of Christ free to have a hobby—or several hobbies?" "How can I discipline my kids and teach them to follow God?" "What should we do about our thirty-year old son, still at home, refusing to

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[233] Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 82.

get a job?" "I love God. Why is he not answering my prayers for a wife?" The questions that emerge from daily living are many, varied, and almost endless.

The pastor needs to love his people, and take their questions seriously. He must have their questions in his heart as he comes to the Scriptures week by week to prepare to preach. He must offer answers in a way that will be helpful to listeners without disclosing questioners' identities. But the very discipline of needing to look to the Scriptures for answers—exploring the law, prophets, poetry, and wisdom literature, the gospels, Acts, epistles and Revelation for answers to people's questions is important. The pastor needs to be constantly aware that his listeners are impacted by their culture. Unbelief, doubt and fear about the Christian way are everywhere in the pews. In every pew there are broken hearts, fearful souls, and doubting saints. Preaching God's word with apologetics in mind is necessary in our day. Presenting God's truth in a way that is sensitive to people's needs and aware of their questions will resonate with them.

Clyde Fant, who taught preaching at Duke Divinity School, also used the term "incarnational preaching." The incarnation, Fant reasoned, is the truest theological model for the divine-human preaching event. Preaching is neither all divine, nor all human; it must truly be both.[234] "The preaching of the word of God is the interpretation of a historical event to a contemporary situation by a person who must be intimately familiar with both."[235] The pastor's calling is to speak a truly divine word to very human followers of Jesus. The word of God is never irrelevant—but our preaching may be. "And

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[234] Clyde Fant, *Preaching for Today* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), xv.
[235] Ibid., 81.

it will be, if it does not bear the eternal Word, and if it does not touch the living situation. Only the word that dwells among us is the word of Christian preaching."[236]

Clearly, the work of sermon application demands careful, prayerful attention in our day, demanding that preachers entrust themselves to God, asking him to use them to bring his word to his people.

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[236] Ibid., 82.

CHAPTER III

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

I have interviewed eleven experienced preachers who have given serious attention to applying sermons to listeners. I have sought out preachers from various denominations, but only preachers who hold to a high view of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scriptures. So preachers who operate from a liberal perspective and a consequently lower view of the authority of the Bible were not interviewed. The assumption of the study is that the Bible is the word of God, eternal and authoritative as a revelation of God's saving purposes. Isaiah expressed it well:

> All men are like grass,
> and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.
> The grass withers and the flowers fall,
> because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
> Surely the people are grass.
> The grass withers and the flowers fall,
> but the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40:6-8)

What God says is eternal and trustworthy; the opinions of men are not.

I have sought a range of preachers and pastors to interview. Some are well-known in homiletical circles and have published books or articles on preaching. Others have not published but have given serious attention to applying sermons to listeners—and have demonstrated skill in doing this work.

This is a qualitative research study. Sharan Merriam characterizes qualitative research with five descriptors:

1. Qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of experiences people have in their world.

2. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (as opposed to impersonal instruments like questionnaires).
3. Qualitative research usually involves fieldwork.
4. It primarily employs an inductive research strategy.
5. The product of qualitative research is richly descriptive, employing words and pictures rather than numbers to report results.[1]

The qualitative research method, with its focus on interviews, has been the most appropriate for this study. It is not advisable, or perhaps not even possible, to quantify sermon application or growth in sermon application skills in some mechanical way. So conducting interviews with seasoned preachers who can look back and see how they have grown in sermon application skills, describe what helped them grow, and how they have changed their approach to sermonic ministry is the approach that has been taken. I believe that reviewing literature on preaching as well as interviewing experienced preachers combines to offer important insights on the process of becoming more skilled in sermon application.

Interview Design

Interview questions have focused on answering the purpose statement and research questions. I have used a semi-structured format for the interviews using a conversational style.[2] I have employed at least ten questions, and the content of the questions has varied to some degree. Although all the questions are important, the conversations have been permitted to move in other directions that are directly related to

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[1] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 6-8.

the purpose of this study. The questions have been designed to shed light on how experienced pastors have grown in sermon application skills, what has stimulated growth, and how they have learned to evaluate sermon application.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on the growth of applicational skills in preaching. It does not attempt to cover other essential aspects of preaching: text selection, sermon structure, exegesis, explanation, ethos, orality, etc., *except as these matters address the issue of effective application.* Since application is the real goal of preaching,[3] many of these matters are addressed, in some measure, in the context of focusing on how experienced preachers acquire sermon application skills in the context of congregational life.

Another limitation of the study is that the interviews result only in data from the viewpoint of the preachers. I have not attempted to gather data from congregants or those who listen to sermons. Such a project would be interesting—but is beyond the scope and purpose of this study. Nor does the study attempt to teach church members how to listen to sermons. The point of view researched is that of the preachers themselves. Some of the preachers have concrete ways of gauging the effectiveness of sermon application by listener response—others less so. But it is the purpose of this study to research and present the preacher's point of view and the preacher's evaluation of sermon application. It would be another interesting study to interview church members to explore their evaluation of sermons and their perception of sermons' relevance to their daily lives.

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[2] Ibid., 73-74.

[3] "The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is *the main thing to be done.*" Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 165. Italics added.

Another limitation is that I did not ask questions about postmodernity or how it affects preaching ministry today. Having treated this complex subject, at least to some degree, in the review of the literature, I did not ask the preachers I interviewed about it. It is too large and too complex a subject to be included as part of the interviews.

Interview Guide

After gathering preliminary background information from the pastors, I have posed questions such as the following:

1. Do you do sermon application differently now than when you started preaching?
2. How is it different?
3. What has helped you learn to apply sermons effectively?
4. What experiences have helped you grow in sermon application skills?
5. How do you evaluate whether your sermon has effectively applied the text?
6. How have you learned to safeguard yourself from illegitimate, unwarranted application?
7. Where should application be in the sermon? (Only the conclusion? Throughout?)
8. Does application affect the sermon's structure?[4] How?
9. What is the relation between illustration and application?
10. What percentage of a sermon should be application?

Whenever practical, I have interviewed pastors in person. Since that was not always possible, I have conducted some interviews by phone.

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[4] Remember for example, that Jay Adams states that the formulation of the main points should be applicatory in nature—stated as complete sentences addressing the listeners. See *Truth Applied*, 85-91.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Interviewing experienced preachers about their approach to sermon application has real value. They speak from years of experience and offer a wealth of insight. For the purposes of this study, I interviewed the following preachers.

Dr. Bryan Chapell is a former pastor and now serves as the President and Professor of Practical Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary. He is the author of the award winning book, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, and many other books and articles.

Dr. Daniel Doriani, former Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, now serves as the Senior Pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Two of Dr. Doriani's books, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* and *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application*, are particularly germane to this study.

Dr. Bob Frederich pastored Galilee Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado,for twenty-three years. He has served churches in California, Illinois, Iowa, and Maine. Now retired, he is mentoring a group of twenty young pastors in Portland, Maine. He is eighty years old and still preaching.

Rev. Richard Gay, in the ministry since 1979, has served churches in Pennsylvania and Texas. Formerly the Senior Pastor at Reinhardt Bible Church in Dallas for six years, he now serves as the Senior Pastor at Central Baptist Church in Ewing, New Jersey.

Dr. Vernon Grounds pastored for ten years in Patterson, New Jersey. He served as the Dean and then President of Denver Theological Seminary. Now retired, he is the Chancellor of Denver Seminary. He has had an extensive preaching, teaching, and counseling ministry.

Rev. Randy Keeley served a church in Washington state and three churches in New York. He now serves as the Executive Director of CBMission to the Northeast, part of the Conservative Baptist Association.

Dr. Gordon MacDonald has served many churches and authored several books. He is probably best known as the pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts. He now serves as the Preaching Pastor of First Baptist Church in Concord, New Hampshire.

Rev. Stephen Nute has pastored for twenty-six years and is presently serving Neally's Corner Church in Maine. His present ministry is bi-vocational.

Dr. Raymond Ortlund, former professor of Old Testament at Trinity Divinity School, Chicago, now serves as the Senior Pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee. He previously served in churches in California, Oregon, and Georgia.

Dr. Haddon Robinson, who taught homiletics for nineteen years at Dallas Theological Seminary, is now the Harold J. Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. He authored *Biblical Preaching* and has written many books and articles on preaching.

Rev. Andrew Spohr pastored churches in Maine for twenty-three years, served as a missionary for five years in Ireland with CBInternational, and now serves as Regional Director with WorldVenture (formerly CBInternational).

What Helps Preachers Grow

Gordon MacDonald reports that his approach to sermon application has not changed much since he began preaching many years ago. Early formative experiences set his approach to preaching, and they have remained constant through the years.[1] But MacDonald is the exception. Most preachers I interviewed look back and recognize stages of growth and can report what helped them grow in sermon application skills.

Ray Ortlund clearly remembers stages in his approach to application. As he began preaching, he describes his application as "trite, moralistic, and naggy." Of course, he did not realize it at the time. But looking back, this is the way he now describes it. He then moved to the idea of helping listeners develop a Christian worldview and his preaching became more intellectual. He wanted to help listeners see the big picture. The third stage for Dr. Ortlund, where he currently is in his preaching ministry, is what he calls a "gospel hermeneutic." He puts it this way:

> I have since learned that Jesus has nothing to say to righteous people, only to sinners, so I've got to preach to sinners. What do sinners need? Sinners need hope. Do they need guidance? Yes. Do they need rebuke at times? Yes. But fundamentally, they need hope. They need to know, not about what they should do for God, but what God has already done for them. And that is the foundation, then, for everything else that is of a more direct and commanding nature.

[1] Gordon MacDonald, interview by author, 30 May 2006.

A gospel hermeneutic is theocentric. Preaching based in a gospel hermeneutic "wakens [listeners'] hearts to the glory and grandeur of God."[2]

What helped Ortlund change his approach to sermon application? He pointed to two mentors. The first was Jonathan Edwards. Reading Edwards' prefatory chapter of *Religious Affections* was life-changing for Ortlund. He commented, "I read it in maybe an hour—but when I put that book down I knew that I had walked through the wardrobe into Narnia."[3] Edwards' emphasis on personal communion with God made Ortlund realize his job was not to "nail people with their failings," but "to bring them to God." Ortlund's second mentor was his father, pastor of Lake Avenue Congregational Church in California for twenty years. Ortlund described his father during the second decade of his ministry at that church as "aglow with the Spirit" (Romans 12:15, RSV). He became the "living embodiment of the church's corporate culture," and Ortlund said his father's "glad earnestness toward God" gave him a personal moral and spiritual authority in the church that was huge. The memory of his father's ministry and impact was formative. "I just hope I might be like that some day," Ortlund said.[4]

Bryan Chapell clearly remembers stages in his approach to sermon application. At first, he just didn't apply the message at all, but preached purely doctrinal messages. "Here's doctrine you should know," was the approach he took as a young preacher. Next was basic application of either "do's and don'ts" or reminders of Christian disciplines. In this second stage, application was either positive or negative. Positively, it came out as "Read your Bible more, pray more, go to church more." Negatively, it came out as

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[2] Raymond Ortlund, interview by author, 21 September 2006.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

"Don't drink to excess, don't smoke, don't go to bad movies." For Chapell, the third stage was defined by creating lists for listeners. "Here are five things you need to do as a consequence of this sermon."[5]

Chapell now looks back at those approaches as only creating additional burdens for people. He recognized a sense of despair in the people and ultimately felt as if he was at war with them, telling them what they should believe doctrinally or do behaviorally.[6] This became a great burden to him, and he did not know how to overcome this for a long time. What led to growth in sermon application skills? Experience. He was not seeing pastoral fruit. He noticed that when he preached messages of encouragement, there was a sense of great relief in the people. He saw them rise in joy, strength, and enthusiasm. Reading was also instrumental for his growth in sermon application skills. Chapell points particularly to Sidney Greidanus and Eugene Peterson as authors who helped him grow in his preaching ministry.[7] A third factor that helped Chapell grow was teaching homiletics at Covenant Theological Seminary, where he developed his concept of the Fallen Condition Focus in the context of teaching seminarians how to preach. Preachers must understand why the text they are studying was written. What was the author seeking to accomplish? Since each biblical text is addressing a need in the original hearers, a part of their fallenness, a divine solution is required. In the redemptive context of the Bible, the divine solution is always Christ, the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit.[8] This ultimately came to expression in Chapel's book, *Christ-Centered Preaching.*

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[5] Bryan Chapell, interview by author, 14 July 2006.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

Dan Doriani says when he began preaching, application amounted to "telling people what to do." "This is God's will and you should do it. I was what I sometimes call a Nike Christian. This is what God says—just do it."[9] Today he focuses much more on Christian character—the listener's heart, his convictions, and working those convictions out in daily life. What helped him grow in sermon application skills? Doriani points primarily to experience with people—listening to people, talking to people. This includes experience in counseling with church members. Talking about life gives insight into struggles. Second, Doriani points to "serious secular sources" that help preachers analyze culture and understand people today. Doriani also mentions simply knowing himself and watching his own children and their friends as sources of insight that help him understand how to apply the Bible. And growing in his knowledge of the Bible itself helps him apply it more effectively. The Bible is, after all, the wisdom of God, and its truth transforms lives. Fifth, Doriani found help by reflecting on the biblical emphasis on obedience. As we obey God, we learn more of God and his ways. He pointed to Hebrews 5:14, "But solid food is for the mature, who *by constant use have trained themselves* to distinguish good from evil." It is by constant use, by practice, that we gain insight into biblical application for life.[10]

Vernon Grounds stated that in his seminary education, the principle focus had been on sermonic instruction. Preachers were taught to be sure people had a grasp of the truth.[11] Looking back, Grounds sees several factors that helped him make progress in sermon application skills. First, he spoke of his own growth, "aging really," and secondly, reading helped him grow. As he grew personally, and read the sermons of

[9] Dan Doriani, interview by author, 7 June 2006.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Vernon C. Grounds, interview by author, 21 April 2006.

others, he became more concerned with sermon application, and how the truth of the text should impact listeners' lives.[12] Grounds also described an earlier, perhaps subconsciously formative influence: the impact of listening to Harry Emerson Fosdick preaching National Vespers on Sunday afternoons. Grounds, only a high school student at the time, put on earphones to listen to the radio. But he listened to Fosdick show that biblical truth was relevant to personal issues as well as to social questions of the day. This impacted Grounds early in his life.[13] Later, in his own teaching ministry, he also brought biblical teaching to bear on social issues.

Gordon MacDonald's approach to sermon application has not altered much since he began preaching. MacDonald cites four formative experiences that shaped his approach to preaching—and have been influential throughout his decades in pastoral ministry.[14] The first was the impact of his father, who was a pastor. Listening to his father preach, and slipping into his study when his father was not present to look at his sermon notes caused him, at the age of five or six, to fall in love with the power of words. Another significant influence was a college professor who began every lecture by writing three points on the board and then he built the lecture around that triad. This teaching approach impressed MacDonald; he became enamored of this symmetrical, three-point structure for preaching. A third influence was a preaching experience early in his career. When MacDonald was a senior in seminary he preached in a Baptist church in Minneapolis, where a large part of the faculty of Bethel College and Bethel Seminary attended. At only twenty-six years of age, MacDonald was intimidated by the learned listeners in his audience. Before he spoke, MacDonald felt the Holy Spirit say to him,

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] MacDonald, interview by author, 30 May 2006.

"Gordon, don't preach to them, just talk to them." So he dropped his "stained glass fervor" and "preacher tone," and spoke to them in a conversational way. He relaxed, and it made a great difference in his preaching.[15]

MacDonald mentioned a fourth influence. He told me the story of a Russian professor at Ohio State University Medical School who lectured on anatomy, generally considered the most tedious subject in the medical curriculum. The professor would conclude his lecture with a story, which would recount his experience with a patient whose condition he was unable to accurately diagnose. He would build the suspense until the students were sitting on the edge of their seats. The professor would then drop in a piece of information that came from the lecture he had just given that would show that, by knowing what he had just taught them, they would be equipped for a proper diagnosis in a similar situation. For MacDonald, this demonstrated the power of story. Story is what people remember. Every preacher has had the experience of people remembering, not a text, nor a sermon, but a story he had told.[16]

Stephen Nute did not speak of progress in sermon application skills, but of several sources that help him in applying the biblical text to people's lives. Before he studied for the ministry, Nute worked a number of years in the private sector. He managed a hardware store and worked as a laborer. So, from the very beginning of his preaching ministry, Nute had a sense of how people were struggling in everyday life. Now, as a pastor, Nute visits his people on their job sites whenever he can, and this helps him understand their needs. And since he is a bi-vocational pastor, and still must work in addition to pastoring, he maintains a sense of where people's struggles are. So the work

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

world has been formative for Nute in helping him apply sermons to listeners' needs.[17] Second, Nute finds his own life as a sinner and fellow struggler a source of insight for sermon application. Third, Nute borrows from others, by listening to sermon tapes of people he respects, like Steve Brown of Key Life Ministries, whom he mentioned several times. Fourth, Nute rides with a motorcycle club, which ministers to outlaw bikers and this keeps him in touch with real life. Experience with the bikers has helped him become more direct and more specific in sermon application. All of these experiences are sources of insight for sermon application for Stephen Nute.[18]

When Andy Spohr began preaching, he emphasized teaching the truth, with little attention to sermon application. At first, just after seminary, his preaching tended to be more academic. Through experience in the church, he learned more about where people were in their daily lives, and he became more attuned to their world.[19] Today his preaching is much more attentive to application. He exposits the meaning of Scripture, but then always asks, "So what? What difference will this make tomorrow in the lives of the listeners?" What helped him grow in sermon application skills? Spohr points to an experience he had. "One Monday my Assistant Pastor wanted to talk to me. He told me that he and his wife had left church on Sunday feeling beaten down from the sermon, rather than having a sense of being lifted up."[20] This conversation impacted Spohr's thinking about preaching. He also recalled a statement he read somewhere and from memory attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote in his diary, "I have been to church today, and I am not depressed." The experience with his assistant and the

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[17] Stephen Nute, interview by author, 30 August 2006.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Andy Spohr, interview by author, 28 June 2006.
[20] Ibid.

quotation made him question, "Is [my preaching] really a meeting with God and enjoying his blessing or is this a chance for me to try to control people and beat them down?"[21] Experiences with people helped Spohr grow in his preaching. In a small town in Maine where he pastored, he was a volunteer firefighter—"not a chaplain, but a smoke-eater," to use his words.[22] Finding bodies in burnt-out houses and working with firefighters in crisis situations helped bring his preaching into closer contact with real life and the serious problems with which people struggle.

After seminary, Haddon Robinson felt the most important goal for preaching was to explain things, and he tended to take what he calls a "buckshot" approach to preaching.[23] The many ideas in a biblical text would lead to many directions in a sermon. But discovering that application was what people really remembered from a sermon helped him emphasize sermon application more. The application, after all, is what touched listeners' lives—and thus, was more important to them. Robinson also points to his Ph.D. studies at the University of Illinois as impacting his approach to preaching. An interpretation class helped him see the Bible as literature and the purpose of exegesis as uncovering the idea of the passage. And then, asking himself the important question, "So what?" helped Robinson focus on sermon application. He began to ask, "Why did the writer write this? What is the purpose of this writing?" Discovering the purpose of the writing helped him think about how to get that idea across and how to apply it to listeners' lives. These things impacted Robinson's growth in sermon application skills.[24]

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Haddon Robinson, interview by author, 5 October 2004.
[24] Ibid.

Richard Gay's preaching ministry has been impacted by Haddon Robinson. Gay's early preaching ministry, before he went to seminary, tended to be multi-pronged, with many ideas in a sermon. Now Gay focuses on one big idea from the text, which he develops in the sermon.[25] Gay points to several influences that changed his approach: first, continued study—he cites Robinson's book *Biblical Preaching* as very influential. Gay went to seminary after he started preaching. It was at Dallas Seminary that he was exposed to Robinson's emphasis on the big idea in the sermon. (Robinson was not teaching at Dallas Seminary when he attended, but Robinson's book on preaching was the text). Second, Gay states that observing speakers who were good communicators helped him grow. Third, Gay reports that actual experience in the preaching ministry helped. In the context of ministry experience he has discovered more about how people actually learn and how they retain what they learn.[26]

Like Stephen Nute, Bob Frederich did not speak of how his approach to sermon application has changed; rather he spoke about how his sources of insight for application have changed during his years of ministry.[27] When he began in the pastoral ministry more than fifty years ago, the principal sources of insight for application were first, his family life and second, frequent visits with church members in their homes. He and his wife had children one after another, and his busy home life with a young family helped him make God's truth practical. And spending time with his people at their kitchen tables, listening to their stories, helped him bring God's word to them.

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[25] Richard Gay, interview by author, 13 September 2006.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Robert Frederich, interview by author, 3 October 2006.

Today, years later, Frederich speaks of other sources for applicational insights. At eighty, he is mentoring twenty young men in the ministry and "we talk about everything from septic systems to septic saints."[28] Application for sermons often comes from these discussions. Frederich also *reads*, he states with some emphasis. He reads *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *the Portland Press Herald* on a regular basis. He also watches cable news. Frederich believes being informed is a source of insight in making God's word relevant to life. Finally, Frederich stated, "I am obsessed with Jesus, and Jesus was a practitioner." "You can't preach Jesus and avoid being practical and applicational in your preaching," Frederich insisted.[29]

Randy Keeley has grown tremendously in sermon application skills. Part of his training in bible college, even before seminary, was thinking through the practical application of Scripture. But when he was actually preaching himself, he realized he needed to grow in this preaching skill.[30] He points to two principal factors in his own growth in sermon application. First, he began by using the *Serendipity Bible* and, when it became available, the *Life Application Bible*, to help him begin to think about the application of a particular text. These sources were like "priming the pump," he said.[31] But what really helped him grow was writing small-group curriculum that went along with the sermon. Keeley began to do this initially as an Associate Pastor. The Senior Pastor would give Keeley the sermon text he was preaching and the direction he was going in the sermon, and Keeley would compose the small-group curriculum for the

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Randy Keeley, interview by author, 26 October 2006.
[31] Ibid.

messages. Then later, when he was a Senior Pastor, this became his regular practice. He put it this way:

> And I think that was probably the time when I did the best at sermon application, because that was the point of the small groups—it was to help people think about the implications of the truth of God's word that they heard on Sunday, to discuss among themselves how to work that out in their lives. And the discipline of writing questions to get them to uncover that [practical outworking] is what I think helped me the most in sermon application.[32]

This approach grew out of small group training Keeley had with Lyman Coleman, who was with Serendipity ministries.[33]

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What helps preachers grow in sermon application skills? The experienced preachers I interviewed pointed to several influences: influential mentors and experience in pastoral ministry were mentioned many times. Some spoke of simply "aging," and the consequent growth in their own ongoing walk with the Lord. Talking with people, including counseling experiences, helped pastors understand church members' needs and struggles and become more applicational in preaching. Reading—both reading about preaching, and reading about the human condition was a catalyst for growth. Awareness of secular analyses of culture and keeping up with news sources was cited. Analyzing one's own needs and struggles was a source of insight for application. Growing knowledge of the Bible itself, the source of divine wisdom, was a factor. Work experience—both personal work and also visiting congregants at their places of employment was a real help for one pastor. Another pastor has learned to be more direct in sermon application through his involvement with a motorcycle club. One points to his

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

involvement as a volunteer firefighter that helped him gain credibility as well as put him in touch with the needs of people in his town. Feedback from listeners was cited as a catalyst for growth in sermon application. Understanding basic principles of human learning—how people really retain what they learn—was cited as a cause for growth. Writing small-group curriculum for discussion about the sermon prompted growth for another. Teaching homiletics in seminary helped one preacher gain insight into how to apply biblical teaching effectively.

Importance and Difficulty of Sermon Application

Richard Gay lamented that sermon application is often neglected. Preachers often focus on knowledge, on biblical content, and neglect application.[34] But application is very important. Haddon Robinson emphasized how important it is to get application right. After all, errors in doctrine can be in people's heads—but errors in application are worked out in behavior. When preachers come to applying biblical teaching to life and say, "Thus saith the Lord," meaning, "you are under obligation to do such and so," this is a "scary" responsibility, Robinson emphasized.[35] How the preacher handles application can make a big difference. Some preachers, in making application, have forbidden people to go to movies, wear shorts, wear their hair too long, etc. Whatever is stated as application of Scripture must be stated with integrity and biblical authority; the preacher dare not preach his own opinions. Sermon application is a very important responsibility.[36]

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[34] Gay, interview by author, 13 September 2006.
[35] Robinson, interview by author, 5 October 2004.
[36] Ibid.

Several of the preachers spoke of the difficulty of sermon application. Bryan Chapell spoke of the necessity of "congregational exegesis." A pastor must ask, who are these people? What are they struggling with? What do they think they're struggling with? Such questions are important for the pastor's approach to preaching. Chapell says, "I always find application to be the hardest part of the sermon."[37] Chapell likes a phrase William Ames uses: *theology is the science of living to God.* Theology is not just a matter of knowing about God; it is the discipline of living to God. Seeing theology this way is a very pastoral task—and a difficult one.[38]

Stephen Nute stated that application was difficult because he speaks to a broad audience. People are at different stages of their walk with Christ, have different levels of Christian commitment, and are at different levels in their understanding of Christian truth.[39] Ray Ortlund said, "I find application hard; I think it's the hardest part [of preaching]. It requires the most imagination, the most thought, the most sympathy of spirit, [and skill in] identifying with people."[40] Haddon Robinson emphasized the difficulty of sermon application. He stated:

> Application is the preacher's question. How do I take this text living in the ancient world and with integrity bring it over to people living in the modern world in the twenty-first century? I think it's extremely difficult, but I think it's the preacher's question, and I think much more about it than I did thirty years ago.[41]

Robinson said, "Preaching has to be the content of the Scriptures applied to people in the twenty-first century. *How do you do that?"* He pointed to the "great disconnect" between seminaries and life. He felt that the problem was the inexperience of

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[37] Chapell, interview by author, 14 July 2006.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Nute, interview by author, 30 August 2006.
[40] Ortlund, interview by author, 21 September 2006.
[41] Robinson, interview by author, 5 October 2004.

students coming to seminary. Students must be taught the basics—Bible, theology, the languages, church history. Such training is absolutely necessary, but not enough to really prepare a man for the pastoral ministry.[42]

Dan Doriani describes a mental checklist he uses as he concludes a sermon: Help people see how this applies. Does this lead to commands of God I need to tell them about? Are there hard issues this passage addresses? Is there a goal, anything about our life as a community—not just as individuals—that must be brought out? Preachers must avoid being too individualistic. What other philosophies are out there today? How can we see the world God's way? Doriani also goes through the four questions detailed in his book: What should I do? Who should I be? Where should I go? How can I distinguish truth from error?[43] All this is hard work.

Randy Keeley spoke of the work involved in preparing the sermon and also developing discussion questions for small-group interaction after the message. "It's an awful lot of work, and yet I always see the pay-off in terms of the responsiveness of people to the message and to the application as they wrestle it from Scripture."[44]

Perhaps no one emphasized the difficulty of sermon application better than Bob Frederich, who is now eighty years old and mentoring young pastors in Portland, Maine. Frederich emphasized that we have to see preaching as a supernatural business. He feared that for some, preaching has become a natural business, or even a carnal activity. He is troubled when he hears men say, "I love to preach." He wants to ask them, *Why? Why* do you love to preach? He fears it may be because preaching feeds their own egos. He

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[42] Ibid.

[43] These are the questions of duty, character, goals and discernment. Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work,* 97-116.

[44] Keeley, interview by author, 26 October 2006.

reminded me that the prophets speak of the *burden* of the Lord. Preaching is a *burden*, he insisted. Recognizing his own dependence on God in preaching, Frederich made it his practice to meet with a group of believers every Saturday evening at six o'clock for prayer. This he did without fail during his tenure as Senior Pastor of First Baptist in Portland, Maine. Even if he had a wedding rehearsal, or a rehearsal dinner, no matter what, he would interrupt it to meet with the group for prayer. Preaching is a supernatural business; it is the work of God, and we must never forget this, Frederich emphasized.[45]

What Motivates Sermon Application

What motivates growth in sermon application skills? What are preachers of the word trying to accomplish? Haddon Robinson came to realize that the most important thing in preaching was not to dispense information, but to *change lives*. He found, as he gave more attention to application, that personal application is what people remembered about sermons (as opposed to the text, or exegetical details he may have brought out). They remembered the application because of how it touched their lives. Robinson said that he noted that the biblical epistles were particular in their focus, that is, addressed to congregations facing particular problems. The biblical materials, addressed to particular, historical needs, are filled with application. People come to church, after all, to get something to help them get through the week. So what the pastor preaches must affect Monday's world; if it does not, it is not worth preaching at all.[46]

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[45] Frederich, interview by author, 3 October 2006.
[46] Robinson, interview by author, 5 October 2004.

Other experienced preachers I interviewed said essentially the same thing in different ways. Vernon Grounds spoke of wanting sermons to "make a difference in the way people work out their discipleship."[47] He desires his messages to strengthen the personal faith of auditors, so they grow in their relationship with God. Grounds was also motivated to speak to social concerns as well as well as personal issues. He wanted disciples and churches to see the social implications of belonging to Christ.[48] And this came out in his preaching and teaching ministry at Denver Seminary.

Gordon MacDonald expressed skepticism about life change being a realistic goal for preaching. "I'm not sure that preaching *changes* people that dramatically," MacDonald said, stating:

> I think preaching, in whatever form it does it, tends to help people not to sin, and to stay encouraged, and good preaching over a period of time, slowly lifts the level of people's Christian consciousness, but real life change happens in much smaller groups, in the mentoring encounter, where people in spontaneous conversation, really work out the stuff of their faith in real time, real-life living.[49]

So MacDonald expressed skepticism about preaching really changing lives—which is the motivation for sermon application that most preachers expressed.

When Dan Doriani thinks about sermon application, he is motivated by the desire to see life change. He wants to lead people to see the implications of the text with regard to duty, character, and goals and discernment. He desires to help people see how biblical texts answer the questions, "What should I do?" "Who should I be?" "Where should I go?" "How can I discern between right and wrong?" He tries to focus on such questions

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[47] Grounds, interview by author, 21 April 2006.
[48] Ibid.
[49] MacDonald, interview by author, 30 May 2006.

as he approaches the application. In actual practice he tends to major on the character issues, the heart issues, "Who should I be?"[50]

Bryan Chapell went into the ministry to help people; he desired to see "pastoral fruit"—Christian growth, changed lives.[51] He found his early approach to preaching, emphasizing do's and don't, stressing the Christian disciplines ("read your Bible more, pray more, go to church more often"), and making lists for people only added to their burdens. This was not his reason for being in the ministry. Through experience he learned to inquire about the purpose for the passage before him. Why did the Holy Spirit include this in Scripture? It addressed a human need—part of our fallen condition. Since modern listeners' needs, as fallen creatures, are the same, the text was written for them as well. And since the problem was our fallen condition, only a divine solution is adequate. God's solution is grace. God's solution is Christ and his redemptive power. This emphasis results in messages that ultimately lead to Christ, to grace, to God's power—messages that encourage God's people and help them grow in their discipleship.[52]

Stephen Nute said something similar. He desires to see change in people's lives, over time. Nute is wary of "raising hands" in response to a message and putting too much stock in such immediate outward response. He wants to see people living the Scriptures. He wants to see the truth walking out the door with his people. "It has to go into our heads, because we are thinking people, sink into our hearts as we apply it to ourselves. And it has to go out our feet—or it's really no good."[53]

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[50] Doriani, interview by author, 7 June 2006.
[51] Chapell, interview by author, 14 July 2006.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Nute, interview by author, 30 August 2006.

Richard Gay is motivated by a desire to preach in such a way that people really learn the truth and see how it is relevant to life so that they understand what they are asked to do. This is why he emphasizes presenting one big idea.[54] He wants his listeners to know something and to do something in response to the message. He desires to bring people what they need—but he underscores the importance of listening to the text of Scripture. The Holy Spirit will only bring power to the message if the application is what God meant to say through the Scripture. So he works hard not to push applications into the text (which, he confesses, he did regularly when he began preaching).[55] He wants people to hear from God, and to experience life change as a result. He desires to have people leave church with something from God's word to take home with them.[56]

Raymond Ortlund, driven by a "gospel hermeneutic," desires to bring sinners to God, and leave them there. He wants to waken their hearts to the grandeur and glory of God. The desired response, for believers and unbelievers alike, is repentance and faith—repentance before God and faith in Jesus Christ. Ortlund thinks of a continuum from zero to one hundred. The devil is at zero, conversion is at point fifty, and the angel Gabriel is at one hundred.[57] His objective in his preaching is to take everybody to the next step—from thirty-five to thirty-six, from seventy-one to seventy-two, etc. He is always mindful there are listeners who are at point forty-nine—ready to trust in Christ and become Christians. "Preaching should have the effect of re-awakening believers and converting unbelievers."[58] Ortlund has no desire to preach law—and law can be preached without using that term. Preachers may speak of "biblical principles for living," but no matter the

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[54] Gay, interview by author, 13 September 2006.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ortlund, interview by author, 21 September 2006.
[58] Ibid.

label they put on it, if it amounts to self-leverage, it comes out to law, to Old Covenant. Our preaching must be New Covenant preaching. When preaching becomes "How to Raise Your Junior Higher," "How to Manage Stress," "How to Handle Fear," it leaves *God* out—and Ortlund wants to have nothing to do with such preaching. Christian preaching must bring people to the living, glorious God of Scripture.[59]

Bob Frederich could not agree more. He describes himself as "obsessed with Jesus."[60] And he finds this strictly biblical. He quotes Paul, "I want to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)" He quotes Colossians 3:17, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." During my interview, he turned to Luke's gospel and read, "And beginning with Moses, and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). So Frederich emphasizes it is our task to preach Christ, whether we are preaching from Old or New Testament. Concurring with Ortlund's emphasis, Frederich said, "I'm very concerned that we have a plethora of practical sermons that are little more than Christian humanism. So we preach a series of messages on family, on marriage and family—and it's fine stuff—but it's *not preaching Christ!*"[61] Frederich decries this approach to "practical preaching," and averred that we must preach Christ and emphasize the grace of God in our preaching ministry.[62]

Keeley expressed his motive for growth in sermon application skills as focusing on life change as well. He desires that people hear God speak, that they wrestle personally with the implications of the text of Scripture, and that they grow in their walk

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Frederich, interview by author, 3 October 2006.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

with Christ as they respond.[63] Because he saw the one-two punch of preaching followed by small group interaction on the sermon to be so effective, Keeley said he would never neglect this approach if he were to re-enter the pastoral ministry. Even now, in his capacity as Executive Director of CB Mission to the Northeast, he uses this method. For example, he recently spoke at a men's retreat. In the plan for the weekend, his speaking sessions were to be followed by small group interaction. Seeing the planned format, Keeley asked if he could provide the questions for the small group interaction. He did that, and the feedback he received from the men indicated that tying the two together had been a meaningful experience.[64]

So the basic motivation for growing in sermon application skills in these seasoned preachers seems to be the desire to see genuine pastoral fruit—real life change and growth in listeners' lives. MacDonald's concern, that life change may be more often effected through small group conversations,[65] may be in part answered by the emphasis of men like Dan Doriani[66] and Randy Keeley who combine preaching with small group interaction.

Sermon Application and Sermon Structure

Does sermon application affect the way the sermon is structured? Although this topic was not directly discussed with all of the interviewees, it surfaced in some of the discussions. Haddon Robinson thinks that sermon application does affect sermon

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[63] Keeley, interview by author, 26 October 2006.
[64] Ibid.
[65] MacDonald, interview by author, 30 May 2006.
[66] See below, 127.

structure. The preacher raises a problem in the introduction that begs to be answered. As the text is expounded (often inductively for Robinson) the text yields the big idea—the answer to the problem raised in the introduction. Then this big idea is illustrated, and in the conclusion the principle is driven home in a personal way.[67] Robinson warns,

> I think it's a matter of accurate reporting that many preachers do not give much attention to the conclusion. They give so much attention to the introduction, when they come to the conclusion, they're just thinking about getting off the platform. But in communication theory, the law of primacy, the first thing you say, and "recentcy," the last thing you say, are the most important in the communication. *So I'm looking toward where I want the sermon to go.* I want it to *land* where the listener is. So application shapes the sermon in that regard.[68]

Robinson emphasizes, if it's a good sermon, the whole message is directed toward application—and these are the messages people remember.[69]

Bryan Chapell takes a similar approach, allowing application to affect sermon structure throughout. But since the way application affects sermon structure is so clear in his book, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, we did not talk about this subject in the interview. Chapell's approach will be reviewed in chapter five of this study.

Several of the experienced preachers I interviewed stated that application does not affect the sermon's structure. For Doriani, an outline of the text yields the sermon's structure, and each point in the text is applied as the message is preached. Application appears throughout the message, not just in the conclusion. For Doriani, the application of the message does not affect the introduction of the sermon "as often as it should," as he put it.[70] Andy Spohr concurs. "In my experience, I get my outline from the text,

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[67] Robinson, interview by the author, 5 October 2004.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Doriani, interview by the author, 7 June 2006.

exegete the text, and then apply it, based on what the text says."[71] He scrupulously avoids bringing his own agenda to the Bible to find a text that will give him a platform to say what he wants to say, or what he wants to ask people to do.[72] Stephen Nute agrees; he preaches through the text in a verse-by-verse manner, making application to his listeners as he goes.[73]

Evaluating Sermon Application

How do preachers evaluate whether their sermon has effectively applied the text and spoken to God's people? This question was answered in various ways.

Andy Spohr said, reflectively, "I always feel exhausted when I feel like I have been communicating with the power of the Spirit. If I'm not exhausted, it's been too much of an essay."[74] For Spohr, listener response is the other way of evaluating sermons—but not perfunctory comments, "Nice sermon, Pastor." For example, Spohr recalled that the Sunday before I interviewed him he had preached on bitterness. One woman, as she left church that Sunday morning said, "That was a good sermon. Thanks—I think—although I'm not sure, because now I have to deal with someone and make something right before noontime."[75] Spohr feels such comments indicate the message has connected. So meaningful feedback is a reliable means of evaluating sermon application.[76]

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[71] Spohr, interview by the author, 28 June 2006.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Nute, interview by the author, 30 August 2006.
[74] Spohr, interview by the author, 28 June 2006.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

Haddon Robinson said, "Sometimes it's word of mouth. A person says the sermon made a difference."[77] But sometimes further conversation with such a listener makes Robinson wonder whether he heard the same sermon he preached! Robinson commented, "The Spirit of God does his thing."[78] Robinson said, other times feedback groups help. Feedback groups are groups of three or four people of different ages and backgrounds in the congregation. They are given questions like, "What do you think the preacher was trying to get across today? Can you think of any illustrations that he used?" "What were they illustrating?" "Did that help you?" "What do you think you could do tomorrow as a result of what the preacher said today?" Or, Robinson suggested a "pre-feedback" group—a group that discusses the message before it is preached. With such a group, Robinson suggests the preacher explain the passage, and the big idea of the sermon, then ask, "If you bought this, how do you think this would apply in your life?" Such a group's reactions can help a preacher think through ways of applying the message when it is preached.[79]

Grounds evaluates messages by basically conducting his own "postmortem," as he termed it.[80] He *reflects* on the sermon and asks whether he effectively connected with auditors. He also pays attention to occasional comments on the message that go beyond the trite remarks a pastor is accustomed to hearing.[81] For Gordon MacDonald, the evaluation process is similar: pastors can measure their effectiveness by how the

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[77] Robinson, interview by the author, 5 October 2004.
[78] By that comment Robinson meant that sometimes God speaks to people through a sermon in a way that is totally foreign to the message's principal thrust or the preacher's intent. Some comment that was made, some story that was told, is used by the Holy Spirit in a special way in the listener's life, entirely apart from what the preacher was seeking to accomplish.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Grounds, interview by the author, 21 April 2006.
[81] Ibid.

congregation responds to the preaching.[82] Similar to Grounds, MacDonald also spoke of personal evaluation of the message:

> I think, as we get older, we are much more able to intuit genuine response and whether there has been an effective connection between the Scripture and what you're preaching. You begin to just know it. I've had times when I felt like the congregation went overboard praising me, and I went home knowing it was a bad sermon. And I've had other times when the congregation said nothing, and I've known it was a good sermon. That takes years and years and years to acquire—a little bit of your own confidence in your judgment.[83]

Dan Doriani evaluates whether his message is connecting with people through small groups that meet Sunday evenings at the church to pray, share a meal, and discuss the message. This happens mostly in the summer. Dan is leading one of these groups himself, so he can determine, five hours after he has preached, whether the message was effectively brought home to listeners.[84] His wife and adult children also provide feedback and evaluation of the message. A third source of potential feedback are the elders, who meet once a month. But they are not at present offering much in the way of feedback. Doriani feels that, if they were to offer evaluation, it would probably happen in one-on-one conversations, more than in elder meetings.[85]

Bryan Chapell pointed to several dimensions of sermon evaluation. First, is the message true to God's word? Second, are we seeing fruit in our people's lives? Fruit could come in a variety of forms: repentance, new obedience, joy, healthier relationships, etc.[86] Chapell qualified his second comment with a third: Ask, "Are listeners' questions clearly unbiblical in nature?" For example, if people respond to the preacher by saying,

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[82] MacDonald, interview by the author, 30 May 2006.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Doriani, interview by the author, 7 June 2006.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Chapell, interview by the author, 14 July 2006.

"Pastor, stop saying that, because it will require me to love a black person—and I don't want to do that." Such an objection to his preaching tells the preacher he is saying the right thing. The listener's question is clearly unbiblical.[87] This needs to be added, Chapell pointed out, because if effective application were evaluated only by judging fruit in people's lives, then Isaiah the prophet would have to be judged ineffective![88]

For Stephen Nute, preachers can evaluate effectiveness in application by seeing "fruit down the road," i.e. response that lasts. He is not excited by raised hands, but wants to see lives changed.[89] He has a friend, a former congregant, who calls him sometimes, and talks about how his life is going now because of teaching he received ten years ago. That, for Nute, is what we must look for if we want to evaluate the effectiveness of sermon application.[90] Nute's wife is also a source of evaluation of his messages; she tells him if he gets off on a tanget and works his own "hobby horse" into the sermon, when it really was not found in the text of Scripture.[91]

Richard Gay puts little stock in verbal response. He remembers a mentor who said, "You don't always hear from people, just like when your wife makes a meal, and then another and another, and you don't always say, 'Wow, that really impacted me.'"[92] He has other safeguards to help him evaluate his preaching. First, he makes sure he has properly interpreted the text and given attention to the historical, grammatical meaning of the passage. Second, he meets with his Worship Pastor. They work together, planning worship months ahead of time. He goes over the passage and explains the big idea he

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Nute, interview by the author, 30 August 2006.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Gay, interview by the author, 13 September 2006.

wants to focus on from the passage. The two of them work through the text and discuss the big idea of the passage and what they want people to take away from church that Sunday morning.[93] This is a form of a pre-feedback group mentioned by Robinson.

Raymond Ortlund, like Richard Gay, puts little stock in what people say in the greeting line after church each Sunday. Ortlund thinks evaluation requires taking a long-term view. He is concerned about the overall health of the church. Is the church seeing adult conversions? Are believers being awakened and unbelievers being converted? This is the measure of effectiveness in sermon application.[94] The emphasis on the long-term results resembles the responses of Stephen Nute and also Randy Keeley, who evaluate the effectiveness of sermon application based on the growth they see in people's lives.[95]

Bob Frederich, 80, surprised me when I asked him how he evaluates the effectiveness of sermon application. He evaluates sermons by listening to the feedback he receives from young people. Feedback he receives from junior high kids tells him he is getting through. Sometimes it is children younger than junior high age. For Frederich, feedback from younger listeners is important.[96] Unlike other preachers I interviewed, he thinks the pastor can pick up helpful feedback from greeting people as they leave church. Beyond that though, "people talk to me about what they have heard," Frederich said.

Interviewing experienced preachers yields real insight into the struggles involved in applying God's word week by week to God's people in the church. Each preacher has his own journey and his own experience, his own story to tell. Each offers a wealth of insight.

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Ortlund, interview by the author, 21 September 2006.
[95] Keeley, interview by the author, 26 October 2006.
[96] Frederich, interview by the author, 3 October 2006.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Study

Biblical application is important both to preachers and to the people of God gathered for worship on the Lord's Day. It is Christ who makes them the people of God. They are united by their faith in him. King Jesus makes his will known in the church through the Bible, the word of God. So when the pastor opens the Bible, reads a passage and brings a message, he is doing something very important.

> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (Acts 20:28-31)

> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:13-16)

Meditating on such passages reveals the significance of preaching in the church. Pastors are under-shepherds of Christ, responsible to lead, guide, nourish, and protect God's people. False teaching threatens them—today as in the apostolic era. Preaching is one means God has ordained to lead and protect his people. Paul calls for earnestness and diligence. Persevering in the gospel—believing it and proclaiming it, trusting in the Savior—saves both the preacher and his congregation. Preaching God's word is important work; eternal issues are at stake.

Paul warrants this study of growth in sermon application skills with his words: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress" (1 Timothy 4:15). Paul uses the word προκοπὴ, which means "progress, advancement, furtherance."[1] Most translations render it with the word "progress."[2]

This study has focused on progress in the important preaching skill of sermon application. Sermon application means *the process of making plain to listeners the relevance of the biblical text to their lives—so they understand its significance, feel its force, and are challenged to obey*. Sermon application shows God's people how the word of God bears upon their lives, on their thinking, their beliefs, their choices, and their behavior. As Haddon Robinson pointed out in my interview with him, this is why people come to church on Sunday. They need something to help them get through the week. They look to their pastor for the guidance they need to follow Christ. The questions of sermon application: *So what? Now what? Yes, but how?* are the questions God's people are asking as they listen to the word of God as it is preached in Sunday worship.

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[1] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 714.
[2] NIV, NASB, ESV, RSV, NLT, etc. The German translation is *Fortschritte* (Einheits).

Most of the preachers I interviewed have changed their approach to sermon application since they began preaching, and they view the changes as progress.[3] They have come to see application as more important than they first realized when they started their preaching ministry. They have learned to give sermon application more attention in their sermon preparation. Some—but not all—have come to believe that sermon application has an important role in shaping the structure of the sermon itself. Many have learned, in the words of John A. Broadus, that application "is the main thing to be done."[4]

Some preachers, like Raymond Ortlund, Bryan Chapell, and Dan Doriani can look back and see definite stages in their progress. Others see progress without being able to name specific stages in their growth.

So what helps preachers grow in sermon application skills? The experienced preachers I interviewed pointed to several influences: influential mentors had their impact, and experience in pastoral ministry was mentioned many times. Some spoke of simply "aging," and the consequent growth in their own ongoing walk with the Lord. Talking with people, even in counseling sessions, helped pastors understand church members' needs and struggles, and so become more applicational in preaching. Reading—both reading about preaching, and reading about the human condition was a catalyst for growth. Awareness of secular analyses of culture, and keeping up with news sources was mentioned. Analyzing one's own needs and struggles as a disciple of Christ was cited as a source of insight for application. Growing knowledge of the Bible itself, the source of divine wisdom, was a factor. Work experience—both from personal work,

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[3] Gordon MacDonald did not see his approach to sermon application as having changed much over the years.

[4] Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 165.

and also from visiting congregants at their places of employment was a real help for one pastor. One pastor has learned to be more direct in sermon application through his involvement with a motorcycle club. One points to his involvement as a volunteer firefighter that helped him gain credibility as well as put him in touch with the needs of people in his town. Feedback from listeners was cited as a catalyst for growth in sermon application. Understanding basic principles of human learning—how people really learn, was cited as a cause for growth. Writing small-group curriculum for discussion about the biblical text and the sermon prompted growth for another. Teaching homiletics in seminary helped one preacher, Bryan Chapell, gain insight into how to apply biblical teaching in sermons effectively.

What has motivated growth in sermon application skills? This study found that the basic motivation for growing in sermon application skills in these seasoned preachers is the desire to see genuine pastoral fruit—real life change and growth in listeners' lives. These preachers want God's word to penetrate the understanding, the emotions, and the choices of God's people, so they are encouraged and helped in their discipleship. They desire to see long-term change—growth that lasts. They want to see changed lives, healthier relationships, and serious discipleship as the evidence of effective sermon application. Repeatedly, though stated in different ways, real life change in listeners was the chief motive for growth in sermon application skills.

How do experienced preachers evaluate whether the sermon has effectively applied God's word and spoken to God's people? The first evaluative question is to ask whether the sermon was true to God's word, based on solid exegesis and good hermeneutical principles. All these experienced preachers recognize that perfunctory

comments after church such as "Nice sermon, pastor," are not helpful in evaluating sermons. But more meaningful comments indicating that a listener really understood and is personally interacting with the message is helpful feedback. Three preachers pointed to the value of feedback groups or small groups discussing the sermon after it has been preached. Two preachers, Haddon Robinson and Richard Gay, spoke of "pre-feedback groups"—groups which discuss the text, the big idea, and the shape it might take in real life before the sermon is preached. Two preachers, Vernon Grounds and Gordon MacDonald, spoke of their own analysis and reflection on the sermon after it has been preached as a means of evaluating its effectiveness. After years of preaching, MacDonald reflected, you get so you can know when the message has been a good sermon, and when it has not—regardless of the praise or lack of praise you may receive from listeners. Several pastors mentioned family feedback—principally from their wives, but also from adult children as significant for evaluating messages. More than one of the interviewees said the real way to evaluate the effectiveness of sermon application is seeing pastoral fruit, real change in lives—change that is deep and lasting. One preacher, Andy Spohr, said he always feels exhausted after he has preached a message in the power of the Holy Spirit. If he is not exhausted after he has preached, he fears the sermon has been an essay, not a sermon. This comment resonates with my own experience. After preaching twice on Sunday morning, I find myself exhausted. When the emotional high of Sunday morning wears off, I always need to rest.

Discussion of Findings

The preacher's own response to God. The pastor must have his own experience with God as he prepares to preach. The preacher must begin preparing to preach with an open Bible and an open heart. The preaching text is first of all the word of God to him.

> This is what the LORD says:
> "Heaven is my throne,
> and the earth is my footstool.
> Where is the house you will build for me?
> Where will my resting place be?
> Has not my hand made all these things,
> and so they came into being?" declares the LORD.
> "This is the one I esteem:
> he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
> and trembles at my word." (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Preachers must guard against becoming perfunctory in sermon preparation. They must tremble before God and his word, and the high calling of preaching. The pastor's first step in preparing to preach is to immerse himself in the text.[5] To encourage this personal meeting with God, Michael Quicke recommends *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This involves four steps: (1) Reading aloud. The pastor slowly reads the text aloud several times. Hearing the word reaches the person more than simply reading it. He must savor the word. Reading different translations will offer different slants on the text. (2) Meditation. The pastor turns the words of the text over in his mind. Meditation involves paraphrasing, making connections with other passages, and immersing the whole heart in what God is saying. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the text, is speaking still. (3) Prayer. The pastor converses with God about the text, its meaning for his own life, and for the people he serves. (4) Contemplation. Contemplation is the willingness to wait and open the mind and heart to experience God's word and God's grace as expressed in this

[5] Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching*, 140.

passage.[6] The pastor must hear God's word himself before he can bring the message to the church. This personal meeting with God often ignites a fire from which the sermon is birthed by the Spirit. The fact that God has spoken to the preacher first will come through in his preaching.

The personal reading of God's word should precede consulting commentaries. Commentaries can be helpful but can also prejudice the preparation. The Lord of the church has appointed each pastor to each church. The pastor should come to the text recognizing that, although others are more gifted than he, the Lord has placed him in this ministry at this time for his own purpose. God desires to bring his word to his people through his personality. Each preacher faces this unique challenge.[7]

The preaching ministry, to be effective, must flow from a life of integrity and authenticity. The pastor must love God and cherish his word. David Larsen writes of John A. Broadus, the Southern Baptist New Testament scholar and homiletician, who, in his last lecture stressed that preachers should seek to be "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24 KJV). Larsen comments, "This means more than vigorous and disciplined exegesis of texts in the interest of the sermons they will yield. This means a diligent personal and devotional study of the Book."[8]

The pastor's integrity, his absolute commitment to Christ as Lord, his consistency in following him, and his love for Christ's people will come through in his preaching. Paul makes clear the responsibility of the pastor to live a life of integrity before his people: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example

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[6] Ibid., 143.
[7] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 68, 313.
[8] David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 52.

for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). When God's people see the word has been taken personally by the preacher, the sermon comes with greater applicational power to his people.

Application and Sermon Structure. Sermon application should shape sermon structure profoundly. Application shapes the introduction. In the introduction the preacher brings up a current concern, need, or problem in the listeners' lives that will be addressed by the text.[9] Bryan Chapell helpfully explains how this may be done. As the preacher studies the passage, he asks, "Why was this passage written?" "What need in the original hearers was this text written to meet?" Inquiring about the purpose of the text yields the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF)—the need in the original hearers, as a result of their fallen condition, which the text was designed originally to address. But modern hearers are also fallen, and they face this same need.[10] So once the FCF has been identified, it can be the basis for building the introduction to the sermon.[11] The introduction will raise questions in his *listeners'* lives, in *their* time and place, that the ancient text will answer with God's authority.

Both Haddon Robinson and Ralph Lewis, in their own ways, take a similar approach to the introduction. Robinson writes:

> Early in the sermon, therefore, listeners should realize that the pastor is talking to them about them. He raises a question, probes a problem, identifies a need, opens up a vital issue to which the passage speaks. Application starts in the introduction, not in the conclusion. Should a preacher of even limited ability bring to the surface people's questions, problems, hurts and desires to deal with them from the Bible,

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[9] Jay Adams has also called attention to this, in what he calls "telic preaching:" analysis of the preaching text should uncover the purpose of the passage—what the Holy Spirit intends to accomplish in the reader through the text. When the preacher builds his sermon, he should make the sermonic purpose identical to the Spirit's purpose in the pericope. This method leads naturally to applicatory sermons. *Truth Applied*, 36-39.

[10] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 40-43.

[11] Ibid., 231.

> he will be acclaimed a genius. More important than that, he will through his preaching bring the grace of God to bear on the agonizing worries and tensions of daily life.[12]

Ralph Lewis emphasizes the value of induction in preaching—moving from the particular to the general, from the concrete stuff of life to Scriptural truth. Full-orbed inductive sermons (to use his term) begin with induction—with particulars, with questions, and with concrete situations in life—then move toward a truth discovered in the biblical text. The question or problem that listeners are wrestling with in their lives leads to an answer that will be found in the Scripture text. From that truth the sermon moves deductively to application and exhortation. The truth presented in the biblical text, shown to be the answer to the questions raised by the inductive quest, now becomes the basis for an authoritative word from God applied to life.[13]

The introduction is about the listeners' lives, and an issue, or problem, or question they face. It will therefore grab their attention and prepare them to hear the answer that will be found in the text of Scripture. In this way, the application is shaping the sermon introduction.

But application, Chapell shows, also shapes the explanation of the text itself. *Application fulfills the obligations of exposition.* If it is God's truth, the people of God cannot ignore it or study it in a purely academic way. It must be applied, and Christ's disciples must respond in changing belief and / or behavior. *Application justifies the exposition.* Explanation of the text has a goal—application, response, and change. The exposition of the text establishes the reasonableness of particular responses. *Application*

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[12] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 164.

[13] Lewis, *Inductive Preaching*, 111-115. See the diagram, taken from Lewis, in illustration 1. Chapell also recognizes the value of inductive moves. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching,* 155.

focuses the exposition. The preacher cannot say everything about a passage of Scripture. There are many historical, exegetical, and lexical details that could be included in the sermon. How does the preacher choose what to say and what to omit? What is essential and what is tangential? The application serves as the criterion to differentiate. The application is an expositional target, guiding the preacher in selecting what he should include in the message. *Application gives ultimate meaning to the exposition.* In a profound sense, we do not really understand God's word, in the biblical sense of understanding, until we obey it.[14]

And application shapes the conclusion as well. The whole sermon, introduction, and main divisions should apply the truth of the text—leading to the conclusion where all the "tributaries" of the message unite to the "river" and bring home God's truth to people's hearts.[15] Chapell says the primary purpose of the conclusion is to motivate listeners to actually respond. Application has already been made clear in the sermon itself. In the conclusion, the preacher seeks to motivate, inspire, and prod the will. He is preaching good news, the gospel, so the message should end on a high note of hope, not despair.[16] It is the Holy Spirit who enables God's people to believe what God says and obey what he commands. We do not depend on our own strength, but on his. Pointing to the Spirit's infinite power to enable listeners to respond to the wisdom of the word gives them hope—hope not in themselves, but in God. This is what preaching is to do. As

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[14] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 199-203.
[15] Adams, *Truth Applied*, 31-32.
[16] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 246, 249.

Raymond Ortlund said, gospel preaching should bring the people to God, and leave them there.[17]

Redemptive-historical preaching. In my view, the redemptive-historical approach is an essential hermeneutical lens to use in approaching the preaching task. The Bible is a book that tells us about God and his redemptive plan, worked out in history. This approach makes preaching theocentric and Christocentric, that is, the Bible is about what *God* has done in history to redeem us, and how his redemptive purpose has come to fulfillment in Jesus, his Son. This approach to understanding Scripture goes back to Jesus himself.

> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:27, 44-47)

Every sermon, to be Christian, must come to Christ, to the cross and the resurrection, and to the gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon us, to enable us to repent, believe, and obey God's word. Peter Adam stated it simply:

> We must be absolutely committed to teaching and preaching the Bible, but to describe our ministry as 'teaching and preaching the Bible' is to describe it in terms of its means, not its end. The purpose of our teaching and preaching the Bible is to explain and commend the good news of God, . . . the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . We teach and preach Christ by means of teaching and preaching the Bible.[18]

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[17] Ortlund, interview by the author, 21 September 2006.
[18] Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 89.

The preacher's task is to preach Christ (2 Corinthians 4:5). Paul was clear in underlining this: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (2 Corinthians 2:2).

Every sermon, whether from Old or New Testament text, must be preached to bring listeners to Christ and his redemptive power. With regard to Old Testament texts, Jay Adams helpfully counsels preachers to apply the "synagogue test." Preaching from the Old Testament that would be acceptable to a Jewish audience is not Christian preaching; it has omitted Christ.[19] Given the backdrop of the great redemptive history presented in the Bible—creation, fall, redemption, new creation—the preacher recognizes that all the great themes of the Old Testament ultimately converge in Christ, who inaugurated the Messianic fulfillment.[20] Old Testament texts fit into this great plan of God.

Bryan Chapell emphasizes this in his book, *Christ-Centered Preaching*. Every sermon, built on the Fallen Condition Focus of the text, adopts a purpose to meet the need of fallen people, who are like the fallen people the text originally addressed. But many texts do not mention the atoning work of Christ, his resurrection, and the enabling empowerment of the Holy Spirit directly. Yet "context is part of text."[21] The expositor must present every text in the context of the wider biblical message of God's redemptive message of grace. Pastors can never present "be good, do better, work harder"

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[19] Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147.
[20] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 191-195.
[21] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 269.

exhortations and call it Christian preaching. Spurgeon put it memorably: as all roads in England lead to London, so all biblical passages lead to Christ.[22]

An example will illustrate. At the beginning of the advent season, when Christians' lives are so hectic in preparation for Christmas, a preacher chose to preach from Luke 10:38-42, where Jesus gently rebuked Martha for her busyness and commended Mary for her undistracted attention to Jesus himself. Certainly Martha's hospitality was praiseworthy, but she was worried and upset, and most significantly, distracted from Christ himself by her preparations. So the preacher might encourage listeners to step back, take a deep breath, and be still—remember who is God! Remember what is important in the Christmas season. But if the sermon stopped here, it would be incomplete. Where in this text is a way to focus on Christ? The preacher could easily go directly from Mary's undivided attention to Jesus to our own—focusing on his incarnation, his atoning death and his triumph over death. To do this, the preacher could highlight v. 38, "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way . . . ." This clause might easily be missed—but it is an essential link to the context. "Context is part of text," Chapell reminds us. *Where* was Jesus going? Examining the context brings the expositor to Luke 9:51, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Jesus was going to Jerusalem.

To the repeatedly asked question in Luke's gospel, "Who is this man?"[23] Jesus' disciples had finally come to the right conclusion, "You are the Christ of God!" (Luke

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[22] "Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? . . . So from every text in Scripture there is a road towards the great metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now what is the road to Christ? . . . I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one . . . I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savour of Christ in it." Quoted in Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 280.

[23] Luke 5:21, 7:49; 8:25; 9:9.

9:20). Only then did Jesus begin to explain that he, as the Messiah, would be rejected, killed, and raised again on the third day. This was necessary. "The Son of Man must suffer . . . he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life" (9:22). Now Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Now he would go to do the Father's will. "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." This is the journey that is mentioned in Luke 10:38. The context leads us to focus on God's redemptive purpose, which Jesus was determined to obey.

This redemptive focus is essential in more than a general sense. In a series on Exodus, for example, the pastor would show that the great themes of Exodus point to Christ. (And clearly they do. The themes of Exodus—redemption from bondage, covenant, worship, priesthood, sacrifice, tabernacle—all come to fulfillment in Christ.)[24] But *each sermon* from Exodus must bring the congregation to Christ. As Raymond Ortlund pointed out, we cannot confuse the people by preaching Old Covenant one week and New Covenant the next week. Every sermon must be New Covenant. This is what he called "the gospel hermeneutic."[25] We must always remember that some people in the congregation on a given morning may be at the point of repentance, ready to trust in Christ. Paul himself envisioned visitors coming to Christ through experiencing Christian worship (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). Each message we preach should be centered in Christ.[26]

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[24] In Exodus Israel is saved from judgment by the blood of the Passover lamb (Exod. 12:13), and Christ is the Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Old Covenant points to the New Covenant, of which Christ is the mediator (Heb. 8:8-12; 9:15). Indeed Christ transformed the Passover celebration into the Lord's Supper, a celebration of the New Covenant in his blood (1 Cor. 11:23-26). The Aaronic high priesthood points to Jesus, our great high priest (Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15). The theology of the tabernacle, of God's living among his people (Exod. 25:22) is fulfilled in Jesus, who "pitched his tent" (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν) among us (John 1:14; cf. John 2:19).

[25] Ortlund, interview by the author, 21 September 2006.

[26] Adams is right when he says: "Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach." Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 147.

In our interview, Bob Frederich made no reference to Sidney Greidanus, Bryan Chapell, or Dan Doriani or any other homiletical author who has emphasized the redemptive-historical method. Yet he said, "I'm obsessed with Jesus. I have a growing fascination with Jesus." He looked up Luke 24:27 in his Bible and read it aloud: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." "There it is," he said. "I wish I could have been there when Jesus explained the Scriptures to them."[27] He said:

> I think one of the things that has helped me most to grow in the last few years is this growing obsession with Jesus. And people tell me that I'm preaching better than I ever have—and I don't think they're saying it to flatter me—I think that's true. But you see, application comes back to, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus."[28]

Orality and sermon application. This study has led me to a new appreciation of the importance of orality for effective sermon application. Preaching is an oral event, and orality has its own dynamic and power. Orality is *dialogical.* The preacher, as he speaks, notes listeners' response and he can respond to them. If listeners look puzzled he can respond with further clarification. He pauses to note attentiveness, and he can react to what he sees. He may even ask, "Am I making sense?" and note listener response. The dialogical quality of preaching is lost to the one whose eyes are directed to a manuscript.[29] Joseph Webb calls this "maximizing connectedness." Preaching without notes makes possible "the fullest and most intense bonding between the preacher and those who share the preaching."[30]

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[27] Frederich, interview by the author, 3 October 2006.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ellsworth, *The Power of Speaking God's Word*, 19.
[30] Webb, *Preaching Without Notes*, 25.

When the preacher stands before his people in Sunday worship, it is a time for talk that comes from the preacher's heart, seeking entry to the hearts of the hearers. In preaching, the word of God becomes personal, relational, even incarnational.[31] It is immediate, coming from God directly through the heart and mouth of the speaker. The dynamic of ethos is essential.

> The kind of preaching that gives hearers a sense that they are hearing a person speak with the authenticity of having stood in the presence of God requires an openness and transparency that freely flows from the mouth and life of one preacher standing alone before a gathering of people.[32]

Oral delivery—apart from over-dependence on written notes—results in greater eye contact and aids in retention. The language used naturally takes on a more oral character—sentences are shorter and less complex; vocabulary is more earthy and concrete.[33] Oral delivery is more dialogical and more persuasive. In actual fact, "orality in preaching touches the core of Christian biblical and theological values."[34] Such preaching comes across to listeners as "from the heart."[35] It is life-changing work, both for preachers and listeners. Orality contributes to credibility and is therefore important for sermon application.

If the preacher prepares by writing his sermon, as I do, he must learn to write the sermon in the style of speech—shorter, simpler sentences, concrete language, description instead of definition. Orality is formulaic. In writing, varying word choice and avoiding

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[31] This reflects Clyde Fant's use of this terminology. "The incarnation, therefore, is the truest theological model for preaching because it was God's ultimate act of communication. Jesus, who was the Christ, most perfectly said God to us because the eternal Word took on human flesh in a contemporary situation. Preaching cannot do otherwise." *Preaching for Today*, 70.
[32] Ellsworth, *The Power of Speaking God's Word*, 59.
[33] Ibid., 61.
[34] Ibid., 67.
[35] Ibid., 59. Webb puts it this way: "In order for one's Christian witness to be as moving as it can possibly be, that witness must appear to those who receive it to come 'from the preacher's heart' and 'not from a page of the preacher's sermon.'" *Preaching without Notes*, 30.

clichés is important. But in speech, if listeners are to follow the speaker, phrases must be repeated, transitions must be clear. Speech has fundamentally different dynamics than writing. In written communication, the reader can go back and reread something if it was unclear; in speech the hearer has only one chance to hear what is said. Different tools are available in writing—various fonts, bold print, underlining, italics, etc. In oral communication, different tones may be used, words may be emphasized by raising or lowering the voice, or the speaker may speak more slowly. Body language is important, gestures are used.[36] Orality is different—and understanding its unique dynamic is important for sermon application.

Recommendations for Further Research

Evaluating sermon application from the perspective of listeners. This study has focused on preachers and their evaluation of sermon application. I have not sought data from listeners. This would be a valuable study. Small groups could discuss messages and their perceived relevance to the lives of the listeners. Feedback groups could interact with pastors or with other group leaders. But several problems with this approach would have to be addressed. Listeners vary widely. Some have been followers of Christ for years, while others are new believers. Some have completed graduate degrees; others have more limited educational background. Listeners are at different stages of life. Some are facing the challenges of high school or college; others are raising young children; others have children in college; still others have grown children who have left home and gotten married. Listeners have different careers; they are laborers, professionals, and stay-at-

[36] Wayne V. McDill, *The Moment of Truth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 157.

home mothers. Some mothers are home schooling their children; others are nursing babies; still others are busy taking children to soccer practice, karate lessons, and school events. Others are retired, and face the unique challenges retirement brings.

And listeners have many different personal needs. A message that speaks a powerful word to one listener may leave another untouched; this may not be the shortcoming of the sermon but reflective of the life situation of the listener. Or the mood of the listener may make him or her less receptive. A bad night's sleep, a nasty cold, or an argument with a spouse before church might make the listener less attentive to what the Spirit is saying in the sermon. A host of variables would come into play, and would have to be taken into account in some way. Nevertheless, research into sermon application from the perspective of listeners would be invaluable to preachers who want to serve God and his people faithfully.

The use of videos in preaching to postmodern people. This study has not addressed the use of videos in preaching, a practice that has become increasingly common in recent years. A recent issue of the professional journal for preachers, *Preaching*, was titled "The Video Issue."[37] Jesus used illustrations, telling stories about farmers and their crops, fishermen and their catches. Some preachers see video clips as illustrations for our time. George Temple writes:

> We live in an entertainment driven culture, spending billions on movies, DVDs, theater, music and other entertainment. If our culture is willing to spend so much money to watch visual stories (i.e. movies, etc.), then shouldn't the church be investing in communicating this way?"[38]

Temple continues: "We all know the saying, 'A picture is worth a thousand words.' In video you have 30 pictures (or frames) a second. If the average clip you show a

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[37] *Preaching* 22 (July-August 2006).
[38] George Temple, "Why Use Video in Preaching?" *Preaching* 22 (July-August, 2006): 6-7.

congregation lasts for two and a half minutes then you have just saved yourself 540,000 words."[39] Videos used as illustrations can be a vital tool to help communicate a life-changing message; videos can provoke thought and assist understanding in an entertaining way.[40]

Some students of cultural change believe that effective sermonic communication with postmodern people, especially young people, requires the use of videos, Power Point presentations, and other visual aids.

Others disagree, seeing the use of video clips in sermons as a passing fad. "God did not give us an image; he gave us his word," one preacher said in my hearing recently. Certainly, when the LORD appeared to his people at Mount Sinai, they heard his words; they saw no image. "Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deuteronomy 4:12). As Paul wrote, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Michael Quicke argues that preachers need to speak to people in a way that is sensitive to the video culture in which they live. Quicke calls for "stereo preaching" that appeals to head *and* heart, both right *and* left brain, using both word *and* image.[41] Multisensory language, which appeals to all five senses, and storytelling are essential to effective communication in today's pulpits. Quicke speaks of our time, introduced by the electronics revolution, as the age of "secondary orality."[42] Indeed language itself uses story, metaphor, and graphic images, completely without video aids. Jesus' teaching

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[39] Ibid., 7.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 179-180.
[42] Ibid., 79-84.

certainly did this. And when Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (Galatians 3:1), he was referring to preaching.

Douglas Groothuis calls for preaching that is word-oriented as opposed to image-oriented.[43] He complains that evangelicals are easily excited by new technologies and innovative means of communication, but they forget that these tools are not neutral. "Popular culture, steeped as it is in postmodernist sensibilities, is typically not the medium for expressing the eternal truths of God," he warns.[44]

The dispute rages even as the practice of using video clips in sermons becomes increasingly common. I have used videos at times, within sermons as illustrations, or as an introduction to a sermon. But I have not used them often. Some preachers use video clips in every worship service. The issue of *Preaching* magazine mentioned above lists no fewer than thirteen websites that offer online resources for finding video illustrations for sermons. This is an important topic, but beyond the scope of this study. It would in itself be a valuable topic for another researcher to explore.

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Sermon application is hard work, but it is important work. It is the Christian pastor's high calling to hear God speaking in his word. He must first encounter God himself through his living and powerful word. Then he must bring the word of God to people in words and ways that effectively communicate what God is saying to them today in their situation. They must see the relevance of God's word, feel its force, and be challenged to believe and obey—with gladness in their hearts. But since both preacher and listener are fallen creatures, they cannot obey, except in God's grace and power.

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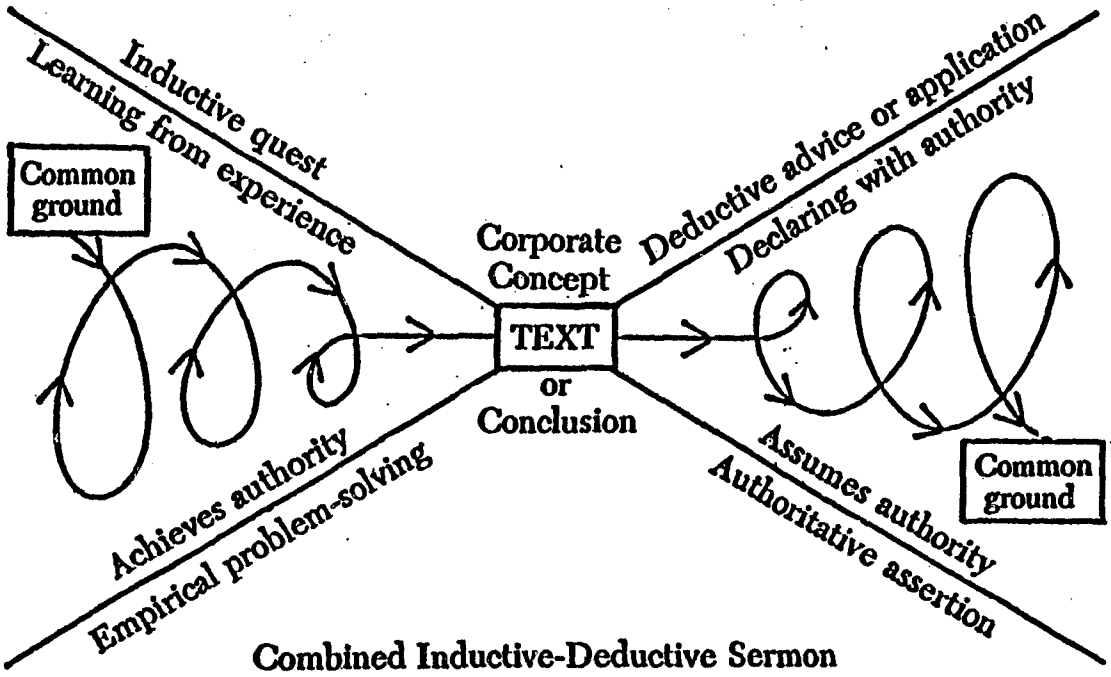
[43] Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 270.
[44] Ibid., 271.

Christian preaching always points to the Lord Jesus Christ, his cross and resurrection, his exaltation to the right hand of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit illumines the text as the pastor studies. The Holy Spirit moves listeners to faith, inspires obedience, and enables growth. Preaching this message, a message that brings us to God, is good news. This is the high calling of preaching.

Illustration 1



Combined Inductive-Deductive Sermon

Taken from Ralph Lewis, *Inductive Preaching*, 114. Full-orbed induction begins with induction, with particulars, with questions, and concrete situations and leads to the Scripture, where an authoritative word from God is heard. The biblical text is the answer to the inductive quest. This answer is then declared and applied deductively. Full-orbed induction thus combines induction and deduction.

APPENDIX 1

OBJECTIONS TO SERMON APPLICATION

Some scholars working within the redemptive-historical school consider attention to application not only inappropriate—but actually misguided. According to Dr. James T. Dennison, professor of Church History and Biblical Theology at Northwest Theological Seminary, working on "practical application" is an error. Dennison laments that much preaching in America today is unbiblical, moralistic, trivial and banal. Following Geerhardus Vos, he emphasizes the biblical-theological approach to preaching as alone appropriate. It is Christ who is to be preached. It is the preacher's task to show that every text of the Bible points to Christ. Dr. Dennison writes:

> I trust you begin to understand what we are doing. We are reversing the way in which a modern congregation listens to a sermon. We are not asking the man in the pew to 'get something out' of the sermon, whether we have given him an outline in the bulletin or whatever. We are proclaiming to the man and the woman and the child in the pew that his or her life is found in the text of the Scripture and in that text-word there is a self-disclosure of the life of God himself, the life of Jesus Christ, the life of the Holy Spirit. And what's more God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost invite that man, woman and child in the pew to participate in their life! To come into that heavenly life! To move into the age to come—into the life from above—to experience what it means to live in the not yet now! We are not imposing upon the pew so that the pew sits to extract something from our message. We are saying to the pew, 'Come up to the heavenlies in Christ Jesus; come and find your life hidden with Christ in God in this text.' Here is your life. We do not ask you to derive lessons from the life of Adam. We proclaim that your life is in Adam—miserable, sinful, rebellious, selfish, autonomous, hellish but we plead with men, women and children everywhere to find their life in that second Adam, to find themselves in Christ Jesus a new creation clothed upon with the righteousness of the Lamb of God, ...[1]

Since the entire Bible proclaims Christ, the preacher is to show how every text in the Old and New Testaments presents Christ. Every text must be seen as part of the history of

[1] James T. Dennison, Jr., "Building the Biblical Theological Sermon, Part I: Perspective," *Kerux* 4:3 (December 1989). http://kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N3A3.asp.

redemption. The eschatological fulfillment has come in Jesus. Believers are to find their lives in Christ, in the text. Preachers should not "find lessons" in the text. Believers should be taught to find their identity in the first Adam—miserable, sinful, rebellious and lost, and then find their identity in the second Adam, Jesus Christ. All believers are one in him. It is not the task of the preacher to bring the text to the listener; it is more to bring the listener to the text—and to the Christ the text presents.[2]

Charles G. Dennison, scholar and historian in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in objecting to sermon application, compares Sidney Greidanus to Rudolph Bultmann. According to Charles Dennison, Greidanus finds the same gap between the biblical world and our world that Bultmann found.

> Nevertheless, Greidanus is knee-deep in the issue that preoccupied Bultmann. No, not the historical Jesus, but application. In fact, many may find themselves in bed with the exile, embracing as axiomatic the principle he so relentlessly and consistently pursued; namely, the profound distance between the biblical world and our own.[3]

Charles Dennison suggests that John Stott and Sidney Greidanus, who find a gap between the biblical world and the modern world, really suggest an inherent deficiency in the Bible. The Scriptures are rendered "bound and mute until the preacher 'enables' it to be effective." Again, Charles Dennison finds echoes of Bultmann.[4] In an essay on preaching, Charles Dennison puts it this way:

> Rather than seeing the hearers of the word called and placed by grace within that word and its flow of the drama of salvation, this approach, as unintentional as it may be, allows the contemporary situation to determine the word's relevance. Moreover, instead of seeing the hearers living by grace out of the heavenly world into which they have been introduced by God's sovereign activity in his word, this

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[2] Ibid., 7.
[3] Charles G.Dennison, review of *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*, by Sidney Greidanus, *Kerux* 4:3 (December 1989): 3, http://kerux.com/documents/KeruxVrN3A4.asp
[4] Ibid., 3.

> approach finds no place for the present eschatological and transcendent environment of the people of God, the very environment that sets them *above* their culture.[5]

Similarly, Gary Findley faults Bryan Chapell for trying to build bridges from ancient text to modern listeners. He insists that Geerhardus Vos, in pointing to Christ, the ladder that connects heaven to earth, is more correct.

> Chapell's method of application also undermines the Christ-centeredness of preaching because it attempts to build bridges instead of holding on to God's eschatological ladder. This bridge-building enterprise further suggests that the ladder is somehow insufficient, which is an implicit denial of Christ's sufficiency.[6]

> Application sets itself on the wrong course each and every time it tries to draw hard lines of distinction between a present and an earlier audience. When proper attention is being paid to the unity of the human race, the one covenant of grace, the promises of God, the Church universal, and the eschatological age in which all saints live, we then realize that all of God's earlier and present audiences are essentially one in the same. We were in Adam. Thus legitimate application of the Scripture causes us to feel the guilt that Adam felt, to see ourselves as Adam saw himself standing outside of Christ. It also causes us to see ourselves in Christ, as Christ saw himself—a Son bent on pleasing his heavenly Father. We see ourselves in Abraham whose covenant, journey, inheritance and destiny are the same as ours connected to the city whose builder and maker is God.[7]

John Frame offers a good corrective to this. He disagrees with interpreters who criticize sermon application and warns against an overemphasis on the redemptive-historical approach. Frame agrees that the preacher must be aware of the redemptive-historical setting of his text—but that does not mean that the sermon must always be about that setting. According to Frame, there are dangers in the practice of preaching exclusively redemptive-historical themes. Frame lists the following dangers:

1. Much biblical truth can be left out or illegitimately de-emphasized.

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[5] Charles G. Dennison, "Some Thoughts on Preaching," *Kerux* 4 (December 1989): 3, http://kerux.com/documents/KeruxV11N3A1.asp

[6] Gary Findley, review of *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, by Bryan Chapell, *Kerux* 11:1 (May 1996): 2, http://kerux.com/documents/KeruxV11N1A5.asp.

[7] Ibid., 3.

2. Some redemptive-historical preachers have an antipathy to the idea of practical application. Some redemptive-historical preachers really want to avoid it, wanting the whole sermon to focus on Christ—not on what works believers ought to do. Frame complains, "When a preacher avoids concrete ethical applications in his sermons, he is not preaching the whole counsel of God, and he is not adequately edifying his people."

3. Some redemptive-historical preachers develop a jargon-laden vocabulary. Frame relates the experience of listening to a sermon in which the preacher used the word "eschatological" over fifty times and used other theological terms so often that he only confused his listeners.

4. Excess enthusiasm for the redemptive-historical approach has at times divided churches and presbyteries. Some pastors condemn those who do not preach as they do as moralistic preachers.

5. An exclusive emphasis on redemptive history can become repetitious and tiresome, especially when the preaching is jargon-laden.

6. Young preachers who try to preach redemptive-historical sermons often spend so much time preparing the theology of their messages that they completely neglect rhetorical considerations and give no attention to communication. So the sermon can come across as theological "gobbledygook."[8]

Hershael York, Associate Professor of preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, also disagrees with those who reject sermon application. After interacting with Dennison and Findley, he agrees with Broadus, that application is "the main thing to be done." York puts it this way:

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[8] John M. Frame, "Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology," http://frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1999Ethics.htm.

> For expository preaching to be effective, application must be viewed as essential to the expositor's task. Leading the congregation to understand how to apply the text is not secondary to leading them to understand its meaning. They are two aspects of the same task. The preacher ultimately desires to confront his hearers with the claims of the text, so that their lives are conformed to the image of Christ. Preaching without application is not expository preaching. In many respects, then, much of what some might consider expository preaching is merely a restatement of the text in homiletic or commentary form with no explicit contact to the hearer's immediate situation.[9]

For York, expository preaching demands that the preacher study diligently to grasp the biblical author's intended meaning, but also to exegete his audience to understand how the truth expressed in the text should impact his people.[10] York agrees with Greidanus, Craddock, Stott, and others who see the gap between ancient text and present day disciples. He defines the gap in terms of time, culture, geography, and linguistic differences. Contrary to Dennison and Findley, he avers that if translation and exegesis are legitimate means to bridge the distance between the text and us, then application of the text is legitimate as well.[11] The preacher does not *make* the Bible relevant; he must however *demonstrate* its relevance.[12] This is what the pastor does when he applies the text.

Certainly, as I emphasized earlier, redemptive-historical preaching is fundamentally correct. Every text has, as its ultimate context, the Bible itself. The Bible is the message of God's mighty acts in the world to redeem a people as his own. Our preaching, like the Bible, must be theocentric and Christocentric. But James T. Dennison, Charles G. Dennison and the others, though earnest in proclaiming Christ, have taken a legitimate emphasis too far. I concur with Broadus, Frame, York, Adams, Greidanus,

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[9] Hershael W. York and Scott A. Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 (Summer 1999): 74, http://sbts.edu/resources/sbjt/1999/1999Summer7.pdf.
[10] Ibid., 75.
[11] Ibid., 76.
[12] Ibid., 78.

Stott, Doriani and Chapell in their emphasis on application in preaching. The Bible is given us to teach, reprove, correct, and train us to be servants of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). True, every sermon must reflect the God-centered message of the Bible; every sermon must preach Christ (2 Corinthians 2:2), and every message must emphasize grace—but every sermon need not be solely about the redemptive-historical framework that surrounds the sermon text. Stott, Greidanus, Chapell, and Doriani are right to recognize the temporal, cultural, geographical, and linguistic gap between the ancient world and the twenty-first century. They certainly do *not* see a "gap" between the ancient mythology of the biblical authors and modern scientific empiricism, as did Rudolph Bultmann! Stott, Greidanus, and Chapell are in agreement with Vos that the people of God live in the eschaton inaugurated by Christ. Criticizing scholarly recognition of the historical, cultural, and linguistic gap between the ancient biblical world and the modern world is misguided.

The message of the Bible is theocentric. It is about God and his redemptive acts, his grace, and his covenant love for his people. Preaching from narrative passages should focus primarily on God and his activity, in the context of the Bible's complete redemptive history. But this fundamental theocentric and Christocentric emphasis does not preclude finding valuable lessons from believers who respond positively to God's acts as described in biblical narratives.

Most important, we see that biblical preachers themselves gave attention to sermon application. Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul applied the truth to their listeners and urged them to respond. We must preach as they did.[13]

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[13] See the biblical-theological framework above, 12-17.

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