Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?

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Introduction

Expository preaching today enjoys a prominence and a practice more widespread than ever before. Several evangelical seminaries are committed exclusively to an expository model. Many pastors purport to practice exposition from their pulpits, unabashedly holding the conviction that their parishioners need to hear the Word of God more than they need social commentary or positive thinking. Many pastors and churches report the experience of spiritual and numerical growth as a result of solid biblical exposition from the pulpit.

Though some disagreement exists about the precise definition of expository preaching, no dissension stands sharper nor has greater consequences than the current discussion regarding the necessity or even the appropriateness of the role of application in an expository sermon. While those committed to an expository model are convinced of the truth and the power of the biblical text, many are unclear as to the role of the preacher. Is he responsible only to *explain* the meaning of the text, or is he also responsible to show his hearers how the passage *applies* in their lives?

Objections to Application in Preaching

Contemporary evangelicals are not the only ones to struggle with this question. Karl Barth, reflective of his transcendent view of God and theology of revelation, questioned whether it was possible for any human being to apply Scripture. He insisted that being faithful to the text and also true to life in this age is "a serious difficulty" that has "no solution."[1] Rather, the task of bridging the gap between the Bible and life today remains in the hands of God alone. For Barth, application in preaching is merely talking about the text and contemporary life, while insisting that God must bridge the gap between the two. Application is inferential, not direct. An individual's response results from an encounter with God Himself, regardless of the preacher's work. Any attempt by the preacher at direct application might prejudice the encounter between God and the individual listener.[2]

Still others object to any strong emphasis on application by insisting that no chasm of relevance exists between the biblical text and contemporary hearers. For instance, Charles G. Dennison strongly rejects the "gap theory" proposed by Sidney Greidanus.[3] His objection springs from the similarity he sees between Greidanus and Rudolf Bultmann. Greidanus's attempt to bridge the chasm between the ancient text of Scripture and the modern preacher is too closely akin to Bultmann's insistence on the distance between the biblical world and our own.

Dennison criticizes both Greidanus's and Bultmann's methodologies because he believes their positions are structurally the same. For both, the ancient text must be "delivered" in the interest of relevance. For both, the machinery of modern criticism is indispensable. For both, faith is an irrational factor (at least in part for

Greidanus) that must assert itself against the uncertainties of logical and historical probability.[4]

Gary Findley also rejects a "two-world" gap which application must fill. Findley directs his attention towards Bryan Chapell, author of the widely acclaimed *Christ-Centered Preaching*.[5] He thinks Chapell's belief in a gap between the ancient and contemporary worlds undermines his desire to uphold biblical authority and the Christ-centeredness of preaching. Chapell's process of application weakens biblical authority because it inherently suggests that the Bible is old and antiquated. Such application removes the meaning of Scripture as well as the audience from its history. Furthermore, Chapell's method of application, according to Findley, weakens the Christ-centeredness of preaching, because it focuses on building bridges rather than holding on to Christ as "God's eschatological ladder."[6] Both Dennison and Findley find a model in Geerhardus Vos.[7] Unlike Greidanus and Chapell, who propose a horizontal gap between the biblical and contemporary worlds, Vos insists that a vertical ladder exists between heaven and earth in the form of Christ.[8]

Dennison criticizes any emphasis on application in preaching because many do so by attempting to find a point of contact between the text and the audience. He states,

> 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 the Word, this 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.[9]

Dennison disdains the notion that preachers are responsible to determine Scripture's relevance. On the other hand, he asserts,

> Good preaching makes us and our contemporary situation meaningful in the text. In other words, good preaching doesn't pull the Word into our world as if the Word were deficient in itself and in need of our applicatory skills. Instead good preaching testifies and declares to us that we have been pulled into the Word which has its own marvelous sufficiency.[10]

John MacArthur, Jr., though not opposed to the preacher developing general application in his sermons, rejects any obligation to do so. He downplays the need for sermon application, arguing that the Word of God has inherent power:

> True expository preaching is actually the most effective kind of applicational preaching. When Scripture is accurately interpreted and powerfully preached, the Spirit takes the message and applies it to the particular needs of each listener. Apart from explicit general application in principlizing the main points in the exposition, the expositor is not compelled to give a set number of points of specific application before a sermon can have an applicational impact. This is not to say he should not make some applications, but if the text is allowed to speak fully, applications will multiply far beyond what he can anticipate as the Spirit of God takes His Word and applies it to each listener.[11]

The Need for Application

Despite the above criticisms and objec-

tions, we are convinced that expository preaching which includes direct and explicit application to the lives of the hearers is the most effective. Those who are committed to an expository model must be determined to do more than merely explain the text in its original context.

Some biblical injunctions, such as those forbidding sexual sin, directly apply to people today. Other texts are more difficult. Eating meat sacrificed to idols is not a problem westerners typically face. Is it enough for the expositor to explain the customs involved? Is the text limited to the specific problem stated, or is it proper to abstract larger principles and to apply those principles to contemporary situations? To explain the cultural meaning of such a passage without leading a congregation to contemporary application would make the text a historical relic.

Some believe that application and translation of the text into contemporary life and specific situations is the work of the Holy Spirit. Such reasoning seems disingenuous at best. Why would the Holy Spirit require a preacher to explain the meaning of the text, but not to apply it? What biblical or moral principle makes exegesis the work of the preacher and application the exclusive province of the Spirit? More plausible is the belief that the Holy Spirit uses human means to accomplish both tasks involved in exposition.

Preaching that rivets and engages a congregation, proclamation that teaches the text, touches the heart, and transforms listeners is exposition that considers practical application a vital element of expository preaching. Rather than disdaining it, we join with other proponents of the expository method in championing the need for application in preaching today.

Haddon W. Robinson notes, "Many homileticians have not given accurate application the attention it deserves."[12] J. I. Packer admits the present-day pulpit is weak in practical preaching.[13] Jerry Vines laments that the "subject of application in the work of exposition has not received sufficient attention."[14] Harold T. Bryson predicts that "more than likely the concern for relevancy of the text will produce more books on application or interpretation and more emphasis in sermons on applying the biblical text to life in today's world."[15]

This attention to application is not new. The Puritans followed a three-tiered methodology in their preaching. The first section of their sermons in which they developed the text was labeled "Explication." The second section, "Doctrine," contained the teaching of the text. The third section was called "Uses," which contained the practical implications of the biblical text and how the Scripture under scrutiny might impact everyday living.

Why would any expositor object to a focus on application? David Veerman suggests that critics do not understand what others mean by application.[16] He says application has the following elements: First, application is not additional information; it is not giving more facts in the sermon. Second, application is not mere understanding. Grasping the sermon or scriptural content mentally is far different from the ability to apply it properly in one's life. Third, application cannot be equated with relevance since listeners need specific and concrete admonitions. Fourth, application does not mean that the preacher provides illustrations. Although sermon illustrations are a necessary ingredient in proclamation, by themselves, they are not to be equated with sermon application.

Defining Application

So what is application in preaching? Several definitions exist, each having its own merit. John A. Broadus, in his seminal work on expository preaching, begins his chapter on application as follows: "The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but it is the main thing to be done."[17] Broadus defines application as "that part, or those parts, of the discourse in which we show how the subject applies to the persons addressed, what practical instructions it offers them, what practical demands it makes upon them."[18]

Application thus includes three items: 1) application proper, showing the hearer how the truths of the sermon apply to him; 2) practical suggestions as to the best way and means of performing the duty urged upon him; and 3) persuasion in the form of moral and spiritual appeal for the right response.[19] Ramesh Richard states, "The application is when you move your audience from just receiving to exhortation and implementation of God's truth."[20] Adams defines application as "that process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent to members of their congregations that they not only understand how those truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and perhaps even eager to implement those changes."[21] Veerman asserts that application is "answering two questions: *So what?* and *Now what?* The first question asks, 'Why is this passage important to *me*?' The second asks, 'What should I do about it today?'"[22] Wayne McDill claims

Application is more than just taking the sermon truth and attacking the congregation with it. Application presents the implications of biblical truth for the contemporary audience. It is a call for action, for putting the principles of Scripture to work in our lives. It deals with attitudes, behavior, speech, lifestyle, and personal identity. It appeals to conscience, to values, to conviction, to commitment to Christ.[23]

For McDill, sermon application can be either descriptive or prescriptive. Descriptively, application applies the principles of Scripture to contemporary life pointing out examples of obedience and disobedience and the results that follow.[24] Prescriptively, the preacher may use Bible truth as guidelines and applications for behavior.[25]

We contend that application in the expository sermon must include the following:

1. Sermon application must be based on biblical truths gained by a historical-grammatical-literary examination of the biblical text.

2. Sermon application must be based on the author's intended purpose for the text.

3. Sermon application must explain the relevance of biblical truths for the listeners.

4. Sermon application must include practical examples so listeners can adapt their lives to the biblical truths presented.

5. Sermon application must persuade listeners that they should conform their lives to the biblical truths presented and encourages them to do so, warning them of the negative consequences of failure in this regard.

Application in the expository sermon is the process whereby the expositor takes a biblical truth of the text and applies it to the lives of his audience, proclaiming why it is relevant for their lives, practically showing how it should affect their lives, and passionately encouraging them to

make necessary changes in their lives in a manner congruent with the original intent of the author.

The Necessity of Application in Preaching

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.[26] Thus Vines notices that "much of the ineffective expository preaching of our day is due to the failure to relate Bible facts to the contemporary world."[27] Such inadequate preaching leads Stephen Olford to say, "So many people hear the *what* of our message but never hear the *how* of our message."[28] Expository preaching must have footing in both the biblical text and the present-day audience. This is not due to any insufficiency in the text or lack of perspicuity. To object to application on that basis is tantamount to the charge that the need for exegesis of the text implies a deficiency in Scripture.

Charles Bugg rightfully criticizes sermons devoid of application:

> A sermon that is not anchored in the Biblical revelation is impotent. It lacks power. But a sermon that is not connected to the lives of people is irrelevant. It lacks purpose. The Biblical text needs to be exposed in such a way that those who listen to us understand that the words spoken there and then have relevance for the here and now.[29]

Application, therefore, is an essential component of expository preaching.

Many proponents of an expository methodology include application in their definition of preaching.[30] Jesse J. Northcutt states:

> Biblical preaching is more than just interpretation of scripture. Biblical preaching is the interpretation of scripture for life. It is interpretation of the Word of God in such a way that people are called into encounter with God. *The Word of God is made significant for the lives of contemporary men and women.*[31]

Faris D. Whitesell defines expository preaching as

> based on a Bible passage, usually longer than a verse or two; the theme, the thesis and the major and minor divisions coming from the passage; the whole sermon being an honest attempt to unfold the true grammatical-historical-contextual meaning of the passage, making it relevant to life today by proper organization, argument, illustrations, *applications*, and appeal.[32]

Haddon Robinson casts the expository sermon as "the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, *then through him to his hearers.*"[33] Jerry Vines's definition of expository preaching also highlights application as a necessary ingredient: "An expository sermon is one that expounds a passage of Scripture, organizes it around a central theme and

main points, *and then decisively applies its message to the listeners*."[34]

Finally, Richard L. Mayhew claims that for a sermon to qualify as an expository sermon it must: 1) find its sole source in Scripture, 2) be extracted from Scripture by careful exegesis, 3) stem from preparation which correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and in its proper context, 4) clearly explain the God-intended meaning of Scripture, and 5) *apply Scriptural meaning for today*.[35]

The expositor's "task is not finished until he relates the passage to the experience of his hearers. Ultimately, the man or woman in the pew hopes the preacher will answer the question, *So what? What difference does it make?*"[36] Expository preaching demands that the preacher study diligently to grasp the author's intended meaning of a biblical text, but also to exegete his audience in order to understand what impact the truths in those chosen verses should have on his hearers. The expository preacher should strive to ensure that after his message his audience has answers to three questions: what did the preacher speak about?, what difference does or should it make?, and now what should I do with God's claims in the sermon?[37]

Hermeneutics and Application

Some scholars distinguish hermeneutics from exegesis. In such a view biblical hermeneutics involves explaining a passage of Scripture, but is not complete after that process. V. C. Pfitzner comments on the difference between these two concepts:

> The task of exegesis is to ascertain exactly what the author wished to say in the precise historical situation in which he was, in which he was himself translating the message of the Gospel. The hermeneutical ques-
> tion already begins with the task of translating the original words of the text, of understanding what they meant then, but it is really felt only when the exegetical task is completed and we are left with the task of understanding this text for ourselves, of understanding its message in our precise historical situation. The hermeneutical problem thus involves not only our understanding of the original text, but also the problem of bridging the historical time-distance between the original text and that which it proclaims and ourselves.[38]

Therefore, the expository preacher, as an interpreter of a biblical text, must move beyond what a Scripture passage meant then to what it means now both for himself and his audience. Paul's discussion about eating meat sacrificed to idols in Romans 14 has a contemporary meaning, even though few Christians today face that same problem.

Hermeneutics as a process includes application as well. In other words, the expository preacher must apply his biblical text in order to complete the task of hermeneutics. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard acknowledge that

> [d]espite the importance of application, few modern evangelical scholars have focused on this topic. In fact, most hermeneutics textbooks give it only brief coverage, and many major commentary series only mention application with passing remarks to help readers bridge the gap from the biblical world to the modern world.[39]

Nevertheless, in their opinion, while proper application is dependent upon establishing the meaning of a text, "the process of interpretation is incomplete if it stops in the land of meaning."[40] Furthermore, they "insist that the goal of hermeneutics must include detecting how the Scriptures can impact readers today."[41]

Bryan Chapell summarizes the role that application serves in exposition and the expository sermon.[42] First, application fulfills the obligations of exposition. Until the preacher explains the duty God requires of human beings, the exposition remains unfinished.[43] Second, application justifies the exposition. The applications stemming from the process of proper hermeneutics give the listeners reason to concentrate on the explanation of the biblical passage. Third, application focuses the exposition. Application guides the expositor in selecting what information he should include in the sermon. Focusing on appropriate applications that spring from the text's priorities is the requirement of accurate exposition. Fourth, application gives ultimate meaning to the exposition. It allows the hearers to understand biblical truth more fully by experiencing and implementing it in their daily lives.

The "Gap" Between Then and Now

As noted earlier, those who object to application in exposition voice their most strident objections to the metaphorical "gap" between the biblical text and the contemporary audience. In their zeal to defend the timeless and transcendent nature of the Word of God, they ignore the very real differences between the world of the Bible and the world of the hearer. To ignore application for fear of rendering the Word of God unapproachable or incomprehensible, however, is a needless fear. If the expositor must explain the cultural significance of a woman's veil in 1 Corinthians 11, does that mean that the biblical text is inaccessible to the average reader? Is the Reformers' doctrine of perspicuity of the Scripture threatened? The need to study and contextualize certain cultural references is obvious, and so

should be the need to make contemporary application. There is indeed a chasm "between two worlds," which is traversed by application.

This "distance" between the context of the Bible and a contemporary setting can be seen in four areas.[44] First is the distance in time. Over 1900 years have passed since the last biblical book was written. Second, the distance in culture widens the gap. Any cursory reading of the Bible reveals rituals, rites, and practices that are unfamiliar to the modern reader. The geographical distance is the third difficulty. Understanding the climate and topography of the world of the Bible is helpful in comprehending certain aspects of its message. The fourth and greatest difficulty is the linguistic difference. Few Western readers would be able to read or understand the text were it not translated into a receptor language that they can comprehend. Most recognize that a linguistic gap exists between the text and most readers, and that God uses human means to bridge that gap through accurate translation. 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.

Sidney Greidanus and John R. W. Stott both write extensively about this thorny issue of biblical interpretation. Greidanus first approaches the issue of this chasm in terms of a gap between stages of redemptive history, which makes application necessary.

> The sermon, therefore, still consists of explanation and application—not because the Word is objective, but because the Word is addressed to the church at one stage of redemptive history while the preacher must address this Word to the church at another stage of redemptive history.

The Word, to be sure, is addressed to the church of all ages, but this confession should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that it is first of all directed to a particular church at a certain stage of redemptive history. There is, certainly, continuity in redemptive history; there is continuity in the church of all ages; but the discontinuity between then and now should not be overlooked.[45]

Elsewhere, Greidanus writes of a "historical-cultural gap," which obligates the preacher to relate the Bible text to contemporary hearers. He notes,

the historical-cultural gap we perceive from our vantage point is accounted for by the fact that the word of God indeed entered history in a relevant way. If preachers today wish to address their contemporary hearers with the word of God in an equally relevant way, they have no choice but to carry the message across the gap to the present historical-cultural situation. Instead of an obstacle to relevant preaching, therefore, the historical-cultural gap can be viewed as a challenge to preach the message just as relevantly today as it was in the past. The challenge is to let the word of God address to people today just as explicitly and concretely as it did in biblical times.[46]

John R. W. Stott, in *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, develops the metaphor of preaching as bridge-building. According to Stott, the enormous cultural changes that have occurred since the Bible was written has caused a "deep rift … between the biblical world and the modern world."[47] Stott compellingly writes that the preacher's responsibility is to build bridges that "enable God's revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of men and women today."[48]

Stott, however, laments two mistakes made in the attempt to bridge faithfully the gap between the two worlds. Conservatives, in his opinion, make the mistake of remaining in the biblical world, never landing on the other side. Their preaching "fails to build a bridge into the modern world. It is biblical, but not contemporary."[49] These preachers, when called to give an account for the practice of exposition without application, piously reply that their trust is in the Holy Spirit to apply God's Word to the realities of this world.

Liberals, on the other hand, make the opposite mistake, according to Stott. Their sermons "are earthed in the real world, but where they come from (one is tempted to add) heaven alone knows. They certainly do not appear in the Bible."[50] Stott, therefore, calls upon preachers "faithfully to translate the Word of God into modern language and thought-categories, and to make it present in our day."[51]

Some application zealots sow misunderstanding when they use terminology that suggests that it is the preacher's task to "make the Bible relevant."[52] To be sure, the Bible is relevant, first because of the nature of the Bible itself. But while the Bible is "amazingly contemporary,"[53] its relevance is not always apparent. That is why expositors must faithfully apply it.

Vines notes the link between the relevant nature of the Bible and the task of application: "To fail to make practical application of the Word of God is to do injustice to the Bible's purpose. God's truth is timeless. God was thinking of us when he wrote the Bible."[54] Scripture is relevant because it has the ability to speak to issues of contemporary human beings despite the distance between them. Olford correctly notes, "It would be safe to say that there is no part of Scripture that is unrelated to some aspect of faith and

life."[55] The expositor, therefore, should take note of Kaiser's understanding of the Bible's ability to address the needs of people today.

> The relevancy and adequacy of the Bible to meet the needs of a modern age are easily demonstrable. In fact, sermons that feature the latest pop psychology or recovery plan are settling for less than they could or should. In almost every contemporary issue the Church faces today, she would have been better off a thousand times over had she gone with a systematic plan to go through the whole Bible in an expository way.[56]

Application is necessary in the expository sermon because of the distance in time, culture, geography, and language between the ancient text of Scripture and the preacher. Nevertheless, the expository preacher does not need to *make* Scripture relevant. He must, however, *demonstrate* its relevance; that is, he must appreciate the task of "transferring a relevant message from the past to the present."[57]

Bridging the gap between these two worlds is a matter of properly applying the message of a given passage to the preacher's audience.[58] It is not an easy task for the expository preacher, but one that is essential in order to fulfill the demands of the expository sermon. We stand with Stott,

> 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.[59]

When the expositor commits himself to the kind of preaching that gets personal, that demands a response and obedience to the text, he will likely see some wonderful benefits occur in his congregation. The final goal of preparing the expository sermon is to demonstrate the relevance of the chosen text for the church here and now so that they apply the truth and become more like Christ.[60] At least five benefits to the audience are recognizable.

Benefits of Application

First, the listeners are urged to respond as a result of hearing the demands made upon them by the biblical truth presented in the sermon. The preacher makes a fundamental mistake if he assumes that by merely presenting biblical information to his audience that they will intuitively make the connection between scriptural truth and their everyday life.[61] 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.[62]

Frank E. Coho acknowledges this responsibility in Reformed preaching: "To effect obedience, from the human side of the matter, the Reformed preacher must move from what the text says and intends, to what it means in the daily practice of a Christian."[63] Application in the expository sermon thus marks the difference between a scribe and a preacher. Information fascinates the scribe, but preachers want to see changed lives.[64] When Peter concluded his Pentecostal sermon, his listeners were not satisfied with information but cried out, "What shall we do?" Expository preachers use application to move their audience to make specific responses to biblical truth

found in the passages they exposit.

A second benefit of application to the listeners of expository sermons is that it reaches the whole person. Application touches the will of the individual, a part of the person that remains ignored if the message includes merely explanation or illustration. Stuart Briscoe notes that interesting preaching is directed at the mind, will, and emotions of the audience.[65] Application is the means by which an individual's will is engaged. He or she is called to a response, and the sermon elicits action from the hearer. McDill concurs that application is part of the preacher's attempt to reach the whole person.[66] The expository sermon consists of explanation, illustration, argumentation, and application to reach the individual's intellect, imagination, reason, and volition respectively. Explanation strives for understanding, illustration causes the person to imagine, argumentation leads to acceptance, and application moves toward intention. When application in the sermon is neglected, the whole being of a listener is not touched and the preacher has not delivered an expository message.

Third, application in the expository sermon develops Christ-likeness in the listeners. It is no overstatement to say that the church is in the midst of a moral crisis. Christians, by and large, fail to live out the life of Christ in their every day lives and do not reflect a true understanding of the biblical demands placed upon those who bear the name of Christ. Vines comments on the need of application to curb the moral crisis in the church: "Somewhere along the way multitudes of those who regularly attend church services have failed to make the connection between the truths of the Bible and their moral application. One factor that may contribute to the problem is the failure to apply Bible truth to the daily lives of those who listen to sermons."[67] Church members, although they have listened to sermons all of their lives, may still live like heretics. The pastor has the responsibility to tell his hearers how doctrine informs duty, how learning affects life. Their behavior should always be challenged and changed.[68] Where the expositor takes seriously the obligation to give relevant, practical scriptural applications in his sermons, his audience will better understand the demands of the biblical text and more faithfully live out the gospel.[69]

The fourth benefit of including application in the expository sermon is the development of moral discernment in an amoral environment. Louis Goldberg comments on the link between application and its ability to impact a fallen world: "Not only is it necessary to recreate the ancient scene of the there. It is also necessary to cross the gap to the here, bringing back principles for application to our world of technology, to the social arena of human need with its deprivation and degradation, to the world of political structures to combat amorality and insensitivity."[70] When the expositor takes seriously the obligation to relate to his audience the biblical demands of the text, they understand the difference between the "what is" of a sin-infected society and the "what should be" of God's divine will. It is the preacher's responsibility to "help the congregation grow out of dependence on borrowed slogans and ill-considered cliches, and instead to develop their powers of intellectual and moral criticism, that is, their ability to distinguish between truth and error, good and evil."[71] Application in the expository sermon greatly enhances the preacher's ability to develop

this goal for his listeners.

Finally, application in the expository sermon allows hearers to grasp the biblical message as relevant to their contemporary needs. One benefit to the faithful performance of this task is almost universally overlooked. Not only do the members of a congregation who sit under applicational exposition face regular exhortation and correction, but they also learn how to read and apply the text for themselves. A church inevitably takes on the personality and textual approach of the pastor. His preaching and approach to the text will largely determine how they read and understand the Bible. If he regularly rips verses out of context and contorts them to fit his own agenda, then they, too, will wrest the Scriptures to their own purposes. On the other hand, if he is always careful to preach the authorial intent of the passage as the result of careful study, then they will learn to look for the author's purpose as the guide to hermeneutics. If he always seeks a congruent contemporary application, then they will also learn to read the Bible with the purpose of applying it to their lives.

Application is the vital link between God's eternal Word given in antiquity and the concerns of men and women in the present.[72] Preachers need not discuss the option of "needs-based preaching," because the biblical revelation is more than adequate to touch hearers across the spectrum of humanity. The role of the expository preacher is to make biblical truth plain enough for listeners to understand its meaning and to demonstrate its relevance. Louis Lotz masterfully characterizes preaching which succeeds at both explanation and application:

> Good preaching begins in the Bible, but it doesn't stay there. It visits the hospital and the college dorm, the factory and the farm, the kitchen and the office, the bedroom and the classroom. Good preaching invades the world in which people live, the real world of tragedy and triumph, loveliness and loneliness, broken hearts, broken homes, and amber waves of strain. Good preaching invades the real world, and it talks to real people—the high-school senior who's there because he's dragged there; the housewife who wants a divorce; the grandfather who mourns the irreversibility of time and lives with a frantic sense that almost all the sand in the hourglass has dropped; the farmer who is about to lose his farm, the banker who must take it from him; the teacher who has kept her lesbianism a secret all these years; the businessman for whom money has become a god; the single girl who hates herself because she's fat. Good preaching helps them do business with God; it helps them interpret their own human experience, telling them what in their heart of hearts they already know, and are yearning to hear confirmed.[73]

Conclusion

We must return to our original question, "Is application necessary in the expository sermon?" We emphatically answer in the affirmative. Application is inherent in the definition of an expository sermon. It is impossible to preach a true expository message without relating the biblical text to the contemporary hearers. Application is also included in the task of hermeneutics, which involves the whole process of interpretation. Furthermore, application is the mechanism to bridge the metaphorical gap between the world of the biblical text and the world of the expositor's audience. Finally, application in the expository sermon pays rich dividends as it challenges the hearers and instructs them in how to read the Bible for themselves. One might propose other reasons for including application in the

expository sermon,[74] but those included here are ample enough to underscore the preacher's obligation to apply his passage to his listeners. But there must be caution against viewing application as a human endeavor alone. It is definitely not a task to be undertaken apart from the preacher's assurance of the inherent power of God's Word (Isa 55:10) and the ultimate role of the Holy Spirit to apply that Word to human hearts.[75] As daunting a task as it may be, application nevertheless is requisite in the expository sermon in order to fulfill the very purpose of preaching in changing lives.

ENDNOTES

[1] Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching* (London: SCM Press, 1964) 108.

[2] Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 20.

[3] Charles G. Dennison, "Preaching and Application: A Review of *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* by Sidney Greidanus," *Kerux* 4 (December 1989) 44-52.

[4] Ibid., 50.

[5] Gary Findley, "Review of *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* by Bryan Chapell," *Kerux* 11 (May 1996) 37-41.

[6] Ibid., 40.

[7] Dennison, "Preaching and Application," 51.

[8] Findley comments, "While Chapell remains forever busy looking for a bridge with which to apply ancient principles to the modern world, Vos finds the ladder that connects heaven to earth, God to his people. Christ is that ladder!" (39).

[9] Charles G. Dennison, "Some Thoughts on Preaching," *Kerux* 4 (December 1989) 8.

[10] Ibid.

[11] John MacArthur, Jr., "Moving from Exegesis to Exposition," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. by Richard Mayhew (Dallas: Word, 1992) 300.

[12] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 89. Robinson also comments that "No book has been published devoted exclusively, or even primarily, to the knotty problems raised by application" (90). Adams, however, takes up his challenge in *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching*. While not fully addressing the reasons why application is necessary in preaching, Adams nevertheless states that it is. He bases his explanation solely on the nature of the task of preaching: "Is application necessary? Absolutely. And the reason is that preaching is heralding. It is not mere exposition. It is not lecturing on history—even redemptive history. It is not 'sharing'. It is authoritatively declaring both the good and the bad news of the Bible. It is forcibly bringing home to God's people God's message from God's Word" (32).

[13] J. I. Packer, "From the Scriptures to the Sermon," *Ashland Theological Journal* 22 (1990) 49.

[14] Jerry Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 97.

[15] Harold T. Bryson, "Trends in Preaching Studies Today," *Theological Educator* 49 (Spring 1994) 119.

[16] David Veerman, "Sermons: Apply Within," *Leadership* 11 (Spring 1990) 121-122.

[17] John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, new and rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1944) 210. John F. Bettler ("Application," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. by

Samuel T. Logan, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986] 332- 333) envisions an even greater role of application: "Application, no matter how skillfully structured or helpfully delivered, must never be viewed as an 'add-on.' It is not a skill to be developed merely as part of a good preaching repertoire. It is not frosting. It is rather the cake—the entire enterprise, from picking a text to post-sermon discussions, must be understood as *application*."

[18]Broadus, 211.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ramesh Richard, *Scripture Sculpture: A Do-It-Yourself Manual for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 116.

[21]Adams, 17.

[22]Veerman, 122.

[23]Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 187.

[24]Ibid.: "The implications of biblical truth are thus used as a measure for life, not to tell the hearer what he should do but to show him what is actually taking place."

[25]Ibid.: "Our hearers want to know in concrete terms how they are to live out the implications of biblical truth."

[26]Keith Willhite ("Audience Relevance in Expository Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 [July-September 1992] 355) concurs, "Without an appeal for a response, however, expository preaching lacks distinctive theological purpose and may function merely as a form of public address. The preacher must relate the Scriptures to people who face

diverse situations and needs." Bryan Chapell (*Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994] 199-200) claims that "without application the preacher has no reason to preach because truth without application is useless."

[27]Vines, *Practical Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 96.

[28]Stephen F. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998) 256.

[29]Charles Bugg, "Back to the Bible: Toward a New Description of Expository Preaching," *Review and Expositor* 90 (Summer 1993) 421.

[30]On balance, however, not every definition of expository preaching includes application. For instance, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. ("The Crisis in Expository Preaching Today," *Preaching* 11 [September-October 1995] 4) defines expository preaching as "that method of proclaiming the Scriptures that takes as a minimum one paragraph of Biblical text (in prose narrative or its equivalent in other literary genre) and derives from that text both the shape (i.e. the main points and subpoints of the sermon) and the content (i.e. the substance, ideas, and principles) of the message itself." In general, definitions that do not include application tend to focus on the length of text chosen or the method of preaching expository sermons as preaching consecutively through individual books of the Bible, rather than describing more inclusively what elements are necessary for the expository sermon.

[31]Jesse J. Northcutt, "How to Prepare

a Biblical Sermon," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 2 (April 1960) 35 (emphasis added).

[32]Faris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching* (Westwood, NJ: Revell 1967) vi-vii (emphasis added).

[33]Robinson, 19 (emphasis added).

[34]Vines, *Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 7 (emphasis added).

[35]Richard L. Mayhew, "Rediscovering Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. by Richard L. Mayhew (Dallas: Word, 1992) 12-13 (emphasis added).

[36]Robinson, 89. Northcutt agrees, "The passage must be related to life. Exposition of scripture that makes no vital contact with life is not preaching" (39).

[37]Richard, 119.

[38]V. C. Pfitzner, "The Hermeneutical Problem and Preaching," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (June 1967) 348.

[39]William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 403.

[40]Ibid., 401.

[41]Ibid., 18.

[42]Chapell, 199-203.

[43]Vines agrees: "In many ways application is the most important step in our expository work. All we have done up to this point has very little practical value if we cannot make concrete applications" (*Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 97). In addition, Richard argues: "Biblical exposition without application leads to spiritual constipation. There is no point in being academically accurate if the information

does not transform your hearers" (116).

[44]Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 13-18.

[45]Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970) 158.

[46]Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 159.

[47]John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 138.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid., 140.

[50]Ibid., 142.

[51]Ibid., 149. Timothy S. Warren ("Mind the Gap," *Preaching* 13 [September-October 1997] 18-22) builds upon Stott's metaphor of bridge-building. In his opinion, the bridge should not merely span in one direction, from text to listener, but should complete a 360 degree cycle between the revelation of Scripture, exegesis, theology, and homiletics. Unlike those advocating a narrower definition of expository preaching, who assert that one must begin with the text, Warren claims where one begins in his "expositional cycle" is not important. Rather, "That you discipline yourself to go back to the text, through exegesis, then through theology, only then through homiletics, and ultimately to obedience is the issue."

[52]Compare Nolan Howington ("Expository Preaching," *Review and Expositor* 56 [January 1959] 63) who states, "To make Biblical truth clear, there must be explanation; *to make it relevant*, there must be application" (emphasis added).

[53]Stott, 141. Willhite further comments that "nothing is more relevant for human beings than the revealed Word of the living God" (356).

[54]Vines, *Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 96.

[55]Olford, 251. Bettler agrees, claiming, "the Bible is about life. It is God's manual to show His people how to live. All of its teachings are *for* living" (335). Pfitzner, however, incorrectly makes a dangerous statement concerning the profitability of Scripture, "In many cases the original form of the text's preachment may remain the same, since the past and present situations are identical. *In other cases a text may not be 'preachable'*" (emphasis added, 361).

[56]Kaiser, 8. William Ward Ayer ("The Art of Effective Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 [January-March 1967] 31) makes a similar call: "The man behind the sacred desk must have studied to show himself approved as he handles the truth, adapting it to the needs of today, needs which are basically the same as for all days, but especially for our day when surface situations have been so radically changed in a rapidly changing world."

[57]Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 158.

[58]Willhite, however, believes it is an argumentative task, that the expository preacher must take into consideration aspects of argumentation to bridge the gap to audience relevance (356).

[59]Stott, 144.

[60]Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 157.

[61]Chapell, 199.

[62]Packer concurs: "Communication from the text is only preaching as it is applied and brought to bear on the listeners with a life-giving thrust. Without this it would merely be a lecture that is, a discourse disguised merely to clear people's heads and stock their minds, but not in any direct way to change their lives" (49).

[63]Frank E. Coho, "From Text to Sermon: The Reformed Preacher and the Mind of Christ," *Reformed Review* 40 (Autumn 1986) 16-20.

[64]David Mains ("From Application to Action," *Leadership* 7 [Fall 1986] 64-65) states, "preachers must build practical bridges. We need to list the first steps necessary to respond to what Scripture requires, and then we have to walk people over those bridges, step by step, to get them to that point."

[65]Stuart Briscoe, "What Makes Interesting Preaching," *Leadership* 11 (Winter 1990) 74-78.

[66]McDill, 188-193.

[67]Vines, *Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 95.

[68]Robinson, 90.

[69]Veerman comments on the role of the preacher: "None of us wants to insult the intelligence of our listeners, and so we lay out the Bible story, the theological insights, or the timeless truths, and leave the rest to them. But most, I found to my dismay, can't make the mental jump. Our congregations don't want to be

spoon-fed, but they do need to be led" (121).

[70]Louis Goldberg, "Preaching with Power the Word—Correctly Handled—to Transform Man and His World," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (March 1984) 13-14.

[71]Stott, 177.

[72]Howington, understands this role of application, stating, "The preacher will throw the light of divine revelation upon human need and will present the resources of grace that are sufficient for that need. His sermons will thus disclose the vital relation between the passage and actual life. Though the setting of the text is ancient, the living word through it speaks to personal need and in the present tense" (63).

[73]Louis Lotz, "Good Preaching," *Reformed Review* 40 (Autumn 1986) 38.

[74]Earl Comfort notes that practical preaching is a decisive factor in church growth. Psychological studies have also concluded that application gives the sermon greater overall impact (Earl V. Comfort, "Is the Pulpit a factor in Church Growth?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 [Jan-Mar 1983] 63). See H. Newton Malony, *The Psychology of Religion for Ministry* (Mahwah, NJ: Integration Books, 1995) 84-85.

[75]"We must do everything we can to enhance the practical nature of our sermons. But we must also be keenly aware that we do not preach in our own skill and energies. The Holy Spirit applies the Word when a preacher preaches" (Vines, *Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 102).