

# APPLICATION AND PERSUASION: BRINGING ALL OF GOD'S WORD TO ALL IN HIS WORLD

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## Application and Persuasion: The Complaint and Challenge<sup>1</sup>

A common complaint from those who listen to sermons is that the preacher 'only told us what we already knew. We were no better off after the sermon than before. We could have got that by staying home and reading the text ourselves.' In other words, all the preacher has done is rehearse the text. Even when the preacher has expounded the text in the light of the rest of the Bible, bringing new insights or deepening truths already believed, the congregation hasn't felt fed, hasn't had its 'itches' scratched.<sup>2</sup> The preacher hasn't integrated the text with the issues faced daily by the listeners. Or, to put it in Barth's terms, there's been no connection between 'the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.'<sup>3</sup> Even when the preacher has made some attempt to apply the text, often that application is superficial, hackneyed, limited to private spirituality, or more suited to another text. Unfortunately, the preacher hasn't wrestled robustly with the contemporary implications and imperatives arising from this particular text.

This work of wrestling with the application of a text takes time. It is often hard. It requires uncluttered, unpressured space for prayer and reflection. It requires theological knowledge, not just of God and his

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper originally given at the Australasian Academy of Homiletics, Sydney, June, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> 'Sermons are born when at least implicitly in the preacher's mind the problematic *itch* intersects a solutional *scratch*—between the particulars of the human predicament and the particularity of the gospel' in Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form: Expanded Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982) p. 149. Stott's source, M. Ramsey and L. C. Suenens *The Future of the Christian Church* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1970) p. 26 (NB—Not as per Stott), does not give the original reference. I am grateful to Dr Clifford Anderson, Center for Barth Studies, Princeton Theological Seminary, for advising that an authoritative source for this quotation is as yet undiscovered. The clearest statement on record from Barth comes from a *Time Magazine* piece on Barth, published 31 May 1963, '[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and your newspaper and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.'" See <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/faq/quotes.aspx?men>, Accessed 11 September 2009.

word, but of ‘the world, the flesh, and the devil.’<sup>4</sup> It requires pastoral experience and insight. It requires self-knowledge and self-giving, because ultimately this work is an act of love towards one’s audience. Its goal is not just to apply and press home the word of God to those listening, but to help listeners see how the text urges this response, so that, having seen, they are moved even more so to respond, and are now better equipped to read and apply the Scriptures themselves.

## Laying some foundations: Application, Persuasion and the Preacher

*Application* is bringing God’s word to bear on our current world. Or, to put it in its mirrored form, it is bringing all that we know about the world under the rule and kingdom of all that we know about God. He is Lord, and Jesus commands us to, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’<sup>5</sup> Application, then, speaks to all aspects of our person, sometimes severally, sometimes holistically, exposing the implications of God’s word. Jesus also commands us to, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’<sup>6</sup> He is Lord not only of individuals, but of the church, as it seeks to live as his people in the world. And he is Lord of the world, longing for the restoration of his relationship with the world, for good stewardship of his creation, and for justice and righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

The implications for preachers are enormous. Not only will they need to know God’s word, but they will need to know God’s world. Furthermore, they will need theological and pastoral skills to bring God’s word to bear on all that’s happening in their part of God’s world. At first, this may seem an impossible task. However, God has promised to guide and equip through his indwelling Spirit, and we have the rich heritage of past believers from which to draw. Moreover, these skills of theological reflection and integration can be developed with practice.

<sup>4</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662, The Litany

<sup>5</sup> Mk 12:30, referencing Dt 6:4, 5. All scripture is from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> Mk 12:31.

<sup>7</sup> Some have called this ministry of applying God’s word one aspect of prophesy, in contrast to, or, perhaps better, complementary to, the ministry of teaching. Such a perspective is supported by an examination of the Old Testament prophets, who knew both God’s word and their circumstances, making the connection, and by 1 Cor 14:6, 24–25, 31, 39. However, the definition of prophesy is better the preserve of other contexts, where fuller treatment can be given. For the purposes of this article, application and persuasion relate to the full range of ministries associated with the word of God, including teaching, evangelising, encouraging, pastoring, rebuking, commanding and, of course, prophesying.

Stott, for instance, suggests the simple discipline of taking the morning's news stories and asking, 'What are some theological responses? And what are some appropriate godly responses of the heart, or behaviourally?'<sup>8</sup> Cultivating such a habit, especially if we can interact with the responses of others, will develop the skill of bringing all of God's word to all in his world, and of bringing all in his world under all of his word.

*Persuasion*, and I use the term broadly, calls for change in accord with the text's application. Persuasion can be considered either a subset or an extension of application. The value in naming it separately is that it reminds us of the preacher's role to call for change, implementing application. Scripture is replete with persuasion. Prophets call for repentance and worship. Jesus commands his listeners to love, believe, obey and go. Paul appeals, implores and urges as he tries to persuade his listeners to 'be reconciled to God.'<sup>9</sup>

Persuasion is not manipulation. Manipulation occurs when the listener is given no real choice to make their own decision. The line between persuasion and manipulation will vary with personality and culture. Some listeners are looking for strong words from their captain-coach. They gauge the sermon's effectiveness by its passion, and are disappointed by the dispassionate. For other listeners, the greater the emotion, the greater the resistance. These listeners want a carefully reasoned call for change.

Some preachers, fearing manipulation, soft-pedal the call for change. However, this excuse can easily mask deeper problems, such as lack of vocational confidence, incompetence at calling for change, a sense of youth, or a fear of having to change oneself. A lack of persuasion is often heard as a lack of conviction in the text and its application. Yet God's word 'is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword.'<sup>10</sup> It convicts. It cuts to the heart. To do it justice, its preaching must be congruent with its content. 'God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.'<sup>11</sup> We therefore implore and urge our listeners 'not to receive God's grace in vain.'<sup>12</sup> Persuasion thus calls for change, respecting the listener, recognising that all, preacher and listeners, will have to give account for all.<sup>13</sup>

Some have real gifts in persuasion and are often natural leaders or salespeople. Their challenge is keeping the focus on the word of God,

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<sup>8</sup> My best recollection is that Stott, after Barth, suggested this at a College for Preachers Conference in Sydney, about 1973. See also J. R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982) pp. 149–150.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 5:11–6:2.

<sup>10</sup> Heb 4:12.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor 5:19–20.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 6:1.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Cor 5:10. See also Mt 12:36; Rom 14:12; Heb 4:13.

allowing this word to be the basis for persuasion, rather than their charm or communication skills. Others are poor persuaders. They may even justify this theologically, arguing it should be the word, not the preacher, that persuades. However, the passion and urgency of the Bible's preachers do not allow this claim.<sup>14</sup> Under God, the word will do its work as the preacher serves that word, delivering it in harmony with all its joy, challenge, encouragement and rebuke.

My experience has been that preachers can develop skills in persuasion, once the central issues of vocation and role have been resolved, as it is usually these issues that hold back a preacher's effectiveness in this area. One exercise I use in class is for members to put a command from Scripture into a box, such as 'Honour one another above yourselves' or 'Be patient in affliction.'<sup>15</sup> Each in turn draws out one of these verses and is given a short time for preparation. Members then have three minutes to persuade the class of this command. To aid analysis and learning enjoyment, presentations are sometimes given a score by each class member, with a prize awarded for the most persuasive. More importantly, a review of each brings out those elements that make for good persuasion.

## Why apply and persuade? Surely all we need is Scripture?

Some argue there is no place for any application and persuasion beyond that expressly asserted in Scripture. They note that we have all we need in Scripture, and the preacher's task is solely to teach this, clearly and comprehensively. This position reminds us of both the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, while alerting us to the dangers of moving beyond Scripture. However, there are numerous difficulties with this view.

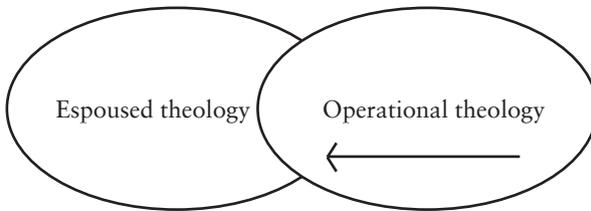
In the first place, it must be remembered that each of the books in the Bible were given at a unique time and context. Their authors knew that context, and spoke to it. How then does one preach about Scripture's interaction with the contemporary context unless contemporary application is made and modelled? Issues related to technology, bioethics and government are obvious examples. There is, then, at least a *contemporary need*, calling for contemporary application.

More fundamentally, there is an *ongoing redemptive and sanctifying need*. Through wilfulness, misunderstanding and ignorance, people do not worship God. The church has been given an evangelistic mandate, and bringing Scripture to bear on all other religions and worldviews will require application and persuasion. As people are saved, their understanding of God needs to be trained and the gap between their espoused and operational theology addressed. Our espoused theology is

<sup>14</sup> As, for example, in 2 Cor 6:1–2.

<sup>15</sup> Rom 12:10, 12.

what we *say* we believe: whether it be formally, as in a creed, or informally, as in a conversation, or simply to ourselves. Our operational theology is what we *evidence* in practice: in our hearts and actions. We might, for example, say we believe in a God who will provide for all our needs, but our worries and energies demonstrate that in reality we are trusting in our own labours. We might, for example, say we believe Jesus is the only way to the Father and that he is coming to judge those who do not honour him, but the complacency of our prayers and efforts in evangelism testify differently. Our natures are beset by sin and even when we know what is right, we do not do it. Thankfully, God is renewing his people. For this renewal to occur, the gap between espoused and operational theology has to be diagnosed, exposed and remedied, so that the two move into alignment, as indicated below.<sup>16</sup>



As Scripture is read and preached, it continually brings us back from our perilous wanderings and keeps our focus on Christ. Of course it has a power to do this on its own, as it often does, if we have the ability to read it. But in God's kindness he foundationally uses preachers to speak his word, identify where we fall short in applying it, and challenge us to obedience.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, there is very specific *modelling* of this process in Scripture. Nathan artfully rebukes David for 'despising the word of the Lord.'<sup>18</sup> At Pentecost, Peter explains the Scriptures to the multicultural crowd. After they were 'cut to the heart,' he warned them to, 'Repent and be baptised' and pleaded with them to, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'<sup>19</sup> In each of their letters, Paul, Peter, James and John teach and make direct application. Among a wide range of contemporary applications, the Corinthians, for example, are called upon to be united,

<sup>16</sup> Of course, sometimes one's espoused theology may need to change in the light of Scripture.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps one of the most graphic illustrations of this need is the parable in Mt 7:24–27.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Sam 12:9.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 2:38–41.

to expel the immoral brother, to exercise propriety in worship and to organise weekly giving for the Jerusalem gift.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the Old and New Testaments Scripture models direct and specific application to individuals, churches, crowds and nations, believers and unbelievers alike. God has given us this wonderful panoply of courageous yet considered models, and the plain expectation of Scripture is that this applicatory ministry will continue as the gospel goes out to the globe, a process exemplified by the New Testament writers as they freshly apply the Old Testament to their own contexts.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, there are clear *commands* to apply and persuade. Paul charges Timothy to, 'Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.'<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Titus is commanded to, 'Encourage and rebuke with all authority.'<sup>23</sup> The Ephesian elders are commanded to, 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.'<sup>24</sup> This watching will necessarily involve modelling, teaching, warning, and the sharing of one's own life, just as Paul himself did in Ephesus.<sup>25</sup> There is no sense here that the apostles simply delivered the word with a 'take it or leave it' attitude, or that, having delivered the word, they considered their responsibility over. On the contrary, the sense is that having brought the word, the apostles recognised its extraordinary life-changing implications and did all they could to gently and patiently apply these implications in each circumstance, even at their own great cost.

Moreover, these commands to apply and persuade come with an *equipping*. God gives gifts to preachers for this ministry of application and persuasion. He also gives gifts for its reception. If we pray that God will speak through us, we should expect that he will speak, even as we apply and persuade. This goes right to the heart of what is happening during preaching. God is speaking through his chosen instrument. God knows who will be listening, and their needs. God takes all that the preacher has to offer: their character, giftedness, learning and experience, and equips by his Holy Spirit as they prepare and bring this section or theme of Scripture to this particular audience. Simultaneously God prepares and works in the hearts of listeners. To be God's ambassador in this way is an extraordinarily privileged and noble work. It is also extremely humbling. Such a ministry requires faith: faith that God is equipping the preacher for the task, faith that God's word will achieve its purposes, and faith

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor 1:9–4:21; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Cor 11–14; and 1 Cor 16:6, respectively.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor 10:1–22.

<sup>22</sup> 2 Tim 4:2.

<sup>23</sup> Tit 2:15.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 20:28.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 20:18, 20, 31, 35. Similarly, in 1 Thess 2:7–12.

that it will produce a harvest.<sup>26</sup> This faith is nurtured and confirmed as we experience the Spirit's work. As preachers, we sense the Spirit's work as applications are given and communicated in a way that is 'beyond' ourselves—that could only have come from God. As listeners, we can testify to those times when we have been challenged and encouraged, even when the preacher may not have known us, or realised the pertinence of an application. We experience the Holy Spirit ministering to us and others in ways that the preacher could never have imagined.

This glorious relationship between the Spirit and the preacher is a great comfort and correction. It encourages us, knowing that the Spirit is going before and after, working in listeners' hearts, in tandem with our own efforts. However, it also keeps us from pride at a 'good' response, and despair or self-blame at a 'poor' one. It brings a mature equanimity to the preacher's work. It calls on us to give all that we have, as faithful servants co-operatively convicting with the Spirit. At the same time it keeps us from manipulation. We cannot force our listeners to act rightly, nor do we need to. If the Spirit is moving, there will be response. Honouring that Spirit, 'knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others.'<sup>27</sup>

Application and persuasion, then, involves far more than rehearsing the Scriptures. Moreover, it moves a step on from teaching and explaining those Scriptures. It means applying those Scriptures in the contemporary context, persuasively calling on one's listeners to change accordingly. Throughout the Scriptures this process is modelled for us. The fact that God equips his ministers for this work, concurrently empowering listeners to respond, means that he expects us to do this work, as indeed he has commanded, and indeed as he has planned.

## Dangers in application and persuasion

Nonetheless, there are significant dangers related to application. The first is creating a culture of *legalism*. Here the application is too prescriptive, with subsequent loss of Christian liberty. Some preaching on alcohol, giving, and Sabbath observance falls into this trap. This exemplifies a larger tension in preaching: creating and maintaining a culture of grace, while simultaneously proclaiming that those who love Christ will obey what he commands.<sup>28</sup> The sin and misbelief of people everywhere is that they can achieve their own salvation, whether by works or sacrifice. Preachers can unwittingly feed this self-righteousness, which is so deeply

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<sup>26</sup> Is 55:11; Lk 8:11–15.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Cor 5:11 (NRSV).

<sup>28</sup> Jn 14:15.

entrenched in fallen human nature, by creating a righteousness based on works: the application of the text.<sup>29</sup>

A second danger is the creation of a culture of *dependency*, where congregations rely too heavily on their preacher for their understanding of the word and its implications. At its most extreme, this dependency is seen in sects and cults where leaders exercise undue power, instead of there being healthy interdependence, freedom and mutual respect. However, this dependency is more common than we acknowledge. Sometimes we cannot even recognise it, especially in some sub-cultural groups, or in church-planting and missionary contexts. Indeed, anywhere where there is strong leadership and preaching there lies the inherent danger of not sufficiently empowering listeners to make their own decisions in applying the word. Dependency will lead to stunted growth and immaturity, and will leave listeners vulnerable to unfaithful preachers. At core, it is part of the larger tension between the ordained authority of those who lead and preach, other sources of authority, such as synods and congregational councils, and individual Christian liberty and responsibility.

A third danger related to the above is creating a *simplistic* or *fundamentalist* culture. Here, the preacher unduly narrows the boundaries and implications of the text and leaves no room for listeners to make their own application. Good preachers will equip and provide space for listeners to apply the text to the particularities of their own worlds. Some preachers balk, consciously or unconsciously, at the prospect of theologically-minded listeners, keen for conversation, engaging with the text. The mature preacher, confident in their vocation, will relish this evidence of fruitfulness.

## What then makes for good application and persuasion?

Good application will be *holistic*. It will bring the word of God to bear on all aspects of the listener's person: their mind, heart, soul and strength. It recognises that our behaviour generally flows out of our thinking and our hearts. So, Paul's charge to the Romans to 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God,'<sup>30</sup> is done in view of their knowledge of God's mercy, and through the renewing of their minds. Similarly, James urges his readers to tame the tongue, recognising that the tongue evidences the heart. The same spring cannot produce 'both fresh water and salt water,' nor a 'fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs.' It will

<sup>29</sup> It is important to remember that both historically and theologically grace precedes law: God created Adam before initiating law and inaugurated a people before giving the Mosaic covenant. Furthermore, without grace, law can be heartless and even cruel.

<sup>30</sup> Rom 12:1.

be the renewed heart that will teach humbly, praise the Lord and honour others with a tongue kept well in check.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to suggest that direct calls for behavioural change are inappropriate. On the contrary, the Scriptures are salted with such commands. Right behaviour is crucial. Indeed, behavioural changes often lead to changes in our hearts and thinking.<sup>32</sup> However, a holistic approach alerts us to the dangers of only treating symptoms. If the symptoms alone are treated, this can result in behavioural change without a long-term change of heart, nor an understanding of why such behaviours flow from faith. Many participants in Christian gatherings change behaviour in order to fit in, but such behavioural changes do not proceed from faith. A veneer of Christian respectability may be presented, even down the generations, but it is soon accompanied by nominalism and legalism.

Good application will therefore be *well-argued*. It will clearly show the Scriptural basis for right thinking and the consequent responses of heart and will. Furthermore, it will also work hard to persuade us and move us to action. It will recognise the gap between our espoused and operational theology, and will identify the obstacles to implementation. Thus, good application attends to *diagnosis*. It will seek to understand the relationships between our thinking, our hearts and our behaviours. It will seek to understand how sin works: how ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’<sup>33</sup> conspire to prevent holiness and foster unrighteousness. Our untamed tongue, for instance, may be due to ill-discipline, lust, self-righteousness, self-promotion, lack of confidence, jealousy, modelling by family, friends or colleagues, or a lack of love for others. Therefore, greater understanding of our acceptance in Christ and our interdependent giftedness in his body will often be more helpful to listeners as they seek to tame their tongues than simply the command.

But beware! Diagnosis and insight will not necessarily lead to change. Insight can help us be more intentional and strategic in attending to our attitudes, motivations and wills. However, all of us are experts at explaining and excusing sinful behaviour.<sup>34</sup> Repentance is required. Good application will therefore *call for repentance*, holistically.

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<sup>31</sup> Jas 3:1–12.

<sup>32</sup> The nature of the interactions between the aspects of the human person, and their relationship to Biblical anthropology, is complex, and fuller treatment is better the preserve of Christian psychological texts. By way of introduction, see for example, W. T. Kirwan, ‘Biblical Anthropology’ and W. D. Norman, ‘Mind-Brain Relationship’ in David Benner and Peter Hill, eds., *The Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 133–134, 755–757.

<sup>33</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662, The Litany.

<sup>34</sup> ‘If we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.’ (1 Cor 11:31).

Let's remind ourselves of how repentance comes about, as there are significant implications for the preacher. The Bible explicitly teaches that humans are 'dead in...transgressions and sins.'<sup>35</sup> They cannot act rightly, as they are 'slaves to sin.'<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, all are blinded to the truth, since a veil covers minds and hearts.<sup>37</sup> Mercifully, the ascended Christ has sent his Holy Spirit, who 'will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement.'<sup>38</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who 'will guide you into all truth.'<sup>39</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who lifts the veil, opens eyes, and gives new life.<sup>40</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates and brings about repentance, using preachers as his instruments.<sup>41</sup> This Spirit is like the wind.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes it moves so powerfully that listeners come under strong conviction with hardly a word from the preacher, as did the city of Nineveh at Jonah's reluctant arrival. More usually the Spirit is moving unnoticed, except to those with searching eyes. This Holy Spirit empowered work of calling for repentance will be a constant process. It means that the preacher will always need to be asking the question, 'So what?' in relation to the text. It also means that the preacher needs to be alert to and in tune with the Spirit's convicting work, both in the preacher's heart and in the hearts of listeners.

### So let's apply all this to the sermon...

Firstly, consider the text's *original purpose* and the application it called for at the time. Why was it written? Was it written, for instance, to record God's power and care for his people, thus calling for renewed faith and praise? Was it written to give instruction on proper worship and behaviour, thus urging faithfulness and obedience? Or was it written to teach about the future, so that listeners would persevere with certain hope?

Consider then the text *in relation to the whole Bible* and the consequent application for God's people more generally. Chappell asks, 'What is the text's 'Fallen Condition Focus?''<sup>43</sup> What aspect of

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<sup>35</sup> Eph 2:1.

<sup>36</sup> Rom 6:17–18; 7:18. See also Ps 14:1–3; Rom 3:9–12, 23.  
2 Cor 3:14–4:6.

<sup>38</sup> Jn 16:8.

<sup>39</sup> Jn 16:13.

<sup>40</sup> Jn 3:5–6.

<sup>41</sup> Rom 10:13–17.

<sup>42</sup> Jn 3:18.

<sup>43</sup> Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 48–57. Not all texts are written with a Fallen Condition Focus specifically in mind, such as texts praising God for his creation and love for his people.

our fallenness does the text address? Does it address, for instance, our natural idolatry? Or our self-centredness, laziness or greed? Particularise the Fallen Condition Focus and its concomitant application as *specifically* as possible. A common mistake of preachers is to so boil down the application of their text that all application looks the same, whether it be, ‘Repent and believe,’ ‘Read the Bible and pray,’ ‘God heals,’ ‘God loves,’ ‘It’s all about grace,’ ‘It’s all about justice,’ or ‘God’s covenant will continue.’ Naturally, there will be aspects of these truths in many passages, but seek to discern what is specific to this text. A useful question to ask is, ‘What would we lose if this text were not in the canon?’ Of course, many parts of Scripture are repetitive. That is usually their very point. This is exemplified in sections of the law, some Old Testament narratives, the Psalms, the prophets, and even in the rhythm of Acts. To be faithful and specific to these texts, the preacher thus needs to convey the implications of that repetition.

Consider then the implications of the text *for your own life*. This will take time, allowing the searchlight of the text to pierce deeply into the ‘nooks and crannies’ of our minds and hearts, exposing all. It will also require humility and teachability. However, unless we begin such examination and be the first to take the initiative of response, it will be all too easy for our preached application to be trite or superficial. Unless we have experienced at least some of the guilt, the pain or the frustration in applying the text, our call to listeners will be slick and lack integrity. It may even be insensitive or cruel. At its most extreme, calling for a change of behaviour in others when the text hasn’t been applied to oneself will lead to a dissociation of personality and ultimately a breakdown of one’s ministry. Frankly, there will be some texts preachers will hardly dare address because of their personal implications. Commonly, preachers are tempted to avoid preaching on divorce and the management of one’s household, on giving, on forgiveness and bitterness, and on the role and qualifications of leaders. Such texts not only challenge and convict us personally, but they also expose us. Yet they must be preached. In fact, those places where we have been most challenged and refined will often be where we have the most to offer.<sup>44</sup>

Having made significant headway in applying the text to yourself—and not till then—consider its distinct application for your *audience*. What does the text say to the group as a group? And as individuals? A practice I have found helpful is to choose four representative listeners in the audience, varied in terms of their gender, age, education, background and spiritual maturity. I then systematically ask, ‘What are the implications of this text for each of these four?’ Naturally some texts will be more pertinent to some listeners at various life stages and circumstances, but

<sup>44</sup> 2 Cor 1:3–7. See also, for example, Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 83–98.

I generally aim to cover as wide a range of application as the text and time allow. Of course, this requires the preacher to know the worlds and issues of the listeners. It raises the deeper issue of the pastor's commitment to the congregation. Is the pastor prepared to love members enough to do the hard work of bringing their worlds and the text together? Is the pastor then committed enough to gently, lovingly, help listeners move to those next steps of faith, repentance and obedience? This specificity and comprehensiveness will demonstrate the care and work done by the preacher in considering the implications of the text for listeners. It will be much appreciated, strengthening the pastoral relationship. Simultaneously, however, preachers also need to be *open-ended*, noting the dangers of legalism, dependency and simplistic applications mentioned above. This is why it is so important to teach the theological principles in a text: the preacher will have no experience or knowledge of many of the issues faced by listeners and will be pleasantly surprised to learn how listeners apply the sermon to their own circumstances.

Having wrestled with the implications of the text for yourself and your audience, consider *appropriate self-disclosure*. Modelling the steps you have taken in response to the text will train in others a similar process, as well as give some specific examples. Of course, the preacher won't necessarily have achieved the text's goals, but will at least have begun the process. However, self-disclosure needs to be monitored, and it is often wise to run it past a trusted critic beforehand. Self-disclosure needs to be helpful. It needs to serve the sermon and the congregation. To do this, it must be God-focussed. It must not serve the preacher's needs, nor be distracting. In preaching, there are few things worse than focussing on the ambassador, positively or negatively. The former is heard as boasting, whereas the latter leaves the listeners more worried about their preacher than their own service of God. Preachers also need to be alert to their own unresolved personal issues, where there is inappropriate focus or energy. These are obviously best resolved in other, less public, contexts. After time and healing have given greater objectivity and perspective, consideration can then be given to their usefulness homiletically.

*Involve others:* Discussing the implications of the text with others before, during and after the sermon will open new worlds to the preacher, as well as train listeners. I clearly remember teaching 1 Corinthians 8 to a student group with little exposure to the issues raised by eating food sacrificed to idols. After explaining the theological principles in the passage I asked the group how it might apply in their worlds. I was surprised at the thoughtfulness, pertinence and comprehensiveness of their replies as they considered the issues of idolatry, conscience, knowledge, and care for weaker brethren. I hadn't been able to deliver such application. Our thinking it through together both internalised the teaching and the

applicatory process and gave us contextualised application as we learnt from each other.

*Be creative, even tailored:* The Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles were all wisely creative in the responses they called for, both in their content and form. Some responses were specifically tailored for a particular person or circumstance. The prophets sometimes called for a covenant renewal or ritual. Jesus commanded one man to sell everything he had. Paul gives very specific instructions to the Corinthians, which are different from those given to the Thessalonians. To each of the seven churches in the Revelation, the Spirit of the Lord commands a unique response. Within the service or event in which the sermon is preached, prayers, music, interviews and testimonies can all be creatively used in application. Small groups provide ideal settings for working through the sermon's implications, especially if the groups have been given open-ended questions by the preacher. Groups also provide good places for mutual accountability and focussed, consequent prayer. Sermon series which remind and build on the application from previous weeks also provide occasions for creativity and accountability.

In the sermon, exercise *variety in the placing* of application, given the constraints of the passage. Application normally comes after an explanation and understanding of the text, but there are numerous times when application can occur at various points within the sermon, so that the preacher's structures do not have a familiar predictability. Otherwise listeners 'tune out' at the challenging moment. Sometimes the most powerful application occurs when there is no stated application at all: when the teaching, parable or story's implications are so clear that to explain them only sullies their effect, as in explaining a joke. At other times the application will not be immediately obvious, but will 'get under the listener's skin,' slowly emerging through the Spirit's work in ensuing weeks.

Understanding and using *reversal* is key to application. Listeners often identify with the prodigal son—and the parable is indeed a life-giving message for the prodigals amongst us. Yet many sermon listeners are much more like the elder brother: dutiful, expecting our rewards, unforgiving, and undelighting in the Father's love.<sup>45</sup> Good preachers will put my face in the mirror, without manipulation or putting down. They will at first allow my smug identification with the prodigal, only to reverse the picture and show me who I really am and how easily I delude myself. Mercifully, even the older son is loved by the Father, if only he will forego his self-righteousness and accept the Father's love for what it is: unconditional, independent of any works or quality in the beloved. Similarly, we may think we have the generosity of the temple widow, but

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, T. Keller, *The Prodigal God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008).

aren't we much more like the rich man looking for acknowledgement? Or the Pharisee showing off his prayers? Or David, indignant at the rich man in Nathan's story, who happens to be us? Reversal is at the heart of the gospel: we gain life by losing it, the first will be last. A major challenge for the preacher is helping congregations own and live this unworldly paradox.

Understanding and using *escalation* is similarly key to application and persuasion. Again, Scripture overflows with escalation. Probably the most common type of escalation is the *a fortiori* argument: *how much more!* If a man will get up grumpily at midnight to help a neighbour with an unexpected visitor's needs, how much more will our Heavenly Father answer the door to our needs!<sup>46</sup> If God cares for the birds, won't he care for you? 'How much more valuable you are than birds!'<sup>47</sup> More generally, escalation will move the application of the passage in steps, leading from one implication of the text to an even more serious, or wonderful one, and even further, till we reach a remarkable climax. Thus, it is not just that Christ died for our sins, wiping our slate clean, but that, by faith and participation in him we now have a righteousness so pure we are considered to have completely fulfilled the law, so that we are even called Jesus' brothers, God's own sons, who reign and judge with him.<sup>48 49 50</sup> Praise God for our new identity in Christ!

*Be sensitive to the rebuke-encouragement pendulum:* The pastorally alert preacher is sensitive to whether the congregation needs to hear encouragement, rebuke or both. Like children, congregations grow in different ways at different times. Sometimes the preacher will focus on God's love, grace, forgiveness and comfort. At other times, congregations will need to hear God's commands, justice, judgement and disturbing.<sup>51</sup> The congregation that only hears grace will be prone to libertarianism and anti-nomianism. The congregation that only hears law will be prone to legalism and self-righteousness. The pendulum must keep swinging for a healthy congregation. The competent pastor-preacher regularly needs to stand apart and assess the congregation's needs. Making this sensitivity more complicated is the knowledge that there will be those

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<sup>46</sup> Lk 11:5-13.

<sup>47</sup> Lk 12:24.

<sup>48</sup> Rom 5:10,17; Heb 2:11; 12:5-7; Col 3:1-4; 2 Tim 2:12; 1 Cor 6:2-3.

<sup>49</sup> For a brilliant example of escalation combined with reversal, see 2 Cor 5:20-21, where Paul also makes use of a number of chiasms.

<sup>50</sup> For a fuller discussion on the use of narratival elements in preaching, see Adrian Lane, "Please! No More Boring Sermons' An Introduction to the Application of Narrative to Homiletics" in K. Weller, ed., *Please! No More Boring Sermons'* (Melbourne: Acorn, 2007), pp. 80-92 and at [www.preaching.org.au](http://www.preaching.org.au).

<sup>51</sup> Obviously these are not discrete aspects of God's character, since God is one and all are related.

who need to hear the re-vivifying words for the prodigal, but instead hear the challenge to the self-righteous older brother; whereas those who need to hear the challenge assume they have repented and are being feted by the father. There are those who consider themselves Pharisees, when they are far more like tax-collectors; or tax-collectors, when they are far more like Pharisees. This is the nature of our brokenness, evidenced during the sermon on gossip, when, in a loud whisper, Joan leans across to her friend Jan exclaiming that she only wishes her friend Roan was there to hear it! One way forward is to identify the implications of a passage for different listeners and help listeners assess themselves with 'sober judgement.'<sup>52</sup>

### Living with the Response to Application and Persuasion

As preachers apply and persuade, they are calling on listeners to own their sin and change. Most of us find this very difficult. Whether it be repenting of an attitude or habit; whether it be adopting new positive attitudes and behaviours; whether it means emerging from a safe isolated individualistic world; or identifying with a group despised by others, the difficulties in making these sanctifying changes are often directed at the preacher. Preachers have to learn to live with the defensiveness, anger and surliness of their listeners as they come under conviction. That conviction may last for years, if listeners are deliberately choosing to resist God and continue to sin. Even as listeners change over time, there is little acknowledgement, let alone thankfulness, that this has been occasioned by the preaching they have heard. Sadly, many do not even respond to the gospel, walking away from Jesus like the rich young man in Matthew 19:22. Yet simultaneously there is the incredible joy of participating in transformed lives. The same word will evoke such opposite responses. 'To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?'<sup>53</sup> One response is to lose courage, confidence and conviction. However, preachers need to remind themselves that any response is to the message preached, and to its author. This sobers our task, sustaining us as we remember that we are ambassadors of the living God who will empower, bring forth fruit and ultimately be triumphant, just as he did for his Son.

The Holy Spirit gives to many hearts a longing to hear the word of God. Don't short-change your listeners. Feed, encourage and challenge them. Don't let listeners go home without hearing a word from God pertinent to their lives. And don't go home without letting that word

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<sup>52</sup> Rom 12:3.

<sup>53</sup> 2 Cor 2:16.

minister to you, because ultimately it's only that word which will sustain and transform.

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