Principles and Parameters for Sermon Application in Personal Sanctification
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Introduction

Biblical preaching’s authenticity is significantly tarnished by contemporary communicators’ being more concerned with personal relevance than God's revelation. Scripture unmistakably requires a proclamation focused on God's will and mankind's obligation to obey. With men wholly committed to God's Word, the expository method commends itself as preaching that is true to the Bible. The method presupposes an exegetical process to extract the God-intended meaning of Scripture and an explanation of that meaning in a contemporary understandable way. The biblical essence and apostolic spirit of expository preaching needs to be recaptured in the training of men newly committed to “preaching the Word.”

What is the necessary response to a sin-cursed world? I agree with Walter Kaiser's appraisal:

Regardless of what new directives and emphases are periodically offered, that which is needed above everything else to make the Church more viable, authentic, and effective, is a new declaration of the Scriptures with a new purpose, passion, and power. Toward an Exegetical Theology, Walter Kaiser, Baker, 1998 242.

Defining Expository Preaching

No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching. . . . It is emphatically not preaching about the Bible, but preaching the Bible. "What saith the Lord" is the alpha and the omega of expository preaching. It begins in the Bible and ends in the Bible and all that intervenes springs from the Bible. In other words, expository preaching is Bible-centered preaching. Principles of Expositional Preaching, Merrill Unger, Zondervan, 1955 33.

Two other definitions of exposition help clarify what it is:

- Exposition is the detailed interpretation, logical amplification, and practical application of a passage of Scripture.

- Expository preaching is the presentation of biblical truth, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, Spirit-guided study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit applies first to the life of the preacher and then through him to his congregation.

In summary, the following minimal elements identify expository preaching:

1. The message finds its sole source in Scripture.
2. The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis.
3. The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context.
4. The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture.

Question
The question at hand is not the importance of expository preaching, but whether expository preaching demands contemporary application. York and Blue define the problem and subsequent question.

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? Is Application Necessary in Expository Preaching? Herschel York and Scott Blue, SBTJ 3/2, 1999, 70. (These notes are an abridged version of this article. It serves as the foundation for the study.)

Options
1. Neo-Orthodoxy: 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.” 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. Karl Barth, Prayer and Preaching (London: SCM Press, 1964) 108.

2. Sufficiency Advocates: Some reject the need for application based upon what they define as the sufficiency of the Word even within the contemporary world. Charles Dennison 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. Charles G. Dennison, “Some Thoughts on Preaching,” Kerux 4 (December 1989) 8.

John MacArthur is not opposed to general applications within a sermon, but rejects the concept that the preacher is obligated to do so. He argues that the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit are sufficient.

   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 principilizing 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. John MacArthur, Jr., “Moving from Exegesis to Exposition,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. by Richard Mayhew (Dallas: Word, 1992) 300.

3. Application Necessity: Some homileticians believe that application is a vital part of preaching. Haddon Robinson notes, “Many homileticians have not given accurate application the attention it deserves.” J. I. Packer admits the present-day pulpit is weak in practical preaching. Jerry Vines laments that the “subject of application in the work of exposition has not received sufficient attention.” 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.” Blue, 72.

A. Defining Application: 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.” Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 20.

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. Blue 73.

Wayne McDill clarifies:

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

B. Bridges to Cross in Application: This “distance” between the context of the Bible and a contemporary setting can be seen in four areas.

1) The bridge of time. Over 1900 years have passed since the last biblical book was written.
2) The bridge of culture widens the gap. Any cursory reading of the Bible reveals rituals, rites, and practices that are unfamiliar to the modern reader.
3) The bridge of geography. Understanding the climate and topography of the world of the Bible is helpful in comprehending certain aspects of its message.
4) The bridge of linguistics. 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 and needed exegesis.

C. Parameters for Application (Blue, 73)

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.

D. Benefits of Application – Blue, 78.

1) 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. 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.

2) 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. . . 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.

3) 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 everyday 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.” 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. 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.

4) 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.

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. Louis Lotz, “Good Preaching,” Reformed Review 40 (Autumn 1986) 38.
Sermon Application Worksheet

Text: ____________________________

1. Biblical Teaching: What did God originally teach through this text?

2. Original Purpose: How did God intend this text to affect its original readers?

3. Comparison of Audiences: How do my listeners compare with the original readers?

4. Listener Need: What listener need does this text address?

5. Sermon Purpose: What should my listeners think, feel, or do differently after having heard a sermon from this text?

6. Sermon Application: What might it look like if the sermon accomplished its purpose in specific listeners dealing with specific life situations?

   Listener 1:

   Listener 2:

   Listener 3:

Safeguards
7. Does this application exalt God? Y/N

8. Is this application consistent with the text’s teaching and purpose? Y/N

9. Will this application motivate and equip listeners to respond to the text? Y/N

10. Does this application give expectations or promises only where the text does? Y/N