
Scratching where Christians itch!

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I take no responsibility for the title, which was given me; nevertheless it does express very well the topic we are to consider: **application, or preaching in such a way as to be relevant to believers**. We are not concerned on this occasion with evangelistic preaching, although much of the material would apply to that also. Nor are we talking about pandering to those with ‘itching ears’, 2 Timothy 4:3, just saying what they want to hear. Our subject is telling our hearers what they need to hear - meeting them where they are. Colossians 4:6 exhorts Christians in their witness to have their speech ‘seasoned with salt’, ie suited to the taste of the unbeliever, not to satisfy his carnal appetite, but ‘so that you may know how to answer everyone’, ie varying our approach and methods according to our hearers. This title refers to the same principle in the case of believing hearers.

This is a vital topic, too often neglected. It is not good enough to leave this entirely to the spur of the moment, although that element cannot be completely discounted. We must agree with Calvin who said,

If I should enter the pulpit without deigning to glance at a book, and should frivolously think to myself, “Oh well, when I preach, God will give me enough to say”, and come here without troubling to read or thinking what I ought to declare, and do not carefully consider how I must apply Holy Scripture to the edification of the people, then I should be an arrogant upstart.¹

God forbid that we should be ‘arrogant upstarts’ in our day.

Let us then consider application under three headings: **meaning, content** and **technique** - or the what, where and how of applying the truth.

The meaning of application

1 Application means bringing the truth to bear upon the hearer and his situation. On a related topic Andrew Swanson wrote,

Exposition is the work of bringing to bear the authority of the Word of God on the totality of a man’s being.²

We use the word ‘application’ of putting on a bandage or a coat of paint. The bandage or paint is brought into contact with the surface; it is no longer separate. In the same way, the truth has to be brought into contact with people; it is no longer *merely* the objective truth.

In one sense this is done for us, for all Scripture applies to us anyway. In 1|Corinthians 9:8-10|the apostle Paul points out that even an obscure verse in Deuteronomy about muzzling an ox applies to the Christian reader: ‘Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes this was written for us.’ Chapter 10, verse 11 adds, ‘These things happened to them as examples and were written down as

warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come', while Romans 15:4 sums it up: 'For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us'. Our task, then, is no less than to point this out - to apply the timeless bandage to the modern wound.

This is not a superfluous work, for times have changed and the fact that 'the fulfilment of the ages' has come on us means that an understanding and use of biblical theology - the development and progress of God's revelation over the biblical centuries - is necessary, if we are to apply the historic truth properly. Paul applied the muzzling of the ox to preachers not to oxen, because he understood the nature and significance of the New Covenant's arrival. Also, culture has changed and it is our task to make allowances for this alteration in the surface as we apply the paint. The paint has not changed, but the surface has; we do not throw away the paint, but we must use the brush differently.

Dr Packer writes,

Application means seeking to answer these questions: If God said and did in the circumstances recorded what the text tells us He said and did, what does He say and what is He doing and what will He do to us in our circumstances?³

This sounds difficult and it is. There is no room for laziness or casualness. However, Dr Packer has encouragement for us as well:

Because correct application is a strictly rational process, most evangelical text-books on interpreting Scripture say little about the Holy Spirit, Scripture's ultimate author ... who by leading and enlightening us in the work of exegesis, synthesis and application, actually interprets that Word in our minds and to our hearts. ⁴

Faith in his work is possibly our greatest need.

2 Application means preaching to effect change. There is a right and proper 'preaching for effect', which is usually hindered by the improper kind! That effect is **edification**, as indicated in the quotation from Calvin above and in the following words from Jay Adams:

The purpose of preaching, then, is to effect changes among the members of God's church that build them up individually and that build up the body as a whole. ⁵

Anything less than this is not good enough. Our sermons must have an effect; we must look not just for approval and agreement, but for change in the thinking, attitude and life of our hearers. (Similarly, our hearers must realize that this change is expected of them - that we are disappointed if they agree with what we say but never change their minds or their lives.)

We must not, however, limit application, as we tend to do, to the 'practical' aspects of our Christian living. There is a much wider range of applications than we sometimes think. As Andrew Swanson wrote, in the article already quoted,

The aim of exposition is to make man understand what God wants him to understand, feel as God wants him to feel, and do as God wants him to do. ⁶

As well, then, as the obviously practical subjects, like behaviour and practice, we

are also instructed, so that we do not go astray doctrinally and so that we may worship, adore and love God as we should. If a sermon leads us to give glory to God for his great salvation, to honour Christ for his gracious work, then it has not been lacking in application, even though we may not have any new thing to go and do.

Two warnings may be appropriate here. First, **do not confuse application with scolding** - a common fault of young preachers, but not of them alone - especially of those members of the congregation who are not present! There may be much criticism and letting off steam by the preacher without in any way conveying the actual application of the Scripture. Secondly, **do not forget the Holy Spirit and, therefore, prayer**. Only he can change men and women, and we must work on this assumption in all our application. There is nothing automatic about it, however well we may have done our homework.

3 Application means giving practical help. There are many Biblical examples of this. When Christ had made his point about his relationship to the law in Matthew 5, he did not just leave it at that and let them work it all out for themselves. He gave specific examples to illustrate what he meant: murder and anger, adultery, lust and divorce, swearing oaths and taking revenge. Of course, we cannot cover every eventuality. Nevertheless, it is helpful to indicate how the principles can be applied in detail.

The danger comes not from going into detail but from a failure to distinguish between this detailed application, which is in the last analysis merely the guidance or advice of our own opinion and the Word of God, which must be obeyed. There is a danger of legalism - 'heavy shepherding' in preaching - and we must beware. This does not mean that we should not go into detail at all, just that we should make clear what we are doing. 'How-to' advice must be distinguished from the Word of God. Once again the safeguard is the Holy Spirit. Do we really believe he works in the congregation as well as in us? Do we accept that they can apply the Word in detail where we have provided the principles?

The content of application

1 How do you decide where Christians itch? Clearly this necessitates an awareness of people and their needs. At this point the pastor appears to have an advantage over the 'lay preacher', although it can sometimes turn the other way, as he is suspected of 'getting at' individuals. Similarly, he can preach through whole books, so that all the relevant topics are dealt with in time. However, the occasional preacher is not completely at a loss. He can have faith in the providence of the God who has sent him to preach. Paul probably knew the details of Felix's injustice and lust when he preached before him on 'righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come' Acts 24:25, but the same personal application can be made by the Holy Spirit when the preacher has absolutely no idea of the specific sins in the members of the congregation. This is illustrated by events in the Lewis revival of 1827, when the preacher was a visiting minister:

Many afterwards came to the minister and asked who had spied on them, as the secrets of their hearts were revealed from the pulpit, but they soon discovered that the revelation came not from men but from the Lord.⁷

In addition to this trust in the sovereign working of God there are general trends and tendencies, which occur everywhere. In discerning these we have two particular aids - Scripture and experience.

2 From Scripture we may discern not only the teaching but the original application. Remember that it was intended to apply in every age and that men and women have not changed essentially, however much they differ externally and superficially. The same general points are true now as when the Bible was written.

We can learn also from the Scriptural method - the way the biblical writers cover a variety of categories. Paul constantly applies his teaching to Jews and Gentiles, and, in the so-called 'house-tables' to be found in Ephesians 5:22ff etc, to husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and their masters. With wisdom we can produce our own range of categories to which we may relate the doctrine.

Even more important is the principle expressed by Andrew Swanson:

The expositor's first concern in preparing his exposition must be to find out the purpose for which the Holy Spirit has given the passage which is before him. The expositor must then 'preach from that passage to achieve that purpose and *that purpose alone*' (quoting Jay Adams: *Journal of Pastoral Practice*).⁸

You will probably choose your text or passage with an idea of what it says and how you want to use it. As you study it in more detail, you must refine your application (or possibly reject it, because it does not really mean what you thought it did!) and so ensure that you are saying exactly what the Spirit originally intended. (You may, of course, quite legitimately deal with only part of this.) Only thus can you speak with the real authority of Scripture. I personally find that unless the exegesis is accurate, the preacher's message carries little weight with me. Even though it may be perfectly true in itself, it does not come to me with the convicting power of God's authority in his Word.

Another way to use Scripture is to determine the writer's intention when he gave certain teaching. The context is of great help here. For instance, you may decide to preach on the grace of God, as described in 2 Timothy 1:8-12. How should you apply this? The context will instruct you that Paul was leading up to his exhortation in chapter 2, verse 1, to 'be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' and your line of application will become clear. Ask your text, 'Why?' For instance, why did Paul refer to the Lord as 'my' God in Philippians 4:19? The answer will provide a wealth of application derived from the Scripture itself.

3 Experience will help us to find the modern equivalent. Our experience comes in two forms. First, we have our personal experience. We can learn much from our own needs, as we apply the text to ourselves first of all. Joel Nederhood described the effect having cancer had on his preaching:

I look at people differently now. Before, my ministry was always oriented to strength. I worked hard, and I looked at my audience as people of strength who worked hard and needed encouragement. Now I look at people as pretty broken; it has made me understand how absolutely mortal and weak we human beings are.⁹

Then we can learn from the church to which we belong. This is particularly helpful when preaching 'away' - the usual situation of the occasional preacher. You may decide to preach on Philippians 4:6-7 and want to enumerate the kinds of anxiety that may beset your hearers. You will probably find that you can produce such a list, anonymous of course in this setting, from the members of your own congregation: illness, sorrow, redundancy, unconverted children or parents, etc.

The technique of application

1 Begin with your application. Decide first of all what you want to achieve, what your aim is. Strangely to some, the introduction is prepared last! In fact, this is quite obvious and natural. You cannot introduce unless and until you know what you are introducing. The chairman must know who the speaker is before he can introduce him to the audience. So, work out what you want to say and then let this control everything: content, illustrations etc. Too much preparation is undisciplined, with material included which distracts from the main point, illustrations used merely because they are 'good stories', but which only divert attention from what you want your hearers to do. The purpose must always be kept in mind, and stringent and ruthless steps must be taken to keep on the straight and narrow way of your aim in the sermon. So this has to be settled first.

This is, to me, the one most important aspect of sermon preparation, after truth itself: **know precisely what you are trying to do.** Jay Adams puts it in characteristic fashion:

This matter of purpose is such an important consideration in preaching that if your wife were to awaken you on Sunday morning at 4 o'clock and ask, "What is the purpose of this morning's message?" you ought to be able to rattle it off *in one crisp sentence*, roll over and go to sleep again, all without missing a single stroke in your snoring!¹⁰

2 Let this govern your whole approach. Do not lecture *about* the original readers; talk *to* your own hearers.

Let the whole be application. False deductions are made from Paul's use of 'therefore', as if he left all his application to the second half of his letters. Consider the 'therefore' in Philippians 2:12, but then realize that there are exhortations already in 1:27 and 2:2. In fact, the purpose of his letters is always present and controlling his material, even in the introduction. Thus in Galatians the basic issues of apostleship and salvation are assumed as true in verses 1-5, before he even begins his argument and, incidentally, before his readers are on their guard! We honour the depth of Puritan teaching and pastoral understand-

ing. However, their system of simply adding on a lengthy set of 'uses' at the end, when the hearers are tired, is not appropriate today, if indeed it ever was. I was horrified to read of Jonathan Edwards' practice in the matter of application.

But even with the long hours which Edwards gave to preparation for the pulpit there are occasional indications that he was not always able to command the amount of time which he required. In the manuscript of one sermon, for example, having written on 'the text' and 'the doctrine', for the 'application' he simply detached some pages which had been part of an earlier sermon. This expedient of removing pages from one sermon to another seems to have been employed at various times. ¹¹

How can it be argued that the doctrine backs up and gives authority to the uses, or leads inevitably to them, when the application was in fact drawn from a different set of premises? Perhaps Edwards was so great that he could get away with this; or perhaps he would have been even greater had he avoided it! Certainly, our sermons must be units.

Another aspect of method is to use commands and exhortations, or questions directed to the hearers, rather than statements about the Bible or the doctrine. This is particularly important in headings. For instance, the headings in this section are (deliberately) couched like this and, I believe, are more effective for it. This partakes more of the nature of a lecture than a sermon, so the main headings are mere phrases. For a sermon it would be more pointed if they were changed to:

- I Be clear what you are aiming to achieve.
- II Learn from Scripture and experience.
- III Let your aim control both study and structure.

This can, of course, be overdone and may become a boring stylistic feature. The same applies to the oft-repeated idea that we(!) should use 'you' rather than 'we' when preaching. Certainly 'you' stresses the need for a response from the congregation, but it can also become a mark of arrogance. Calvin said,

I so speak to the congregation that the teaching must first be addressed to myself.

Parker comments on this,

The way he treats himself as a member of the congregation is shown by his customary use of 'we' and not 'you'. ¹²

Both points are valid; perhaps a variety is best.

3 Work at this as much as at your exegesis. Refine your application so that it hits the target exactly and precisely. Drive your hearers into a corner by removing wrong ideas and excuses, which might enable them to avoid the issue. Refuse to let them off the hook by clumsy handling of the application. So direct everything that they have no alternative but to do what you want or be in clear disobedience to the Word of God.

From our Lord we can learn to use what I would call 'crunch' issues. Some of the difficulties in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, come from a

failure to realize what he was doing. His command to turn the other cheek is not to be exegeted out of existence, but seen as the ultimate demand. If it came to the crunch, when called for by our circumstances, would we be willing to do even that rather than take revenge? Similarly, we are not all commanded to sell all and give to the poor in order to follow Christ. But, if it came to that, would you be prepared to do it? It did come to that with the rich young ruler. Different challenges apply to different people, but all must be pressed in this way to face up to the implications of your message.

Although we should not save up our application to the end, it is good to finish with a real conclusion, like an arrow-point, that will fix the application in the mind and conscience of the hearer as he leaves - the same point that you have been making all along.

Conclusion

May I follow my own injunctions in two ways. First, some 'how-to' advice. Examine your old sermon notes and write out your aim in 'one crisp sentence', if you can. If you cannot, examine why. Then check your headings and convert them into hearer-oriented form, ie exhortations or commands. Finally, examine whether your structure and content were controlled by your aim at all times.

Secondly, hear Calvin's words to the preacher:

It would be better for him to break his neck going up into the pulpit, if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God.

References

- 1 Quoted in T H L Parker, JOHN CALVIN, Lion, 1987, p 110
- 2 Andrew Swanson, BANNER OF TRUTH magazine 199, April 1980, p 27
- 3 J I Packer in SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH, ed D A Carson and J D Woodbridge, IVP, p 345
- 4 Ibid, p 347
- 5 Jay E Adams, PREACHING WITH PURPOSE, Presbyterian and Reformed, p 13
- 6 Swanson, op cit
- 7 Maurice Roberts, BANNER OF TRUTH magazine, December 1988, p 23
- 8 Swanson, ibid, p 29
- 9 EVANGELICAL TIMES, December 1988, p 8
- 10 Adams, op cit, p 31
- 11 Iain Murray, JONATHAN EDWARDS, Banner of Truth, p 38
- 12 Parker, op cit, pp 113-14
- 13 Ibid, p 113

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