APPLYING A TEXT-DRIVEN SERMON

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INTRODUCTION
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On any given Sunday in today’s preaching pantheon, one can observe a diverse group of devotees, some paying homage to the chapel of “creativity,” others sitting at the feet of the “culturally relevant.” Some are transfixed at the nave marked “narrative,” whereas others have their hearts strangely warmed at the chassé of “pop-psychology.” There is never a shortage of worshippers at the “new homiletic” altar, and the “topical” shrine always receives its share of Sunday patrons. Fearful that some as yet undiscovered homiletical “method” might be missed, the gatekeepers of the pantheon have installed an altar inscribed “to the unknown preaching method.” It is that method which the authors of this book declare unto you. Actually, the method itself is not “unknown” at all, and like the true church on earth, it has always had its practitioners in every era of church history. In fact, it is the oldest method in the preaching pantheon, having been used by the earliest preachers as far back as the apostolic era of the church. It is called “expository preaching.”

But why has this time-honored method of preaching fallen into disuse in so many places and misuse in so many others? What has happened to engender so many substitute methods? It should come as no surprise that the century that witnessed the greatest assault on biblical authority (the twentieth century) should also be the century that witnessed an unparalleled attack on expository preaching. At times, the assault was frontal; at other times, surreptitious. The sallies and sorties of her detractors, along with the niggling neglect of her friends, continue unabated. With everything from Harry Emerson Fosdick’s 1928 harangue to Fred Craddock’s “New Homiletic”; from the Hybel’s/Warren’s baby boomer “purpose-driven” sermonic church to the “great communicator” gurus Young/Stanley; from the “your-best-life-now” Osteens to the sometimes whacky misadventures of the emerging
church; and from Buttrick’s broadside to Pagitt’s dialogical diatribe, expository preaching has come under attack these days. But somehow expository preaching manages to live on, refusing to give up the ghost. In fact, in some homiletical pockets of Christendom, it is experiencing something of a revival.

Paul Van Gorder, one-time assistant to Richard Dehann, remembers vividly a late-night telephone call his father received. When Van Gorder was a teenager, his father, the local Baptist pastor, received a phone call at 11:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 3, from the local Methodist pastor. It seems the pastor was so excited about his July 4 sermon, but he could not remember the location of the text in the Bible from which he wanted to preach. He wanted to know if he recited the text whether pastor Van Gorder might be able to tell him where to find it in the Bible. “What is the text?” Van Gorder asked. The pastor replied, “Give me liberty or give me death!”

We can at least be grateful the pastor thought he had a text, even if it came from the annals of American liberty and not the Bible. Whatever his sermon turned out to be on the following Sunday morning, it certainly was not “text driven.”

What exactly is text-driven preaching? Is this merely another name for expository preaching? In one sense, yes. However, much that goes under the umbrella of exposition today is not really worthy of the name. While there are many books on the subject of preaching, those that promote an expository approach to preaching are few and far between. Of these, many treat the subject in more general and traditional ways. This book rests firmly on the biblical and theological foundation for exposition: God has spoken. God is not silent. He has revealed Himself in Jesus, who is the living Word, and in Scripture, which is the written Word. Therefore, the theological foundation for text-driven preaching is the fact that God has spoken!
It is the nature of Scripture itself that demands a text-driven approach to preaching. God is the ultimate author of all Scripture, according to 2 Tim 3:16 (NKJV): “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” What Scripture says is indeed the Word of God.

Both the inerrancy and the sufficiency of Scripture serve as the theological ground for text-driven preaching. This is the testimony of Scripture itself. For example, it is interesting how “God” and “Scripture” are used as interchangeable subjects via metonymy when New Testament authors quote the Old Testament. Thus, God is viewed as the author even when He is not the speaker in Matt 19:4–5, and “Scripture says” is used when God Himself is the direct speaker of what is quoted, as in Rom 9:17. In three places, Scripture is called “God’s speech” (Gal 3:8,22; Rom 9:17). In the words of J. I. Packer, “Scripture is God preaching.”

The best preaching throughout church history has always been expository preaching. Even before the advent of the church, Jewish preaching sought to make plain the meaning of a passage from the Torah. A clear quality of Jewish preaching in the synagogues was its text centeredness. This approach was continued by the apostles as well as by the early church fathers. In the patristic era, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others show painstaking exegesis and explanation of Scripture in their preaching. Origen was the first to preach through books of the Bible. During this period, there were different methods of preaching, but there was never a time when exposition was not prized and practiced.

While preaching waned during the Middle Ages (Bernard of Clairvaux was one of the few exceptions), with the Reformation (the sixteenth century) came a recovery of expository preaching. The publication of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, along with other factors, contributed to the Reformers’ rediscovery of Scripture in its original language and genuine Bible-centered preaching. Luther, Calvin, and
Zwingli preached expositionally. The post-Reformation Puritans continued this heritage. Systematic exposition was practiced often in the churches. From that time of the Reformation until now, the best preaching in the churches has been preaching that is basically expositional in its character and method.

Now if this is the case, how is it that so much of the preaching that cascades over pulpits today is anything but an exposition of a text of Scripture? By what hubris do we think we could possibly have anything more important to say than what God Himself has said through Scripture? It is the height of arrogance to substitute the words of men for the words of God. So much modern-day preaching is horizontal in dimension rather than vertical; that is, it is man-centered preaching that appeals to so-called felt needs rather than what exalts God before the people as the One who alone can meet genuine needs.

The church today is anemic spiritually for many reasons, but one of the major reasons has to be the loss of biblical content in so much of contemporary preaching. Pop-psychology sometimes substitutes for the Word of God. Feel-good messages on “Five Ways to Be Happy” and “Three Ways to Love Your Mother” have become the steady cotton candy diet fed to the average church. Today’s sermonic focus therefore is on application. But application, without textual warrant for such, does not “stick”; it needs the glue of textual meaning. Biblical content accordingly must precede application; how else can we possibly know what to apply? Thus, in the headlong rush to be relevant, People magazine and popular television shows have replaced Scripture as sermonic resources. There are other signs of this anemia: in some churches, the music portion of the worship service has lengthened, whereas the sermon time has diminished. No wonder so many spiritual teeth are decaying in our churches.

Eloquent nonsense abounds in many pulpits today; sometimes it is not even eloquent. The conjuring adroitness of many preachers who keep producing fat rabbit
after fat rabbit out of an obviously empty hat is the marvel of much contemporary preaching. There is mounting evidence that people are beginning to grow weary of these trite pop-psychology sermons. Biblical preaching, especially when it is done in a creative way, will always meet the needs of people, felt or otherwise. In fact, it is our contention that only biblical preaching can meet the ultimate spiritual needs of people.

Preaching is a spiritual act. So much of its ultimate effectiveness depends on the role of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual life of the preacher. This topic is often neglected in books on preaching. No one has ever improved on Aristotle’s rhetorical triad—logos, pathos, and ethos—as descriptive of the basic elements of powerful and effective communication. This book begins with these matters rather than plunging immediately into the nuts and bolts of the “how-to” of text-driven preaching. Dr. Paige Patterson masterfully outlines for us the Aristotelian triad and explains just how important this is for effective preaching. To give some historical perspective, Jim Shaddix takes us on a brief tour of some of the giants of text-driven preaching in the past. Bill Bennett and Ned Mathews follow up in this vein as well with chapters on the empowering of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual disciplines of a text-driven preacher.

These days it seems everything is “purpose driven.” Glossing this valuable concept and applying it to preaching, we believe that true expository preaching should be “text driven.” By this, we mean that sermons should not only be based upon a text of Scripture but should also actually expound the meaning of that text. Too often preachers take a text and then straightway depart therefrom in the sermon. The biblical text becomes for many not the source of the sermon but merely a resource. Many a preacher uses a text of Scripture, but the sermon that follows is not derived from a text of Scripture.
David Allen introduces part 2 with a survey of text-driven preaching’s methodology and how that aids sermon preparation. Text-driven sermons deal with the actual structure of the text itself, and thus the role of exegesis, discourse analysis, genre analysis, and contemporary communication theory are explained and illustrated in this work in a practical way. The Bible is not monolithic in its genre or its structure. It contains narrative, poetry, gospels, epistles, and prophecy, among others. Text-driven preaching is not a monolithic, cookie-cutter approach to preaching. This book investigates ways in which the structure of the text should influence the structure of the sermon. Issues such as how a text-driven sermon differs in form and style from a narrative on a New Testament epistle are explored. These matters are taken up and illustrated well by David Black, Robert Vogel, and Herschel York.

Linguists now point out that meaning is structured beyond the sentence level. When the preacher restricts the focus to the sentence level and below, there is much that is missed in the discourse that contributes to its overall meaning and interpretation. The authors of this book believe the paragraph unit is best used as the basic unit of meaning in expounding the text of Scripture. Expositional preaching should at minimum deal with a paragraph (as in the epistles), whereas, in the narrative portions of Scripture, several paragraphs that combine to form the story should be treated in a single sermon since the meaning of the story itself cannot be discerned when it is broken up and presented piecemeal. Bottom line: the structure of the text itself should guide the structure of the sermon, since meaning is expressed by an author through the text itself.

This work also addresses issues of outlining, application, and sermon delivery. Many homiletics books focus more on preparation and devote little space to the importance of application and delivery. No preacher can fail to take account of how he says what he says. The “how” may not be as important as the “what,” but it is important. Danny Akin is fond of saying, “What we say is more important
than how we say it, but how we say it has never been more important.” Jerry Vines takes us into his study and, from the reservoir of his more than 50 years of expositional preaching, teaches us about the delivery of a text-driven sermon. Danny Akin caps it all off with a chapter on the “how-to” of application in a text-driven sermon.

The authors of this book believe the following components are essential to text-driven preaching. First, God has spoken His final word in His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1–2). Second, because Scripture is authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient, our motto is always Textus Rex—“the text is king.” Third, as Ned Mathews points out elsewhere,

*The preacher submits to the authority of the text. Therefore, he shuns the reader-response approach of the postmodern hermeneutic which manages the text in such a way that the biblical author’s view is replaced by the reader’s own perspective. The preacher, as interpreter, to the degree possible in humankind, seeks to empty his presuppositions, biases, and previous conclusions as he approaches the text. His goal is to come to the text, as if for the first time, in order to be instructed by the text rather than to instruct the text.*

The authors agree that text-driven preaching is not enslaved to artificial outlining techniques such as a three-point structure and alliteration. Expository preaching is a broad umbrella term that permits a wide variety of styles and structures to communicate the meaning of the text. The text-driven preacher strives to practice exposition, not imposition. Faulty hermeneutical methods such as spiritualizing and allegorizing the text are avoided. The preacher’s goal is to allow the text to stand forth in all its uniqueness and power. Text-driven preaching is driven by the text, not by theology. Theology serves the
text, not the other way around. It is first the text, then theology. Biblical theology therefore precedes systematic theology. Text-driven preachers also believe that creativity ultimately resides in the text itself. The first place to look for creativity to use in preaching is often the last place that many preachers look: the text. All the creativity in the world is of no value if the text itself is neglected, obscured, or ignored in the process of preaching.

The authors of this book are not claiming that only text-driven preaching has these components. Rather, we claim that there cannot be text-driven preaching without these components. A text-driven sermon is a sermon that develops a text by explaining, illustrating, and applying its meaning. Text-driven preaching stays true to the substance of the text, the structure of the text, and the spirit of the text.

Some preachers, instead of expounding the text, skirmish cleverly on its outskirts, pirouetting on trifles to the amazement of the congregation. Text-driven preachers refuse to let the congregation walk away without understanding what God is saying to them through the text. It is in this way that people encounter God. It is not outside of the text of Scripture but through the text of Scripture that people encounter God. Jesus said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! . . . Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25–27 NASB).

The authors of this book are committed to helping you fulfill Paul’s mandate to Timothy in 2 Tim 4:2 (NKJV): “Preach the Word!”
In Jas 1:22, the half brother of Jesus charges his readers, “But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” He then proceeds to answer the all important “why question” in v. 25, “a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does.”

In the Bible, belief and behavior are never separated. What we believe will determine how we live. The famous North Carolina evangelist Vance Havner was fond of saying, “What you live is what you really believe; everything else is just so much religious talk.”

Text-driven preaching that is faithful to Scripture not only will expound the text but also will, of biblical and theological necessity, apply the text. Unfortunately, this is an area of some homiletical confusion, and the church has suffered greatly as a result. On the one hand, topical and felt needs preaching gives significant attention to application, but it fails to expound the text and thus provide the necessary biblical and theological grounding for application. On the other hand, some expositors of the Bible offer only a running commentary on the text, neglecting to show the relevance of the text for the eagerly listening audience who are desperate for a word from God that will (1) educate the mind, (2) motivate the heart, and (3) activate the will. Howard Hendricks says, “Application is the most neglected yet the most needed stage in the process. Too much Bible study begins and ends in the wrong place: It begins with interpretation, and it also ends there.”

He then shocks our hermeneutical and homiletical sensibilities with a startling image: “Observation plus interpretation without application equals abortion. That is, every time you observe and interpret but fail to apply, you perform an abortion
A gap of crisis proportions exists between the steps generally outlined in most seminary or Biblical training classes in exegesis and the hard realities most pastors face every week as they prepare their sermons. Nowhere in the total curriculum of theological studies has the student been more deserted and left to his own devices than in bridging the yawning chasm between understanding the content of Scripture as it was given in the past and proclaiming it with such relevance in the present as to produce faith, life, and bona fide works. Both ends of this bridge have at various times received detailed and even exhaustive treatments: (1) the historical, grammatical, cultural, and critical analysis of the text forms one end of the spectrum; and (2) the practical, devotional, homiletical, and pastoral theology (along with various techniques of delivery, organization, and persuasion) reflected in collections of sermonic outlines for all occasions forms the other. But who has mapped out the route between these two points?  

In this chapter the goal is to provide such a map that crosses the bridge from exposition to application and to demonstrate its essential nature in a healthy and holistic homiletical strategy. The place to begin is with a good, solid definition and description of what we are after.

What Is Text-driven Application?
When I taught at Southern Seminary, I had the joy of supervising an outstanding student of preaching as he pursued his Ph.D. degree. His name is Scott Blue and
he serves our Lord as both a teacher and pastor. He is a remarkable individual in that he completed his Ph.D. in record time, receiving the highest possible grades for his work. This accomplishment is further enhanced by the fact he is a quadriplegic. Dr. Blue wrote his dissertation on “Application in the Expository Sermon.” He also coauthored a superb article with Hershuel York addressing the same theme.\(^4\) Having worked closely with both men, Blue as his Ph.D. supervisor and York as a cherished colleague, and discussing this important issue for many hours, I want to draw on their excellent treatments, especially in terms of a definition and description of application.

Application in text-driven preaching can be defined as “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, and passionately encouraging them to make necessary changes in their lives in a manner congruent with the original intent of the author.”\(^5\) To this excellent definition I would add that the application should be God-centered and Christ-focused, fitting into the grand redemptive storyline of the Bible and the pattern of creation, fall, redemption, restoration. Let me unwrap this definition/description.

First, text-driven application is grounded in biblical truth gained through a historical-grammatical-literary-theological analysis of the biblical text. Application, of necessity, flows from our exegesis and exposition. The order is not optional. It is essential. Practical application must find its foundation in biblical exposition.

Second, text-driven application must be based on the author’s intended meaning found in the text. Authorial intent determines and dictates application. Because we believe the ultimate author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit of God, we dare not trifle or manipulate the plain sense of Scripture to fit any preconceived agenda with respect to how we want to apply our sermon. This is homiletical malpractice worthy of pastoral disbarment.
Third, text-driven application should demonstrate the relevance and practical nature of biblical truth for the listeners in their present life context. The Bible does not need to be made relevant. It is relevant now and forever as revealed, eternal truth. However, it is the responsibility of the preacher to unfold and make clear the Bible’s relevance. I particularly like the way Louis Lotz puts it:

*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 and 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.*

Fourth, text-driven application must include practical illustrations, examples, and suggestions so that the audience can adopt and model their lives after the biblical truth being taught. The best place to begin, in my judgment, is with biblical examples. The Old Testament in particular contains a reservoir of resources. One should then proceed to the here and now, taking into careful consideration the specific context in which one ministers the word. In this sense there is a cross-cultural contextualization in good preaching that must not be ignored, especially when
we find ourselves in an increasingly missiological context, even in America. The brilliant missiologist David Hesselgrave is extremely helpful at this point:

Contextualization can be defined as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with the theologizing, Bible translation, interpretation and application, incarnational life-style, evangelism, Christian instruction, church planting and growth, church organization, worship style—indeed with all those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission.

Fifth, text-driven application must persuade and exhort listeners to respond in obedient faith to the truths of Holy Scripture. York and Blue state, “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.” Jay Adams adds that 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 eager to implement those changes.”

**Why Is Text-driven Application Necessary?**

Application in preaching helps us answer two important questions based upon the exposition of God’s Word: (1) So what? and (2) Now what? In other words, how does the Bible speak to me today and what do I do about it? So important is this component of preaching that the father of modern exposition, John Broadus, said,
The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done. Spurgeon says, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.” . . . Daniel Webster once said, and repeated it with emphasis, “When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter, a personal matter!” And it is our solemn duty thus to address all men, whether they wish it or not.10

Text-driven application is necessary because it requires a decision on the part of the listener. Further, if done well, it provides a specific action plan that allows the Spirit of God to take biblical truth and make it a part of who we are and are becoming in Christ (Rom 8:28–29).

Text-driven application is necessary then for at least five reasons.

First, it is one of the main purposes for God’s revelation. God wants us to know Him, love Him, and obey Him. The act of proclaiming biblical truth is incomplete without the call to obey.

Second, it brings balance to the information element in preaching. Knowing precedes doing, but knowing must lead to doing, or biblical exposition will come up short of its intended goal.

Third, it focuses Scripture on the genuine needs of the congregation. Sin brings separation, sorrow, pain, and death. Ours is a hurting world. Application speaks to those needs and provides the healing balm of divine truth.
Fourth, it makes biblical principles specific to real life situations. Addressing the whole person with the whole truth of Scripture is what good application does.

Fifth, it provides the necessary bridge between the world of the Bible and the world in which we live. Application shows us that our problems ultimately are the same as those of the ancients. Sin is our problem and Christ is the answer. Some things remain the same across the centuries.

My friend and colleague Wayne McDill, professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, provides helpful insight concerning the “right use” and necessity of text-driven application. He writes,

> 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.¹¹

The great Reformation theologian John Calvin also saw the essential and necessary nature of text-driven application. He said it would impact just how and what we teach to the congregation in our charge and under our watchcare:

> What advantage would there be if we were to stay here a day and I were to expound half a book without considering you or your profit and edification? . . . We must take into consideration those persons to whom the teaching is addressed. . . . For this reason let us note well that they who
have this charge to teach, when they speak to a people, are to decide which teaching will be good and profitable so that they will be able to disseminate it faithfully and with discretion to the usefulness of everyone individually.12

We would do well to heed his admonition.

**How Do We Do Text-driven Application?**

Timothy Warren is most certainly correct: “[Preaching] is not complete until God’s people think and act differently for having heard the Word expounded.”13 Text-driven preaching has as its goal a community of believers who think and live differently as a result of their confrontation with the Word of God. Changed lives is what we are after, and nothing less will satisfy the faithful expositor. Pastor Rick Warren is direct and to the point:

> I’ll say it over and over: The purpose of preaching is obedience. Every preacher in the New Testament—including Jesus—emphasized conduct, behavioral change, and obedience. You only really believe the parts of the Bible that you obey. People say, “I believe in tithing.” But do they tithe? No? Then they don’t believe in it.

> That is why you should always preach for response, aiming for people to act on what is said. John did this: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17 NIV). And in 1 John 2:3 (NIV), “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.”14
As we prepare to set forth our method, several observations should guide our process. Let us again draw on the insights of Pastor Warren. I will closely follow him at some length, as I believe you will see it is worth it.

**Basic Observations for Application in Preaching**

1. **All behavior is based on a belief.**
   
   What you believe will determine how you act. Creed and conduct go hand in hand. For example, if you get divorced because you are unhappy, it is because you believe that disobeying God will cause you less pain than staying in your marriage. It is a lie, but you believe it and you act on it. When somebody comes to you and says, “I’m leaving my husband, and I’m going to marry this other man because I believe God wants me to be happy,” they just told you the belief behind their behavior. It is wrong, but they believe it.

2. **Behind every sin is a lie I believe.**
   
   At the moment you sin, you are doing what you think is the best thing for you. You say, “I know God says to do that, but I’m going to do this.” What are you doing? You are believing a lie. Start looking for the lies behind why people in your church act the way they do. When you start dealing with those, you will start seeing change. Titus 3:3 (NIV) declares, “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.” When you live in sin, you’re living in deception and believing a lie.

When you look at your congregation, you may not see the lies they believe, but you do see their behavior. You know they are unfaithful; you know they are uncommitted; you know all these things. The tough part is figuring out the lie behind the behavior. The wiser you
get in ministry, the quicker you will start seeing the lies. You will grow and become more discerning, because you will start seeing patterns over and over.

3. **Change always starts in the mind.**

   You have got to start with the belief—the lie—behind the behavior. Romans 12:2 (NIV) commands, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The way you think determines the way you feel, and the way you feel determines the way you act. If you want to change the way you act, you must determine (change) the way you think. You cannot start with the action. You have got to start with the thought. Remember Prov 23:7!

4. **To help people change, we must change their beliefs first.**

   Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NIV). Why? Because to help people change, you have got to help them see the lie they are basing their behavior on. That is why when you know the truth, it sets you free.

5. **Trying to change people’s behavior without changing their belief is a waste of time.**

   If you ask a person to change before his mind is renewed, it will not work. He has to internalize God’s Word first. God’s Word has got to become a part of who he is.

   Your belief patterns are in your mind. Every time you think about a belief, it creates an electrical impulse across your brain. Every time you have that thought again, it creates a deeper rut. If you want to see change in your church, you must help people get out of their ruts and change their autopilot. For example, let us say I go out and buy a speedboat with an autopilot feature on it. I set the speedboat to go north on autopilot, so the boat goes north
automatically. I do not even have my hands on the wheel. If I want to turn the boat around, I could manually grab the steering wheel and, by sheer willpower and force, turn it around. I can force it to go south, but the whole time I am under tension because I am going against the natural inclination of the boat. Pretty soon I get tired and let go of the steering wheel, and it automatically turns around and goes back to the way it is programmed.

This is true in life. When people have learned something over and over, being taught by the world’s way of thinking, they are programmed to go that way. What if a man is programmed to pick up a cigarette every time he is under tension? But one day he thinks, “This is killing me! I’m going to get cancer.” So he grabs the steering wheel and turns it around forcibly, throws the pack away and says, “I am going to quit!” He makes it a week without a cigarette, a week and a half, two weeks, but the whole time he is under tension because he has not changed the programming in his mind. Eventually, he is going to let go and pick up a cigarette again.

If you want to change people radically and permanently, you have to do it the New Testament way. You have to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Just telling people, “You need to stop smoking . . . You need to stop doing this . . . You need to stop doing that” is not going to work. You have got to help them change their belief pattern.

6. **The biblical term for “changing your mind” is “repentance.”**

What do most people think of when they hear the word “repent”? They think of a guy on the street corner with a sandwich sign saying, “Turn or burn. You’re going to die and fry while we go to the sky.” They think of some kook.
But the word “repentance” is a wonderful Greek word—*metanoia*—which means “to change your mind.” Repentance is changing the way we think about something by accepting the way God thinks about it. A modern way of describing repentance is “paradigm shift.” We are in the paradigm-shifting business. We are in the repentance business. We are about changing peoples’ minds at the deepest level—the level of belief and values.

7. **You do not change people’s minds; the applied Word of God does.**
First Corinthians 2:13 (NLT) helps us keep this in focus: “We speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit’s words to explain spiritual truths.” In real preaching, God is at work in the speaker.

Zechariah 4:6 (NIV) says, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.” So keep in mind that you do not change people’s minds; the Word of God applied by the Holy Spirit does.

8. **Changing the way I act is the fruit of repentance.**
Technically, repentance is not behavioral change. Behavior change is the result of repentance. Repentance does not mean forsaking your sin. Repentance simply means to change your mind. John the Baptist said in Matt 3:8 (NIV), “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” In other words, “OK, you have changed your mind about God, about life, about sin, about yourself—now let’s see some fruit as a result of it.”

9. **The deepest kind of preaching is preaching for repentance.**
Because life change happens only after you change somebody’s thinking, then preaching for repentance is preaching for life change. It is the deepest kind of preaching you can preach.
Repentance is the central message of the New Testament. What did the New Testament preachers preach on?

- John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 3:2 NIV).
- Jesus: “Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15 NIV).
- What did Jesus tell his disciples to preach? “So they went off and preached repentance” (Mark 6:12 NAB).
- What did Peter preach at Pentecost? “Repent and be baptized every one of you” (Acts 2:38 NAB).

Warren concludes,

I believe that one of the great weaknesses of preaching today is that there are a lot of folks who are afraid to stand on the Word of God and humbly but forcefully challenge the will of people. It takes courage to do that, because they may reject you. They may reject your message; they may get mad at you and talk about you behind your back. So now, I have a personal challenge for you—life application. Are you going to use the Bible the way it was intended or not? Will you repent of preaching in ways that were not focused on application that could change people’s character and conduct?¹⁵

These are sobering and challenging words from a seasoned veteran of preaching, but they help us see how necessary text-driven application is. Faithful expositors are not only responsible to explain and expound the meaning of the text; they are also responsible to apply the text, preaching for a life-changing verdict from
the audience. We are called to be doers of the Word and not just listeners of the Word. Therefore, we must instruct and inspire our people in applying Holy Scripture to their everyday lives. Let us turn to a model for accomplishing this all-important objective.

Guiding Principles for Doing Application
First, your application should be Theo/Christocentric. No one has said this better than Dennis Johnson, who writes,

*Preaching must be Christ centered, must interpret biblical texts in their redemptive-historical contexts, must aim for change, must proclaim the doctrinal center of the Reformation (grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, God’s glory alone) with passion and personal application, and must speak in a language that connects with the unchurched in our culture, shattering their stereotypes of Christianity and bringing them face to face with Christ, who meets sinners’ real needs—felt and unfelt.*

Drawing upon the insights of Timothy Keller, a pastor in New York City, Johnson adds, “What both the unbeliever and the believer need to hear in preaching is the gospel, with its implications for a life lived in confident gratitude in response to amazing grace.”

This observation is crucial and must drive all aspects of biblical proclamation. Jesus is the hero of the whole Bible. He is the Savior in that He delivers us from the penalty of sin (justification), the power of sin (sanctification), and the presence of sin (glorification). Text-driven application is particularly interested in sanctification. Our people must understand that they are saved by Jesus and that they grow into Christlikeness through Jesus.
Mark Driscoll, a pastor in Seattle, calls this the “Christological Question” in preaching:

How is Jesus the Hero-Savior? The Bible is one story in which Jesus is the hero. Therefore to properly teach and preach the Bible we have to continually lift him up as the hero. Any sermon in which the focus is not the person and work of Jesus will lack spiritual authority and power because the Holy Spirit will not bless the teaching of any hero other than Jesus. . . . There is an ongoing debate as to the purpose of the sermon and whether it should focus on converting the lost or maturing the saved. The apparent conflict between preaching for seekers and preaching for believers is resolved simply by noting that both need to repent of sin and trust in Jesus to live a new life empowered by the Spirit. 18

Second, weave your application into the outline or movements of your sermon. In other words, let the outline of your message be the application points of your sermon. State them in complete sentences that are clear and concise, in the present tense, and in harmony with the plain meaning of the text of Scripture. A simple example from Col 3:18–21 will help us see what we are after. The context is the lordship of Jesus Christ wherein His Word dwells richly in each of us (Col 3:16). The subject at hand is the Christian family where a directive is given to each member of the family. Text-driven application wed to a text-driven exposition would look something like this:
Title: When Christ Is Lord of the Home

Outline:

I. Wives submit to your husbands (3:18)
II. Husbands love your wives (3:19)
III. Children obey your parents (3:20)
IV. Fathers [Parents] encourage your children (3:21)

We should recognize that some applications of a text will more readily apply to the mind (belief) and other applications will more readily apply to the will (behavior). Some will actually speak to both. The key is that the application is true to and faithful to the meaning of the text.

Third, aim for specific action on the part of your people. Fuzzy thinking is deadly to any aspect of a sermon. This is especially true when it comes to application. Using the imagery of the Bible we must remember that we are preaching to sheep (Psalm 23; John 10). Sheep need very specific and particular guidance and direction. We must not assume that they will just “get it” on their own. This is one of the deadly weaknesses of the so-called New Homiletic. We cannot hope our people will “fill in the blanks” of sermon applications. Practical steps that are challenging but attainable by God’s grace and Christ’s strength is our goal. We cannot beat them over the head with “oughts” without also providing “hows.” Challenge your men to be leaders in the church and home, to be godly husbands and fathers, but make sure you show them how.

Fourth, tie application to illustration and provide some practical examples of Scripture at work. Again, the text must drive this union. Some examples will appeal to the mind and be deeply theological. Others will move the heart and give attention to the practical. Warren says,
If you want your people to share their faith with others, then tell stories about people in your church who are already doing that. If you want your people to care for the sick, tell stories about people in your church who care for the sick. If you want your people to be friendly to visitors tell stories about people who were friendly to visitors.¹⁹

Fifth, state your application in the form of a universal principle. Look for what is true anywhere, anyplace, anytime, and under any circumstances. There is an ultimate principle to remember: the solution to any problem is a person and His name is Jesus. As you state your universal principle, be in line with the needs, interests, questions, and problems of today. This is the key to relevance. The chart below visualizes what we mean:

---

**THERE ARE TWO HISTORIES AND YOU MUST BRIDGE THE HORIZONS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL HISTORY</th>
<th>COLOSSIANS</th>
<th>OUR HISTORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colossae AD 60–63</td>
<td>Truth revealed out of “the then”</td>
<td>Eternal truth that bridges the two worlds</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your principles must be in harmony with the general tenor and totality of Scripture. The analogy of faith is crucial here: “Scripture will not contradict Scripture.” As you state these principles, be specific enough to indicate a course of action. Always ask any text these 13 questions:

1. Is there an example for me to follow?
2. Is there a sin to avoid/confess?
3. Is there a promise to claim?
4. Is there a prayer to repeat?
5. Is there a command to obey?
6. Is there a condition to meet?
Sixth, saturate your mind in terms of the many relationships of life. Examine the text with relations like education, social life, business, church, values, thought life, worldview, marriage, family, and sex in view. Release your mind to run freely and explore the various possible relationships the text speaks to. Be realistic and think concretely and not abstractly. Work to see the text vicariously through the eyes of those you shepherd. Hans Finzel in Unlocking the Scriptures highlights four broad categories with specific considerations under each:

**A. WITH GOD**
1. A truth to understand
2. A command to obey
3. A prayer to express
4. A challenge to heed
5. A promise to claim
6. A fellowship to enjoy

**B. WITH YOURSELF**
1. A thought or word to examine
2. An action to take
3. An example to follow
4. An error to avoid
5. An attitude to change or guard against
6. A priority to change
7. A goal to strive for
8. A personal value or standard to hold up
9. A sin to forsake

C. WITH OTHERS
1. A witness to share
2. An encouragement to extend
3. A service to do
4. A forgiveness to ask
5. A fellowship to nurture
6. An exhortation to give
7. A burden to bear
8. A kindness to express
9. A hospitality to extend
10. An attitude to change or guard against
11. A sin to forsake

D. WITH SATAN
1. A person to resist
2. A device to recognize
3. A temptation to resist
4. A sin to avoid and confess
5. A piece of spiritual armor to wear

Seventh, remember the meaning of the text is always one but the applications are many. Jerry Vines and David Allen have rightly argued, following E. D. Hirsch, that there is a distinction that must be made between “meaning” and “significance” (what we would call application). They note, “When the biblical exegete comes to a text of Scripture, he can proceed on the premise that there
is a determinate meaning there. His job is to discover this meaning through exegesis. Having done this, there remains the further task of applying this meaning to modern man. . . . We propose then that a text has one primary meaning with multiple significances or applications of that meaning.”

Eighth, consciously put into practice the application(s) gleaned from the exegesis of the text. Never forget that you have not applied until you have appropriated and put into practice what you have learned. Indeed, the application and practice of the text will serve as a commentary on your understanding of the biblical truth. It will be extremely difficult for you to apply to others what you have not first applied to yourself. Granted, no one can apply everything, but you should diligently and intentionally be working to apply something. What are you trusting God for right now? In what ways are you looking to Jesus and appropriating His grace? What is your action plan to experience change in what you think and how you live? These are questions you should ask yourself before you put this to your audience. Howard Hendricks provides a helpful comparison as to where we have been/are but hope to be/move:
### Introduction of Biblical Truth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>SAME PERSON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old beliefs</td>
<td>New beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old values</td>
<td>New values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old behaviors</td>
<td>New behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old habits</td>
<td>New habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old relationships</td>
<td>New relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old outlook</td>
<td>New outlook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old dreams</td>
<td>New dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old purpose</td>
<td>New purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old environment</td>
<td>New environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old job/career plans</td>
<td>New job/career plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old character</td>
<td>New character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old morals</td>
<td>New morals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old desires/passions</td>
<td>New desires/passions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old communication/language</td>
<td>New communication/language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ninth, beware of the challenges and problems to application. Howard Hendricks warns us of what he calls “substitutes for application.” He raises five, and a quick survey and digest of each one is beneficial for our study.

6. **We substitute interpretation for application.**

   It is easy to settle for knowledge rather than change. That is tragic because as the Hendrickses say, “According to the Bible, to know and not to do is not to know at all.” Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). The implication is clear: either stop calling me “Lord,” or start doing what I tell you. You cannot have one without the other. James 4:17 reminds us, “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (NIV). The person who knows the truth but does not act on it is
not simply making a mistake—making a poor judgment—he is committing sin. In God’s mind, knowledge without obedience is sin. The fact that we have knowledge only increases our accountability.

7. **We substitute superficial obedience for substantive life change.**
   Here, we apply biblical truth to areas where we are already applying it, not to new areas. The result is no noticeable and genuine change in our lives. A blind spot remains, and the truth never affects that part of our life needing change.

8. **We substitute rationalization for repentance.**
   The Hendrickses note, “Most of us have a built-in early-warning system against spiritual change. The moment truth gets too close, too convicting, an alarm goes off, and we start to defend ourselves. Our favorite strategy is to rationalize sin instead of repenting of it.” We build up a healthy supply of responses so that, whenever the truth gets too convicting, we have a dozen or more reasons why it applies to everyone but me.

9. **We substitute an emotional experience for a volitional decision.**
   There is nothing wrong with responding emotionally to spiritual truth. However, if that is our only response, then our spirituality is nothing more than a vapid empty shell with nothing inside. We are after a volitional response to God’s truth. We are after substantive, life-changing decisions based on what the Scriptures say. We must not be satisfied with just being exposed to the truth of God or convicted by it; we must be changed by it. Real change always takes place in the will.

10. **We substitute communication for transformation.**
    “We talk the talk, but we don’t walk the walk.” We think that if we can speak eloquently or convincingly about a point of Scripture, we are on safe ground.
We have fooled others into believing we have got that biblical truth down. But God is not fooled. He knows our hearts. He knows our actions. First Samuel 16:7 says, “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at [and listens to] the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at [and listens to] the heart” (NASB). Hebrews 4:13 adds, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (NIV). God is not impressed with our words as fellow humans might be. The Lord looks at the heart, and nothing is hidden from His sight.

Tenth, be on guard against “the heresy of application.” This particular danger is so prevalent, we will dedicate a short section to it, drawing extensively on the outstanding article by Haddon Robinson titled “The Heresy of Application.”

**The Danger of Heresy in Text-driven Application**

Haddon Robinson says, “More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis.” He points out that “preachers want to be faithful to the Scriptures, and going through seminary, they have learned exegesis. However, they may not have learned how to make the journey from the biblical text to the modern world. They get out of seminary and realize the preacher’s question is application: “How do you take this text and determine what it means [I would say ‘applies’] for this audience?”

Sometimes we apply the text in ways that might make the biblical writer say, “Wait a minute, that’s the wrong use of what I said.” This is heresy of a good truth applied in the wrong way. He notes that this heresy looks like a sermon from Ruth on how to deal with in-laws. Ruth was not given to solve in-law problems!

Robinson notes there is a devastating effect on our congregation in terms of how they, themselves, will handle the Word of God:
One effect is that you undermine the Scriptures you say you are preaching. Ultimately, people come to believe that anything with a biblical flavor is what God says. The long-term effect is that we preach a mythology. Myth has an element of truth along with a great deal of puff, and people tend to live in the puff. They live with the implications of implications, and then they discover that what they thought God promised, he didn’t promise.

Affirming the steps to application we have offered, Robinson notes, “In application we attempt to take what we believe is the truth of the eternal God, which was given in a particular time and place and situation, and apply it to people in the modern world who live in another time, another place, and a very different situation. That is harder than it appears.”

Indeed, “the Bible is specific—Paul writes letters to particular churches; the stories are specific—but my audience is general.” Robinson then provides guidelines or principles for avoiding heresy in application leading to what he calls the “Ladder of Abstraction.” He proposes two questions that we should put forth to each text we examine: (1) What does this teach about God? (2) What does this teach about human nature? To this, we would add, what does this text teach me about Jesus?

He explains how to get at this issue:

[T]ake the biblical text straight over to the modern situation. In some cases, that works well. For example, Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” I say to my listeners, “Do you have enemies? Love them.”
But then I turn the page, and Jesus says, “Sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me.” I hesitate to bring this straight over because I think, If everybody does this, we’ll have problems, big problems.

Some texts look as though they can come straight over to my contemporary audience, but not necessarily. I need to know something about the circumstances of both my text and my audience.

Robinson correctly warns us again, “A text cannot mean what it has not meant. That is, when Paul wrote to people in his day, he expected them to understand what he meant. . . . I cannot make that passage mean something today that it did not mean in principle in the ancient world. That’s why I have to do exegesis. I have to be honest with the text before I can come over to the contemporary world.” Robinson goes on to apply his “Ladder of Abstraction” to a most unusual text he locates in Leviticus. (Actually, the text he cites is found in Exod 24:19; 34:26.) His insight is very helpful:

Leviticus [sic] says, “Don’t boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” First, you have to ask, “What is this all about?” At face value, you might say, “If I have a young goat, and I want to cook it in its mother’s milk for dinner tonight, I should think twice.”

But we now know the pagans did that when they worshiped their idolatrous gods. Therefore, what you have here is not a prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk, but against being involved in the idolatry that surrounded God’s people or bringing its practices into their religion.
If that’s the case, it does no good for the preacher to bring this text straight over. You must climb the ladder of abstraction a couple of levels until you reach the principle: You should not associate yourself with idolatrous worship, even in ways that do not seem to have direct association with physically going to the idol.

In other words, look for what is true anywhere, anyplace, anytime, and under any circumstance. Work in the text until you capture, on one hand, the vision of God that is there and, on the other, the portrait of fallen man that is there.

Robinson expounds on what we are talking about:

*One thing I always do with a passage is abstract up to God. Every passage has a vision of God, such as God as Creator or Sustainer.*

*Second I ask, “What is the depravity factor? What in humanity rebels against that vision of God?”*

*These two questions are a helpful clue in application because God remains the same, and human depravity remains the same. Our depravity may look different, but it’s the same pride, obstinacy, disobedience.*

*Take 1 Corinthians 8, in which Paul addresses the subject of eating meat offered to idols.*
The vision of God: He is our redeemer. Therefore, Paul argues, I will not eat meat, because if I wound my brother’s weak conscience, I sin against Christ, who redeemed him.

The depravity factor: People want their rights, so they don’t care that Christ died for their brother.

Robinson goes on to challenge us to be honest with application, both in terms of the text and our audience. He says,

We want to have a “Thus saith the Lord” about specific things in people’s lives, but we can’t always have that. So we need to distinguish between various types of implications from the text. Implications may be necessary, probable, improbable, or impossible. . . .

Too often preachers give to a possible implication all the authority of a necessary implication, which is at the level of obedience. Only with necessary implications can you preach, “Thus saith the Lord.” This will help us to avoid legalistic prescriptions in our application of the text!

In his closing thoughts, Robinson provides a pastoral word to those called to preach the inerrant Scriptures:

People who are good at exegesis tend to spend a lot of time in that and may not know when to quit. Those folks would be well served to spend extra time on how to communicate the fruit of their research.
Others are into the communication side. They’re always relevant, but they desperately need to spend more time in the biblical text to let it speak to them.

The Spirit answers to the Word. If I am faithful to the Scriptures, I give the Spirit of God something to work on that he doesn’t have if I’m preaching Reader’s Digest. . . .

That’s the greatness of preaching. Something can always happen when a preacher takes God’s Word seriously.

**Conclusion**

The *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* reads, “The preacher is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but is to bring it home to special use by application to his hearers.” To do this effectively, we must know the Scriptures and the culture, the world of the Bible and the world in which we find ourselves. Eric Alexander says it well:

We are thus to be contemporary in our application. For that reason, it is important that we know the world and the pattern of thinking in the world in which we live. For that reason too it is important that we know the world in which our congregation lives. Evangelicals have traditionally been strongest in knowing the Scripture, and weakest in knowing the world. Others have mostly been stronger in knowing the world and weakest in knowing the Scripture. But there is no reason why these two things should be mutually exclusive.
Of course, to do this well, we will need to ask of the Holy Spirit of God who must first apply the biblical truth to the heart of the man of God. Hear Alexander once more:

*Now of course we will recognize and acknowledge that it is the Holy Spirit who is the true applier of the Word. That is a vital, central, basic truth for all our thinking. It is the Holy Spirit who takes the Word of God and uses it as the sword that pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. But that does not excuse us from the labor of asking, “How ought I to apply these truths to my own conscience and then to the conscience of this people?”*\(^\text{27}\)

The great puritan John Owen would add, “A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others, which preacheth itself in his own soul. If the word does not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us.”\(^\text{28}\)
FOOTNOTES

Introduction

2 In personal correspondence with coeditors David Allen and Danny Akin concerning the need for this book.

Applying a Text-driven Sermon

2 Ibid., 290.


5 Ibid., 73–74.


8 York and Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" 73.


15 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 55.


22 Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living By the Book*, 313.

23 Ibid., 291–97. I follow their analysis very closely in this section, quoting them directly at some length.


26 Ibid., 30.

27 Ibid., 29.

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