

**Transforming Encounters with Truth:
Applying the Bible to Contemporary Life**

APPL 695: Guided Study – Applied Theology

3 Credit Hours

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December 7, 2001

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I. The Hope and Problem of Biblical Application

As Christians, we depend upon revelation from God in order to think and live in a manner that is pleasing and honoring to him. Even more importantly, we believe that God's revelation is central to becoming reconciled to the God from whom we are estranged. It is only through his initiative to reach us that we can be saved from the destructiveness that threatens from within and without. This revelation of himself and his ways has come principally through the coming of Jesus, God's son (Heb 1:1-2). He came that we might have life, that we might be saved from the many perversions of truth to which we cling, that we might be fully formed in his image to become a people of God fully appropriate to be called by that name.

In this time between the first and second coming of Jesus, we depend upon the Bible as the central source of God's revelation to us. Though he also reveals himself through creation and through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us fundamentally through the Bible. It is in the Bible's written words that we learn about him and we learn about ourselves. Indeed, many of us have had the beautiful experience of a heart burning with love, gratitude, understanding or even godly sorrow when meditating on the words of Scripture as we sense God's presence and voice speaking to us. It is sometimes like having our own exchange with the Lord on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32). However, in our honesty most of us would have to admit that there are seasons when the Bible seems like a closed, inscrutable, irrelevant book. It sometimes seems to be filled with stories that are as foreign as they are familiar, as cryptic as they are profound, and as unrealistic as they are inspiring. Jesus says to the rich man, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22, *NIV*). But what does he mean for me? Is this an example for me to

copy, an uplifting principle, or something else? So many times preachers wave Bibles over their heads and proclaim that it is God's answer book—that everything we need to know is contained between its covers. But what happens when we talk to the same preacher and frankly disclose our teenager's struggle to stay away from drugs, our spouse's spiritual doubts, our friend's homosexual passions, and our own despair at the horrors of the modern world? So often the response is either a shrugged shoulder or a numbing recitation of verses that claim much more ability to conquer our foes than they deliver.

For those of us who teach the Bible, either as leaders of Bible studies, preachers in pulpits, or in any number of other settings, we need to learn to handle the Bible well. Christians, and Protestants in particular, see the Bible as “sufficient for the moral and spiritual needs of individuals and of the Church.”¹ But how does that sufficiency actually work? How do we plumb the depths of this invaluable word from God so that we can live rightly? Furthermore, how do we then bring that message to our students, congregations, friends and neighbors? These questions are both important and difficult.

The problem of biblical application has two different aspects, one that moves from the ancient world to the contemporary and the other that moves from the contemporary to the ancient. The first asks what the Bible is saying to us today: how can we hear its revelatory voice from the ancient past in such a way that it transforms life in the present? The second question moves in the other direction: how can we bring the issues of today to the Bible, which sometimes seems so indifferent to our particular and modern problems? In this essay, I explore our understanding of the phrase “applying the Bible” so that we see that the Bible both has an ancient message to speak to us today, and that it viably and realistically enables us to engage the

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 49

circumstances we face every day. I hope to broaden our understanding of biblical application so that it is seen to be much more than the closing minutes of a sermon, the ‘practical’ part of the presentation, or a list of three ‘take-home messages’ from a particular passage of the Bible. I contend that the Bible becomes fully sufficient when we see it as a transformational book that first and foremost reshapes our character and then goes on to provide helps for practical living. By opening our eyes to the full range of what it means for the Bible to have relevance in contemporary life, we will be strengthened to do the hard work of studying the Bible, of finding its message for our own lives, and of presenting its unique and valuable message for the benefit of those around us.

II. The Possibility of Biblical Application

The Bible is an old book, written in ancient and foreign languages, and by people living in a profoundly different age and culture than our own. Why is there any reason to believe that this book is useful today, much less to believe that it carries a message of central importance for modern people? In this section, I survey the central tenets of historical Christianity concerning the Holy Spirit and the Bible to address these questions. I do not argue the points against those who believe otherwise, but simply present them as foundational for our exploration of biblical application. The footnotes and bibliography provide starting points for exploring these issues further. This section then closes with a discussion of how the Bible functions today.

II.A The Work of the Holy Spirit

When considering the Bible and its use in contemporary life, one must begin with the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has the particular ministry of bringing the work of God

to completion.² The covenant love of God the Father and the redemption won at the cross by God the Son would be worthless without the Holy Spirit's work of making those things complete in the hearts and lives of women and men. The Holy Spirit turns these things into living realities for those who are called by God. It must be borne in mind that the Holy Spirit is not a force, some sort of technology that we can employ to accomplish our desires, but is a person who gets ahold of us and employs us for the purposes of God. He turns us into faithful disciples and therefore the collective people of God. He has several means for accomplishing this task, including such things as inspiring people to particular tasks and empowering them with spiritual gifts to enable them to complete these tasks. But central to the present discussion are his activities involving the Bible. He has inspired the biblical authors in their work of writing and compiling the Scriptures. He has overseen the work of canonizing the authoritative writings and preserving them through centuries of transmission. He has been present to ensure their faithful translation into so many native tongues. These activities are all part of his work of guiding the Church "into all truth" (John 16:13, *NIV*). The result is not a magical book, but a book that is fully sufficient for the Holy Spirit's greater task of forming the Church. The Bible is a means to his end.

The Holy Spirit's work did not end with the preservation of the Bible. He continues to use the Bible as a tool, while also remaining actively involved in teaching and guiding the Church. Theologians label this activity of the Holy Spirit with the term "illumination." Because of human depravity, our ability to deceive ourselves and our driving desire to assert our own righteousness end up distorting our understanding of the Bible. The goal of a sanctified people of God cannot be accomplished by simply presenting us with a Bible in our own language. Illumination is the process by which the Holy Spirit "works internally in the life of the believer,

² Berkhof, 82.

witnessing to the truth and countering the effects of sin so the inherent meaning of the Bible can be seen.”³ Without the Holy Spirit’s illumination, our ability to rightly handle Scripture would be nonexistent.

Even the work of illumination is not enough to accomplish the Holy Spirit’s goal. The believer is also carried through a process of sanctification, of being made fully pleasing to God in belief and activity – a work of restoring the believer’s whole nature into the full image of God.⁴ A central part of the sanctification process is the movement of biblical truth into the very lifeblood of the Christian. This is what “biblical application” means: the meaning of the Bible is understood and then results in a transformed life that is pleasing to God. From beginning to end, the Holy Spirit enables and guides this process.

A cautionary note must be raised at this point. Too often Christians err by taking an “either/or” stance with respect to activity by the Holy Spirit and human activity. They reason that if the Holy Spirit is illuminating believers and applying the Bible to their lives, therefore our only ‘activity’ is a passive receiving from him. This is far from the truth. Grasping biblical truth and living in accord with it takes work: spiritual, physical and intellectual work. “All the people of God...are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search [the Scriptures].”⁵ Furthermore, the work of searching the Scriptures is not the same for all believers in the body of Christ. Some are called to the meticulous and specialized task of studying the ancient language and cultures so that accurate translations may be produced and the settings of the writings can be understood. Others have the specific role of studying and teaching the Bible to others, whether as full-time pastors, seminary professors, or home Bible study leaders. Many people depend on such teachers

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, ²1998) 282.

⁴ Berkhof, 267.

⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I, Section VIII.

for their biblical knowledge, supplementing it with their own reading as they are able. It is important to realize that these various activities are all necessary and demanding, but they are also under the superintending leadership of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the rest of this essay, dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit will be implicitly present although the emphasis will be on the human activity involved in applying the Bible to contemporary life.

II.B The Bible

Several tenets concerning the Bible must be affirmed before we can continue: its authorship, authority, purpose, and particularity.⁶

First, the Bible exhibits double authorship. It is the work of both humans and God. Just as it is important to affirm both the humanity and divinity of Jesus, lest one fall into serious error, both realities of the authorship of the Bible must be affirmed. Its human authorship is the key to its interpretation and its divine authorship is the key to its authority. As a human document, the Bible is written in ordinary human language, requiring only “the ordinary means”⁷ of study that other examples of literature require. This ordinariness does not denigrate the unique nature of the Bible, but disallows any attempt to develop an unusual or mystical method for reading. The Bible was written by human authors to convey ultimate truth by means of language that ordinary people of their day could read and understand. This means, for example, that care must be taken to read the Bible with sensitivity to genre, metaphor and imagery, just as with any literature. A physics textbook must be read differently from a romance novel. Likewise, proper study of the Bible requires sensitivity to the styles of writing employed by the human authors.

⁶ Further discussion of the nature of Scripture can be found in J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979) 89-124.

⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I, Section VII.

The divine authorship of the Bible asserts that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors to write the words that communicate God's authentic message for his people.⁸ The Christian belief in biblical authority ultimately rests on the authority of Jesus: his attribution of authority to the Old Testament, and the New Testament's testimony about Jesus as accepted by those who knew him. Its authority is fundamental to its ability to accomplish the Holy Spirit's purpose for Scripture: transformation of the believer, the Church and the world.

At this point, we must reflect on the subtle nature of the Bible's authority. The Bible is unlike other authorities.⁹ For example, traffic laws are authoritative and violating them may result in the authorized penalties. But traffic laws are different from the Bible. Traffic laws contain an exhaustive list of prescribed and prohibited activities. When encountering a stop sign, drivers must bring their vehicles to a complete stop before proceeding. This sort of imperative authority is only a small portion of the Bible, and even where it occurs, its applicability to contemporary life must be carefully handled. The Bible is not a list of principles by which to live. For the most part, the Bible is story—a narrative.

Unlike imperative authority, the Bible's authority rests in its privileged position of describing reality that is not afforded other writings. The Bible alone reveals the heart and mind of God. But it does not do so through abstract and detached statements and collections of timeless truths, the kind we modern people like to employ.¹⁰ Instead, the Bible is deeply particular. Its description of reality is profoundly tied to particular people, living in particular

⁸ see Erickson, 224ff.

⁹ For an insightful analysis of biblical authority, see N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991) 7-32. This section draws heavily from his essay.

¹⁰ see Barton's discussion of Martha Nussbaum's work in this area: John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998) 22-4. In his consideration of the function of Scripture, Thiselton writes, "[The Bible] is not a textbook of dogmatic theology which contains merely general rules and universal truths. Not only man, but also God is portrayed in personal terms. It may be true that God should be

places at particular times, speaking particular languages, and facing particular problems.¹¹ The difficulty of applying the Bible to contemporary life, for figuring out what to do with its authority today, stems from this particularity. The key question is how an ancient narrative text can be authoritative and applicable in contemporary life.¹²

The most common approach for applying the Bible to contemporary life is through the discovery of ‘timeless truths.’¹³ The idea is straightforward: each passage of the Bible contains timeless truths wrapped in cultural conditioning. Since the timeless truths are valuable and the cultural conditioning mainly serves to obscure them, the biblical interpreter must scrape away the muck of the ancient culture to discover the pearls of truth. These pearls can then be seen for what they are and can provide guidance for living today. One of the principle arguments against this approach is that it far under-appreciates the Bible God has given us. It would prefer to have a Bible that listed a comprehensive set of timeless truths, but instead has to make do with these mixtures of culture and truth. Much confusion has been generated and ink spilt over the question of whether the story of Rahab (Josh 2) endorses lying or not. The timeless truth approach would appreciate a simple statement about the permissibility of lying and then the Rahab story could be reduced considerably. Although here I have unfairly caricatured this method of biblical interpretation, it is important to realize that the Bible is not a collection of abstract truth claims about God, Christ, salvation, etc. To envision biblical application as the extraction of such things

regarded as being ‘more’ than a person, but he is not less.” [Anthony C. Thiselton, *Language Liturgy and Meaning* (Nottingham: Grove Books Ltd., 1986) 32.]

¹¹ “It is not by chance that the bulk of scripture is narrative. This characteristic corresponds to the nature of Christian faith. The fundamental Christian message is not an ethic, such as the challenge to humanity to live by the law of love, a challenge Christianity shares with some other religions. Nor is it a theology, a collection of abstract statements such as ‘God is love’ – statements that it also shares with some other religions. It is a gospel, an account of something God has done, a concrete, narrative statement: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....’ Christian faith affirms the ethic and the theology just described, which it is glad to share with other religions, but it believes that the grounds for the former and the evidence of the latter is the gospel.” [John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 23.]

¹² Wright, 10.

from the biblical text is to impoverish Scripture.¹⁴ The ‘take-home message’ from a sermon must be more than a list of practical snippets.

The model of the Bible that I propose is considerably different from the one described above. As described previously, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to bring God’s creation plan to fruition, specifically in the work of calling people to faith and sanctifying them to live in a manner worthy of the calling they have received. In God’s wisdom, he has done this through the particularity of the Bible. He has revealed himself in special ways to the biblical authors, particular people who experienced God in particular ways in their lives. Reflecting on their particular experiences, they have written and compiled the biblical texts in all of their richness: legal codes, hymns of praise, poems of lament, wisdom sayings, prophecies, apocalyptic, instructional letters, and stories of Israel, the nations, the apostles, and the activities of God the Father, Son and Spirit. All together, these writings form an extraordinarily rich *story*. The Bible contains many genres, but all form one story, not through scientific facts, but through resonances, echoes and patterns.¹⁵ This story, in all its variety, is the one the Holy Spirit has provided for us so that he can complete his work of transformation in us. This story is designed for our engagement, and the result of that engagement accomplishes the purpose of God. It is the work of the Bible teacher to engage this story personally and then bring its message to others.

The Bible is a particularized book, both in that it tells of particular people and events, and that it exists as a particular book of literature that tells of those particular things. It presents an

¹³ Wright, 11-3.

¹⁴ Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 55-6.

¹⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat this Book: The Holy Community at Table with Holy Scripture* (Vancouver, BC, Canada: Regent College Press, 2000) 45.

understanding of reality, a God-centered reality,¹⁶ that challenges every other understanding, that woos and convinces those who see with different eyes. The particularity of the Bible then goes one step further. Its effect on particular readers today is to shape their understanding, their character, their ideas, their loves and their wills, so that they will be able to live out the particular lives that please God today. Just as it is vastly incomplete to say the Bible is a collection of abstract truths, it would be just as incomplete to say that the Bible's purpose is to produce belief in a collection of abstract truths. The purpose of the Bible is to change particular reality. For each person that encounters its message, Monday's office or factory, Tuesday's lunch, Wednesday's time with the children, Thursday's walk in the forest, Friday's shopping trip, Saturday's soccer game, and Sunday's worship will be changed more into the shape that God desires. Encountering the truth changes a person, and therefore changes their particular world. Yes, it is possible for an ancient narrative text to be relevant in today's world, and indeed it happens with power every day, all around us.

III. The Process of Biblical Application

Within the variety of roles given to different members of the body of Christ, one key role is that of the teacher. The teacher is an agent of the Holy Spirit for the work of transformation. Because the Bible contains the special revelation of God, the teacher must be a Bible teacher, even if the Bible is never mentioned in the teaching. The point is that the teacher actualizes God's revelation for the present audience.¹⁷ The Bible teacher has the difficult task of forming a

¹⁶ The Bible "reveals a God-created, God-ordered, God-blessed world in which we find ourselves at home and whole" (Peterson, 11).

¹⁷ see Jacob Firet, *Dynamics in Pastoring* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1-112.

bridge between the ancient biblical text and today's people.¹⁸ Since a bridge must be anchored on both sides of a chasm, two errors must be avoided: (1) dwelling too much on the biblical side and becoming irrelevant, and (2) dwelling too much on the contemporary side and becoming 'ir-revelant,' *i.e.* lacking the content of God's revelation. The Bible teacher communicates the message of the Bible in ways and terms that the hearer can hear. The method of the Bible teacher can be broken down into three steps: exegesis, application and proclamation.

III.A Exegesis

Exegesis is the process of understanding the original meaning of the biblical text. It seeks to understand what the author sought to convey to the original audience.¹⁹ While some people do exegesis in an *ad hoc* fashion, many have found that a somewhat systematic approach helps to protect against random and decontextualized readings. Though we all bring our personal biases to the text, careful exegesis helps limit the effect of these biases, allowing the text more opportunity to control the teacher's understanding, rather than the reverse. The teacher's job is to proclaim and explain the received message, not a personal position.²⁰ Many do not have the patience for careful exegesis, nor do they believe it is necessary for 'Spirit-led' teachers, but Peterson points out, "All our masters in spirituality were and are master exegetes. ... Exegesis is simply noticing and responding adequately (which is not simple) to the demands that words make on us, that language makes on us."²¹

¹⁸ This theme of bridge-building is developed in John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982) 135-79. [published in America as *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994)]

¹⁹ Literary theorists are currently engaged in a vigorous controversy concerning the ability and desirability of seeking to understand the author's intent from a text. While acknowledging the philosophical validity of the debate, treating its details is beyond the scope of this booklet. For further reading and bibliography, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 145-51, 167-70.

²⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Powerful Preaching" in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr., (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ., 1986), 192.

²¹ Peterson, 49-50.

An exploration of the nature of exegesis is beyond the scope of this booklet, however I will briefly describe some of its features. First, exegesis examines a text on multiple levels: textual, grammatical, structural, stylistic, historical, canonical and theological. Second, beyond the author's original intent, exegesis is concerned with understanding the text within its larger canonical context so that a passage's particular message can be fitted within the whole Bible.²² Third, exegesis cannot be done without a provisional theological framework. This is to say that broad ideas of who God is and what he is doing directly influence one's exegesis. Of course, one's exegesis will likewise re-shape one's theological framework. Exegesis and theology continually influence each other. Fourth, exegesis encourages a biblical sense of proportion, challenging our own emphases with the Bible's understanding of which concerns are principal and which are peripheral.²³ Fifth, exegesis is an exercise in putting away previously derived conclusions, of being suspicious about what we have been told about God in the past. As Ricoeur pointed out, a hermeneutic of suspicion is necessary because of so many lies about God all around us. But then we must re-enter the text with a 'second naivete' – a hermeneutic of adoration.²⁴ While suspicion and scrutiny are important as part of the exegetical process, when we find God's voice in the text, the result should be awe, praise, repentance and worship.

III.B Application

After dwelling on one side of the chasm, *i.e.* living with the ancient text in order to hear its strange voice and become accustomed to it, it is time for the teacher to return to the present world. It is important to realize that application of the biblical message is much more than putting icing on a sermon. Indeed, it is the essence of preaching and teaching. The application of

²² Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 70-9.

²³ Donald Macleod, "Preaching and Systematic Theology" in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ., 1986), 259.

²⁴ Peterson, 75-6.

the Bible is every word that affects peoples' identities; their understanding of themselves, God and the world; and causes them to make decisions and take action. Application is an encounter with reality.

Biblical application is not simply directly reading the biblical words and hearing them as words to us. Though an injunction such as, "Carry each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2, *NIV*) may seem manifestly transparent, the nature of those burdens is further developed in the surrounding text, and the Galatians' situation may not be the same as the present one. Some people are being crushed under their own burdens and cannot bear anyone else's – so they might need to hear someone *else* being told to lend a hand! Application is more than re-reading the text with disregard for both the biblical context and the contemporary context.

In addition, biblical application is not simply finding the closest analogy between the text and a contemporary issue. Many a Bible teacher has headed into treacherous waters by seeking to find analogies to Rahab's ethical dilemma of lying about the spies. In truth, not many people are faced with the problem of being surrounded by the army of the people of God. Often, lacking good analogies, questionable ones are found instead.

Biblical application by means of direct injunctions and drawing analogies have their place, but the best overarching idea for understanding biblical application is to make the biblical world real in the present world. N. T. Wright provides a helpful illustration.²⁵ He asks us to imagine what would happen if an unfinished Shakespearean play were discovered, one that is missing its final act. Rather than any playwright daring to complete it, imagine an acting company that performed the existing play and then sought to improvise the completion, in plain view of the audience. The improvised last act would have to be consistent with the story thus far,

²⁵ Wright, 18-9.

but it would be far from completely determined by what Shakespeare had written. This illustration is helpful for reflecting on biblical application. We have in the Bible a rich story of God's activity with humanity, full of history and passion. We even have hints as to how the story will end through prophecy. But each of us, as actors and actresses in the play, lack our particular lines. Applying the Bible involves learning the story so that we can play our part. We join our narrative into the biblical metanarrative. To answer 'What am I to do?' we must first answer 'Of what story am I a part?'²⁶

As the Bible teacher reflects on application, there is no substitute for living in the modern world with the same care and observation as used in biblical exegesis. Teachers must exegete their own students and congregations, their environment and culture, so that their teaching and preaching can build bridges, can sew the two worlds together. People are empowered by the word of God when they begin to realize that they actually do live in the same world as the one described in the Bible, that the God of the Bible is living and moving today, that they are called to respond and act in ways that no person has yet imagined or seen. To apply the Bible is to see the world as it truly is so that our lives can be true and pleasing to God.

III.C Proclamation

The final step in applying the Bible is proclaiming the message. Proclamation involves informing, persuading and calling forth a response. It may be in a sermon, in a small group Bible study, around a family dinner table, or even in the privacy of one's own study. It is done with care and (as with every step of the process) dependence upon the Holy Spirit. It is important to realize that biblical application is much more a pastoral art than a mechanical skill. Knowledge,

²⁶ cf. J. Richard Middleton and Bruce J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 93.

sensitivity, courage, sympathy, love, effort and prayer all come together in this most mysterious activity.

In this section, I have provided a brief overview of the process of applying the Bible to contemporary life. Each step deserves much more attention, but these broad strokes provide an outline from which to work. In the next section, I expand on the rich variety of ways the biblical text comes to life and affects people's lives.

IV. The Richness of Biblical Application

What does it mean to apply the Bible to contemporary life? If one were to poll ten expository preachers, at least eight would talk about the final part of the sermon, where the preacher transitions from talking directly about the Bible passage to drawing together three implications of the study for today's audience. At this point, two different kinds of listeners reveal themselves. One type wakes up, scrambles for a pen, searches for a blank space on the church bulletin, and begins scribbling down the 'important' part of the sermon. Another type loses interest, glazes over, and laments the trivialization of God's voice that is about to take place. It is my contention that this scenario misses the point of biblical application. I argue that, for good or ill, the entire encounter with the biblical text results in contemporary application. Each part of the process has an impact. The application is not an appendix on the sermon; it is not the last step in 'observation-interpretation-application.' Biblical application is the process by which the message of the Bible transforms the reader, the hearer, or the student. In this section, I describe that process under two major headings: character formation and daily life.²⁷

²⁷ I lean heavily on Birch and Rasmussen for the outline and content of this section: Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1976), 80-123, 184-94.

IV.A Character Formation

I once heard a preacher lament that in his own life, he could only remember the main points of a handful of sermons—whether his own or others he had heard. Despite hours dedicated to fashioning alliterative headings, searching for compelling illustrations, and focusing the messages down to three key points, preachers generally fail at producing memorable sermons. It is tempting to grieve over this reality and to redouble our homiletical efforts, but I believe that solid, biblical preaching is considerably more useful and life-changing than this picture might portray. The reason is that the central transformative power of biblical teaching is *not* in its ability to be remembered, but in the shaping of the character of the hearer that it achieves. In the end, it matters relatively little if a Christian understands and can recite that humility, gentleness, and patience are fitting responses to being called by God (Eph 4:2). But it matters greatly if that same Christian is humble, gentle and patient. The central application of the Bible in contemporary life is the formation of Christian character.

One dictionary defines character as: “the inherent complex of attributes that determine a person’s moral and ethical actions and reactions.”²⁸ Each person has a make-up (a complex one!) that structures the way that person looks at the world, reacts to events, and guides thinking and behavior. This internal construction is different for every person and has elements that are relatively fixed and immovable as well as those that are continually being recolored and reshaped. In the Christian view, character is more important than right action. Jesus repeatedly challenged the ill-motivated ‘correct’ actions of the Pharisees (*e.g.*, Matt 23:27-8). Fortunately, the Bible is most effective in transforming the characters of those who engage it. In the words of Middleton, “We must be willing for the biblical text to judge our constructions, to call us into

²⁸ WordWeb, available from x-word.com.

question, to convert us.”²⁹ Therefore, Bible teachers should concern themselves with how their teaching is related to character formation. Under this heading, I divide character formation into four aspects: worldview, eternal human questions, symbols and stories, and habits.

Worldview

The most fundamental aspect of human character is worldview. Everyone has a model of reality in their heart: what is real, what is good, how things work, where the world is headed, what role individuals and various corporate entities play, and so on. More recently, this idea has been described as a metanarrative, an overarching story into which each individual story fits. However it is described, there is a basic understanding of reality that drives each person’s interpretation of what is happening as well as that person’s behavior.

Each person has a worldview, and the Bible has one, too. Just as it is impossible to adequately summarize an individual’s worldview, it is likewise impossible to do so for the Bible’s. Each biblical text shines a different light on this rich complex. However, every worldview fundamentally works itself out from a single “ultimate concern”³⁰ or “fundamental principle.”³¹ For the Bible’s worldview, the ultimate concern is God in Christ. Everything follows from this central character in the biblical story. Of course, useful as it is to do so, naming the Bible’s ultimate concern does not do any more than begin to describe its worldview. For the biblical worldview is developed through its slow revelation of God, revealing his nature, his preferences, his goals, his methods, and even his mystery! This is done in many different ways. Stories portray God as an active character who creates with words, calls individuals to unique

²⁹ Middleton, 107.

³⁰ D. Mackenzie Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

³¹ Kuyper writes, “As truly as every plant has a root, so truly does a principle hide under every manifestation of life. These principles are interconnected, and have their common root in a fundamental principle; and from the latter is developed logically and systematically the whole complex of ruling ideas and conceptions that go to make up our life and world-view.” [Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931) 189.]

tasks, wages war on behalf of (and even against!) his people, incarnates himself as a baby, dies on a cross, and rises again. Biblical narrators reveal God's inner life, such as when he was grieved that he had made man (Gen 6:6) and when he was amazed by the faith (or lack thereof) of the people he was with (Luke 7:9; Mark 6:6). Every biblical detail about God reveals something about him, though not always in a way that easily harmonizes with every other detail.

From this ultimate concern about God in Christ, the Bible's worldview flows outward to involve the created order we inhabit and of which we are part. The Bible's world is not one of constant peace and simplicity, but is one infected by sin and judgment. However, this sick world is also one that was seen to be very good from the beginning, and one that will reach the beautiful goal to which God has destined it. The Bible's world also reveals humankind in all of its richness. This biblical worldview is comprehensive, though not exhaustive. It transcends culture but also reveals itself through culture. It cannot be reduced or summarized, though it can be explored through themes and other techniques of organization.³²

The biblical worldview is not simply an entity that presents itself for our inspection. Rather, it is presented in the Bible as *the* worldview, the compelling understanding of reality that calls all people everywhere to adjust themselves to it.³³ It vibrates with an energy that seeks to challenge every other worldview. Brueggemann writes of the Old Testament: "Israel's testimony about a world with Yahweh at its center intends to debunk and nullify all other proposed worlds

³² Hasel writes of the search for an overarching theme of the Old Testament, "It is evident that even the most carefully worked out single center or formula will prove itself finally to be one-sided, inadequate, and insufficient, if not outrightly erroneous, and therefore will lead to misconceptions." [Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 155.] But Hasel also helpfully suggests that the person of God functions usefully as a dynamic center to the Bible, with a cluster of different theological themes revolving about him (170-1). Brueggemann agrees that God is the primal subject of the Bible, and also agrees that systematization is inappropriate: "The elusive but dominating Subject of the Old Testament [*i.e.* God] cannot be comprehended in any preconceived categories." [Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 117.]

³³ Sternberg writes of the biblical narrator working like a rhetorician, seeking to establish consensus in the face of opposition, "bringing the audience's viewpoint into alignment with his own," by vindicating and inculcating its

that do not have Yahweh at their center. This testimony undertaken persistently by Israel is not neutral or descriptive, but it is thoroughly and pervasively partisan advocacy.”³⁴ As Peterson describes it, “The Bible reveals the self-revealing God and with that the way the world is, the way life is, the way we are.” He then quickly adds, “God and his ways are not what most of us think.”³⁵ Everyone’s understanding of God is corrupt; humans are wonderfully efficient creators of idols.³⁶ This is simply another way of saying that we all generate understandings of God that are distortions of who he really is. Therefore our resulting worldviews distort reality. The chief way the Bible is applied in contemporary life is by challenging, wooing, persuading, and confronting people with who God is. Brueggemann writes, “Israel’s testimony is intended to generate an accepted, normative narrative construal of reality in which the members of Israel can live.”³⁷ For the preacher who wishes to make the Bible relevant, the chief work is to present the reality of the triune God as he is revealed in the Bible. It is this understanding of reality that provides a place for us to live.

Eternal Human Questions

The second aspect of character is the collection of eternal human questions that we all face and for which we all seek satisfying answers. Examples of these are the questions of purpose, significance, destiny, identity, guilt, freedom, relationship, suffering, and hope.³⁸

worldview: Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University P, 1987) 482.

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 723.

³⁵ Peterson, 32.

³⁶ “For the people doth quite overthrow the worship of God; they refuse the doctrine of the law; they bring in a strange and profane religion. And this is a notable place, because it pointeth out the fountain from which all manner of superstitions did flow since the beginning, and especially what was the first beginning of making idols; to wit, because man, which is carnal, will, notwithstanding, have God present with him, according to the capacity of his flesh. This is the cause why men were so bold in all ages to make idols.” [John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, tr. Christopher Featherstone, ed. Henry Beveridge, chapter 7, verse 40.]

³⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 134.

³⁸ Stott, 151.

Everyone encounters these questions many times over the course of life. People make real-life decisions every day based on the conclusions they have reached. For one person, the purpose of life is to enjoy pleasure. For another, the purpose of life is to muddle through pain. For one, significance is found in pious activity. For another, it is in feeding a beggar. For some, their destiny is the grave, while others aspire to live in a new heavenly kingdom. All of these questions lurk behind shadows in our hearts, leaping out at the most surprising and inopportune moments to upset our understanding of ourselves and our worlds. The Bible does not provide many simple aphorisms for these deep questions, but it does reveal many examples of lives lived in light of particular answers, and provides materials from which answers can be built. When Jesus set his face like a flint to go to his death in Jerusalem, the question of purpose begins to transcend personal pleasure and pain. Our understanding of guilt must be transformed when we realize that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1, *NIV*), yet the same apostle lashes out against some who *are* in Christ Jesus with the words, “You foolish Galatians!” (Gal 3:1). Bible teachers must remain aware of the importance of these questions for the seemingly insignificant decisions we all make every day, but which have tremendous effects on the directions of our lives.

Symbols, Stories and Evaluations

The third aspect of character is symbols and stories. We all have symbols in our minds that define the anchor points of our worldview. They include people (both individual personalities and types), places, documents, events, cultic objects, systems and processes, institutions, and so on. Collections of these symbols make up yet more symbols. For example, Americans understand themselves in terms of a basic (though large) collection of symbols. These include such people as the founding fathers, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton,

industrial robber barons, slaves and slaveholders, and rags-to-riches businessmen. It includes documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Landmark events such as the moon landing, political conventions, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima are important symbols. Institutions such as the stock exchange, the presidency, the welfare system, and so on, all operate as symbols for Americans. Collected together, these symbols produce a large composite symbol: the United States of America.

These symbols are not free-standing objects, but are associated with stories. The moon landing was not simply an event but was a story that began with watching Sputnik orbit overhead, continued with Kennedy's commitment to accomplishing the feat before the end of the decade, the work of countless engineers, the tension of the launch, the glory of the small step and giant leap, and the relief of splashdown. This story is not just a recounting of the past, but is a powerful narrative that shapes Americans' self-understanding. Without realizing it, when a challenge is presented to an American, a nearly inaudible voice whispers, "If we could send a man to the moon, we can do *this!*" When the challenge is met, the adrenaline we experience is reminiscent of Neil Armstrong's first words. People map their own experiences into these symbolic stories, shaping them to fit one of the many patterns we carry in our hearts.

These symbols and stories also carry with them moral evaluations. The same lunar landing story can be portrayed as praise for human ingenuity or as condemnation of an economic boondoggle. The same Pentagon building can be a symbol for the protection of human freedom or for oppression of the impoverished world. The symbol of a welfare mother produces sympathy in some and disgust in others. Collections of symbols, stories and evaluations are the

building blocks for each person's character. They produce an order for our world, the pattern by which we perceive reality.

The Bible also presents a collection of symbols, stories and evaluations. These symbols cover the full range of types listed above. People include Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Israelites, gentiles, widows, orphans, tax collectors, Pharisees, shepherds, and apostles. Places include Eden, Egypt, Israel, Jerusalem, Babylon, Rome, the Temple, the wilderness, the sea, the Garden of Gethsemane, Golgatha, and the New Jerusalem. Events include the crossing of the Red Sea, the theophany at Sinai, the exile, the return from exile, the birth of Jesus, the crucifixion, and the final judgment. These symbols likewise have stories that surround them, such stories as the Creation, the Exodus, the ministry of Jesus, the spread of the gospel, and the New Creation. These symbols and stories also have evaluations that go along with them. Mention Israel and some Christians marvel at the chosen people of God while others grow angry at the blindness of legalism. Mention the crucifixion and some people respond with horror at the cost of sin while others rejoice in the love of Jesus. These symbols, stories and evaluations provide compartments in Christians' hearts and minds in which they organize their understanding of reality. Whether the Church is seen as marching in triumphal procession (2 Cor 2:14) or as a motley array of fools who shame the wise (1 Cor 1:27) has a tremendous effect. As in this example, the biblical symbols are not designed to be uniform and consistent, but to provide a rich vocabulary of understanding, a sourcebook that provides structure and categories for living.

Every time a preacher speaks from the Bible, the hearers refine their understanding of the biblical symbols, stories and evaluations. These then become elements of their character. They provide the perspective through which we view the world. When a preacher tells the story of the

Exodus, each symbol (*e.g.* Moses, Pharaoh, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea) is planted into the hearer's character. The story is not simply prelude to the application, it *is* application unto itself, for those symbols, stories and evaluations transform the hearers. In small but decisive ways, each presentation of a symbol changes what happens in offices, factories and boardrooms on Monday morning.³⁹ When one understands how forceful, omnipresent and influential are the world's competing symbols, stories and evaluations presented in television, movies, advertising, and news reports, the Bible teacher's task is clearly all the more urgent.

Habits

Life is too fast-paced and full to allow us the luxury of thinking through every thing we do from first principles. This limitation is not a problem but simply a reality. When someone touches a hot dish that has come straight out of the oven, what happens is not a cognitive process about temperature, pain and burns. No, what happens is an automatic reaction of pulling away. This is a natural reflex, but other habits of behavior are developed through time and repetition. I make my bed every morning not because I work through the possible uses of that minute of time and decide that making my bed is its proper use, but because that is what I do every morning. It is a long ingrained habit, impressed upon me by my mother. I am not trapped by it, but I continue to live by this pattern because I find it is a good way to live: there is no need to hide my bedroom when a guest appears; my sheets stay fresh and unwrinkled; etc. One of the ways that the Bible forms character is by forming good habits within us. These habits are collections of beliefs, activities and evaluations that need not be thought through anew every time. They provide a continuity of life that propels us forward, even during dark and turbulent days. They are a fundamental part of our character.

³⁹ Brueggemann notes, "A regularized, stylized practice of symbolization is indispensable for the sustenance of intentional ethical practice." [Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 678.]

An example of a belief habit is that God is aware of, and interested in, everything that happens in our lives: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6-7, *NIV*). When this habit is well-formed in someone's character, every joy and every sorrow is experienced in the presence of God. For someone who only believes it, but does not have a habit of belief, only those experiences that are consciously brought to mind before God are shared with him.

Habits can also be activities. When a beggar asks for money, is the reflexive, habitual response to be suspicious of the beggar's truthfulness and trustworthiness or to give freely? Of course, further thought and reflection may reverse the gut response, but habits provide the basic response. “Give to everyone who asks you...Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:30, 35, *NIV*).

Finally, evaluations are habit-forming. Many of us instinctively respond to someone who is poor and dirty with the evaluation that they must have done something to deserve landing in that miserable place. After all, upright and moral people gain good educations, work proper jobs, and take care of themselves. But is this not the same instinctive evaluation as Job's counselors? “Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). In his misery, “Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes” (Job 2:8). Eliphaz responded to his suffering friend with the charge that flows out of habit for so many of us: “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?” (Job 22:5). But this habit-based response was judged by God: “You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:8). Our most important evaluations are not those few that are reached

through careful thought and reflection, but the many that occur every day without thought, but through habit.

There is another part of one's character that provides continuity to life besides our collection of habits. Habits provide a basis for belief, activity and evaluation without needing to stop and think. Goals provide a similar continuity. Goals are conscious, desirable objectives that are maintained over some extended period of time. The goal may be to go to college, or to run a marathon, or to play the piano, or to read a classic novel. Whatever the goal, aiming at a distant target provides a fixed category for many different priorities, decisions and activities. Why am I dragging myself out of bed at 6am on a dark, rainy morning? Because I need to get eight miles of running under my belt this week. The goal provides momentum when our wheels are stuck in the mud, provides justification when excuses pop into our minds, and provides an overarching banner under which we can order various aspects of our lives. Bible teachers should recognize that they have a responsibility to articulate goals for their students to embrace. Some goals are concrete while others are more abstract. Whether they are goals of generosity, biblical literacy, family worship, or many less edifying goals, we all organize our lives around objectives we desire to reach. Without guidance from the Bible, our goals will be those implanted in us by the non-believing world.

Summary of Character Formation

In this section, we have examined four different aspects of character formation: worldview, eternal human questions, symbols, and habits. These aspects of character are fundamentally important to our lives. The Bible primarily addresses itself to these issues and its primary application is in forming character in a way that bears a likeness to Christ and honors God. As we seek to apply the Bible to contemporary life, we must recognize character formation

as the primary way in which this application occurs. Bible teachers must then commit themselves to cooperating with the Holy Spirit in forming the characters of those in their audience by consciously considering how their messages function in this way. To describe a universe that sparkles with the majesty and holiness of God is not an abstract, inconsequential activity. Rather, it is foundational to the daily decisions and activities that shape the world for good or for ill. No one in our congregations may remember the three points of last week's sermon, but that is relatively unimportant if their characters are moving into concord with the character of God in Christ. Character formation is not a once-for-all task, but a slow and steady work that requires dedication and labor from those who expound the scriptures.

IV.B Daily Life and Decision Making

The previous section outlined ways in which Christian character is formed, and the role the Bible can play in this formation. In this section, I examine the more direct role of the Bible in daily life and decision making. We all face scores of decisions every day—some are seemingly insignificant and innocuous while others seem momentous and pivotal. Some of these decisions are handled quickly and easily, with no extended reflection or contemplation. Others can be almost debilitating in their difficulty, preoccupying us for extended periods of time. The Bible can help with decisions of all sorts and here we consider how it can help us think through the decisions of daily life. I consider this topic under two headings: norms for decision making and practical ramifications of theology.

Norms for Decision Making

As stated previously, the topic of 'biblical application' tends to be narrowly understood as meaning that study of the Bible leads to certain ways of living that can be extracted from the text: how generous one should be with money, how often one should pray, and so on. The above

discussion of character formation sought to broaden this view considerably. This section extends the ordinary myopic view one step further. More than telling individuals specifically how to live in light of the reality of God in Christ, the Bible provides certain foundations for making good decisions. Rather than painting a definitive picture of the ideal Christian life, the Bible spends much more time describing and illustrating aspects of living to which we should aspire. These patterns, or norms, come in a number of different types. The Bible describes *ideals*, such as love, righteousness, purity, and justice. It presents proper *goals*, such as peace and contentment. The Bible contains *models* of human behavior, though with the exception of Jesus these are often mixed. So some elements of David's life, or Moses', or Paul's should be seen as exemplary while others (*e.g.* adultery with Bathsheba, refusing God's call because of 'humility,' persecuting the church) should obviously be discarded. The Bible also contains *rules*, such as the rules presented by the Jerusalem council to the new Gentile converts (Acts 15:20), or Paul's guidance to Timothy on the selection of elders (1 Tim 3:1-7). Please note that rules applicable to the particular biblical situations may be insufficient or even improper for our own situations. Finally, the Bible contains many broad *principles*, such as the unity and diversity of the church that produces a mature body of Christ when each part is functioning properly (Eph 4:3-16). All of these ideals, goals, models, rules and principles provide foundations for decision making.

Bible teachers should recognize that it is their responsibility to teach their people these norms, either explicitly or implicitly. Love is the biblical ideal, not hatred, cynicism or apathy. Maybe this seems self-evident, but the competing norms, which are heavily promoted by secular society, must be challenged. Furthermore, the simple word 'love' must be unpacked and described. Love means many different things to different people. The Bible does not stop with the simple statement "God is love" (1 John 4:16), but fills many pages with descriptions of it,

examples of it being lived out, poems celebrating it, and laments bemoaning the absence of it. Communicating the biblical ideal of love could be a lifelong task by itself for a conscientious teacher. Likewise, presenting David's life as a model consists of more than telling the story of killing Goliath and sketching his struggle with Saul. For David's life to become actively exemplary means that his heart, his motivations, his priorities, his challenges, his options, his choices, his loves, his heartbreaks, and his exultations have to be conveyed. We need to get under his skin, into his heart, and inside his mind. Fortunately, the biblical literature is designed for this sort of thing. It is not content to give us a factual chronology of his life, but invites us to travel with David and experience such things as his 'irrational' decision to spare Saul's life as the remarkable events they are (1 Sam 24:6). To apply the Bible is to breathe new life into these norms so that we can make them our own.

The question remains: how do these biblical norms lead to decisions in daily life? Three basic steps are required to bring the force of norms to bear on a decision. First, the decision must be analyzed to understand what is really going on. What is the decision being faced? Who and what does the decision impact? What are the possible options? Only when such questions have been clearly answered can the decision be put into perspective. Second, the appropriate norms should be applied to the result of the analysis. What ideals are at stake here? What goals do the different options seek to accomplish? What parallels does this decision have to situations faced by people who are models (positive or negative models!) for behavior? What principles and rules are caught up in this decision? Third is the difficult matter of coming to a judgment. Any non-trivial decision will have multiple norms involved in it. More troubling is the fact that the options will all have positive and negative stances with respect to those norms. Therefore moral

judgments are not matters for calculation or scientific precision, but for prayerful reflection and then doing the best we can before God.

As a simplified example of this process, consider the matter of deciding what to do with some unexpected income. First, what is the nature of the decision? The basic options include spending the money on oneself, giving it away, or investing it. At the next level, the decision involves what to spend the money on, who to give it to, or how to invest it. Those affected by the decision include the person making the decision, any family members involved, the companies involved in the item being considered for purchase, the possible recipients of a donation, and the companies who would receive the investment. Clearly the complexity gets out-of-hand quickly, so pruning away some of the options and factors is a good idea. The second step is to apply the norms to the decision. How do the biblical ideals of generosity and stewardship apply? What about the biblical principles that warn against the love of money? How about the models of behavior toward money demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles? How similar is my own situation to theirs? Again, the complexity of the issues may become discouraging, but drawing from this wide array of material helps to protect against clearly wrong choices, while also pointing out some of the very positive aspects of other choices. The third and most difficult step is applying judgment, a process that requires both intellectual and emotional maturity. It might help to consider that the Bible usually presents God's people making decisions from the gut, based on a well-developed character and a deep devotion to God. But discipline in decision making may be a necessary step towards developing that kind of character and devotion.

Applying the Bible to contemporary life therefore involves developing an understanding of the biblical norms and also developing a mature ability for making decisions. Bible teachers have a responsibility to both communicate the norms and teach their proper use. Such teaching

need not necessarily be explicit, but it needs to be present. Teachers should remember that working through typical real-life decisions as part of teaching can bring hundredfold returns from their students as they are transformed into mature Christian decision-makers.

Practical Ramifications of Theology

In this final section of expounding the nature of biblical application, I want to observe two well-known attributes of Paul's epistles. First, his letters are properly labeled 'occasional theology,' meaning that they were written for particular occasions facing particular people in particular places and times.⁴⁰ Their unfading value is recognized by their place in the Christian canon, but this does not negate the fact that Paul's focus was to communicate particularized information and not to develop objective, detached constructions that describe the Christian faith. The second attribute is that several of them exhibit a structure that begins with theological truth and concludes with practical ramifications of that theology. The difference is often clearly observed by the lack of imperative verbs in the theological section and their overwhelming presence in the 'practical' section. Many expository teachers of the Bible imitate Paul's pattern when applying the Bible. Present-day Bible teachers often present theological reality, and then move to particularized practical ramifications for these particular people and their particular situation. For Paul, the turning point is usually marked by the great "Pauline 'therefore'" (*e.g.* Rom 12:1; Eph 4:1).⁴¹

This use of 'therefore' is what most teachers mean when they talk about biblical application. While I have sought to expand the notion of application, I in no way desire to diminish the importance of this more common usage. When Jesus asks, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt 6:27), all care-burdened persons are compelled

⁴⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 268.

to insert their own ‘therefore’ and directly apply the ramifications of this question to their own lives. This sort of direct application does not in any way nullify the necessity of careful exegesis and the importance of considering each text in its context, but nonetheless some passages cannot help but be forcefully and directly applied. The responsible Bible teacher helps the hearers to make this step of personal application. Sometimes it means ‘warming them up’ so that the weight of the text is felt. Sometimes it means carefully explaining the cultural setting and literary context so that the text is clearly understood. Sometimes it means restating the text in a variety of ways, maybe even using varied presentations such as drama, poetry or song. Sometimes it means offering provocative examples of how the text would be applied in particular situations. Sometimes it means challenging the community to make a concrete response. These direct applications are appropriate forms of biblical application, but it must always be borne in mind that the much more significant avenues for application are the transformations of character that result from the larger message of the Bible.

IV.C Summary

What does it mean to apply the Bible to contemporary life? One narrow meaning is the insertion of the ‘therefore’ after explaining a Bible passage and bringing people (the teacher included, of course!) to respond appropriately to the gospel revelation present there. But it means much more. It means to allow God’s revelation of himself to become incarnate, to become present in living form, in people by shaping them, transforming us into a faithful community of God’s people. It means to build Christian character within our hearts and minds so that we have eyes to truly see the reality before us. Our perception of reality is affected by our worldview so

⁴¹ Ferguson, 208.

we must allow the Bible to shape our foundational understandings.⁴² We all ask the same eternal questions, and the Bible helps us to frame those questions properly and discover adequate answers to them. Our lives are largely lived out in terms of basic symbols, stories and evaluations that give shape to the complexity of the world we inhabit. The Bible provides symbols that help us to see God's world in the categories he has revealed. Little decisions and activities build up to have large effects, and many of these little things are done from habits. The Bible can develop habits of righteousness and goodness within us so that the unconscious things of life are glorifying to God. Finally, when facing the hard decisions of life, the biblical norms provide a foundation for making them with maturity and with confidence. This rich, transformational complex that is 'biblical application' brings the scriptural world and the present world into convergence. Those who study and teach the Bible do a good work, because the implications on life are comprehensive, and much greater than any of us can imagine.

V. The Work of Biblical Application

Doing the actual work of applying the Bible is impossible to pin down to a series of steps that automatically produce relevant nuggets for today's world. However, there are some principles that can guide us through the process and help us to do the work more responsibly.

V.A Dwelling in Two Worlds

The Bible teacher is a bridge builder – joining together the ancient text and the present age with all of its modern glories, pitfalls and eccentricities. To connect these worlds, one must dwell in both worlds, the ancient and the present. To live in the ancient world is no easy task. It requires dedication, study and effort. It is necessary to be steeped in ancient culture, language,

⁴² Brueggemann argues that we do not 'apply' Scripture but instead our reading of reality is subverted by it (quoted in Middleton, 175).

life and literature.⁴³ We cannot simply read the Bible as if it were written last week in English. It is a very foreign book, filled with places we have never heard of, social and political structures that defy contemporary parallel, and figures of speech that draw on alien modes of life. Though our modern translations are of very high quality, learning the ancient languages provides invaluable insights into the mind of the biblical authors. Many Bible teachers do not have the time to devote to language study, but gaining familiarity with the biblical landscape through atlases and studying the history of Israel, Greece and Rome can help tremendously. Even when studying the New Testament, it is helpful to know that the authors largely assumed that their audiences had a deep knowledge of the Old Testament. Finally, it is important to be familiar with the overall sweep of the Bible, its story, epochs and predominant symbols. In order to understand the Bible, we must understand its world.

However, Bible teachers cannot be content with knowing only the biblical world. The roles of ‘pastor’ and ‘teacher’ go together in the New Testament (*e.g.*, Eph 4:11), and for good reason. The teacher must also be present in the world that the flock inhabits. The teacher does not simply bring the Bible to the people, but bridges the gap between the Bible and the people. As one preacher said, “It remains an axiom of Christian preaching that the road from study to pulpit runs through a living, demanding interrupting manse; out into the noisy street; in and out of houses and hospitals, farms and factories, buses, trains, cinemas...up between rows of puzzled people to the place where you are called to preach... For the living Word there is no by-pass road from study to pulpit.”⁴⁴ In order to apply the Bible to contemporary life, the teacher must be an active participant in contemporary life and be involved in other peoples’ daily lives. Vosteen

⁴³ Brueggemann calls this learning part of “nurturing a historical imagination,” and being a responsible participant in the biblical narrative means endeavoring to become an “insider” to the culture of the text: Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) 29-31.

⁴⁴ quoting David Read: Stott, 191.

explains it this way: “The preacher must know their hopes, their desires, their dreams, their failures, their sins. He must be acquainted with their work and their recreation. The closer he can get to them in all aspects of their lives, the more real will be God’s message as applied to their needs.”⁴⁵ One experienced pastor said that the study that most prepared him for the pulpit was his habit of spending a few hours a week with a parishioner in his or her place of work. The simple fact is that the teacher’s own life is much too shallow by itself to provide the deep soil from which an applicable message can grow. The Bible teacher must learn from the community in order to be of use to the community. Only by being fully present in this world, exegeting contemporary life with as much care as we exegete the Bible, can we communicate the biblical message.

V.B Time and Reflection

The teacher must first apply the Bible personally before seeking a message for others. It is generally disingenuous to seek ‘the message they need to hear’ rather than listening oneself. I do not mean to diminish the necessity of knowing the needs of the people, but our deepest clues to others’ needs are usually present within our own hearts.⁴⁶ Bible teachers with integrity must first expose their own lives to the searching light of Scripture. If we cannot apply the Bible for ourselves, we will never be able to do the harder work of bringing it to other people. As Peterson warns, “If Holy Scripture is going to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized.”⁴⁷

This process of internalization takes time. It is nearly impossible to open a new passage from the Bible and begin exegesis in the same week we hope to preach a relevant sermon.

⁴⁵ J. Peter Vosteen, “Pastoral Preaching” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ., 1986) 407.

⁴⁶ One pastor recalls the admonition from Lloyd Ogilvie to pray over each message, “Lord, never let me preach a sermon I do not need to hear.”

Today's exegesis may not lead to a sermon for several years. We must live with and in the Bible, not simply present it. Some preachers have found it helpful to teach the same material to different audiences over several years. The first year, it is worked out interactively, in raw form, with a small group, possible a group of up-and-coming leaders who are learning to study the Bible themselves. The second year, it can be taught to a Sunday school class or home Bible study – something halfway between a discussion group and a sermon. The third year, it may be ready for the pulpit. Allowing the Scriptures to penetrate us over a longer time and a greater breadth of situations will deepen its application. The biblical message simmers in our mind as we go to the bank, grieve with the mourning, celebrate with the rejoicing, read the news, argue with our spouses, and eat our meals. The result is a bridge that joins two worlds. “[We] don’t just learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized.”⁴⁸ That metabolized Scripture enables us to faithfully improvise the yet-unwritten act of the play.

Of course, the most important reason for time and reflection is so that the message can be consciously developed before God. A Bible teacher is a tool of the Holy Spirit, an agent for bringing creation to its God-ordained end. Prayer and study must be as intermingled as the breath of lovers. Prayer may not result in lightning flashes of insight, but study without prayer is barren. May God bless the reading, the study, the reflection, the teaching, and the hearing of his word.

V.C *Telling the Story*

As Bible study turns into sermon preparation, ideas turn into tools that reshape people and influence the future. Teaching is not just presenting the Bible. It is not just telling people what to do. It is the transformation of lives – a process that requires thought, creativity and

⁴⁷ Peterson, 15.

⁴⁸ Peterson, 12.

respect. Reflect carefully on the various aspects of character formation. How can I draw people into the Bible's understanding of reality? What ultimate human questions are on the tips of peoples' tongues? How can the symbols and stories of the Bible be presented so that my audience can live for a moment in this other world? How can those symbols then be translated into present-day terms? What habits of belief, thought and action are instilled by the message I am preparing? Finally, consider the questions of daily life and decision making that are in the air for your community. What is at the heart of these dilemmas? What norms does this Bible passage advocate? These questions, which probe both the Bible and the contemporary world, help to shape a biblical message that transforms the present world.

When all is faithfully done, the result is a transformed world. The Bible teacher does an honorable and good work, an enabling work commissioned by the Holy Spirit for the transformation—indeed, the *conversion*—of individuals and of the entire world. It is a ministry of Jesus Christ, shared with those who serve him, for the building up of his body into maturity (Eph 4:12-13).

VI. The Pitfalls of Biblical Application

There are many ways to go astray in applying the Bible, and ultimately we trust God's grace and power to keep us from flying off the rails. However, there are some common pitfalls that most of us have fallen into from time to time, and it is helpful to consider some of them briefly as a reminder of ways that we may go wrong.

The first error is to teach one's own message rather than the Bible's message. Anyone who has done much teaching knows the temptation to contort and force Scripture to justify a previously determined point! But integrity compels us to speak the truth with humility, and even

admit if we have misapplied a passage. I was teaching a small group one time and illustrated a point with several verses from the Bible. The group had been very quiet and attentive, but at that point one student cautiously raised his hand and said that he thought one of the verses meant the opposite of what I had said. As I glanced at it again, I realized that he was completely right. In such a situation, it is very easy to brush off the comment, to take the authoritative stance of the master, and to press on with our dignity intact. But such a moment also presents an opportunity for establishing whether the truth or the teacher's reputation is more important. When the Bible seems to be pressing against the point you have formulated in your mind, consider it to be a personal teachable moment.

The second pitfall is the temptation to rely upon sloppy exegesis. After all, we already know what these various passages mean...or do we? How easy it is to preach the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:2, 11-32) or the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) as if Jesus were praising the wretch rather than challenging the self-righteous! Another aspect of this problem is having either a too-rigid or a non-existent theology. If we feel we already know all there is to know about God and humanity, then we cannot hear the Bible's voice when it challenges our formulae. Peterson points out that the more 'spiritual' we become, the more important exegesis becomes so that we read the text more than we just hear our own voice.⁴⁹ But just as dangerous is to lack the theological structures through which we can receive the biblical message with balance and maturity.⁵⁰ We simply must do our homework before we can faithfully teach others.

A third danger is the temptation to avoid difficult passages and confounding issues. After all, admitting that one does not have all of the answers risks embarrassment. But the reality is that many issues do not have clear-cut right answers and it is deceptive to ignore them. We all

⁴⁹ Peterson, 52.

have to face difficult issues in own lives, so part of spiritual leadership is to engage with such topics. The responsible teacher will provide a framework for thinking, different answers that others have come to, an evaluation of those possible solutions, and a personal stance—even if it is a tentative one. I once traveled across town to hear a sermon on Romans 9-11 because I wanted to know what “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26, *NIV*) meant. I was both disappointed and thrilled to hear the preacher admit that he had his whole sermon prepared when he came across an opposing point of view and was now questioning anew his own conclusions. So instead of acting like he knew more than he did, he used the morning sermon time to discuss how one works through a difficult passage. I believe I learned more that morning than I would have gained from the ‘right’ interpretation of this difficult passage.

A fourth error is to do all of the thinking for your audience. Jesus’ command was to make disciples, not robots (Matt 28:19). People need to learn to think clearly more than they need to be given all of the answers. Each student is going to leave the Bible study to enter a unique situation, facing issues in family, work and community that no one has ever faced before. Our role as Bible teachers is to equip Christians for their unique roles, not to build copies of ourselves. If we are doing our jobs well, we should regularly be amazed at the ways people are living out the things that we teach—and we should personally be learning many things from them as well.

Fifth, and finally, we need to avoid the error of reducing the Bible’s message to a single message. It is not right for one church to live under the banner of ‘justice for the poor’ while another dedicates itself to ‘saving souls’ and a third focuses on ‘living self-sacrificially.’ All of these themes are important parts of the biblical message, but any taken by itself turns into a

⁵⁰ see Macleod, 246-72.

perversion.⁵¹ It can be helpful to read widely, especially outside of one's own tradition—there is truth to be learned from both liberationists and fundamentalists. No matter how much one studies, the gospel of Jesus Christ is always fresh, new and revolutionary. An inherent danger in the model of biblical application described here is the temptation to make the Bible overly “slack and accommodating”⁵² If we are not being challenged by the Bible's message maybe we have reduced it to something much more narrowed than it intends. Simply put, the Bible continually reveals a world that is larger than our own.⁵³

VII. The Glory of Biblical Application

In this essay I have sought to consider what it means to apply the Bible to contemporary life. Much more than an appendix stuck onto the end of a sermon or a practical three-step how-to for living the higher life, to apply the Bible is to involve oneself in the Holy Spirit's activity of transforming an individual, a community and the world. This is the glory of biblical application: that God still speaks to people today through Scripture, in meaningful and transformational ways. However, as much as we would like for the power of God always to simply magically jump off of the page, the Bible sometimes bears more resemblance to the thorn-infested ground than the Garden of Eden. Subsequently, applying the Bible well requires hard work in exegesis, in involvement with one's audience, in reflection and in prayer. We take courage from the fact that the Holy Spirit is aware of both of our abilities and limitations, and that he will use both the Bible and faithful servants to accomplish his work.

Against the more conventional view that biblical application focuses on catchy ‘take-home messages’ of living the Christian life, I have argued that the central way the Bible is

⁵¹ cf. note 32 above.

applied in people's lives is through character transformation. In other words, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to progressively and thoroughly convert us. Ultimately this is a mysterious work upon the heart, but as with everything that God does in this world, it also involves human effort, human intention and human love. To apply the Bible is to encounter its truth, to hear its message, and to be transformed as a result. It is the encounter with biblical truth that is the application of the Bible.

Joshua 24:1-28 tells the story of Joshua and all of Israel renewing their covenant with God as they enter into their new life in the promised land. The people are confronted with choosing a worldview. They could live with their former gods at the center of their lives, or with Yahweh in that decisive position. It is important to note that Joshua does not present them with a 'Yahweh idea,' an eternal principle, or a philosophy of life from which they can draw from for living out their commitment. Instead, he tells the story of Abraham, of Moses and the Exodus, and of the conquest of the land upon which they stand. It is the person of Yahweh that Joshua calls the people to center their lives on. And the person of Yahweh is best known through these stories of what he has done. It is through these stories that we learn who he is, what he cares about, and what he wants for us. When we look to the Bible as our sufficient guide for this life, as a text that can be applied to the circumstances we face each day, we are allowing the God of the Bible to shape who we are, how we think, how we feel, and how we act. Our study and teaching of the Bible thereby invades every corner of life, far more than any rule book or list of ultimate principles could ever do. When we see the Bible this way, it vibrates with life because it testifies to a reality that pervades everything around us, and our very souls. We read this simple story of Joshua and Israel, hearing Joshua speak these words to Israel: "Now fear the LORD and

⁵² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 597.

serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD” (Josh 24:14, *NIV*). And somehow, as we encounter the reality of God, life is never the same again.

⁵³ Peterson, 73.

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