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EQUIPPING DISCIPLES THROUGH SERMON APPLICATION
GROUPS AT THE PROTESTANT CHAPEL,
HEIDELBERG, GERMANY

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EQUIPPING DISCIPLES THROUGH SERMON APPLICATION
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To my King and Savior, Jesus Christ,
who sought me and bought me with
His Redeeming love.

To Cheryl,
my love, helpmate, and best friend. I thank God for you.

To Brittney, Courtney, Stefanie, and Jamie,
you are my joy.

And to the Sermon Application Group Members,
you are my Family.

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PREFACE

As with any endeavor, there are certain key elements that must be in place in order to ensure success: God's grace, perseverance, and a team of loving supporters. I wish to thank those who had a powerful impact on me during this project.

First, I want to give all the credit and all the glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I am in awe of His boundless grace, covenantal love, and all-sufficient atonement.

To my wife and best friend, Cheryl, thank you for believing in me, supporting me, and encouraging me along this journey. To my children, Brittney, Courtney, Stefanie, and Jamie, you are my pride and joy.

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My heartfelt and deepest appreciation to the sermon application group participants, it was my honor and joy to be with you during this project. Your faith and passion to grow in Christ was such an encouragement to me. I pray the Lord will continue to bless you as you continue to seek Him.

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Lane Joel Creamer

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to gather select chapel members of the Contemporary Protestant Chapel of Heidelberg, Germany, into a sermon application group to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to become mature disciples in Christ.¹

Goals

Three goals determined the success of this project. The first goal was to assist the sermon application group members in identifying the biblical application from the previous week's sermon. The method for accomplishing this goal was to provide a weekly small group setting so that members could discuss the sermon and its biblical application. To measure the success of this goal, members received a weekly Sermon Application Survey to assess their ability to recognize the biblical application of the sermon. To achieve success within this goal, a greater than 75 percent threshold had to be attained, as indicated by the aggregate number of survey responses in either the "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" categories within the Sermon Application Survey (see Appendix 3).

The second goal for this project was to help the sermon application group members improve their spiritual growth practices by applying the scriptural tenets to their

¹Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the US Army Chaplain Corps, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency.

daily lives. The method for accomplishing this goal was to provide a weekly small group setting, so that members could discuss with other group members their spiritual practices and growth over the past week. To measure the success of this goal, each participant received a pre and post-series survey (see Appendix 1 and 2). The information received was compared in order to evaluate an improvement in spiritual growth over the course of the sermon series. Success within this goal was characterized by a greater than 25 percent threshold positive improvement from baseline data assessment of pre-survey to post-survey responses.

The third goal was to determine the usefulness of the sermon application group in growing and equipping disciples in Christ. The method for accomplishing this goal was in a focus group format. I paralleled this format from the military After Action Review (AAR), which is normally conducted after any military training to highlight issues, promulgate discussion, and provide recommendations. The adaptation of this AAR specifically focused on the “recommendation” component and ascertained if the sermon application group meetings should continue in the future. To measure the success of this goal, if greater than 67 percent of the participants were willing to continue the sermon application group, then the chapel would continue to use this group setting for discipleship and recommend the methodology be shared with other chapels. Conversely, if less than 67 percent were not willing to participate, then the sermon application group meetings would end at the close of the project.

Ministry Context

The Patrick Henry Village Contemporary Chapel service is comprised of active duty Soldiers, family members, and Department of Defense (DOD) civilians. This service includes a senior chaplain who provides oversight to the preaching responsibilities while affording other chaplains the opportunity to preach. The denominational backgrounds of the chaplains who preach are diverse across the

Protestant faith. These chaplains espouse differing perspectives and convictions in the areas of theology, hermeneutics, and assent to expository preaching. Therefore, the congregation does not routinely hear an expository sermon.

The chapel service offers a Sunday school program and small groups, such as Protestant Men of the Chapel and Protestant Women of the Chapel. The small groups meet monthly and are well attended. However, there are no small groups which focus on the previous week's sermon and its relevant application to their lives. There are no tools in place to evaluate whether or not the small groups are effective in equipping disciples or improving spiritual growth in Christ.

Rationale

The chapel program has multiple small groups; however, there are no small groups specifically designed to reinforce and discuss the previous week's sermon and how the text expressly applies to their lives. Traditionally, small group programs have a proclivity to unveil the knowledge of Scripture with little intention on how that knowledge specifically applies to the individual's life. As Michael Fabarez states, "Most small groups desire more Bible knowledge. What most Christians need is more biblical application of what they already know."² The Bible is not meant for examination to acquire only knowledge about God, rather it is a meant for His people to read about God, understand His purposes, and be transformed into the image of His Son, so that all can declare His glory. Additionally, the chapel service has several small groups meeting at different times of the week for different audiences. Each of these small groups focuses on a different topic or a different portion of Scripture rather than focusing and reexamining what was proclaimed on Sunday morning and how they should apply it to

²Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 184.

their lives. Therefore, a methodology that firmly upholds Christ-centered expository preaching coupled with a small group focus on sermon application is critically needed. As such, a sermon application group was developed to meet weekly and discuss the previous week's sermon and how to joyfully and obediently live out this practical theology.

The sermon application group filled an essential need in the chapel small group program. First, it fostered a deepening of what God desires of each member with an intentional focus on biblical application. The members joining this group did not have to do much preparation for the meeting. There was no certain knowledge requirement or level of Christian maturity that one must have in order to be part of the group meeting. Moreover, if someone came to hear the message proclaimed on Sunday he should feel comfortable about coming to the sermon application group meeting. Larry Osborne, lead pastor of North Coast Church, asserts that the focus of the sermon and its application in small groups “keeps the entire church focused and headed in the same direction.”³

Finally, the sermon application group equipped members to understand Scripture while living out their faith. The famous pietist Jacob Spener, who initiated a similar methodology, described the effect on the individual members as “watching the practice of theology bear fruit.”⁴ As there is a natural proclivity within the small group milieu to develop relationships over the course of the meetings, group members begin to ask each other how they are growing in the Lord and applying the biblical application to their lives.

If disciples want to glorify Christ and reach this generation, they must be thoroughly equipped in the knowledge of Scripture and clearly understand its daily

³Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 62.

⁴Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 185.

application. The Sermon Application Group is one method that assists the individual in both of these endeavors through the use of expository sermons, recognition of application from the text, and inclusion in their Christian walk.

Definitions

Three terms in this project must be clearly defined to establish a common understanding:

Expository preaching. For the purpose of this project, *expository preaching* was defined by Stephen Olford: “The Spirit-empowered explanation and proclamation of the text of God’s Word with due regard to the historical, contextual, grammatical, and doctrinal significance of the given passage, with the specific object of invoking a Christ-transforming response.”⁵

Application. *Application* in this project was defined using the definition provided by J. I. Packer and Craig Blomberg. J. I. Packer states, “Preaching is essentially teaching *plus* application (invitation, direction, summons), and where that *plus* is lacking something less than preaching takes place.”⁶ This definition informed the reader of the weightiness of application in the preaching process. Craig Blomberg further defines the term:

Application has to do with the response of the reader or hearer to the author’s meaning of the text. It is the movement from knowing cognitively what to do or believe in light of a passage of Scripture to understanding how to implement that belief or behavior in one’s life . . . it primarily deals with the exegete’s ability to

⁵Steven F. Olford and David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 68.

⁶J. I. Packard, “Why Preach?” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 3.

convey ideas to one's audience about how the meaning of the text should shape individual lives.⁷

This project utilized both definitions of application to inform the readers of this term.

Sermon Application Group. *Sermon Application Group* for the purposes of this project was defined as “a group of Christians that gathers around the passage expounded the previous Sunday to decide how they will specifically apply it.”⁸ The sermon application group for this project consisted of fifteen chapel members who were eighteen years or older.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this project were varied. First, the length of this project was limited to fifteen weeks: two weeks to research the sermon application group members understanding of God and how His Word applies to their lives; eleven weeks for the expositional sermon series and application group meetings; and two weeks to evaluate the project. This shortened time frame provided only a glimpse into the effectiveness of the Sermon Application Group meetings.

A second limitation was the transition from one duty station location in Germany to another. Currently, I am is stationed at United States Army Europe, Headquarters in Heidelberg, Germany. This large Army Service Component Command (ASCC) moved from Heidelberg to Wiesbaden from the spring of 2013 to the summer of 2013. This move effected the transitioning of several soldiers and family members. The sermon application group members faced this move from April 2013 through July 2013. Some of the personnel moved to Wiesbaden, some transitioned to another location in Germany, while others transitioned back to the United States. The move of some

⁷Craig Blomberg, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 244.

⁸Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 184.

congregants to other locations prevented them from attending all of the sermon application group meetings.

A third limitation was the required travel of my current position throughout the European theater. The timing and length of travel could not always be projected with such timely accuracy. The emergent need to fulfill military duties at other locations was anticipated as a probable limitation, although did not come to fruition during the application phase of this project.

A fourth limitation was occasional absences by sermon application group members over the course of the fifteen-week sermon series. There was a constant movement of this audience due to their roles and responsibilities in this military theater. The reasons for the fluidity of this congregation were varied, but typically included one of the following reasons: (1) permanent change of station, (2) deployment, (3) temporary duty, (4) school attendance, and (5) retirement. These factors confounded the implementation of the application series.

A delimitation of the sermon application group was its member composition. Each application group consisted of fifteen military personnel (Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard) 18 years of age or older. While these members represent the Active Duty Military in this location, the group excluded military dependents, DOD Civilians, and local nationals, and therefore was not fully representative of the local military community.

Research Methodology

The initial phase of this project provided a written and verbal request for voluntary participants four weeks prior to project initiation. The information presented included the purpose of the project, participants' involvement, and length of the project. The venues to disseminate this information included emails, word of mouth, and distributed flyers, and chapel announcements. The selection criteria for participants

consisted of military personnel (Active Duty, Reserve, or National Guard), who were 18 years or older, and confession of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The first goal of this project was to assist the members of the sermon application group members in identifying the biblical application. A Sermon Application Survey (outline and Likert scale) was developed to measure the individual's ability to recognize the biblical application from the sermon. To facilitate this goal, an expository sermon series on discipleship was developed to provide a context for the biblical application. This sermon series was preached over the course of eleven weeks. The following sermon themes were utilized: (1) A Reset of Priorities, (2) The Joy of the Secure Life, (3) How a Disciple Runs the Race, (4) Holy Justice, Wholly Grace, (5) The Cost of Discipleship, (6) How a Disciple is Rooted in Christ, (7) The Worthy Walk of a Disciple, (8) Receiving a fellow Disciple (Part I), (9) Receiving a fellow Disciple (Part II), (10) Sing your Song, and (11) The Commander's Marching Orders.

To measure the success of this goal, members received a Sermon Application Survey every week to assess their ability to recognize the biblical application from the sermon text. I reviewed the surveys prior to the start of the meeting and provided general observations to the group during the meeting. I also demonstrated how application could be understood in light of the scriptural text while facilitating and answering questions during the remainder of the meeting. To achieve success with this goal, a greater than 75 percent threshold had to be attained, as indicated by the aggregate number of survey responses in either the "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" categories within the Sermon Application Survey.

The second goal for this project was to help the sermon application group members improve their spiritual growth practices by applying the scriptural tenets to their daily lives. The method for accomplishing this goal was to provide a weekly small group setting, so that members could discuss with other group members their spiritual

practices and growth over the past week. To measure the success of this goal, each participant received a pre and post-series survey (see Appendix 2 and 3). Initially, the group members received a pre-series survey two weeks prior to the start of the Sermon Application Group meetings. This survey provided the initial data for this goal. At the conclusion of the sermon series, week 13, the members received a post-series survey, which was compared to the pre-series survey in order to evaluate an improvement in spiritual growth over the course of the sermon series. Success within this goal was characterized by a 25 percent improvement from pre-survey to post-survey responses.

The third goal was to determine the usefulness of the sermon application group in growing and equipping disciples in Christ. The method for accomplishing this goal was to hold a focus group during week 15 to inquire if members would like to continue with the sermon application group meetings. The method for accomplishing this goal was in a focus group format. I paralleled this format from the military AAR, which is normally conducted after any military training to highlight issues, promulgate discussion, and provide recommendations. In the military setting, the AAR process helps hone future training by correcting any deficiencies. The adaptation of this AAR specifically focused on the “recommendation” component and ascertained if the sermon application group meetings should continue in the future. To measure the success of this goal, if greater than 67 percent of the participants were willing to continue the sermon application group, then the chapel would continue to use this group setting for discipleship and recommend the methodology be shared with other chapels. Conversely, if less than 67 percent were not willing to participate then the sermon application group meetings would end at the close of this project.

CHAPTER 2
THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR THE APPLICATION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

This chapter examines the biblical and theological foundations for the application of Holy Scripture to the lives of the believer. It answers the fundamental question of what Scripture says about the application of Scripture to the disciple's life.

Evangelicals would affirm the Holy Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God. It is God who inspired and superintended the Word of God and it holds supreme authority over the disciple's life. Moreover, the Bible is the revelation of God. This revelation is an extraordinary and magnificent truth. God, in His love and grace, chose to reveal Himself through written form, so that all may know Him. It is also through Scripture that people can understand His kingdom, His divine purposes, and His desires for His people. So, if disciples hold to these truths, how do they approach the scriptural text? Graeme Goldsworthy provides clarity to this question:

The soundest methodological starting point is the gospel since the person of Jesus is proclaimed as the final and fullest expression of God's revelation of his kingdom. Jesus is the goal and fulfillment of the whole Old Testament and, as the embodiment of the truth of God, he is the interpretative key to the Bible.¹

The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, unveil and point to the risen Christ. He is the focal point of Scripture. However, interwoven throughout Scripture is that God not only reveals Christ, but demands action from His people. His desire is that people come to a full knowledge who He is and obediently follow Him in word and deed.

¹Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 25.

Daniel Doriani notes, “A God-centered approach to the relevance of Scripture has two foci: knowing the God who redeems and conforming ourselves to him.”² Throughout Scripture, a person is continually challenged to apply the Word of God to their lives. As a disciple who has been saved, the ultimate goal should be to know Him and obediently follow Him.

The following texts provide the foundation for the relevancy of Scripture and its application in the lives of the disciple.

Second Timothy 3:16-17

The apostle Paul, a prisoner in Rome, is coming to the end of his earthly ministry and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens these words to Timothy: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

First, Paul states, “All Scripture is given by the inspiration of God.” The noun in this passage is “Scripture” (*graphe-γραφή*), and it is predicated by the word, “all.” The intent is to focus on the full contents of Scripture, not just a single verse or chapter. Doriani explains, “Scripture as a whole—every book, section, and genre. . . .³ To be sure, Paul is referring to the Old Testament, but this does negate the inclusion of the New Testament as being part of Holy Scripture. A. T. Robertson states, “There is no doubt that the apostles claimed to speak by the help of the Holy Spirit (1 Thes. 5:27; Col. 4:16) just as the prophets of old did (1 Peter 1:20f). . . . Peter thus puts Paul’s epistles on the

²Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 13.

³Ibid., 55.

same plane with the O.T.”⁴ Therefore, one can safely rest that all sixty-six books of the Bible are included in Holy Scripture.

Second, the verse continues by revealing Scripture as divinely inspired by God, and not man. The adjective, God-breathed (*theopneustos*), provides pristine clarity to the divine author of the text. Hendricksen and Kistemaker state,

The word *God-breathed*, occurring only here indicates that “all scripture” owes its origin and contents to the divine breath, the Spirit of God. The human authors were powerfully guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. As a result, what they wrote is not only without error but of supreme value for man. It is *all* that God wanted it to be. It constitutes the infallible rule of faith and practice for mankind.⁵

The human writers were not writing on their own authority, but the authority of God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The divine superintendence of the Holy Spirit is what provides Scripture with its power, as God is the author of His Word. And therefore, as Calvin states, “It is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it [Scripture] with reverence.”⁶

Moreover, since the Word of God has been established as divinely inspired, it is therefore “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness teaching” (2 Tim 3:16). Michael Bentley furthers this point: “Because it is the very Word of God, the Bible is of great *usefulness* to God’s people. It is vital that the Word of God should form the basis of all our teaching.”⁷ The disciple, who understands the ultimate authority of Scripture, rightly applies its teaching to their life. As Paul

⁴A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 6:179.

⁵William Hendricksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 302.

⁶John Calvin, *Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 203.

⁷Michael Bentley, *Passion on the Truth* (Durham, England: Evangelical, 1997), 279.

explains, it is profitable in building up the disciple, convicting of sin, and providing the instruction to live a holy life. The focus on doctrine is also critical to the maturity of the disciple. Some in today's culture see doctrine as out of vogue. They see it as boring and not "practical." However, these verses declare that doctrine is practical. Doriani notes, "Paul says Scripture is useful for teaching and refutation; he asserts that doctrine helps the church overcome error and grow in truth. Doctrine is practical; deviant ideas promote wickedness."⁸

Lastly, Paul provides the climax to these verses with a purpose statement, boldly asserting "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The man of God applies the Scripture to his life, so that he may be complete. The word "complete" (*artios*), in this form, is only found in 2 Timothy 3:17. The disciple is to be complete in Christ and standing in His Word, so that they can apply it to any situation in life. Paul connects the word "complete" with the equipping of the disciple. The believers in Christ who understand Scripture will apply it to their life in order to accomplish every good work. Scripture does not just provide the disciple with knowledge for the sake of becoming wise, but exhorts the disciple to apply this knowledge in order to fully accomplish their task in bringing glory to Jesus Christ. This can only happen if the believer assents to the Word of God and applies it.

James 1:22-25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

⁸Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 56.

James writes this book to distinguish true faith from dead faith. The overarching theme is that true faith produces action. The true disciple cannot say that they have faith and yet their life does not represent what they believe. If the disciple truly has received Christ, then there should be evidence in the way he lives out his faith. The Christian faith is one in which the disciple believes the Word, is transformed into the image of Christ, and lives out this faith in action.

In verse 22, James states, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” The word “be” (*ginesthe*) is an imperative verb that tells the disciple he is to become something. After being justified through the grace of Christ, the disciple is not passive in this life of faith, but is called to be a man or woman of action. The next few words in the verse are very descriptive of who they are to become. The disciple is first called to “hear/listen” (*akroatai*) to the Word of God and allow it to penetrate deep in their spirit. Adamson notes, “To attend such instruction as *merely hearers* was not enough, as any teacher knows; the lesson must enter the hearer’s heart and mind. The implanted Word can only flourish in the soil of true obedience.”⁹

The process does not stop here. James reveals that the disciple must also become “doers” (*poiētai*) of what they have heard. According to Verbrugge, in classical Greek, “*Poiēsis* means both directed action and the manufacture of objects, *poiēma* denotes the finished work. It is executed by *poiētes*, a doer.”¹⁰ James uses the latter term and meaning to denote a doer, a person of action.¹¹ Moreover, this phrase connotes someone who does more than a one-time act, but is continually putting the Word into

⁹James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 82, italics original.

¹⁰Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), s.v. “*poiētai*.”

¹¹The word *poiētes* is also used in other NT passages to denote a “doer” of the Word (see Rom 2:13; Jas 1:23,25)

action. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, speaks of this person as a wise man:

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24).

Conversely, if a disciple is a hearer only and does not apply what he has heard, then he deceives himself. Jesus calls them foolish, for they have not put into the action the Word of Life (Matt 7:27). These are the people who see hearing as the end instead of the means to the end.¹²

In order to provide even more clarity, James provides an illustration of those who hear, but do not apply the Word to their lives: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he is” (Jas 1:23-24). The illustration is remarkable to the reader. The natural man looks into the mirror of the Bible and is exposed to the light of Christ. It is here that the natural man is exposed to who he really is and is convicted of his sins. However, many having their conscience pricked for a moment, forget and do not repent and seek after the things of God. This hearing without applying to his or her life happens in many church services where the preaching of the Word is faithfully proclaimed. The congregant hears the Word, but forgets the message and what it demands. Kistemaker notes, “This seems incredible and yet it is true. Many people hear a sermon on any given Sunday and a week later cannot remember a single word of the sermon. The person who only listens to the Word goes away and fails to respond to its demands.”¹³ Calvin summarizes,

The teaching of the law, let it no longer lead you to bondage, but, on the contrary, bring you to liberty; let it no longer be only a schoolmaster, but bring you to

¹²Gordon Keddie, *The Practical Christian: James Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical, 2008), 75.

¹³Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 61.

perfection: it ought to be received by you with sincere affection, so that you may lead a godly and a holy life.¹⁴

James 1:25 provides a stark contrast to the person who only hears the Word: “But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” The writer reveals not only “a” law, but “the” law. James further describes the law as “perfect” and in it “liberty” is discovered. The image is striking as the Word sets the captive free from his bondage. Some may quibble about the perfect law of liberty, but it is here where the disciple rests. The perfect law of God contained herein Scripture does set boundaries for the disciple, but these boundaries are to give him life and protect him from foolishness and destruction. Keddie adds, “This is true freedom and it is all in the gospel. As ‘the perfect law of liberty,’ the Word of God (both Old and New Testaments) is not a mere code of ethical restrictions, but a blueprint for a happy life in Christ!”¹⁵ Psalm 19:7 states, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.” This verse demonstrates that the Word of God converts the soul back to life. This truth from Holy Scripture is why James can confidently state that those who are *doers* are blessed because they have received and implemented the Word of God in their lives. This thought is further underscored in Luke 11:28, when Jesus states, “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!” This person is truly blessed for they have the Words of Life.

Throughout this passage, James faithfully exhorts the disciple to become hearers and doers of the Word. The disciple who loves Christ, and loves His Word, will

¹⁴John Calvin, *Catholic Epistles, Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 264.

¹⁵Keddie, *The Practical Christian*, 78.

therefore obediently live out its commands. Keddie aptly summarizes these verses, “The Word heard must become the Word done!”¹⁶

Matthew 7:24-27

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

One of the first parables that young children are taught is the parable of the wise and foolish man. In fact, the parable is taught in a song with accompaniment of dramatic hand illustrations to drive home the central motif. The emphasis of the story is that when the rain, flood, and wind come, those who build their house on the rock are wise, while those who build their house on the sand are foolish. However, there is a deeper truth to what Christ is revealing in this text. Those who hear the words of Christ coupled with putting them into action are indeed wise. Those who hear, but fail to heed the instructions, are foolish. Leon Morris notes, “All either respond to Jesus’ words or do not; there is no other possibility.”¹⁷

In verse 24, Jesus draws a contrast between those who are wise and those who are foolish.¹⁸ The wise person is one who receives the Word of God and applies the teachings of Christ to their life.¹⁹ A wise person is obedient to what he has received

¹⁶Ibid., 73.

¹⁷Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 182.

¹⁸Morris rightly notes, “There are only two kinds of people: wise or foolish. There is not a multiplicity of paths. A person both hears and does the will of Christ or he does not. There is no middle ground.” Ibid.

¹⁹Application is paramount in the preaching of the Word. The teaching must be conjoined with application. It is not merely teaching, but promulgating a person to

through the hearing and reading of the Word of God and carefully lays a firm foundation. The foolish person hears the Word of God, but does not apply the truths he has received and recklessly builds their faith on an unstable foundation.

Jesus then provides a parable of what this looks like in both the wise and foolish man. The imagery set forth is a wise man who builds his house on a solid foundation, the rock. He digs deep down in the soil until he finds the solid rock before building his foundation.²⁰ It is here that the foundation of the house is established. After some time, the house is subjected to three natural elements: rain, flood, and wind. The elements are continually levied against the house and its very foundation. In fact, Jesus describes the wind as beating on the house.²¹ The idea projected is that the heavy rain, floods, and strong winds beat upon and/or strike against the house. However, the house did not fall. Chrysostom notes, “The truly marvelous thing being this, that not in fair weather, but when the storm is vehement, and the turmoil great, and the temptations continual, he cannot be shaken ever so little.”²² Jesus tells the listener exactly why it did not fall: “For it was founded on the rock.” The house was established on a solid foundation.

action. Therefore, preaching is teaching plus application, so the disciple is encouraged to grow in the likeness of his Master, Jesus Christ.

²⁰Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 1:51.

²¹The phrase “beat on” is the Greek word *prosekopsan*. It is the compound verb *pros* (towards, against) and *kopto* (to strike or beat). Bromley adds, “Literally, this word means “to strike,” “to dash against.” Intransitively it means “to stumble against,” “bump,” “slip,” “fall,” “suffer harm,” “perish.” George W. Bromley, “*Prosekopsan*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged ed., ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 745.

²²Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 10 (New York: Christian Literature, 1889), 165.

In stark contrast, these same elements of rain, floods, and strong winds beat against the house built upon the sand. The listener begins to see the imagery as the foolish man built his house on the sand. A grain of sand is a very tiny particle and when joined together with other particles it produces a loose bond. The reader knows from personal experience that when one places their foot on sand, it shifts and makes for an unstable platform. Moreover, when water or wind is thrust into the mix, sand begins to dissipate and drift away in the path of least resistance. In this parable, when the elements descended on the foolish man's house, it was not able to stand. In fact, it not only fell, but it fell greatly. The word "greatly" indicates it crashed or fell into ruins. The word "great" (*megas*) in classical Greek also meant "powerful."²³ Whether one envisions a great fall or a powerful fall, the result of the destruction is plainly understood. Morris notes, "The expression points to a complete ruin."²⁴ The foolish man in his haste did not build upon the solid rock, but the shifting sand which quickly destroyed his home.

This parable begins with the preface of the difference between a wise man and a foolish man. The wise man builds his life upon Christ and His Word. He allows the Word to become his sure foundation. Once the disciple's life is firmly established in the Word, it cannot be moved. It is firmly anchored in Christ. Therefore, it can withstand the trials and tribulations of this life because it has been built upon the solid rock. However, the foolish man only hears the Word and proceeds to live out his life on his own accord. Their foundation is weak and shifting. He succumbs to trials, tribulations, and sins because his foundation is not built on the life-giving Word.

²³Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. "megas."

²⁴Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 183.

Jesus concludes this parable with a negative outcome. The life of the person who only hears and does not do the things Christ commands will end in destruction. However, Christ is the giver of life and speaks truth to dispel the darkness. He yearns for His own to come to Him, so that they may have life to the fullest. Those who have built their life on the saving work of Jesus Christ and applied it to their lives have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved (Eph 2:5, 8-13; 1 Cor 15:2; Phil 2:12). However, for those who do not hear and do, the Day of Judgment is close at hand. It is of eternal significance whether the disciples are hearers only or are doers of His Word. France masterfully concludes this section of Scripture: “To ignore his words, therefore, will result in total spiritual disaster.”²⁵ Calvin notes,

Who heareth these sayings? The relative *these* denotes not one class of sayings, but the whole amount of doctrine. He means, that the Gospel, if it be not deeply rooted in the mind, is like a wall, which has been raised to a great height, but does not rest on any foundation. “That faith (he says) is true, which has its roots deep in the heart, and rests on an earnest and steady affection as its foundation, that it may not give way to temptations.” For such is the vanity of the human mind, that all build upon the sand, who do not dig so deep as to deny themselves.²⁶

Finally, Legg succinctly notes, “Mere profession of faith without practical obedience to Christ’s teaching is useless and hopeless, building without a good foundation.”²⁷

Therefore, the true disciple will anchor himself in Christ and carry out His will. Paul states, “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 3:11).

²⁵R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 296.

²⁶John Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 485, italics original.

²⁷John Legg, *The King and His Kingdom: Matthew Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical, 2004), 137.

Colossians 1:9-10

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, full pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Paul, writing from prison, strives to demonstrate the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ in all things. The Christians at Colossae were receiving false teachings. These teachings added something else to Christ and His Word. The false teachers were making the case that the new Christians needed “special knowledge” in addition to what they had learned and received from Epaphras. Paul wants to ensure they know it is Christ plus nothing in their life of discipleship. There is nothing else they need to cling to or hold on to: Christ is everything they need.

To begin, Paul applauds their love for Christ and now prays that they will be filled with the knowledge and will of Christ. The significance of the Word in their lives is the most important thing for them to grasp. The Word has everything they need; it is all-sufficient in pointing them to Christ and maturing in their faith. There is no secret knowledge that they need to seek outside of Holy Scripture. The Word is the fullness of Christ and is all that is necessary for their growth in Him. In verse 10, Paul furthers the reason for being filled with the knowledge of His will: “So that you may walk worthy of the Lord.”

The word *peripatēsai* literally means to “walk around.” *Peripatēsai* is a combination of the root word *peri* (around) and the root word *pateo* (walk), and was the common definition and understanding of the word in both classical Greek and usage in the Old Testament.²⁸ According to Verbrugge, however, Paul applied a figurative meaning to the word that was similar to the LXX usage, to denote how one lives out their

²⁸Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “*peripateo*.”

life for Christ or continues to walk according to the world.²⁹ In essence, when Paul uses the word *peripatēsai* he is referring to how one lives out or conducts his life. Paul uses this specific word in different passages, but the following verses are in concert with Colossians 1:10: “Therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to *walk worthy* of the calling with which you were called” (Eph 4:1); “That ye would *walk worthy* of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:12). These verses testify to Paul’s figurative usage of the word. The clear indication is that the disciple is to receive the Word of God, be filled up, understand it, and apply it for the distinct purpose of walking in manner that is *fully pleasing* to Christ. The motive for his action is the all-sufficiency of Christ and what He has accomplished for the believer. Christ accomplished everything for the disciple through His death and resurrection. Furthermore, if the disciple clearly understands these facts, his desire should be to please Him in every facet of his life.³⁰

Hendricksen summarizes this thought:

That this God glorifying conduct will actually be the result of being filled with *clear knowledge* of his will is easy to see, for the more God’s children know him, the more they will also love him; and the more they love him, the more they will also wish to obey him in thought, word, and deed.³¹

It is not difficult to see that the byproduct of their work is being fruitful. Paul provides a clear example of this: the disciple who receives this grace and applies it with wisdom and spiritual understanding will faithfully produce good fruit.³² Additionally, as the disciple

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Kenneth Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, eds., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: New Testament*, abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 817.

³¹William Hendricksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 57.

³²Hendricksen notes, “Paul attaches high value to good works viewed as the fruit—not the root—of grace.” Ibid., 58.

lives out his walk and grows in the grace and knowledge of Christ, his hunger to know more of Christ will increase (Ps 84:7; Phil 3:10).³³

Paul, therefore, encourages not only the Colossians, but the disciples in any era, to be filled with the knowledge of Christ, so that they can emulate Christ in both word and deed.

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spoke to them saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The Gospel of Matthew closes with a charge from Christ to his disciples. It is known as the Great Commission. It is the Sovereign Lord who has risen from the dead and before He ascends to the Father he provides instructions to His disciples. This powerful charge is predicated by a very important statement by Jesus: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” Jesus makes it clear that He has all (*pasa*) authority in heaven and earth. Verbrugge notes the root *pas* “expresses a collective totality.”³⁴ Therefore, Christ’s authority, power, and reign are not limited to some small sphere of land or limited to only an earthly realm, but are pervasive, *a collective totality*, throughout the heavens and earth. This statement is also a clear confirmation of Christ’s divinity, for He is the very God incarnate who has absolute authority of *all* things. Only

³³Bruce comments, “For obedience to the knowledge of God which has already been received is a necessary and certain condition for the reception of further knowledge.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, To Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New Testament International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 47.

³⁴Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “*pas*.”

God has absolute power and dominion.³⁵ Paul's writes in Ephesians 1:19-22,

And what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

These verses are the foundation of the Great Commission. If Christ did not have *all* authority, then the disciples' work would be in utter vain. So, Christ ensures that His disciples are clearly aware of His complete authority over everything. And as they do His work, they can rest in the full surety of His power.

After Jesus presents the facts of who He is to His disciples, He then charges them with a direct command to "go and make disciples." The word "go" (*poreuthentes*) means having gone and is the direct antithesis of not going. The disciples of Christ are to be people who are going out into the world. Christ sends His people to accomplish a mission. They are not passive disciples in this process. They do not sit and wait for people to come to them, but rather are actively going to make disciples thereby being on mission with Christ. The following verb in verse 19, instructs the disciple on what they are to be doing, making disciples. Their primary charge is to make disciples,³⁶ which invokes a full commitment from the disciple. Morris comments, "The Master is not giving a command that will merely secure adherence to a group, but one that will secure

³⁵Daniel prophesied of Christ's authority: "Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass way" (Dan 7:14).

³⁶It is interesting to note here that Jesus does not ask his disciples to go and make converts, but asks them to make disciples. Morris notes, "The apostles are called not to evoke decisions but to make disciples. And that is an altogether tougher assignment." Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746. Therefore, the act is not a temporary proclamation of the gospel, but a lifelong actionable investment in discipling others as they grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that they may be *complete in Him*.

wholehearted commitment to a person.”³⁷ Christ is the one who emptied Himself, laid down His life, and rose again from the dead so that the disciple may bring glory and honor to Him. Now, He declares to them that He has *all* authority and demands complete commitment to Him. For if the disciple truly loves Him and abides in His love, then he will go forth and make disciples. If the disciple truly understands the truth and has a relationship with the Truth then the knowledge received must be put into action.

Hendricksen poignantly notes, “The truth learned must be practiced.”³⁸

Jesus continues in providing clear instructions to His disciples: they are to make disciples of all nations. Here one may pause and see the vastness of His love. His Word is to go out to all people. The disciples must remove any barriers that prevent them from sharing the gospel to *all* people in *all* nations. The good news is not just for the rich, but also for the poor. It is not just for kings, but also for paupers. It is not just for men, but for women. It is not just for the Jew, but the Gentile as well. Jesus tells the disciple that His love and grace are for all people, all nations. According to Revelation 5:9, “Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”

Jesus furthers His statement on making disciples by adding baptism and teaching. The disciple is to baptize all those who have received the gospel. Additionally, the disciple is to teach the new Christian in all things he has received from Christ. The disciple is to teach the new believer *all* things—the life, death, resurrection of Christ, His miracles, sin, repentance, forgiveness—everything Christ has commanded them. However, Jesus did not just say teach them, but teach them to observe all of His commandments. The disciple is to receive the Word of God and put it into action. Paul furthers this point in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship,

³⁷Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746.

³⁸William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 1000.

created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Now that the disciple is justified through faith in Christ, they are to be sanctified through Him, by living their lives in a way that is pleasing to Him and brings Him glory.

At the beginning of the Great Commission, Christ infuses such hope in His disciples by telling them that He has all authority in heaven and on earth. This word of hope provides such assurance to the disciple who is about to engage in the holy task of making disciples. However, the blessed Savior does not stop there. Now, in a perfect bookend to the disciples’ commission, Jesus says, “And lo, I am with you, always, even to the end of the age.” This affirmation is such an incredible truth. The disciple who is doing the work of the Lord is not alone. He, Christ Jesus, is with him. This Savior is not a fleeting friend that may come and go during times of hardship, but the blessed Christ who is with His own *always*, even unto the end of the age. There is no time, circumstance, or space that can separate Him from those in whom He loves. Calvin notes,

It ought likewise to be remarked, that this was not spoken to the apostles alone; for the Lord promises his assistance not for a single age only, but *even to the end of the world*. It is as if he had said, that though the ministers of the gospel be weak and suffer the want of all things: he will be their guardian, so that they will rise victorious over all the opposition of the world. In like manner, experience clearly shows in the present day, that the operations of Christ are carried on wonderfully in a secret manner, so that the gospel surmounts innumerable obstacles.³⁹

These words of Christ demonstrate the mandate to be doer of His Word. The disciple is an active participant in spreading the gospel. The disciple receives the blessings of the Word and shares it with others. It is the charge and it is the blessing. Jesus states, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt 10:7).

³⁹John Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 485.

This scriptural passage is the last in this chapter, but it is a culmination of all that has been previously stated. The disciples receive the Word and carry out the Word in their conduct.

This chapter unfolded the relevance and application of Scripture to the life of the disciple. This was not an exhaustive list or full discourse, as Scripture repeatedly instructs the believer to obey the commandments of God and put them into action. However, it has provided sufficient evidence on the application of Scripture and its role in the life of the disciple. France summarizes, “To be a disciple is to obey Jesus’ teaching.”⁴⁰ This is the application of the Word!

Finally, this chapter undergirds the theoretical and practical use of biblical application, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁰France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1119.

CHAPTER 3
THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL
USE OF BIBLICAL APPLICATION

This chapter examines the theoretical and practical use of biblical application. It will answer the fundamental question of why biblical application is a vital component in the preaching and teaching of Holy Scripture.

The Importance and Purpose of Biblical Application

Biblical application is one of the most important aspects in the disciple's life.

Craig Blomberg defines the term best:

Application has to do with the response of the reader or hearer to the author's meaning of the text. It is the movement from knowing cognitively what to do or believe in light of a passage of Scripture to understanding how to implement that belief or behavior in one's life.¹

It is applying the truths of Scripture to the life of the believer, so one can be transformed into the image of Christ, be complete in Him, and bring Him glory.² As the disciple is regenerated, receives the Holy Spirit, and applies Scripture to his life, he will begin to transform into the image of his Master. Jack Kuhatschek furthers this thought:

Paul makes it clear that process has already begun in the life of every Christian. . . . In Romans he declares we are undergoing a transformation (12:1-2), a metamorphosis (the essence of the Greek word). This metamorphosis is a miraculous, spiritual process. As we renew our minds with Scripture, being careful to put its teaching into practice, we are transformed from spiritual caterpillars to

¹Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 184.

²The purpose of application is further emphasized in 2 Tim 3:16-17, Rom 12:1-2, 2 Cor 3:18, Matt 7, Matt 28:19-20, and Col 1:9-11. See chap. 2 for further treatment of these texts as it relates to application.

beautiful butterflies who reflect the grace and glory of Jesus Christ. This is the goal of application!³

Scripture testifies to its application in the life of the disciple. This truth is further developed in the third question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What do the Scriptures principally teach? The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”⁴ Doriani notes,

Paul says, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10). The goal is to know God, love him (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37), believe in him (John 20:31), walk faithfully with him (Mic. 6:8), and increase in likeness to him. . . . The goal of our redemption is to make us more and more like God, and ever more like Christ, who is the perfect image of God.⁵

It is through the application of the Word that a disciple is able to understand who God is, love Him for what He has done, conform to His image, do His will, and bring glory to Him.⁶ The move from text to praxis is a quintessential goal of application.

It is also the *duty* of disciples to apply the Bible to their life. However, duty should be conducted out of love for Christ. Disciples must remember what Christ accomplished for them on the cross. As a faithful follower of the King, disciples must deeply understand the sacrificial love of Christ, fervently pursue His commands, and declare His goodness to others. John Calvin emphasizes Isaiah’s declaration in Isaiah 53:6 to demonstrate to all believers that they are not their own, but were bought with a

³Jack Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 26.

⁴Westminster Assembly, *The Shorter Catechism with Scripture Proofs* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 1.

⁵Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 13.

⁶Doriani adds, “Bible application promotes a relationship with God and conformity to Him. We honor the laws because we exalt God, who gave it and reveals himself in it. We honor virtue because virtue is conformity to God’s character (not simply because no one can take it from us). This double goal of knowing God and conforming to him pervades Scripture, from Eden to Sinai to the teaching of Jesus and Paul.” *Ibid.*, 14.

price.⁷ Disciples, realizing what Christ accomplished for them, will surely love Him and pursue Him. According to Calvin, “*Until* people establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.”⁸ Disciples must understand who Christ is and what He has done, but must also know that He demands obedience. Paul alerts the disciple to the dangers if he fails to do God’s will: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). Every disciple is accountable for the truth he has received. Henrichsen and Jackson convincingly appeal to the believer: “Judgment is individual, not corporate. Each of us is responsible for applying the Scriptures to our lives, and each of us must give an account before God of how we have done.”⁹

The Scripture is God’s Word and should be the standard for every disciple as he applies its precept to his life. It is not just a book to increase knowledge. Henrichsen notes, “The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, not increase our knowledge.”¹⁰ Therefore, disciples of Christ should not read the Bible just to know more about Christ, since the receipt of knowledge alone does little for the spiritual life of the believer, but it must be coupled with action. Ian Tait conveys this point, “Those who study the Bible only to gain more information may believe their minds are expanding

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 315, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html> (accessed September 6, 2013).

⁸Ibid.

⁹Walter Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson, *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 282.

¹⁰Ibid., 130.

when, in fact, only their heads are swelling. Knowledge, purely for knowledge sake ‘puffeth up’ (1 Cor. 8:1).”¹¹

Sermon Application

Typically, the disciple receives biblical application through two methods, either individual devotions or through the Sunday sermon. Both approaches are valid and equally necessary in the life of the believer. The following section provides a cursory look at the primacy of expositional sermons while specifically attending to the topic of biblical application as it relates to the sermon.

The sermon is the unfolding of Scripture to the congregation. It is composed of a text of Scripture and communicates who God is and what God intends for the disciple to believe and do. The centrality of any expository sermon must likewise focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹² Paul declares in Colossians 1:28, “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” The proclamation of Christ should be the goal of every preacher. Their desire should be to see every person come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, grow in their knowledge of Him, and be transformed into His image. Their focus should be to provide sermons that are Christ-centered and declaring the glory of the risen King. Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, poignantly adds,

Every single text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ. . . . He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and

¹¹Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 17.

¹²Michael Horton notes, “Bring me into the chamber of a holy God, where I am completely undone, and tell me about what God has done in Christ to save me; tell me about the marvelous indicatives of the gospel—God’s surprising interventions of salvation on the stage of history despite human rebellion—and the flickering candle of faith is inflamed, giving light to others.” Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 132.

every story in the Bible ends with Him. . . . Every text—not just the ones we know well—cries out about the Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

However, an expository sermon does not just provide knowledge of the person and work of Christ, but it forces the hearer into a decision to apply the teachings of the Word to daily life.

Therefore, biblical application is not a separate element of the sermon, but part of it.¹⁴ J. I. Packer explains, “Preaching is essentially teaching *plus* application . . . where that *plus* is lacking something less than preaching takes place.”¹⁵ Spurgeon adds, “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.”¹⁶ Therefore, the preacher who proclaims Christ to his congregants on Sundays must always include application of the Word.¹⁷ Lloyd-Jones articulates it this way,

We must ever remember that the Truth of God while meant primarily for the mind is also meant to grip and to influence the entire personality. Truth must always be applied, and to handle a portion of Scripture as one might handle a play of Shakespeare in a purely intellectual and analytical manner is to abuse it. People have often complained that commentaries are “as dry as dust.” There is surely something seriously wrong if that is the case. Any kind of exposition of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” should ever produce such an impression. It is my opinion that we have had far too many brief commentaries on and studies in Scripture. The greatest need today is a return to expository preaching. That is what happened in the time of the Reformation and the Puritan Revival and the Evangelical Awakening of the 18th Century. It is only as we return to this that we

¹³R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 96-97.

¹⁴Greg Heisler goes further in his explanation by stating, “The element of application is not a step or part of sermon development, application in its purest form is preaching, and therefore preaching at its core level is the application of the biblical truth to life.” Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching* (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 122.

¹⁵Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, xiv.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷J. A. Motyer declares, “The art of preaching is application,” quoted in Wallace Benn, “Preaching with a Pastor’s Heart: Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*,” in *Preach the Word*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 137.

shall be able to show people the grandeur, glory and majesty of the Scriptures and their message.¹⁸

The focus on application was also vividly displayed in Calvin's preaching. T. H. L. Parker, commenting on Calvin's expositional model, states, "Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture. Without application it is not expository; without application it is not preaching."¹⁹

It is therefore imperative for the pastor to focus on application in his sermons if he wants to see transformation in the people in whom he serves. Additionally, the pastor proclaiming the Word must see application as a priority for himself. He is no less in need of the truths and application of the Word than any other disciple in Christ. John MacArthur notes, "The exegete's ultimate goal is to release the meaning of the Word so as to convict and encourage his own heart, enabling him to grow spiritually by personal application. From the expositor's application flows corporate application."²⁰ The preacher who has wrestled with the text, seen the glory of Christ, been restored, and applied the biblical truths to their own life will invariably develop applications in their sermon that speak to many of the congregants in his service.²¹ This certainly adds to the

¹⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1998), xii, quoted in Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 116.

¹⁹T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 79. Chapell notes, "Application gives the exposition a target on which to focus." Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 202.

²⁰John MacArthur, "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth," in *Preach the Word*, 85.

²¹Jim Shaddix adds, "Application, then, is not primarily about addressing perceived needs with practical advice but addressing real needs and restoring right relationships. . . . Application must be defined according to the agenda of God in Scripture." Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon* (Nashville: B & H, 2003), 102-03; John Cheeseman states, "This is what really makes the message come home with force and penetration to the congregation. People want to hear something that is relevant to them in their daily lives. We must spare no effort in making our application as real and down-to-earth as we can." John Cheeseman, *The Priority of Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 17.

richness of the sermon as the focus is on Christ and the application to the hearer.

The preacher must be mindful of this important work as he preaches the riches and glorious truths of Holy Scripture. It is through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, proclamation of the Word, and biblical application that lives are transformed. The disciple must be able to see Christ and all His glory in order to bring him from death to life, and from life to life in Christ Jesus. Dennis Johnston notes,

The purpose of preaching is not only to inform or even to elicit assent to its truths. Preaching God's Word produces change in those who hear it, and the change is not merely intellectual or academic. To be sure, God's truth in Christ exposes and refutes false ideas about the nature of the divine, the nature of humanity, and the purpose of the universe, for example. But Paul preaches Christ not merely to reproduce theologically correct thinkers. Through preaching Christ Paul seeks to recreate people into the image of God, so they enjoy God's presence in unashamed purity, serve his will in unreserved love, express God's justice and mercy in relationships with others.²²

The above sentiment underscores the urgency and extreme importance of application in the preaching of the Word to both the minister and congregant.

The Elements of Sermon Application

There are numerous elements of sermon application. Each one has a necessary role in providing meaning and relevance to the life of the disciple. This next section focuses on the importance of prayer, the role of the Holy Spirit, and contemporary relevance, and answering the "so what?" and "now what?" questions, as they relate to biblical application in the sermon.

Prayer and the Holy Spirit

Prayer and the Holy Spirit are the most important elements in preparing for biblical application. It is communication with a Holy God who set the stars in the heavens, who cares about His glory, and draws His children unto Himself. Further, He

²²Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 65-66.

is the divine author of Holy Scriptures and the releaser of the Holy Spirit who guides and directs the path of the disciples. The Holy Spirit has many functions in the sanctification of the disciple. It is His Spirit that guides into all truth (John 16:13) and testifies and glorifies Christ (John 15:26). It is also His Spirit that reveals the deep things of God (1 Cor 15:10). It must not go unnoticed that the disciple needs the power and illumination of the Holy Spirit in order to understand and apply the truths of Scripture.²³ Williams of Pantycelyn, a Welsh hymn writer, stated, “Unless I have the power of heaven in the Word of Life I shall die.”²⁴ Thomas Manton added, “God’s mind is revealed in the scripture, but we can see nothing without the spectacles of the Holy Ghost.”²⁵ These men of God knew the need for the Holy Spirit in their life and in their ministry of the Word. They hungered for His presence and knew they were nothing without Him. This same passion should be the desire of every minister and disciple of Christ. The disciple should long to be like their Master and follow His precepts. He should yearn for the help of the Holy Spirit in making him more like Christ. Greg Heisler notes, “If the presence of prayer in a preacher’s life indicates a dependence on God, then the absence of prayer in a preacher’s life indicates independence from God.”²⁶ The minister cannot abandon this fundamental and glorious task. Therefore, if the minister wants to preach to change lives, he must seek the Holy Spirit prior to sermon preparation, during sermon development, and in the course of proclamation of the

²³Al Mohler brings to light Tertullian’s important role of the Holy Spirit and “called the Spirit his ‘Vicar’ who ministered the Word for himself and to his congregation.” Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 45.

²⁴Arturo G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 161.

²⁵Ibid., 29.

²⁶Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching*, 148.

Word.²⁷ Jesus reminds the disciple in Matthew 7:11, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things who ask Him!” Here one sees the efficaciousness of prayers in asking Him, according to His will, to aid in the application and proclamation of the Word. Christ desires for His people to be fed and transformed into His image. A minister would be remiss in his duties if he did not pray and seek the divine presence of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who convicts of sin and regenerates the heart. The power lies not in human strength or talent, but solely upon the power of the Spirit. Azurdia adds,

No human eloquence or rhetoric can convince men dead in sin of the truth of God. The unquickened heart is unpenetrable . . . to attempt to a preaching ministry apart from an active dependence on the vitality of the Spirit of God is to blatantly disregard our biblical anthropology. We affirm the opening of the heart is a divine prerogative (Luke 24:45), the monergistic work of God (Acts 16:14). . . . Therefore, any effective ministry of exposition must include both a resolute commitment to the practice of diligent exegesis and a thorough going dependence upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

The minister must see the absolute necessity of prayer and reliance upon the Holy Spirit in his daily living. He must yearn to see the Spirit’s power and illumination of the Word in his lives and those in whom he serve. To be sure, sermon application is a small element in his duties, but it is a vital component. The minister who fails to seek the

²⁷MacArthur notes, “Meditation is also an important part of the application process, since God’s people are called to think upon his truth and its implication in their own lives. Meditation entails focusing the mind on one subject, involving reason, imagination, and emotions. It is a natural outflow of the discovery process in Bible study. Concentrated meditation on the truths of God’s Word weaves those truths into the fabric of lives.” MacArthur, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” in *Preach the Word*, 85.

²⁸Jim Shaddix adds, “No preacher will ever be able to scratch the surface of the infinite amount of variables in the application of God’s truth. We could deliver sermons from now until Christ’s coming that are filled with how-to instructions and action-driven task, and we would never be able to exhaust the host of life situations that our people will encounter during their days on earth. No preacher is that smart. Again, that’s at least one of the reasons Jesus gave us His Spirit when He checked out of here bodily. He knew that if He gave believers His presence—the very source of His wisdom and grace—then they would have a constant resource for acting and keeping with His character and will.” Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 117.

Holy Spirit in prayer and application will inevitably be ineffective in the primary and glorious task he has been given, preaching the Word.

Contemporary Relevance

Another key element to sermon application is understanding how to bridge the gap from the original audience to the contemporary audience. Since all Scripture is relevant to all disciples in any era, the minister should demonstrate how it could be applied to a contemporary audience. The exegete must begin by unfolding the text using the historical-grammatical approach. This methodological approach aids the minister in determining the authorial intent of the passage, provides insight into the lives of the original audience, and significance of the text. In essence, this approach unveils the eternal truth of God as given to a particular people during a particular time, ensures fidelity to the genre used by the author, and provides a well-defined structure. The historical-grammatical approach also stays true to the text and prevents allegorization.²⁹ Once authorial intent is understood, the minister can see if the imperatives or principles were only for the original audience or for every Christian in every era. If so, then direct application can be made to the congregants. If not, is there a principle that can be gleaned from the text and applied? Craig Blomberg comments on a similar process and underscores that most scholars hold to four principles in application of the text:

- 1) Determine the original application(s) intended by the passage.
- 2) Evaluate the level of specificity of those applications in their original historical situations. If the original applications are transferable across time and space to other audiences, apply them in culturally appropriate ways.

²⁹The term *allegorization* is used in this context to mean multiple interpretations of a text which are in direct odds from the true authorial intent or meaning.

- 3) If the original applications are not transferable, identify one or more broader cross-cultural principles that the specific elements of the text reflect.
- 4) Find appropriate applications for today that implement those principles.³⁰

Each one of these enduring principles provides a solid outline for the minister to seek and discover when approaching any text of Holy Scripture. Michael Fabarez uses a similar model and asks,

- 1) What was this text intended to change in their (original audience's) lives?
- 2) What should this text change in our lives?
- 3) What is the greatest need my audience has as it relates to the application?
- 4) What should my audience feel about the application?
- 5) What should my audience do about the application?³¹

So What? and Now What? of Biblical Application

The methodology above leads to the final and most critical elements of sermon application, answering the “so what?” and “now what?” questions. If the aim of the preacher is to change lives for the glory of Christ, then the congregant should understand the relevance of the message to one's life.³² These questions answer the “so what?” question.³³

³⁰Craig L. Blomberg, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 251.

³¹Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 44-54.

³²Dale Ralph Davis provides an example of how ministers can effectively develop biblical application in their sermon: “Alexander Whyte was writing to a discouraged Methodist Never think of giving up preaching! The angels around the throne envy you your great work. You [he quotes Jenkins] ‘scarcely know how or what to preach.’ Look into your own sinful heart, and back into your sinful life, and around on the world full of sin and misery, and open your New Testament, and make application of Christ to yourself and your people.” Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2007), 93.

³³David Veerman adds, “So what? and now what? The first question asks, ‘Why is the passage important to me?’ The second asks, ‘What should I do about it today?’ Application focuses on God's Word on specific, life-related situations. It helps people understand what to do or how to use what they have learned. Application persuades people to act.” David Veerman, “Apply Within,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 286.

However, biblical application must not stop here, for it must demonstrate how one is to live it out in a practical way. It must answer the “now what?” question or “how now shall I live?” Doriani is helpful in providing a method to answer this question:

Ethicists have long organized the moral questions people have in four categories. People ask, and the Bible answers, these four essential questions:

- 1) What should I do? That is, what is my *duty*?
- 2) Who should I be? That is, how can I become the person or obtain the *character* that lets me do what is right?
- 3) To what causes should we devote our life and energy? That is, what *goals* should we pursue?
- 4) How can we distinguish truth from error? That is, how can we gain *discernment*?³⁴

If these are the questions that most people ask, it is incumbent upon the minister to seek to answer these questions. This will aid in not only the relevance of the message, but forge the biblical application in the heart of the believer so that they can live out their calling.³⁵ The minister, after determining the authorial intent, must ask, “What does a disciple in the twenty-first century need to know and do with this text?” Ramesh Richards provides further insight to this discussion when he speaks to three important questions the must be answered: “(1) What did the preacher speak about? (2) So what difference does or should it make? (3) Now what do I do with God’s claims in this sermon?”³⁶

Ultimately, the minister wants the passage to be clearly explained so that the hearer

³⁴Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 98.

³⁵Veermem provides further thought to this topic by posing four steps to consider in application: (1) The listener must receive the message: Do I understand what was said? (2) The person should find reason to reflect on his or her own life. What does the message mean for me? (3) The individual needs to identify necessary behavior changes: What should I do about it? And (4) The person should lay out a plan or steps to make a change: What should I do first? Veerman, “Apply Within,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 286.

³⁶Ramesh Richards, *Preparing Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 115. Ramesh also provides a few examples to consider when answering the “now what” question: “How should this truth affect our attitudes, knowledge of God, behavior, relationships, motives, values and priorities, and character.” Ibid.

understands the meaning of the text, its relevance to their lives, and how to apply it. The goal is to clearly explain it so that the congregant understands and he can make the decision to act. John MacArthur notes,

I believe the goal of preaching is to compel to make a decision. I want people to listen to me to understand exactly what God's Word demands of them when I am through. Then they must say either, 'Yes, I will do what God says,' or 'No, I won't do what God says.'³⁷

There are a plethora of models to use, but the minister must firmly hold to one that answers the "so what?" and "now what do I do?" questions. If not, the application of the text might not reflect the meaning of the text and lead to serious error. Haddon Robinson notes, "More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis."³⁸ The application of the text is a serious matter for the exegete. Biblical application should not be an afterthought in sermon, but a vital element in the development and delivery of the sermon. It is the very focal point in which the minister tries to drive home to the congregant as he seeks change lives for the glory of Christ. The minister, and every disciple of Christ, would do well to following the prophet Ezra's example: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). The prophet prepared his heart, sought the instructions of God upon his life, and then applied them. The prophet's actions are a wonderful example to emulate.

Sermon application, however, is only one vehicle in which the disciple receives

³⁷John MacArthur, <http://www.gty.org/resources/questions/QA87/ive-heard-it-said-that-50-percent-of-a-sermon-should-be-application-could-you-comment>, quoted in Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 69; Albert Mohler furthers this sentiment, "Every sermon presents the hearer with a forced decision. We will either obey or disobey the Word of God. The sovereign authority of God operates through the preaching of His Word to demand obedience from His people." Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 69.

³⁸Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 306.

application of the Word. During a typical sermon of 40 to 45 minutes, the minister can only provide a few examples of application. Most often, because of constraints, differences in ages, gender, economic status, and cultural backgrounds of the congregants, the minister may often keep the applications general in nature to allow the specificity of the application to the individual.³⁹ Some ministers thereby focus most of their efforts in sermon development and communicating the meaning of the text while spending less time on sermon application. However, sermon application can never be seen as an afterthought or receive less attention from the minister. There are appropriate times to provide application of a text to a specific group of people in the chapel and equally acceptable to provide general application of the text. The wise minister will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he prepares this important element. Additionally, many people reveal that they quickly forget the sermon and its application days after it was delivered. This lapse in memory is not because the person did not hear or understand, but the primary problem was the message was not reinforced or the questions of the hearer were not adequately answered. There is also the requirement that the disciples should *do* something. Disciples are not passive in the biblical application process. A study in 1987, conducted by two leading researchers in education, Bruce Snow and Beverly Showers, may aid the minister and congregant in instilling biblical application to long-term memory and immediate action. Snow and Showers identified five components that were needed to effectively enhance learning in the classroom: (1) presentation; (2) demonstration; (3) practice; (4) feedback; and (5) coaching. They hypothesized that these variables

³⁹It must be noted that many Puritans focused on multiple applications in their sermons to reach the multiple variants of hearers in their congregation. In fact, William Perkins provided seven different applications for each doctrinal point in order to reach the different spiritual conditions/hearers in his congregation. A typical sermon might include up to forty-two applications. While this is commendable, the time constraints may hinder this approach in today's sermon. William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying and the Calling of Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 52-64.

would increase learning if implemented by teachers.⁴⁰ R. N. Bush applied their theory and published the results,

It was found that implementation of the descriptive or presentation component resulted in only 10 % of the teachers trained using that new knowledge in the classroom. If the teachers were exposed to the first two components, presentation and demonstration, 2 to 3 % more teachers could implement the new skill in the classroom. Inclusion of the third and fourth components, practice and feedback, resulted in 2% to 3% more implementation each. The first four components combined resulted in 16-19%. When teachers were exposed to all five components, 95% of them were able to apply what they learned in their classrooms. Coaching was determined to be the most critical component in long-term use and application of their professional development training.⁴¹

As more components were utilized in each step along the continuum, the students were better able to apply what they had learned. When the fifth component of coaching was added, the teacher's ability to apply the newly learned material rose to 95 percent. This research demonstrates the necessity to use all of the components in learning.

How can the minister increase the effectiveness of biblical application in the lives of their congregant? Particularly if one agrees with the statement by Henrichsen and Jackson, "Application is a process, not a single event,"⁴² the answer may lie in the form of a Sermon Application Group.

The Purpose of a Sermon Application Group

It has been demonstrated in previous sections the importance of disciples becoming *complete in Him*. The disciple should be transformed into the image of Christ as he walks out his sanctification. This growth is a result of biblical principles being

⁴⁰R. N. Bush, "Effective Staff Development," in *Making our Schools More Effective: Proceedings of Three State Conferences* (San Francisco: Far West, 1984), quoted in Shannon Wells, Daniella Pearson, and Lorie Sousa, "Show Me the Research," http://www.keydatasys.com/common/downloads/Show_Me_Research.pdf (accessed August 26, 2013).

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Henrichsen and Jackson, *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying*, 260.

applied to the disciple. The Sermon Application Group may be an additional tool in the arsenal of the disciple who truly wants to apply the Bible to his or her life. Fabarez notes,

The small group meeting is another significant tool that can be used to prompt God's people to become doers of the Word. I am not referring to the kind of small group that gathers people in a circle to ask what a passage *means*. I am talking about a group of Christians that gathers around a passage expounded the previous Sunday to decide how they will specifically *apply* it. Most small groups desire more Bible *knowledge*. What most Christians need is more biblical *application* of what they already know!⁴³

The idea of a Sermon Application Group is not a new phenomenon. Noted historian John Weborg comments on Pietist leader Jacob Spener:

Spener sought a way to renew the church from the inside out. In his thinking, one could begin in a small way and with a few people and watch the "practice of theology" bear fruit. What emerged was . . . a group of people who met to discuss the Sunday sermon and to make application to their lives.⁴⁴

The great reformers and puritan pastors utilized similar methods as they went from house to house in what was known as catechization. This process involved the pastor going to a congregant's house and discussing with the family, through questions and answers, the doctrine of the Christian faith. It is here that the pastor learned about the people in his congregation and it is here that congregants understood more about Christ.⁴⁵

The advantages of a Sermon Application Group are multifold. First, the Sermon Application Group affords disciples the opportunity to revisit the Sunday sermon, have questions answered, and identify specific applications to their lives.⁴⁶

⁴³Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 184.

⁴⁴Ibid., 185.

⁴⁵C. John Weborg notes that Spener called this group the *eccelsiola in ecclesia*, the little church in the big church. C. John Weborg, "Reborn in Order to Renew," *Christianity Today*, April 2, 1986, <http://christianitytoday.com/global/printer.html?/ch/1986/issue10/1017.html> (accessed December 25, 2012).

⁴⁶Peter Adams echoes that these type of gatherings "meet every Monday night with a small group to discuss the sermon you preached yesterday, and the text you will preach on next Sunday." Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 133.

Fabarez, comments on people involved in a Sermon Application Group,

They know there will be a personal discussion about the truth of the passage and its demands upon their own lives. They understand, in the most profound way, that the preaching of God's Word is not for their entertainment, or solely for increased knowledge. More than others, participants in these groups recognize that God intends every sermon to change their lives!⁴⁷

Secondly, the Sermon Application Group provides reinforcement of the sermon's main point and its application to the life of the disciple. This paradigm enhances the learning and applying of biblical precepts. The Sermon Application Group also allows congregants to digest the message and meditate on what they have heard. During this time, questions arise on the sermon text and the direct application to their lives. This meeting allows for questions to be answered as well as communicating individual application through clarification, reinforcement, teaching, doing, and coaching.

Another benefit of the Sermon Application Group is that of community. People desire to be in communion with one another. However, it is often difficult to develop relationships in a large chapel on any given Sunday morning. Yet, these small groups can have a powerful impact in the life of the believer and have been largely abandoned. Shaddix expresses a similar point: "The loss of community is one of the most overlooked realities of contemporary church growth."⁴⁸ Yet, Scripture reveals that disciples are the "bride of Christ" and belong in communion with one another.⁴⁹ The small group allows this intimacy and connectedness to take place. The development of a small group does not mean it is easy to join. The lack of biblical knowledge may prevent some from joining. They may not feel equipped to join in difficult theological discussions and

⁴⁷Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 185.

⁴⁸Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 118.

⁴⁹See Mark 2:19, John 3:29, 2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:25-29, and Rev 19:7-9.

therefore inadequate to contribute to the small group.⁵⁰

Sermon Application Groups may provide benefits to those who feel they are ill-equipped to engage in group discussions. First, it does not require a lot of preparation to join the group. Larry Osborne states, “It’s a relatively short step from listening to a sermon to joining a small group that discusses the sermon he’s already heard.”⁵¹

Everyone who listens to a sermon is able to understand the main idea and begin to see how it can be applied to his or her life. If the disciple has a question regarding the sermon and its application, it can be brought into the group setting. Second, the Sermon Application Group provides community among believers. The connectedness of the group is a vital component in developing relationships, but Christians are also commanded to do it for another reason. Hebrews 10:24-25 states, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Believers are encouraged to meet together to spur one another in good deeds, and to help each other grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. As disciples meet together, they encourage one another to fight the good fight of faith and to apply the truths of Scripture to their lives. Dennis Johnson, commenting on Ephesians 4:13-16, states,

⁵⁰Larry Osborne writes, “People may feel like they are signing up for a spiritual honors course.” Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 68.

⁵¹Ibid., 68. Osborne provides another example of application questions for the small group in what he titles “priming the pump”: (1) As you reflect on last weekend’s sermon, what one principle or insight stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp? (2) If Pastor Larry had to give an abbreviated version of last weekend’s message, what two points or ideas would you tell him to include no matter what? (3) What’s one thing from last weekend’s sermon that you hope we talk about as a group? and (4) Was there any one thing that you most agreed with or disagreed with from last weekend’s message? What was it and why? Ibid., 163.

Christlike perfection is not an individualistic pursuit but a corporate, cooperative, community endeavor to reach a goal that none will reach until all have reached it: “until *we all* attain . . . to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . *the whole body*, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the whole body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”⁵²

Conclusion

This chapter examined the theoretical and practical use of biblical application. It answered the fundamental question of why biblical application is a vital component in the preaching and teaching of Holy Scripture. Further, it opened another venue, Sermon Application Groups, in which to apply the Bible to the life of the disciple. It is fitting to end this chapter with a hymn stanza from John Newton: “Our pleasure and our duty, though opposite before, since we have seen his beauty are joined to part no more. It is our highest pleasure, no less than duty’s call; to love him beyond measure, And serve him with our all.”⁵³ If we are indeed in love with Christ, we will certainly obey Him and apply His Word, so that He is glorified.

⁵²Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 67.

⁵³John Newton, “Hymn 3,” http://www.ccel.org/ccel/newton/olneyhymns.h3_3.html (accessed August 27, 2013).

CHAPTER 4
DETAILS OF THE MINISTRY
RESEARCH PROJECT

In July 2013, United States Army Europe completed its move from Heidelberg, Germany, to Wiesbaden, Germany. This move was a limitation of the project, as the Patrick Henry Village Chapel closed. Therefore, the move to Wiesbaden precipitated a change in the location of the ministry project. Although the venue changed, the sample population of participants remained the same. The setting for the Sermon Application Group moved from Patrick Henry Village Chapel to Clay Chapel in Wiesbaden, Germany. Additionally, because of previously established preaching plans, an expository sermon was provided every Thursday. On Friday, those joining the Sermon Application Group met to discuss the sermon and its relevancy to their lives. This allowed participants to attend their weekly Sunday services as well as this mid-week sermon and application group meeting. Project approval was officially received in September 2013.

Upon project approval, the Sermon Application Group was advertised for purpose and overall intent. Because this project was previously discussed with my supervisor and the Garrison Chaplain, flyers were distributed from the home office as part of the religious support ministry. I personally spoke to several people who were not engaged in a Bible study and elicited their interest in attending this Sermon Application Group. By October 2013, 15 people consented to participate in this project.

The purpose of this project was to accomplish three goals: (1) to assist the Sermon Application Group members in *identifying* the biblical application from the

weeks' sermon; (2) to help the Sermon Application Group members improve their spiritual growth practices by *applying* the scriptural tenets to their daily lives; and (3) to determine the usefulness of the sermon application group in *growing* and *equipping* disciples in Christ.

The project was comprised of three phases, which served as the foundation for this ministry project. The first phase of the Sermon Application Group ministry project incorporated advertisements for volunteers to participate and provided a pre-sermon series questionnaire to obtain foundational thoughts and knowledge of participants as disciples of Christ.

The second phase consisted of an eleven-week expository sermon series. Each sermon was a Christ-centered message designed to grow disciples in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The weekly expository sermon highlighted the main point(s) of the text, coupled with relevant application for the Sermon Application Group members. This phase also consisted of meeting with the participants after the sermon to discuss the sermon text, and its application to the original audience and to our contemporary lives. This phase culminated with a discussion on how participants would implement the Scriptural demands into their daily walk.

The third phase consisted of two main components. First, the post-sermon series questionnaire was administered to the group members for aggregate comparisons with the pre-sermon series questionnaire. Second, an After Action Review (AAR) was conducted to elicit member feedback on areas to sustain and improve in the overall project. The AAR focused on the recommendation component to ascertain if the continuance of the Sermon Application Group was warranted in the future.

Phase 1: Explanation of Sermon Application Group

In early September, I spoke to participants about the Sermon Application Group, its purpose and their interest in participation. My goal was to recruit 15 military

personnel (Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard) who were 18 years or older to commit to the project.

The consent to participate was read and discussed with each participant prior to involvement in the Sermon Application Group. Questions were answered to ensure participants understood the agreement and level of commitment through project completion. The agreement consisted of participating in the pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire, the sermon application survey, and the AAR.

The sixteen-question pre-sermon series questionnaire used a six-point Likert scale and measured baseline beliefs in the areas of (1) inerrancy of the Bible, (2) level of understanding when reading the Bible, (3) application and relevancy of the Bible, (4) implementation of biblical principles, and (5) importance of discipling others in Christ (see Appendix 1). The pre-sermon series questionnaire was completed prior to the implementation of the sermon series.

Participants agreed to attend the eleven sermons and Sermon Application Group meetings. However, this commitment was a major challenge given the operational tempo and competing demands on the soldiers' time and ability to participate in this two-day a week project (Service and Sermon Application Group). To reinforce project expectations, the importance and benefits of consistent weekly attendance were emphasized. After completion of the eleven-week sermon series, the post-sermon series questionnaire was administered to participants in order to measure the effectiveness of the Sermon Application Group (see Appendix 2). This questionnaire consisted of twenty questions and used a six-point Likert scale to measure post-sermon series beliefs in the areas of (1) inerrancy of the Bible, (2) level of understanding when reading the Bible, (3) application and relevancy of the Bible, (4) implementation of biblical principles, and (5) importance of discipling others in Christ. Additionally, the post-sermon series

questionnaire incorporated five questions concerning the Sermon Application Group (see Appendix 2). The post-sermon survey questionnaire data was compiled during week 14 of the ministry project.

The Sermon Application Survey (see Appendix 3) was developed and facilitated participants understanding of the weekly sermon and its application. This survey was administered weekly and included (1) text of the sermon, (2) main idea of text, (3) main point(s) of sermon, (4) application to the original audience, (5) application for us today, and (6) other life application. Additionally, two questions at the end of the Sermon Application Survey were presented to the participants on a six-point Likert scale: (1) I easily recognize the application of the sermon to my daily life; (2) I will implement the application into my daily walk (see Appendix 3). These two questions provided a measurement of text application understanding and a willingness to implement the text into their daily lives. During week 14, the project members participated in an AAR, which provided a forum for open discussion to highlight areas to sustain and improve the Sermon Application Group.

Finally, the project had 7 committed participants throughout the eleven-week series who were over the age of 18 years and currently serving in the military.¹ The demographics of the Sermon Application Group consisted of 4 males and 3 females with varied enlisted and officer ranks, military occupation specialties (MOS), educational backgrounds, and ages. The diversity of the group enhanced discussions and fostered a richer understanding of God's Word and its application for His children.

¹Some individuals did not participate in the Sermon Application Group meetings, but attended the sermon series. These individuals were not included in the measurements of the Sermon Application Group, but were welcomed throughout the series.

Phase 2: Expository Sermon Series and Sermon Application Group Meeting

An eleven-week sermon series was presented to the participants. Each expository sermon was Christ-centered and focused on disciple application for growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ.² These sermons provided the context in which to discuss during the Sermon Application Group meetings.³ The blending of sermons from both the Old Testament and New Testament established the congruity of God's purpose and will for His people. It was imperative for the sermon series to be both expository and Christ-centered, as this is the primacy of preaching the Word of God. It highlighted different texts that focused on discipleship while affording participants a diverse understanding of biblical doctrine and related applications. Further, the sermon texts demonstrated God's covenant throughout the Bible in demanding His children to conform to His will through the discipleship of Christ.

A Sermon Application Group meeting followed each week's sermon and was the primary focus of this project. The sermon series could focus on other topics or themes, but the centrality of this project developed the participants' understanding of the text, its relevancy and application to participants' lives, in order to become more mature disciples of Christ. The Sermon Application Group meeting allowed both the new and mature believer in Christ to participate and grow in Him.⁴

²The theological underpinning for this sermon series is developed and outlined in chap. 2 of this project. These texts were also brought into the meetings to undergird the premise that Christians are called to be disciples of Christ.

³The sermon series focused on discipleship; however, any expository sermon series can be used. The prime objective for any sermon series is to highlight Jesus Christ, for all Scripture speaks of Him, and understand how the Word applies to the disciple's life.

⁴Often new believers do not join small groups for fear they do not have the requisite knowledge to engage in the discussion or offer any valuable input to the group. However, the only prerequisite knowledge needed for the Sermon Application Group was that the participant heard the sermon preached the previous day. This methodology also affords the mature believer to provide a deeper understanding and input into the group discussions. Both participants are spiritually fed and encourage one another in the faith.

To provide contextual support after every sermon, the group met the following day and discussed the sermon and relevant application. The participants brought their Sermon Application Survey Tool to each meeting (see Appendix 3). The meeting began with prayer and we asked God to help clarify His Word and how we can incorporate His teachings into our lives to become more like Him. The meeting occurred during the lunch hour and food was provided for all participants. This eliminated the need for participants to prematurely leave the meeting and provided a relaxed atmosphere to discuss the sermon and its application. After prayer, the participants were asked a few questions about the sermon: (1) Does anyone have any input from last week? and (2) Would anyone like to share any discipleship moments since last we met? These were icebreaker questions that allowed participants to comfortably begin discussions within the group.⁵ Further, it provided a natural transition into the contents of the Sermon Application Survey tool, which was used to provide a structure and foundation to the group's meeting (see Appendix 3). The participants were provided this tool prior to the delivery of the sermon, which allowed for completion during or after the sermon.⁶ The Sermon Application Survey tool included the following questions: 1) What was the text of the sermon? (2) What was the main idea of the text? (3) What was the main point(s) of the sermon? (4) What was the

Larry Osborne furthers this point: "It's a relatively short step from listening to a sermon to joining a small group that discusses the sermon he's already heard. But it's a much bigger step into a traditional small group Bible study . . . [where] they tend to feel like they're signing up for a spiritual honors course." Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 68.

⁵Larry Osborne calls these "Priming the Pump" questions, which puts the member at ease and naturally leads into the discussion of application of the text. *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶The participants also received the sermon text a week before the sermon to afford them the opportunity to review the passage of Scripture and write down any question they may have prior to sermon delivery.

application to the original audience? (5) What is the application for us today? and (6) What are other applications to your life? Each question was raised to the group in systematic fashion, without time limits for ease of discussion. At times, the group focused more on a specific question as it related to the sermon. My role was strictly a facilitator of the discussion, ensuring biblical truth throughout the group-led dialogue. If a member of the group asked me a direct question, the question was reworded to assist in thought-provoking discourse among the group. I was not a silent voice during the meetings; however, I encouraged participants to actively engage and provide their input.⁷ Moreover, the Sermon Application Survey tool was reviewed to get a sense of group understanding regarding the following questions: (1) I easily recognize the application of the sermon to my daily life, and (2) I will implement the application into my daily walk. These two questions provided further context to the discussions and allowed the identification of gaps in understanding from sermon meaning and application. Further, the mature believers provided quality discussion input and integrated other biblical texts, including previous sermon series text that supported the main idea of the sermon. This greatly added to the richness of the discussion and prevented the meeting from being a reiteration of the sermon itself. The following is a cursory glance at each week's Sermon Application Group meeting.

Sermon Application Group: Week 1

The first sermon focused on the disciples resetting their priorities on what Christ called them to do. The text of the sermon was Haggai 1. The participants were provided a look at Israel's mission to rebuild the temple after their captivity. However,

⁷As the chaplain who provided the sermon, I did not want to be the direct lead of the group, but rather a facilitator in the process. However, there are two areas that I would address, questions that the group could not answer, or any allegorizations of the text and/or its application.

persecution and their own selfish desires prevented them from fulfilling the will of God. God used the prophet Haggai to speak to the people of Israel. Haggai called them back to the mission that God had directed them to accomplish: “build the temple.” The first priority is for the believer to see that it was God who reached out to Israel. God pointed out Israel’s disobedience, but also called them back to Himself and back to the mission. In similar fashion, God calls believers in Christ to be on mission with him to build His kingdom. However, through persecution or their own agenda, disciples sometimes forget their primary mission to build the kingdom of God through witnessing and living for His glory. The mission always begins with God and it is He who calls disciples to reset their priorities and get back on mission with Him.

The Sermon Application Group met the day after the sermon. As this was our initial meeting, there were challenges to navigate. Most of the participants did not know each other, so an intentional decision was made to allow for some general discussion before we delved into the Haggai 1 text. The members needed some time to feel that they were in a secure and comfortable environment before freely discussing their observations, concerns, challenges, and application of the text. I took this time to reiterate the focus of the Sermon Application Group, the importance of their participation, and the need for each participant to invite the Holy Spirit to help us grow in Christ during the upcoming weeks. This opening discussion was followed by a thorough discourse on the sermon, including its relevance and application. A discussion ensued on the sermon and specifics toward application in their lives. Although some of the participants spoke more often than others, by the end of the meeting all participants were actively engaged in the conversation. The comments from participants were positive and ranged from “a timeless message” to “this is the first time I have ever heard a message from Haggai.” The other main talking point put forth by the group was the personal need

in their own lives to “reset their priorities.” As with Haggai, they mentioned and agreed that God was calling them to be back on mission with Him. As facilitator, this was an encouraging moment in group discussion, as each participant understood the text and how it specifically applied to their lives. The meeting concluded with a word of prayer asking the Lord to help us live out what we had learned from the message and subsequent group discussion.

Sermon Application Group: Week 2

The second sermon from 1 John 1:1-4 entitled, “The Joy of the Secure Life,” conveyed a message that joy was available for believers because of Christ. Disciples should be secure in their joy because Christ is eternal. He is very God and very man. He has always been with the Father. The disciples’ joy in Christ is also due to His manifestation that He lived, died, rose again, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. Finally, the disciples joy in Christ is rooted in fellowship with Him. These indicatives secure joy in Christ and anchor believers in His love. These foundational truths are the reason disciples can have joy when they face false teachings that clearly go against the teaching of Holy Scripture. The group discussed the importance of this message. One participant mentioned the similarities of the first-century church with Christians today and noted that they were experiencing the same false teaching inside the church as we face today. The group found such hope in this text because the apostle John began his letter with the very foundation of our faith, Jesus Christ. They discussed how important it is to be reminded of the fundamentals of faith and what Christ has completed for us. As disciples in Christ, the only reason for the fullness of joy is what Christ accomplished for us. Because of what He accomplished, Christians now have fellowship with God and fellow believers. The group discussed this unique fellowship with Christ and other

believers. We are not alone in the journey, they concluded, for we have Christ. This truth is our true joy and satisfaction.

Several members reflected on Christ's eternal truth and the satisfaction found only in Jesus Christ. The group discussed the necessity to read the Word of God daily in order to understand the true gospel and keep themselves from false teachings. Finally, the group discussed the need to be in fellowship with one another. As we are all in Christ and fellow heirs, we need to be in communion with another. This discussion was encouraging, as many participants reflected on past struggles when a fellow believer strengthened them in their faith. There was a commitment from everyone to encourage one another and continue to meet in fellowship. The meeting concluded in prayer asking the Holy Spirit to keep us from false teaching, resting in Christ for fullness of joy and maintaining fellowship with believers.

Sermon Application Group: Week 3

The third sermon was from Hebrews 12:1-3 as the primary text and focused on how a disciple runs the race for God's glory. This sermon showed disciples how to run the race of faith. They are to run the race with encouragement from all of those who have gone before them. Hebrews 11 provides numerous examples of godly men and women who have gone before and faithfully finished their race. They are a testament of how God uses faithful servants in their race to glorify Him. The group noted the importance of looking at godly examples in Scripture, particularly how God used men and women who submitted their lives to Him. The members revealed their need to run the race for God's glory without "encumbrance." Each disciple, through the power of the Holy Spirit, should lay aside every sin so that it does not entangle and slow him down in the race set before him. The group disclosed personal sin and its impact on faith, but also remarked on the great hope we have in God's faithfulness to forgive all sins. The group also

conversed on how we are to run this race for God's glory with endurance. The race is long and the disciple needs to prepare for its difficulties and length. These three elements can only be accomplished when disciples continually keep their eyes on Jesus Christ. He is our Savior and example of how we are to run the race for His glory. The group agreed to apply these principles to their daily lives and encouraged one another to run their race with steadfast devotion for Christ.

Sermon Application Group: Week 4

This week's sermon text was Amos 2:6-16, entitled "Holy Justice, Wholly Grace." The focus was the holiness of God, His justice, and His mercy and grace to Israel and to us. The group discussed the holiness of God and how He was just in His indictment of Israel for their sins. Participants related Israel to the current society, as we are not obedient to God's Word, fall short of His glory and pursue our own ways. Thus, in every respect, God is just to correct His children. One member pointed out from the sermon that even in Israel's failure, it was God who was the initiator to call them back to obedience. God had every right to punish them and it is the same with us. Through His Word and the Holy Spirit, God calls us back to repentance when we have sinned against Him. It was wholly God's grace that called them back to Himself. God would have been just to punish and remove Israel because of their sins, but out of His mercy and grace, He called them back to Himself. The group also discussed the need for Israel to live a life of obedience to God, not only for them, but so that the glory of God be known to the nations. The correlation to Israel and disciples today was discussed, as we are also called by God to live a life, holy and pleasing unto Christ, so that the nations may know Him. We closed the meeting in prayer asking the Lord to help us in our walk with Christ and to be faithful servants of Christ, so the world may know Him.

Sermon Application Group: Week 5

This sermon focused on the cost of discipleship. The text utilized for this sermon was Matthew 16:24-28. Jesus has just told the disciples that He is going to Jerusalem and will suffer, be killed, yet be raised on the third day. Peter, after earlier revealing that Jesus was the Christ, now rebukes the Lord for making this troubling statement. Jesus firmly reproves Peter and states that he is a stumbling block and does not seek the things of the Lord. It is here that Jesus turns to his disciples and tells them they will have to do three things if they are to be true followers of Christ: (1) deny themselves, (2) take up their cross, and (3) and follow Christ. The group discussed the first requisite of being a disciple in denying him or herself. This can only be accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. A person who is not saved by the redeeming blood of Christ is unable to accomplish this command, as they are set in their sin. The disciple, being endowed with the Holy Spirit, can actively obey and deny himself as he seeks to glorify Christ. The discussion of the meeting then moved to the second salient point of the text, taking up their cross daily. The disciple must be ready to suffer for the sake of Christ and if required, give up his very life. An additional Scripture verse incorporated into the discourse was Jesus' statement in John 15:20, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you." The group discussed this passage and concluded that as disciples of Christ, we should not be surprised by suffering and persecution. The group also focused on the final point of the text, their need to follow Christ. Disciples will go where Christ wants him to go, preaching the gospel and making believers. Disciples who fully understands what Christ has accomplished on the cross will obediently deny himself, take up His cross and follow Christ, for the glory of the Father. We concluded in prayer asking for Christ to help us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him wherever He may direct.

Sermon Application Group: Week 6

This week's text centered on John 15:1-11. The title of the sermon was "How a Disciple is Rooted in Christ." The meeting opened in prayer as we invited Christ to be Lord over the meeting as we studied His Word. The group was asked what it meant to be "rooted in Christ." A member commented on the need to abide in Christ. He is our source and the one that we get all our nourishment to live out our lives. One member commented on the analogy that Christ used was easy to understand. Although they were not in the studying of vines, they clearly saw the parallel of a vine producing fruit and a farmer pruning a tree. The group discussed this a bit further regarding a farmer pruning a tree and noted the obvious point revealed in the text was so the vine can produce more fruit. We then discussed what this meant to the believer in Christ. The group provided a great dialogue on God pruning the sin out of our lives, so that we can be more like Him and display His glory more fully. If we, as disciples, do not receive this pruning, we would not produce fruit. The participants discovered the importance of abiding in Christ and the implications of those who chose not to abide in Him. The group agreed that to be a disciple of Christ, we must continually be in His Word and ask God to work in and through us. In this way, we can produce the fruit of Christ and glorify the Father. We concluded our meeting with prayer, asking for Christ to purify us from our sins and help us to remain in His love.

Sermon Application Group: Week 7

In this week's sermon, the text was Ephesians 4:1-6 with the sermon entitled, "The Worthy Walk of a Disciple." The meeting began with a word of prayer. The group was asked what they thought was the main point of the sermon. One individual sheepishly stated, "It is wrapped in the title of the sermon, we are to walk worthy." The group was asked to discuss chapter 4 and why Paul could not give the Ephesian church a commandment to walk worthy? The response from a member was all of the

information he presented to them from chapters 1-3. This was the point of the exposition of the text, in that Paul had already laid out the indicatives of the gospel and now he told the Ephesian church to walk worthy of their calling from Christ. The group debated the differences between doctrine and application. They concluded that disciples need to balance both doctrine and application in their lives. A reference was made from the sermon on a quote from D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, “They (Ephesians) must not put all the weight on doctrine and none on practice; nor all the weight on practice and just a little, if any at all, on doctrine. To do so produces imbalances and lopsidedness.”⁸ The group then focused on what Paul was asking the Ephesians to do and what all Christians are called to do: walk in humility, be patient with one another, and keep unity with other believers. There was fruitful discussion on how fellow believers are to walk in humility and be patient with another. The group concluded that it is only by God’s grace that we can do any of these things, as written by Paul 1-3. It is only by God’s grace we can live out our lives in a manner that is worthy to the Lord. One member stated that this is why we can only boast in Jesus Christ, because we can never do this on our own accord. Further discussion centered on the unity of believers. If we are truly under one hope, one Lord, and one faith, then we should seek unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. The group discussed the difficulties of walking worthy of our calling, but acknowledged failure was related to our own sin and pride. I added that because of Christ, we can walk in a way that is pleasing to Him, but first we must submit to Him in order for His love and attributes to shine through us. We closed the meeting in prayer, asking for God to help us walk in a way that honors Christ in all that we do and say.

⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 24.

Sermon Application Group: Week 8

This meeting opened with prayer. We informally talked about how we were able to apply and walk out last week's text. We then focused on the week's sermon text of Philippians 2:25-30 entitled, "Receiving a Disciple: Part I." The focus of this sermon was Paul's request of the Philippian church to receive Epaphroditus, who risked it all for Christ, having already received it all from Christ. A member brought to light that Paul went further and requested that the church "receive him therefore in the Lord with all hold such men in high esteem" (v. 29). I asked the group why would we receive such men in this way? A member pointed out that the church was to receive Epaphroditus because he risked his very life for the cause of Christ. Another member brought to light that Epaphroditus was truly a servant who was sent by the Philippian church to Paul to help him in the ministry. He put others' needs before his own. The participants were asked how Epaphroditus could conduct himself in this manner, particularly "not regarding his own life." One member quickly mentioned that this could only be accomplished because of the love of Christ and His love flowing through us. The message clearly pointed to Christ as Epaphroditus was not the central figure, but it was Jesus Christ and what He did in and through his servant, Epaphroditus. The group was challenged on how they could specifically apply this text to their lives. One participant stated that we need to keep our focus on Christ, be obedient to His Word, and ask Him to help us be a servant to others. Another noted that it should be easy for them to be risk-takers for Christ, like Epaphroditus, because of what Christ had done for them, but it was often difficult to daily walk this out. The group discussed how they easily fell short of being the best servant of Christ, due to fear and rejection. But one participant reminded the group that men like Epaphroditus were given to us in Scripture to point us to Christ. He was a person just like us, and yet God used him mightily, because he yielded himself to Christ and understood that he had gained everything

because of Christ. The conclusion was that God can use each of us in similar ways. Further, we should encourage and receive those brothers and sisters in Christ who are serving the Lord faithfully. During this meeting, there was a more focused discussion from all the group members. It appeared that they were more comfortable with each other and not afraid to share, ask questions, and engage in the discussion. This was exciting to witness. We closed the meeting in prayer asking the Lord to help us see Him more fully and help us to live out our lives as risk-taking servants, so that Christ is glorified in and through us.

Sermon Application Group: Week 9

The Sermon Application Group meeting began with prayer to ask for the Lord's guidance and the help of His Holy Spirit to direct us as we delved into His Word. The text in focus for this week's sermon was Philemon 1:1-25. The members extracted the theme of forgiveness as Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus and charged anything he owed to Paul's account. The members saw the direct correlation from Paul stepping in for Onesimus and promising to pay a debt he did not owe ("charge it to my account"), to Christ going to the cross and paying our debt, a debt that we could never have paid. The group discussed the depths of Christ's love and his unyielding grace as He went to such lengths to forgive us of all our sins. There was a slight pause in the meeting after this statement was made. This was a silent moment of reflection on the vast love of Christ and what He accomplished for each of us on the cross. One participant revealed that he needed to apply the same love and forgiveness to others; if Christ could do that for him, then by the power of the Holy Spirit he should do the same. The group also discussed the difference between Epaphroditus from the previous week's sermon and Onesimus. In each letter Paul states, "Receive him." The group mentioned that it would be easier to receive Epaphroditus because the church at Philippi

sent him out to do the work of Christ on their behalf and because of that, he almost lost his life. However, it would be more difficult to receive Onesimus, as he was not sent out by Philemon to do the work of Christ, but rather was a runaway slave. Furthering the point, a member pointed out from the text and sermon that Paul asked Philemon to not only receive Onesimus, but receive him as he would if Paul himself was there. This added to the discussion of complete forgiveness and restoration, as Onesimus is now a believer in Jesus Christ, a fellow brother in the Lord. The group discussed the fullness of forgiveness. They realized the need to apply this act of forgiveness to their lives fully by saying I forgive you, I love you, and I receive you as Christ receives all of His children. The meeting closed in quiet humbleness and prayer for the Holy Spirit to help each one with a spirit of forgiveness and love for those who have hurt us. We also prayed for those people in our own lives who are running away from Christ, that God would call them back unto Himself.

Sermon Application Group: Week 10

This week focused on Luke 1:39-55 with the sermon entitled, “Sing Your Song,” and began with a time of prayer and reflection.⁹ We informally discussed how the group was progressing in their walk with Christ and how the application of each sermon was working in their daily lives. The focus of the dialogue became the transforming power of Christ when a person is touched by His grace. The group reviewed the story line in the Old Testament pointing to Christ and His fulfilled promise to become Immanuel. The group discussed Mary’s song. It was a song that God gave her that would speak from generation to generation. Her song highlighted the majesty of God: His holiness, His mercy, His desire to fill all those who are spiritually

⁹As this was the advent season, I wanted to incorporate a sermon that spoke to the coming of the Lord.

hungry for righteousness, and that He is Savior. The group highlighted the power of God to transform Mary from a person who was initially fearful, to one who was confident in the Lord. Due to the touch of God, Mary highlighted the attributes of God and exalted Him. The believer in Christ has also been touched by His power and He has given each one a song to sing. It is not a song about power, greed, or selfishness, but of how great God is and what He has accomplished through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Disciples should sing the song that Christ has given to them. It should be one that highlights His attributes and what He has accomplished to redeem His elect unto himself. The group discussed the challenges, such as fear, but also the importance of singing this song to the world. Some highlighted that the song that Christ had given them was a little rusty, but they knew that they needed to “brush off the vocal cords” and fall in love with Christ all over again. The group committed to reading the Word and praying for God’s power and love to shine through them as they sang the song Christ had given them. The meeting concluded in prayer and with encouragement for one another to remain to be faithful to what we were learning and its application to our daily walk.

Sermon Application Group: Week 11

This week was the culmination of the sermon series. The text for this week’s sermon was Matthew 28:18-20 entitled, “The Commander’s Marching Orders.” The meeting opened in prayer, soliciting Christ to be Lord over the meeting and to help us understand and apply His Word. As the meeting began, we discussed the Lord’s command to make disciples. The participants noted that this was not a suggestion, but a commandment by Christ for all His disciples. Unfortunately, some of the group revealed that they had not been formerly discipled and that it was a missing element in their lives. However, they now understand the need to be a disciple and one who discipled others. One member mentioned that as he learned more about Christ, he

cannot help but share Him with others. I added that there must be an intentional commitment to disciple others. The group revealed that it was sometimes easier to tell others about Christ but more difficult to make a commitment to disciple them. This act takes time, energy, and prayer. The group noted that Christ not only commanded us to make disciples, but He gave us his authority to do so. The Sovereign Lord gave us His authority to disciple others. Additionally, He stated that He is with us always as we go and make disciples. The group talked about the security of knowing that Christ is with us. He does not command us to go without Him. The group recognized the importance in being obedient to His commands and made a commitment to make disciples as the Lord instructed. The meeting concluded in prayer as we asked Christ to be Lord over our lives. We asked that He would be glorified in all that we do and that we would be faithful disciples who live out their calling before the world. We also asked the Lord to seal all that we learned over the course of the past weeks in our hearts for His glory.

Summary

The Sermon Application Group weekly meetings provided a place where believers in Christ could join and encourage one another in the faith. We prayed and sought to encourage each other in applying the Word to our daily lives. This was a powerful part of the Sermon Application Group, as participants knew they had the love of Christ and the encouragement of fellow believers as they went back to their daily lives.

These meetings provided insight to the participants, particularly their walk with Christ, their understanding of the Word, and their ability to apply the meanings and precepts to their life. This provided a greater appreciation for the people that God was calling me to reach. As a consequence of this project and during sermon development, I began to clearly see the bridge from the biblical text to the specific people in the Sermon Application Group. I continually asked Christ to show me how

these applications applied to these specific group members, so that I could better equip them to see the glorious truths of the gospel and walk out their faiths through the glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ. In my past ministry as a chaplain, there were many instances that I was unsure of where my audience was in their journey with Christ. Because of this uncertainty, some of my biblical applications were general in nature. The Sermon Application Group meetings allowed me to understand each individual more fully and helped provide me with more specificity in my sermon applications. I saw where some of the participants struggled in living out their faith and where they were growing in their faith. This knowledge was invaluable in better serving the needs of those entrusted to my ministry.

Phase 3: Administering Post-Test and After Action Review

During week 14 of the project, the participants received a post-sermon series questionnaire. They were provided one week to complete the questionnaire. I also used this time to conduct an AAR. The participants were asked to provide feedback on the Sermon Application Group. The format was based on the common military structure of sustains and improvements using the issue, discussion, and recommendation format. This time afforded each participant an avenue to provide feedback on the Sermon Application Group, particularly on the recommendation of whether to continue the Sermon Application Group. I also provided a more in-depth AAR, separated by each phase of the project, to each participant to take home and fill out. This AAR requested the Sermon Application Group members to provide any comments, sustain or improve, to enhance the implementation and facilitation of future Sermon Application Groups.

The final week of the project, week 15, involved analyzing the data from the pre- and post-sermon series questionnaires. The results obtained would be a way to

identify measures of effectiveness. This was one way to ascertain if the participants feel better equipped in understanding the relevance of application from the sermon text and whether the Sermon Application Group increased obedience to the Word of God.

Conclusion

The central theme of this project was to better equip disciples through the use of Sermon Application Groups. This process was rewarding and gratifying along each phase of this project. I began to see participant's growth in Christ as the members heard the Word, understood it, and began to apply it to their lives. Additionally, the development and honing of my sermons and delivery were other key factors. Specifically, this project helped me grow in the development of applications to my audience. As the puritan Thomas Manton poignantly stated, "Doctrine is but drawing the bow, application is hitting the mark."¹⁰ The aim was to blend the doctrine of Holy Scripture with its application to the disciple's life. The use and implementation of the Sermon Application Groups went beyond my expectations. I found the Sermon Application Groups to be a time and place for a community of believers to meet and encourage one another in the faith to be of critical importance. Further, the time to clarify, discuss, and commit to the teaching of the Word cannot be overstated. It provided a profound understanding of who God is and what He demands of every disciple. As mentioned previously, there are many times when people do not fully understand the doctrinal emphasis of the text, posing a very real and challenging problem. Disciples must first understand the Scripture before applying it to their life. The Sermon Application Group provided a bridge to fill this need. It was also a place where a group of disciples could pray for one another and support each other in their walk with

¹⁰Thomas Manton, *A Practical Commentary, or an Exposition, with Notes, on the Epistle of James* (London: James Nisbet, 1871), 357.

Christ. There was definitely a desire to continue these meetings as well as expand this process to the larger community. Their response was encouraging and aligned beautifully with what Paul declared to young Timothy, “Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save yourself and those who hear you” (2 Tim 4:15-16). May Christians all heed this call to continue in the doctrine to become more like Christ.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This project asserts that sound doctrine through the exposition of a Christ-centered sermon must be joined by the application of the Word if the disciple is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ and conform in His image. The primacy of this project was founded on scriptural texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16-18, Colossians 1:9-10, and James 1:22-25 (see chap. 2). These scriptural proofs encourage and charge the disciple to be in a relationship with Christ, read and understand His Word, and apply the life-giving truths to their life so that they are “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). This is the joy and honor of every believer and it was my sincere hope that the Sermon Application Group fostered an environment where these capabilities could take place, particularly in the lives of the disciples who live and work on Clay Kaserne in Wiesbaden, Germany. In chapter 3, the importance of expository sermons was explained. It was here the reader was able to understand the most important element of expository sermons: the person and work of Jesus Christ. Participants were challenged to make a decision to apply these truths. The Sermon Application Group definition was established, which provided an additional approach to discipleship and reinforced the sermon and biblical application. The details of the project were then explicated in chapter 4 and the steps of implementation delineated.

This final chapter provides a compendium treatment of the project through reflective analysis. The initial discourse begins with an evaluation of the project’s purpose and goals, followed by a synopsis of the project’s strengths and weaknesses. An After Action Review (AAR) is then presented to capture the recommendations from the

Sermon Application Group members. It is here the reader will learn from the members who participated in the Sermon Application Group what items in the project should be sustained and what areas could be improved. The paper then offers retrospective analysis on alternative design, methodology, and implementation, should the project be replicated in the future. These insights are followed by a discussion on theological reflections that affirm the biblical essence of the project. Finally, the author's personal reflections are offered, followed by a summative conclusion.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The stated purpose of this project was to equip disciples with the requisite knowledge and skills to become mature disciples in Christ. The method utilized to support this purpose was the Sermon Application Groups. The Sermon Application Group provided a venue where disciples could hear the Word of God preached and a subsequent meeting to help disciples understand the Word of God and its application. This was accomplished through the elucidation of the sermon text, answering questions, demonstrating scriptural relevance, and encouraging disciples to recognize appropriate life applications.

The project's purpose, through the use of the Sermon Application Group, was in partial response to a perceived decline in disciples' understanding of Scripture and their ability to comprehend its relevance to their lives. This decline is not just inherent to the military community, but in my estimation, the Christian community and universal church at large. However, it is also important to note that these Christians yearn to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and be discipled.¹ They desire to learn and understand how to read the Bible accurately and they are eager to apply its truths in their

¹In the military context, this methodology is called teaching, coaching, and mentoring.

lives. So, what can the minister do to help undergird the disciples' desire to mature in Christ? As the evaluation of this chapter unfolds, I hope the reader will discern that the project's purpose was fulfilled and appreciate the importance of implementing a Sermon Application Group in their respective ministries.

The formal evaluation of this project's purpose will be empirically examined through the comparison of the pre- and post-sermon series questionnaires using descriptive and inferential analysis.² Although this analysis will illuminate the immediate results of this project, the true evaluation will reflect the transformed lives of the disciples, as they continue to live out their faith in the world.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

This section will focus on the evaluation of the project's stated goals through the discussion of descriptive statistics.

Identifying Biblical Application

The first goal of this project was to assist the Sermon Application Group members in identifying the biblical application from the week's sermon. The method for accomplishing this goal was to provide a weekly small group setting so that members could discuss the sermon and its biblical application.

The success of this goal was measured through the weekly completion of the Sermon Application Survey, as the results reflected the participants' ability to recognize the biblical application of the sermon. To achieve success within this goal, the aggregate number of Sermon Application Survey responses in the categories of "Agree" and/or "Strongly Agree" had to reflect a greater than 75 percent threshold (see Appendix 3, Question 1).

²Analysis of the pre-sermon series questionnaire and post-series sermon questionnaire are located in the "Evaluation of Goals" section of this chapter.

This goal was successful as 100 percent of responses (39/39) were either in the “Agree” and/or “Strongly Agree” categories. The responses reflected a positive understanding of the sermon and its subsequent application to individual lives. These results were very encouraging, as the ability to comprehend and recognize how the Word of God is relevant in a disciple’s life are fundamental components in discipleship. Based on the stated goal and given these positive results, the Sermon Application Group was a success.

Improving Spiritual Growth Practices

The second goal for this project was to help the Sermon Application Group members improve their spiritual growth practices by applying scriptural tenets to their daily lives. This goal was accomplished through small group discussions of spiritual practices and growth over the past week.

To measure the success of this goal, each participant received a pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire (see Appendix 2 and 3). The responses received were compared in order to evaluate if an improvement in spiritual growth occurred over the course of the sermon series. Success within this goal was achieved if a greater than 25 percent threshold positive improvement from baseline data assessment (pre-sermon series) to post-sermon responses.

This goal was unsuccessful in demonstrating a 25 percent or greater positive improvement from pre- and post-comparative analysis of aggregate data. In fact, the noted positive increase percentage change was nominal, with a 3.67 percent increase (see Table 1). Likewise, Table 2 reveals the aggregate changes from baseline to post-sermon series were not statistically significant ($t(6) = -0.923, p=0.196$).

There are several factors which contributed to this unsuccessful goal. The stated measurement of success (achieve a greater than 25 percent threshold positive improvement) was unrealistic given the questionnaire and Likert scale developed. The

Likert scale incorporated six variables for each question. In order for this goal to be successful, the participants would have had to self-report (pre-sermon series baseline data) with a median score of no greater than 63. However, the pre-sermon series baseline median score was 71.9. Therefore, this goal could not be obtained given the high self-reported pre-sermon series scores. Additionally, the questionnaire utilized self-reported responses, which may not present the most accurate representation of questionnaire results, due to inherent bias when using a self-reporting tool and measurement.

Table 1. Percent change: Pre- and post-scores

	Pre-Scores	Post-Scores	% change
Member 1	76	79	3.973
Member 2	61	64	4.918
Member 3	78	78	0
Member 4	72.5	74	2.068
Member 5	75	78	4.000
Member 6	73	76	4.109
Member 7	68	73	7.352
Group Sum	503.5	522	3.6742

Note: Results from 14-item survey with 6-point Likert scale/maximum score: 84/member.

Table 2. Overall pre- and post-sermon application scores

	Mean	SD	N	DF	T	p-value (1 tail)
Overall	-2.642857143	7.597775364	7	6	-0.920314489	0.196453163
Pre	71.92857143	5.762150723	7	6		
Post	74.57142857	5.15936504	7	6		

Usefulness of the Sermon Application Group

The third goal was to determine the usefulness of the Sermon Application Group in growing and equipping disciples in Christ. The method for accomplishing this goal involved a focus-group format. I paralleled this format after the military's AAR,

which is generally conducted after any military training in order to highlight issues, promulgate discussion, and provide recommendations. I focused on the “recommendation” component of the AAR to ascertain if the sermon application group meetings should continue in the future.

Success of this goal was measured in a greater than 67 percent of the participants’ willingness to continue the sermon application group. If this measure was obtained, the understood success and positive input from the group signified the use of this setting for continued discipleship with the recommendation to share the methodology with other chapels. Conversely, if the 67 percent threshold was not met and participants were not willing to continue in the discipleship format, the group meetings would conclude and cease at the close of this project.

The third goal was overwhelmingly successful. In the AAR, 100 percent of the participants (7/7) recommended that the Sermon Application Group meetings continue. Each member articulated his/her desire and enthusiasm to continue the Sermon Application Group meetings and verbalized the need to expand this discipleship strategy to other military members. Several members commented that the Sermon Application Group meetings were “just what the church needs to help believers grow in Christ.”³

Additional Analysis: Individual Question Analysis

Although not a stated goal for this project, the analysis of individual questions yielded statistically significant results for the four questions described in this section.

Question 1: *I believe regular meetings, in addition to a church service is essential to my growth in Jesus Christ.* The teaching of doctrine and Sermon Application Group meetings to the select adult group members made a statistically

³The AAR also provided more information that will be further extrapolated in the AAR section.

significant difference in the increase of their belief that regular meetings, in addition to church service, are essential to participant's spiritual growth ($t(6) = -2.645, p = 0.019$; see Table 3).

Table 3. Question 2: Pre- and post-scores

	Mean	SD	N	DF	T	p-value (1 tail)
Overall	-1	1	7	6	-2.645751311	0.019122592
Pre	5	1	7	6		
Post	6	0	7	6		

Question 3: *I frequently understand how to read and understand the Bible.* The Sermon Application Group meetings to the select adult group members made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of members' understanding how to read and understand their Bible ($t(6) = -2.645, p = 0.019$; see Table 4).

Table 4. Question 3: Pre- and post-scores

	Mean	SD	N	DF	T	p-value (1 tail)
Overall	-1	1	7	6	-2.645751311	0.019122592
Pre	4.428571429	0.534522484	7	6		
Post	5.428571429	0.786795792	7	6		

Question 8: *I believe the chaplain clearly provides sufficient application of the sermon that is relevant to my life.* The sermons proclaimed to the select adult group members made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of sufficient applications that were relevant to their lives ($t(6) = -2.091, p = 0.04$; see Table 5).

Table 5. Question 8: Pre- and post-scores

	Mean	SD	N	DF	T	p-value (1 tail)
Overall	-0.785714286	0.994029797	7	6	-2.091290027	0.040726414
Pre	4.5	0.866025404	7	6		
Post	5.285714286	0.487950036	7	6		

Question 9: *I believe it is necessary to apply the truths of Scripture to my life.*

The teaching of application to the select adult group members made a statistically significant difference resulting in the increase of their belief that it is necessary to apply the truths of Scripture to their lives ($t(6) = 2.121, p = 0.039$; see Table 6).

Table 6. Question 9: Pre- and post-scores

	Mean	SD	N	DF	T	p-value (1 tail)
Overall	0.857142857	1.069044968	7	6	2.121320344	0.039070375
Pre	5.714285714	0.755928946	7	6		
Post	4.857142857	0.690065559	7	6		

Sermon Application Group Specific Question Analysis

Although not a stated goal of this project, the Sermon Application Group members were asked specific questions on the post-sermon survey questionnaire regarding the Sermon Application Group meetings (see Appendix 2). A descriptive analysis for each question is provided below using a 6-point Likert scale: 1pt = Strongly Disagree; 2pt = Disagree; 3pt = Disagree Slightly; 4pt = Agree Slightly; 5pt = Agree; 6pt = Strongly Agree.

Question 15: *The Sermon Application Group meetings clarified my questions on how the sermon text applies to my life.*

Q 15 6 5 5 4 3 4 5

Six out of 7 (85.7 percent) members positively indicated that the Sermon Application Group meetings clarified their questions on how the sermon applies to their lives. This is another indicator of the usefulness of the Sermon Application Group meetings and reinforces the previously identified, positive results.

Question 16: *The Sermon Application Group meetings provided an accountability mechanism for me to apply the scriptural truths I learned.*

Q 16 5 5 5 4 2 4 5

Six out of 7 (85.7 percent) members positively asserted that the Sermon Application Group meetings provided an accountability mechanism to apply scriptural truths to their lives. Although not formally stated, accountability was an implicit goal and outcome.

Question 17: *The Sermon Application Group meetings provided me with other ways to apply the Scriptures to my life.*

Q 17 5 5 6 5 5 5 5

Six out of 7 (85.7 percent) members positively agreed that the Sermon Application Group meetings helped provide them other ways to apply Scripture to their lives. This demonstrated the usefulness of a group meeting formally to discuss the biblical application to their lives.

Question 18: *The Sermon Application Group meetings helped me grow in Christ.*

Q 18 5 5 6 6 4 5 5

Seven out of 7 (100 percent) members positively agreed that the Sermon Application Group meetings helped them grow in Christ. This was the ultimate goal of the project: to equip disciples with the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Question 19: *The Sermon Application Group provided me with a sense of community.*

Q 19 5 5 6 5 3 6 6

Six out of 7 (85.7 percent) members positively agreed that the Sermon Application Group provided them with a sense of community. This is encouraging as believers are to be in community with each other and supporting one another in the faith.

Strengths of the Project

The following section will offer strengths of this project.

Passionate Members

The primary strength of this project was the ability to gather a group of believers who were passionate to see Christ glorified both in and through their lives and witness their transformation over the course of the eleven-week project. Members confirmed their wishes to learn more about God's Word and its contemporary, life-applications. Their enthusiasm and passion resonated throughout the weekly meetings, which assisted fellow believers to realize the importance of learning about God's Word and the blessing they share as they grow in Him.

Diversity

Another key strength was the diversity in the group. The group embraced those new in the faith as well as those mature in the faith. This group dichotomy was a true blessing. Mature Christians were able to answer questions and assist group members as they inquired deeper into the application of the text, while those new in the faith helped us to remember the simplicity and purity of the gospel from a new Christian's perspective. Additionally, the diversity within the group conveyed nuances in the application of the text to each member's life. The diversity of the group also provided a richer experience as every member heard how the application could be applied through others' perspectives and experiences. The increased knowledge helped every member as they were able to see how disciples applied this truth during different stages of their walk with Christ. I believe the diversity of the group helped all of the members to grow in a fuller, richer knowledge of Christ. There is little hesitation to assert that the diversity of the Sermon Application Group added fullness and depth to the weekly discussions.

Open Communication

Another strength of this project was the openness of each individual to become active members within the group. An anticipated barrier to the Sermon Application Group members was that rank (officer and enlisted) would be a confounding variable in

the group dynamic. The assumption was that the rank structure might hinder some participants from freely involved in the group discussions. However, this potential barrier was not perceived, as each subject was actively engaged in the discussions throughout the eleven-week project.

Group Size

A final strength of this project was the size of the group (7). This small sample provided a more intimate setting for participants to discuss the Word of God and its application. The dynamics would have been drastically different if the group was comprised of the larger sample size of 15, as originally intended at the inception of this project.

Weaknesses of the Project

The following section will examine the weaknesses of this project.

Pre- and Post-Sermon Series Questionnaire

The primary weakness of this project was the pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire tool. After completion of the pre-sermon series questionnaire, I noted most of the Sermon Application Group members' responses were in the "Strongly Agree" and/or "Agree" categories. This initial baseline data reflected a small window for improvement in the post-sermon series questionnaire, with little ability to reach the stated threshold goal of success of greater than 25 percent improvement. The initial high scoring in the pre-sermon questionnaire is a potential problem with a self-reporting questionnaire and reflects an inflated baseline assessment (pre-sermon series) and thus a bias inherent in the questionnaire itself. Additionally, this questionnaire was developed specifically for this project and as such, did not undergo content validity prior to its use.

Relocation

A second weakness was the move from Heidelberg, Germany, to Wiesbaden, Germany. Although this move was anticipated, it still proved difficult in implementing the project. If the implementation occurred prior to the move, I believe there would have been greater attendance in the Sermon Application Group meetings, as most attendees from the Patrick Henry Village Chapel in Heidelberg lived in close proximity of the chapel.

Time Commitment

A third weakness was the time commitment burden placed on each group member. Some participants missed meetings throughout the project. I attempted to mitigate the missed meetings through calendar reminders and personal invites at the beginning of each week. However, attending two, one-hour meetings a week for thirteen weeks proved very demanding on participant schedules. Mission essential commitments sometimes rose to the forefront and prevented group members from attending every meeting. The inability to attend each meeting did not equate to a desire not to participate. On the contrary, group members' need to attend was evident in the positive post-sermon series questionnaire results and AAR comments.

After Action Review

An AAR was conducted to receive recommendations on the continuance of the Sermon Application Group. However, the AAR format also allowed Sermon Application Group members the opportunity to provide a more in-depth analysis of areas in the project which needed to be sustained and/or improved. The comments provided should be carefully considered for future implementation. The results are highlighted below using the military format of issue, discussion, and recommendation.

Issue: Advertisement

Discussion. The advertisement of the Sermon Application Group was limited to certain areas around the post. The use of advertisement is a great tool to highlight the Sermon Application Group and receive more members in the group.

Recommendation. Recommend advertising for several weeks prior to the start of the Sermon Application Group. The flyers should be posted in different sections (G-1, G-4, etc.) for wider dissemination and awareness of the meeting. Also, it was recommended to send out more emails reminders before each meeting.

Issue: Sermon Application Survey

Discussion. The Sermon Application Survey was of great benefit. It was easy to use, simplified, and provided the basic foundation for each weekly sermon. It also provided an outline to use in personal devotions.

Recommendation. Continue to use this tool.

Issue: Chaplain Facilitation of Sermon Application Group Meetings

Discussion. After the sermon, the chaplain facilitated the group meetings. The reason for the meeting was to discuss the sermon delivered the previous day. The chaplain was always prepared and provided excellent feedback during the course of the meeting. He challenged us to apply the Scripture to our lives, but did not primarily lead the discussions

Recommendation. Continue the excellent discussion, preparation, and facilitation of the discussions.

Issue: Sermons

Discussion. The chaplain provided sermons on discipleship from different books of the Bible. This allowed us to see Christ in different books of the Bible and how

it relates to us today. It is always nice to see the unity of the Bible and hear sermons from texts you do not always read or hear preached on Sunday.

Recommendation. Continue this style of sermons to show how all of the books relate to Christ and our lives.

Issue: Group size

Discussion. The size of the group was small. The diversity of the group was extremely helpful, but it would have been better to have a larger group. This would have added to the discussions each week.

Recommendation. Try to get a group of 12 or more to attend the Sermon Application Group meeting.

Issue: Time

Discussion. The sermons delivered were just the right amount of time, between 30-40 minutes. The Sermon Application Group meetings were 45 minutes after the initial greetings. However, this was not enough time to discuss everything, particularly when dealing with difficult texts.

Recommendation. Recommend extending the Sermon Application Group meetings to an hour to an hour and a half to allow for further discussion.

Issue: Application

Discussion. The application of the text showed us how it was personally relevant to our lives (i.e. the way we live, the way we act, the way we interact with other people, the way we grow in Christ).

Recommendation. Continue the emphasis on application of the text as well as its meaning.

Issue: Group Interaction

Discussion. During the course of the Sermon Application Group meetings, everyone was able to respond without repercussions. We all learned from one another. The chaplain set the conditions for each meeting, which allowed everyone to freely discuss their comments, questions, or concerns.

Recommendation. Continue to set this environment for all future Sermon Application Group meetings. Everyone wants to learn and participate and should be free to do so without regard to rank.

Issue: Steward of Time

Discussion. The chaplain was a steward of time. When preaching the sermon, the chaplain would close the chapel door promptly at 12 noon and open up in prayer. This sends the message to members that time is precious, particularly when we are about to receive the message of God.

Recommendation. Continue to honor God's time and the participant's time.⁴

What I Would Do Differently

This project posed varied challenges throughout each phase toward completion. Given the gap in existing literature concerning this type of project and specifically, the use of Sermon Application Groups to nurture and develop disciples in Christ through greater understanding and scriptural application, this section will highlight areas of challenge in order to mitigate barriers for effective, future implementation.

⁴Other Comment: Great overall! We enjoyed having the opportunity to learn and discuss God's Word. It was always a refreshing part of our week. Thank you for all your efforts.

Exposition of One Biblical Book

First, I would have selected texts from one book of the Bible. Although the use of various texts undergirded the theme of discipleship, I believe the group members would have been better served if I had provided a systematic discourse through a particular book of the Bible. The exposition of sermons from a single book would have been particularly beneficial for those members who were new in the faith as they sought to understand the Word of God. This technique would have demonstrated the main theme of the book, and afforded participants the sermon understanding through the book's overarching theme. It would be less burdensome on the minister as well, as the background of original audience and historical setting could be established during the first meeting.

Timing of Implementation

Second, I would have re-considered the timing of implementation of this project. The final approval of the proposal was obtained in September 2013. I had hoped to implement the project several months before the final approval. However, given the approval and subsequent implementation, the project ending was pushed into the advent season. In retrospect, I would have changed the sermon text to incorporate a more deliberate emphasis on the season of advent or waited until January to begin the project. Thus, consideration must be given to the timing and/or time of year, i.e., Christian calendar, before choosing scriptural texts and sermons.

Distribution of Sermon Application Survey

Third, I would have conducted the distribution of the Sermon Application Survey in a different manner. During the course of the project, I provided the members with the text of the next sermon a week prior to delivery, so they had reasonable time to read and reflect on the upcoming sermon. The Sermon Application Survey was handed

to each member right before the delivery of the sermon. Allowing the members to complete the tool prior to the next Sermon Application Group meeting. However, upon further reflection, I should have sent the members the Sermon Application Survey along with the sermon text. This advance copy would allow them to read the text and fill in the Sermon Application Survey a week before the delivery of the sermon, then, on the day of the sermon, they could write down what they heard in the sermon. This method would afford them an opportunity to compare what they studied prior to the sermon with what was preached on that particular week. This delivery would also enhance discussion during the Sermon Application Group setting, particularly if what they noted prior to hearing the sermon did not align with their perspective after the sermon was preached (i.e., main point and application).

Accountability Mechanism

Fourth, there was a perceived lack of an accountability mechanism within the group. Although relationships were naturally forged during this project, participants did not hold each other accountable for each week's application and walk with Christ outside of the group setting. This perceived lack of an accountability mechanism may be partially due to the inconsistency of group members' attendance at every meeting. Another variable could have been the rank structure, as participants may not have been comfortable forging this type of accountability knowing that one individual may be senior in rank. Additionally, there was a lack of a consistent discussion by myself on the topic of accountability. In the future, I would ensure that I brought this need for accountability to the forefront at each weekly meeting. I would also try to bring a balance of awareness without forcing accountability among the particular group members.

Validated Questionnaire

Finally, I would have conducted further research to inquire about a validated pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire. Although I was unable to find a reliable and valid tool for my project, I may not have exhausted all possible research search tools. The use of a validated tool would have aided in the validity of my results and possibly even changed my results. Confirming content validity for each question of the survey with a qualified researcher would prove to enhance the validity of my tool and improve the overall rigor of my project.

Theological Reflections

The charge and privilege today and for every generation of believers is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. There are many distractors that prevent believers from keeping the primacy of Christ at the forefront of our lives. Scripture beckons disciples to understand who God is and what He desires for their lives. The emphasis is first and foremost on a relationship with Christ through the study of His Word and a vital prayer life. The more we know Christ, the more we understand Him, love Him, and want to do His will. The Psalmist states, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps 119:97). This is at the very heart of every disciple as he loves the Word of God and wants to obey the central treasure of all Scripture: Jesus Christ. The Sermon Application Group provided the members in the group a bi-weekly opportunity to step away from the business of their lives to further study the Word of God, obtain a greater understanding about their savior Jesus Christ, and apply His life-giving Word to their lives. If for no other reasons, the Sermon Application Group was a success on these principles alone.

Additionally, the importance of Christ-centered sermons through exposition of the Word was of utmost importance and foundational to the Sermon Application Group meetings. The Word of God must be rightly divided and delivered to include, as J. I.

Packer notes, “Teaching plus application,” and it was my sincere hope that I honored the Lord in this endeavor.⁵ The preaching of the Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is how lives are changed and transformed in the image of Christ. The sermon was the genesis for the Sermon Application Group meeting and provided a firm foundation in which to discuss and grow in Christ.

Personal Reflections

This was, in no uncertain terms, both a rich and rewarding endeavor, albeit challenging. Throughout the formation of the project, I personally experienced a move, deployment exercises, and demands of being a full-time chaplain. However, throughout this process, God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has kept me and allowed me to persevere when it would have been easy to put down the mantle of this lofty goal. The encouragement I received from the Sermon Application Group members cannot be fully captured in this paper. I saw firsthand their passion and desire to learn more about Jesus Christ and what He desires in their lives. Their enthusiasm and outright love for our Savior impacted me greatly and encouraged me to continue on this venture. They also brought out discussion points during the Sermon Application Group meetings that provided encouragement and uplifted my circumstance.

Finally, this project personally reinforced my calling and passion to proclaim Christ through the exposition and delivery of Christ-centered sermons. There is no better thing in this world than when you are in line with what Christ has called you to do for His purposes and for His glory. I achieved this through facilitating the Sermon Application Group meetings. It is through group meetings that I ultimately learned about

⁵J. I. Packer, “Why Preach,” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 3. Further, ministers must heed Paul’s instruction to Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

these disciples and was privileged to witness the impact that Christ was making on participants lives. To be a small part of how Christ is moving in someone's life can never be understated or forgotten. We are in the business of making disciples to glorify our Lord and I was able to bear witness in the lives of these magnificent men and women of faith.

Conclusion

This project has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my ministry. I was able to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ through expositional sermons and meet with members post-sermon to answer questions and discuss the biblical application to their lives. I was also able to appreciate the nurturing of the faith and the growth in members' walk with Christ. The Sermon Application Group provided me with a better understanding of the people with whom I serve on a daily basis. This project confirmed my strong belief in the teaching and application of Scripture. The two must be unified in order to grow into the image of Christ. John Calvin, when speaking of the importance of both dogmatic theology and practical religion, stated,

If we desire so much to defend one flank of this sacred city, that is the Church, that we ignore an evident assault by the enemy on another flank. For we must guard against this most beguiling trick of Satan, lest in being so concerned about defending dogma on the one hand . . . we lose practical religion on the other, which is the end and goal of the Christian religion.⁶

Therefore, practical theology highlights the importance of creeds and deeds, for they must be unified as a cohesive unit. Ministers of the gospel should use every instrument possible to preach and teach sound doctrine that is joined with sound application. The more ways we afford people to discuss the glorious truths of Christ and how it specifically applies to their life, the more we will equip them to become mature

⁶Scott M. Manetch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 235.

believers in Christ. The use of the Sermon Application Group may be another tool for the church to incorporate into their weekly regimen of small group study.

APPENDIX 1

PRE-SERMON SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE FOR
SERMON APPLICATION GROUP MEMBERS

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your understanding and application of the sermon text to your life. This research is being conducted by Lane J. Creamer for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be part of the sermon application group meetings and answer questions for the pre-sermon and post-sermon series. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of his research instrument, you are giving consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Using the scale below, please circle the number that best describes your feelings on the following questions.

Strongly Disagree SD	Disagree D	Disagree Somewhat DS	Agree Somewhat AS	Agree A	Strongly Agree SA
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1. I believe the whole Bible is the very Word of God, is true, and is without error.
SD D DS AS A SA
2. I believe regular meetings, in addition to a church service is essential to my growth in Jesus Christ.
SD D DS AS A SA
3. I frequently understand how to read and understand the Bible.
SD D DS AS A SA
4. I see the value of understanding the context original audience.
SD D DS AS A SA
5. When I read a passage of Scripture, I readily know how it applies to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
6. I frequently understand the main idea of the sermon.
SD D DS AS A SA

7. I frequently understand the application from the sermon and how it applies to my life.
 SD D DS AS A SA
8. I believe the chaplain clearly provides sufficient application of the sermon that is relevant to my life.
 SD D DS AS A SA
9. I believe it is necessary to apply the truths of Scripture to my life.
 SD D DS AS A SA
10. I frequently implement the application of the sermon into my daily Christian walk.
 SD D DS AS A SA
11. I believe that I am called to be a disciple and grow daily in Christ.
 SD D DS AS A SA
12. I feel comfortable in helping others grow in Christ.
 SD D DS AS A SA
13. I have grown deeper in my relationship with Christ over this past year.
 SD D DS AS A SA
14. I believe meeting with other Christians during the week to discuss last week's sermon would encourage me and help me apply the Scriptural truths to my life.
 SD D DS AS A SA
15. I hold myself accountable to other Christians to ensure my spiritual growth.
 SD D DS AS A SA
16. I have grown deeper in my relationship with Christ over this past year.
 SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 2

POST-SERMON SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SERMON APPLICATION GROUP

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your understanding and application of the sermon text to your life. This research is being conducted by Lane J. Creamer for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be part of the sermon application group meetings and answer questions for the pre-sermon and post-sermon series. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of his research instrument, you are giving consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Using the scale below, please circle the number that best describes your feelings on the following questions.

	Strongly Disagree SD	Disagree D	Disagree Somewhat DS	Agree Somewhat AS	Agree A	Strongly Agree SA
1.	I believe the whole Bible is the very Word of God, is true, and is without error.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2.	I believe regular meetings, in addition to a church service is essential to my growth in Jesus Christ.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3.	I frequently understand how to read and understand the Bible.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4.	I see the value of understanding the context original audience.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5.	When I read a passage of Scripture, I readily know how it applies to my life.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6.	I frequently understand the main idea of the sermon.					
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

7. I frequently understand the application from the sermon and how it applies to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
8. I believe the chaplain clearly provides sufficient application of the sermon that is relevant to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
9. I believe it is necessary to apply the truths of Scripture to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
10. I frequently implement the application of the sermon into my daily Christian walk.
SD D DS AS A SA
11. I believe that I am called to be a disciple and grow daily in Christ.
SD D DS AS A SA
12. I feel comfortable in helping others grow in Christ.
SD D DS AS A SA
13. I have grown deeper in my relationship with Christ over this past year.
SD D DS AS A SA
14. I believe meeting with other Christians during the week to discuss last week's sermon helps me apply the Scriptural truths to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
15. The Sermon Application Group meetings clarified my questions on how the sermon text applies to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
16. The Sermon Application Group meetings provided an accountability mechanism for me to apply the Scriptural truths I learned.
SD D DS AS A SA
17. The Sermon Application Group meetings provided me with other ways to apply the Scriptures to my life.
SD D DS AS A SA
18. The Sermon Application Group meetings helped me grow in Christ.
SD D DS AS A SA
19. The Sermon Application Group provided me with a sense of community.
SD D DS AS A SA
20. I have grown deeper in my relationship with Christ due to the Sermon Application Group meetings
SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 3

SERMON APPLICATION SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The survey in which you are about to participate is designed to measure your understanding and application of the sermon text to your life. This research is being conducted by Lane J. Creamer for purposes of project research. In this research, you will be part of the sermon application group meetings and answer questions for the weekly sermon application survey. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of his research instrument, you are giving consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Text of Sermon: _____

Main Idea of Text: _____

Main Point(s) of Sermon: _____

Application to the Original Audience: _____

Application for Us Today: _____

Other Applications to my life: _____

1. I easily recognize the application of the sermon to my daily life.
SD D DS AS A SA

2. I will implement the application into my daily walk
SD D DS AS A SA

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ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING DISCIPLES THROUGH SERMON APPLICATION GROUPS AT THE PROTESTANT CHAPEL, HEIDELBERG, GERMANY

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014
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The project examines the effectiveness of using Sermon Application Groups to equip disciples with the knowledge and skills necessary to become mature disciples in Christ.

Chapter 1 provides the purpose, goals, ministry context, rationale, definitions, and limitations of the project.

Chapter 2 examines the biblical and theological foundations for the application of Holy Scripture. It answers the fundamental question of what does Scripture say about the application of Scripture to the disciple's life.

Chapter 3 explores the theoretical and practical use of biblical application. It establishes the vital importance of application in the preaching and teaching of Scripture and the purpose and description of a Sermon Application Group.

Chapter 4 presents details on the implementation of the project through each of the three phases, to include a pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire, expository sermon series, Sermon Application Group meetings, and After Action Review.

Chapter 5 provides analysis of the project's effectiveness through descriptive and inferential statistics including the evaluation of the project's purpose and goals. Further, strengths and weaknesses are described to help aid others who implement this project in their ministry.

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