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DEVELOPING BIBLICAL APPLICATION IN PREACHING THE BOOK
OF JAMES AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, ELKHART, TEXAS

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APPROVAL SHEET

DEVELOPING BIBLICAL APPLICATION IN PREACHING THE BOOK
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To Heather,
my biggest fan,
and faithful encourager.

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PREFACE

When I began this project, I did so in the hope that the Lord might teach me how to better instruct those I serve toward biblical application. Like most in pastoral ministry, my desire was to see the Word of God shape hearts and lives, both for His glory and for the good of His people. While I could not imagine that this project would have any impact beyond the borders of Anderson County, it is now my prayer that somehow, God might use this small experience to encourage and instruct others who have been entrusted with the preaching of His Word.

I want to thank God, first and foremost, and praise Him for using this experience to shape my heart. Inexpressible gratitude is owed to my wonderful bride, Heather for all her support and encouragement alongside the joy of our precious children. I wish to thank the members of First Baptist Elkhart for their patient support and willing participation. It is a privilege to serve as their pastor. I am also grateful for the friendship and support of the pastors of the Dogwood Trails Baptist Association. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Vickers for his encouragement, labor, and instruction. His patience, especially in pushing me to make chapter 3 something more than a cliché, is greatly appreciated.

Bill Gernenz

Elkhart, Texas

May 2013

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a biblically faithful and gospel-honoring approach to application in expository messages from the book of James at First Baptist Church, Elkhart, Texas.

Goals

This project intended to accomplish four goals. The primary goal was to develop a deliberate, faithful, and gospel-honoring approach to application in preaching expository messages. Though this goal has clear implications for preaching in general, it is especially pertinent in my present ministry context. In the Bible-belt culture of east Texas, many people possess a background that involves church and provides some knowledge of who Jesus is. Unfortunately, this cultural knowledge often promotes an inadequate view of the lordship of Christ and encourages an anemic self-imposed morality that does nothing to compel people to live lives transformed by the abiding Word of God. For many, even some who attend on a regular basis, church has become a hollow habit and an empty tradition. For their purposes, the sermon is an encouraging speech, an informative lecture, or an enthusiastic presentation; however, it carries little influence over day-to-day living. In light of this deficiency, the aim of this project was to

develop an approach that guides preachers toward biblically faithful and gospel-honoring application in the development of expository messages.

In order to accomplish this primary goal, I sought to develop, implement, and maintain practices in sermon preparation and presentation that would give specific attention to developing intentional application. The development phase involved comparing philosophies of application, becoming familiar with techniques for discerning application and gathering various tools and helps. Exercising and maintaining the practice of the developed methods included learning to budget sermon time appropriately so that sufficient time could be given to the development of application. Too often, application is an afterthought and, as a result, is either absent from the sermon, haphazardly directed at current circumstances, or recycled from a stock of generic issues. By protecting budgeted time, I worked to improve my preparation in order to focus intentionally on points of application and their inclusion into the sermon.

The third goal was to encourage Baptist pastors in the Palestine area to evaluate their approach to application, working toward a biblically-driven and gospel-honoring approach. A group of 8 Baptist pastors from the Palestine were recruited to preach through the same 10-week sermon series through the book of James. After an initial survey regarding current philosophies and approaches to application, the participants were presented with the four principles of biblical application as explained in chapter 3. The pastors were to record their experience on a response sheet and attend frequent feedback sessions.

Improving as a preacher for the sake of bettering one's self is a narcissistic endeavor, and pursuing effectiveness for effectiveness' sake can be largely superficial.

However, when excellence is not the end but the means to the end, then a pursuit of excellence becomes a worthwhile and God-honoring. And what is that end? It should be nothing less than the glory of God revealed through His people as they are transformed by His Word. Therefore, the final goal sought to improve the measure of biblical application in the lives of the members of First Baptist Church, Elkhart, Texas, through the implementation of a deliberate, faithful, and gospel-honoring approach to application in preaching expository messages. A large group of members were surveyed concerning issues of belief and behavior before and after hearing the James sermon series in order to determine if an initial change in trajectory can be noted. A smaller group of 10 volunteers made up a focus group to provide weekly and more detailed feedback by means of a questionnaire and discussion in an attempt to determine if application was being recognized, how it was being perceived, and what factors motivated or hindered application.

Context

Located under the pine trees of east Texas, First Baptist Church shines its light before a small rural community. Elkhart has a population of close to 1,400 people, predominantly white, blue-collar, middle- and lower-class Americans with a median age of forty-one, many with school-aged children.¹ In this “bedroom community” of neighboring Palestine (a city of fewer than 20,000),² those who do not farm or drive

¹“City-Data.com Report on Elkhart, TX,” <http://www.city-data.com/city/Elkhart-Texas.html> (accessed September 4, 2008).

²“City-Data.com Report on Palestine, TX,” <http://www.city-data.com/city/Palestine-Texas.html> (accessed August 3, 2009).

trucks will commute between twenty to sixty miles to their workplace while others choose to travel an hour or more to larger cities such as Tyler or Dallas. Most endure the drive because they enjoy the small town, rural setting, and desire to stay close to family. The local school district also serves to draw people into the community. The school is the pride of the town and contributes much to the modest growth this community experiences. In fact, much attention in this small community goes to its children.³

Demographically, First Baptist Church does not reflect the community around it. The median age of the church is at least twenty years greater than the community. With a membership around 350 and a Sunday School enrollment of 115, the church averages between sixty-five and seventy in Sunday School and around eighty in worship. Of those who do attend, 30 to 35 percent are over seventy, and another 25 percent are younger retired (between fifty-five and sixty-five). Many of these members comprise the back-bone of the church, however, the weight of time and the burdens of ministry sit heavily on their backs. They desire to see a generation rise up and continue to walk in the faith they hold dear.

The church began with seven charter members in the spring of 1886.⁴ Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Cromwell had moved from Kansas to Elkhart. Finding no organized Baptist church, they began to pray that God would assemble a group of like-minded believers. Later, in April of 1886, meeting in the local Methodist Episcopal Church, First Baptist

³“City-Data.com Report on Elkhart, TX.”

⁴Kathleen Hortman, ed., *First Baptist Church: 1886-1986* (Elkhart, TX: First Baptist Church, 1986), 14.

Church was founded. Shortly thereafter, they moved to their own building near downtown.

The history of the church has been divided into three periods, based on the three locations the church has met. “The Early Years,” as the church history records, refers to the church’s first fifty-seven years while in the first building. After the fire, the next twenty years are remembered as “The Years of Struggle.” While little is written in the church record concerning the nature of this struggle, it may be assumed that the “years of struggle” refer to the difficult time that our nation faced during the closing years of the Second World War and the subsequent recovery. Unfortunately, tragedy would strike again. On October 8, 1963, for the second time in twenty years, the church building caught fire.⁵ Seven months after the fire, the church moved into its present location on May 24, 1964.⁶

For the past twelve years, the church has been in steady decline. In 2000, this steady decline became a sharp drop. Between the years of 2000 to 2004, membership dropped from 458 to 342. For some reason, young families began to relocate and others stopped coming. Eventually, there were few people in attendance, and no children could be found. This difficulty led to the resignation of the pastor, Floyd Petersen. Although the circumstances surrounding his departure were tense, no one speaks negatively about him.

Upon Petersen’s resignation, the church secured an interim, Bill Rambo, who would faithfully preach for almost a year. Some families moved back, others moved in,

⁵Ibid., 35-36.

⁶Ibid., 41-43

and it was not long until modest growth could be seen and the sounds of children returned to the hallways. The turbulent season of sharp decline had ceased and people began to think optimistically about the future.

In this atmosphere of healing and hope, the church assembled a pulpit committee and began searching for another pastor. The search team had communicated the desire to have a pastor who could identify and reach out to young families, and who showed energy and a passion for the Word of God. The members of the search team also expressed a strong desire for solid biblical teaching. Though I possessed no experience as pastor, the search team felt confident that the Lord had provided a shepherd for their struggling church. In April of 2005, I became their new pastor.

In the church's 125-year history, I am the church's thirty-fourth pastor. In my short time here, I have already exceeded the average tenure of First Baptist's pastors, which sits between three and four years. Adding to this unfortunate trend, twenty of the thirty-four pastors have stayed two years or less, and only four pastors has recorded more than five years. The most recent pastor, Floyd Petersen, recorded the longest tenure by far, ministering for fourteen years. Prior to Petersen, only three pastors had stayed close to eight years.

Since I have become pastor, the church has remained plateaued – through six years membership has seen neither significant growth nor decline, hovering steadily around 345. Throughout these five years of ministry, families have come and gone. Some held on to see what would happen when the new pastor arrived but left for larger churches in nearby Palestine when change and growth did not happen as speedily as they

had desired. This “revolving door” has neutralized the modest growth the church has experienced.

The church, desiring growth, is on the threshold of a crisis of faith. The Lord will require us to choose whether we believe His Word and are committed to His kingdom or whether we will marginalize His Word and cling to our own agenda. Is Christ’s kingdom going to gain supremacy in our hearts or will we remain in bondage to fear, comfort, and culture? I am challenged by the reality of the Lord’s growing pressure and pray that each of us here at First Baptist Church surrenders joyfully to the grace He is showing us.

Rationale

In James’ great epistle, he proclaims that whoever is a hearer of the Word and not a doer has deceived himself and possesses a dead faith (Jas 1:22, 2:17). Jesus also communicates this truth at the close of his Sermon on the Mount when he contrasts the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27). Both builders hear the words of Jesus, but only the wise builder obeys, or puts into practice, the words he has heard. In other words, to hear the words of God and fail to heed them is a foolish exercise in self-deception. However, to hear the words of God and apply them to daily living is a liberating, God-pleasing display of wisdom.

This contrast is seen clearly in the lives of those who live in an east Texas culture steeped in church tradition. While it is not uncommon for people here to speak of having faith and of trusting God, there is little that demonstrates a devotion to Christ and a submission to his Word. Jesus could say of many that which he said of the Pharisees, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (Matt 15:8).

This attitude even creeps into the hearts of those who are dedicated and faithful. The temptation exists for every believer to think that he or she has learned all there is to learn; this is clearly a great error. However, the greater error is in thinking that something has been learned just because information has been received. When these two deceptions are coupled, the result is fatal. Church members may fill their heads, but their hearts remain empty. This atmosphere breeds self-righteousness, pride, discontentment, and rebellion. Competition, criticism, complacency, and grumbling all work together to quench the Spirit of God as the church dries up and slowly dies. No pastor desires that experience for himself or for his people.

My desire is to see First Baptist Church become the kind of believers Paul commended in Thessalonica—believers who are both examples and agents of change. For that to happen, we must improve our willingness and our ability to apply Scripture to our everyday lives. In order to break free from this counterfeit faith and overcome its paralyzing effects, we must submit ourselves to the Word of God, both personally and corporately. Only then can we experience the power and blessing that come from existing for the Lord's glory instead of our own preferences. Any church that remains content with merely the facts of the gospel will remain forever impotent and may even die. But, when we submit our lives to his authority, we experience the power of the gospel and the freedom and the life his Word brings. I am also burdened for pastors. Every message from the world, and even some from inside the Church, demand that pastors produce and impress. I hope to provide encouragement and guidance to other pastors that they might be equipped and emboldened to preach the Word of God with confidence in its agenda and power.

Ultimately, my prayer for this project was that it would challenge me to focus on the results of my preaching and not just the presentation. More than that, I wanted to give careful attention to the source and quality of those results. I am firmly convinced that preachers are called to preach for life-change. A well-crafted, theologically sound, and carefully presented sermon falls incomplete if there is no application. As G. Campbell Morgan has written, “the mere enunciation of a truth is of no value in a sermon, save as it is brought to bear upon life.”⁷ As a pastor, I do not merely want people to be hearers of the Word but doers, living lives impacted by the Word of God. I had expected that this project would increase my ability to make biblical application and, in the process, sought both to encourage other pastors and to instruct my congregation in recognizing and evaluating biblical application.

Definitions and Limitations

For the purpose of this project, Haddon Robinson’s benchmark definition of expository preaching was assumed:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.

Robinson’s definition covers the central elements of expository preaching (the integrity of a proper exegesis, a biblically-based message, and a presentation that exalts Scripture) without venturing off into matters of preference. He avoids limiting expository preaching by the length of the passage or by the method upon which the preacher arrives upon a sermon text. He requires a context-minded hermeneutic, but does not require a

⁷G. Campbell Morgan, *Preaching* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937), 59.

systematic walk through a book in its entirety from week to week—as valuable as that approach may be, it is not intrinsic to the nature of the expository sermon. As long as a message is built on and faithful to the holy Word of God, it qualifies as an expository message for it exposes the instruction and intention of the biblical text.

Another key term forming the foundation of our discussion is “application.” In short, application “is the main thing to be done.”⁸ Merely being able to show that a truth has been processed, even accepted, does not demonstrate application. Hearing a sermon does not mean that application has happened, and achieving agreement with the sermon does not assure the desired end. The end of all preaching must be life-change, whether in belief or behavior, therefore, application involves a deliberate change of an individual’s will to God’s Word. So, for the purposes of this project, a broader, clearer definition of application has been adopted. Wayne McDill defines application as “the form of development that presents the implications of sermon ideas for human experience.”⁹

Preaching through and measuring the application of the entirety of Scripture would be a task beyond the scope of any one project. Therefore, this project has limited to application while preaching through the New Testament epistle of James. As a result, the implications of this project upon other genres and authors will remain conjecture.

Finally, due to the nature and time frame of this project, another limitation was the difficulty of evaluating any long-term results. At only fifteen weeks, this project was only able to determine the effectiveness of preaching to move people toward initial

⁹John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 165.

¹⁰Wayne McDill, *Twelve Essential Skills for Great Preaching*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 125.

change. Whether any change reflected a genuine life-change or merely good intentions was outside the bounds of this project. Also, in a related concern, this project could not determine whether repeated exposure to the Word of God eventually produces change in the heart of someone initially unresponsive.

Research Methodology

In order to achieve the above stated goals, methods and philosophies concerning application in expository preaching were researched. These were evaluated and critiqued in order to develop a biblically-faithful and gospel-honoring approach to application. This approach has been presented to a handful of pastors who evaluated them throughout a 10-week sermon series through the epistle of James. On the other side of pulpit, 12 to 15 volunteers were given both a pre- and post-series survey. This was utilized in attempt to identify any initial change in the basic trajectory of the hearers' beliefs and behaviors. In addition to this survey of volunteers, a focus group of 10 adults was recruited, ranging from age 20 to 70. This group, in the context of a small group class setting, was presented with a Scriptural foundation for and a philosophy of biblical application. Ultimately, this focus group served three purposes. First, the focus group met weekly for discussion in order to evaluate each sermon's application. Quality was measured to the degree that the application was exegetically sound, clearly communicated, and honestly presented. This information served to improve the preacher's ability to communicate and encourage biblical application in the lives of his listeners.

The second purpose of the focus group was to determine if the application theory presented in this project connects with the congregation. By means of comparing

the responses given to the pre- and post-series surveys, individual attitudes toward application were measured. Their willingness to adjust their behaviors was also measured, but the motivation behind any change was impossible to determine by means of a survey. Within the focus group, more specific information was gathered and an evaluation was made concerning what the congregation heard and the initial impact of the sermon.

The third benefit to the focus group was to determine what effect, if any, their training had on their application—whether they were more or less likely than others to make changes as a result of the preached Word. By comparing the survey results for the members of the focus group against others who participated in the survey, I sought to determine if the special instruction helped build a bridge from instruction to application, transforming the listener from hearer to doer.

CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL APPLICATION

In a 2009 Gospel Coalition interview, Bryan Chapell made this statement about the future of expository preaching:

The best expository preaching is not only getting its principles from the text, it's also applying them to the lives of the people. When those two things come together—I see what the text says and I see that it applies to my life—*that* kind of expository preaching *is* the future of preaching. There is no other true preaching that can last over the course of time.¹

That last sentence is compelling, “no other true preaching.” Chapell is right; the only preaching that will endure, especially in a culture that has all but abandoned preaching, is preaching that people understand and apply. Therefore, because this is the only “true preaching,” the value of application is at a premium. This is not imply that application has ever been considered unimportant, but in recent years it has received a significant amount of attention.

The Demand for Biblical Application

Three decades ago, Haddon Robinson observed that “no book has been published devoted exclusively, or even primarily, to the knotty problems raised by application,”² yet in a more recent work, Jim Shaddix makes reference to our “modern

¹Bryan Chapell, “Q/A - Bryan Chapell: What Is the Future of Expository Preaching?” http://the-gospelcoalition.org/resources/a/what_is_the_future_of_expository_preaching (accessed September 27, 2008).

infatuation with application.”³ To be sure, over the past several years, preachers have not been the only ones to notice this disconnect between the Scripture and daily living. Average believers are also sensing this disparity. A growing demand has prompted an increasing response to address this issue. So, a number of books have been devoted to application displaying unmistakable titles such as *Applying the Bible*, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, and *How to Apply the Bible*.⁴ This latter work, in its initial printing, carried a subtitle boasting “proven techniques for discovering the truths of Scripture and putting them into practice today.” Tyndale Publishers markets their *Life-Application Study Bible* as being 75 percent “application oriented.”⁵ In the preface material they claim that their study notes go beyond explanation and understanding and help the reader “discover the timeless truth being communicated, see the relevance for [his or her] life, and make a personal application.”⁶ There is clearly a hunger to see the Word of God make an impact on lives as it is read, preached, and heard.

Of course, this desire for application is more than appropriate, it is warranted by Scripture. The psalmist wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who *practice* it have a good understanding” (Ps 111:10, emphasis added). In the

²Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 89-90.

³Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon: Changing the Way Pastors Preach and Congregations Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 102.

⁴Jack Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002); Dave Veerman, *How to Apply the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993).

⁵*Life-Application Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1991), xvi.

⁶*Ibid.*, xvi.

New Testament, the apostle James exhorted believers to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas 1:22). Again, in the parable of the two builders, while both heard Jesus’ words, he only commended the obedient hearer as wise (Matt 7:24-27).

However, this explosion of interest in application has created an unfortunate problem. A fog of confusion has risen amidst the multitude of voices touting a variety of opinions. For example, while John MacArthur discourages overly specific application,⁷ Wayne McDill says that the “most common failure with application is that it is too general. . . . Give concrete suggestions,” he says. “Show how your hearer can express his faith and experience the grace of God.”⁸ If the differences were limited to simple practical preferences, the issue would prove to be small, but some of the concessions and innovations being made in the name of application raise deep and serious questions, questions that involve the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. It is no wonder that Shaddix concludes that today’s “concept of application has evolved into a perverted albatross.”⁹

The Foundation of Biblical Application

While many voices in the application conversation are primarily (and sometimes purely) pragmatic, the man of God cannot afford to be so motivated. Rather, the preacher of the Word of God must be driven by Scripture. Scripture must shape not only in his message but it must also govern his practice. Many claim that the reason

⁷John MacArthur, ed., *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 281.

⁸Wayne McDill, *Twelve Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 131.

God's Word does not appear to produce the life-change expected is that people are not grasping its relevance. Furthermore, they theorize, therefore, that if preachers were to give specific, clear, "real-life" applications, people would then be able to make the necessary adjustments. Under this understanding, the preacher's challenge becomes how to speak into the felt needs of his people and give readily acceptable and immediately profitable solutions that people can employ in "real-life" issues. But is this how Scripture handles application? How specific is Scripture in its application? Does this view of application fit with the doctrine man's corrupt nature? And who ultimately bears the burden of change in the hearts of God's people?

Scripture provides an alternate blueprint for Biblical application. For starters, when God speaks to his people, he does not appeal to the relevance of his commands in order to persuade his people, neither does he appeal to the attractive benefits of obedience. God simply reminds his people of his position as their Lord. Here lies the biblical foundation for application: the knowledge of the person of God and his authority. This truth is evident in Moses. Through Israel's first national leader, God commanded, "Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, *for I am the Lord your God*" (Lev 20:7, emphasis added). Also, in Leviticus, he states, "You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, *for I am the Lord your God*" (Lev 25:17, emphasis added). Later, through the prophet Jeremiah, God again appeals to his position when he calls Israel back to himself, "Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord; *for I am your master*" (Jer 3:14, emphasis added). The people of God are called to obey God, not because of perceived relevance or pleasant results, but because they know God. When

⁹Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 101.

application is allowed to bypass theology and move directly to attitude adjustment and behavioral modification, it becomes either superficial self-improvement or baseless legalism. When application appeals to man's ability to obey God and secure his blessings apart from God's provision it distorts the gospel. For application to be truly biblical, it must rest on the foundation of God's position.

But what about this issue of results? Who bears the burden of production as the Word is preached? The short answer is: God. Biblical application trusts in the sufficiency of God's provision. David, a man after God's own heart, brings together God's position and provision when he prays, "Teach me to do your will, *for you are my God!* Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground!" (Ps 143:10, emphasis added). It is clear that David's confidence rested in God. Isaiah and the prophets emphatically proclaim this same confidence. Therefore, the preacher's confidence must rest here as well. This confidence does not deny the responsibility of the believer to work out his salvation with fear and trembling, rather, it recognizes the Spirit's role in sanctification. Having begun by the Spirit, the Christian must be perfected by the Spirit (Gal 3:1-6).

Isaiah: The Power of Biblical Application

In this dynamic work lies a mystery. In what way does the Spirit produce change? Scripture presents, in no uncertain terms, God's primary tool for producing change: his Word. God, by his Spirit, uses his Word to transform his people. This truth can be held in complete confidence because God promises to watch over his Word. It is by this very truth that the Lord empowers Jeremiah, saying, "I am watching over my word to perform it" (Jer 1:12). The power for biblical application lies in the Word of

God. God declares this truth perhaps most clearly and powerfully through the prophet Isaiah.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

Up to this point in his proclamation, Isaiah has spoken beautifully of the salvation God gives his people. He has skillfully woven together the images of a barren woman singing, an unfaithful wife forgiven and a destitute city restored. These vivid portraits are glorious and compelling; they celebrate the new life and the new identity granted to God's children. Isaiah then transitions from these stirring sketches of salvation and issues a gracious offer of salvation, an offer complete with a guarantee. Yet on what basis does God speak in such fixed and certain terms? First, because of the Word's supernatural origin; it flows from the very mouth of God.¹⁰ The Lord's promises are not empty promises, neither is the hope he brings a vain hope, much to the contrary, his Word will prove to be true and effective. It is on account of this certainty that all who come to him can come with a complete confidence.

Paul speaks of this divine quality when he says that God's Word is "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). His Word is not simply an unveiling of who he is, it comes right out of his person. Every time God speaks, his Word is endowed with the character and the power of God himself. Therefore, every word God speaks either is true or will prove true. He is "the Lord . . . the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 55:5) and he does not speak

¹⁰J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 390.

anything that he cannot or does not achieve. God declares this truth emphatically a few chapters earlier when he says, “I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it” (Isa 46:11). God also communicates this certainty through the prophet Ezekiel, “And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. *I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it*” (Ezek 17:24, emphasis added, see also 22:14, 24:14, 36:36, and 37:14). God’s Word is effective. It is trustworthy because it is consistent with God’s character.

Human speech is wrought with sin and weakness. Man frequently speaks without thinking, and he is also known to speak with evil intent. Even after regeneration, the Spirit must teach individuals to measure their words and to consider how those words effect others. Man makes boasts he cannot accomplish and hides his ways for fear and corruption. It is for good reason that Proverbs warns us against the abundance of words (Prov 10:19) and James identifies the tongue as “a restless evil” (Jas 3:8) announcing that if someone can bridle his tongue he is a perfect man (Jas 3:2). Jesus also has much to say about our words. He reveals the heart as the source of all our words (Matt 15:18) and warns that people will give an account “for every careless word they speak” (Matt 12:36). The words of man come out of a wicked heart and are commonly marked by carelessness, thoughtlessness, boasting and deceit. However, God is not subject to these sinful weaknesses. God declares, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways” (Isa 55:8). His ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa 55:9) both in their nobility and in their ability. His words are of greater quality because God never speaks rashly but always thoughtfully and with perfect wisdom. He cannot speak beyond his

knowledge for He has perfect knowledge. Neither does he make empty boasts for he is completely capable of enacting anything he sees fit to speak. God's Word is effective because it is always spoken from God's character and attended by his power.

Yet, to stop here when discussing God's Word, is to stop considerably short. There exists an indissoluble link between God's character and his plans, between his activity and his Word. Indeed, his Word is instrumental in achieving his purposes.¹¹ So much so that God identifies himself with his Word and he speaks of his Word itself as accomplishing his will. In short, When God speaks, things happen. This truth flows from Genesis to Revelation. At his Word, everything sprang out of nothing. At his Word, promises are kept and judgements are made. At his Word, kings rise and kings fall. At his Word, one nation is born and another feels the birth pains. Prophecies are made, wars end, exiles begin, a virgin conceives, a baby is born and the heavens rejoice – all by the declaration of his Word. When God speaks, his plans and his purposes are unfolded for all to marvel. Repeatedly, throughout Scripture, God speaks to the future and history is written. Such is the nature of his Word; it is certain, unailing, and completely reliable.

God states clearly that it is *his Word* which “shall accomplish” and it is *his Word* which “shall succeed” (Isa 55:11). God could have spoken of his Word as the direct object of his action, promising that he himself was going to accomplish that word, but he does not. He could have spoken of his Word in the passive voice, declaring that his word would be made successful, but he does not. He does neither of these things.

¹¹Ibid., 390.

The Word is the subject and it is active. “Yhwh’s word is not merely a way of referring to something. It makes things happen.”¹²

To speak in this manner concerning God’s activity and his Word is, by no means, unique to Isaiah and the Old Testament prophets. Peter declares that it is by the Word of God that the earth was made and by that same word it will be judged (1 Pet 3:5,7). Hebrews identifies the Word of God as a sharp two-edged sword able to divide soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and intentions of men’s hearts (Heb 4:12). James writes that it is the Word of God implanted that can save souls (Jas 1:21). Paul encourages those in Rome to proclaim the Word of God for it is that Word which produces faith in the lives of its hearers (Rom 10:17). Finally, Jesus prayed that his people would be sanctified by God’s Word (John 17:17). This Word, therefore, is not merely the means by which God reveals himself and discloses his plans, but it serves as his means in achieving these same purposes throughout the world and in the lives of his people. J. Alec Motyer, says,

The Word of God – in our privileged day, the Holy Scriptures – comes from the Lord himself and is the Lord’s chosen instrument to achieve his purposes. The Bible reveals his thoughts and ways, sets his targets, voices his promises and is powerful to achieve what it expresses.¹³

John: The Purpose of Biblical Application

Of course, all this talk concerning the effectiveness of God’s Word must be qualified by one phrase in Isaiah’s declaration, “the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11).

¹²John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 2:378.

¹³Motyer, *Isaiah*, 390-91.

God's Word is powerful and effective, but it is not a tool to be wielded for any purpose, only the purposes for which God intends. The importance of this qualification cannot be understated. Against a menagerie of false teachers in our world today who are intent on peddling the Word of God for profit and perverting the Word of God for their own self-promoting purposes, this truth must be emphasized. It is not enough, however, for the preacher to be watchful of others, he must be diligent to defend against such distortions in his own life and teaching. These temptations to twist God's Word are subtle and destructive. Consequently, maintaining faithfulness in gospel proclamation requires steadfast resistance to selfish, man-centered purposes.

So, what is God's purpose? What is this "thing" for which he has sent his Word? The apostle John, especially in his first epistle, provides a comprehensive umbrella under which the Lord's purpose for his Word is discerned. His primary, overarching purpose is self-revelation. The God of the Bible is a uniquely self-revealing God and this revelation is primarily accomplished by speaking. No other god speaks, but Yahweh speaks and he does so in order to make himself known. To be more specific, from a New Testament vantage point, God's purpose is to reveal Christ who is the fullness of the revelation of God (Heb 1:3).

For many this purpose may seem too simple, overly generalized or vague. After all, commentaries pay significant attention to the purpose for which a particular book has been written. Yet, while Scripture does indeed serve other purposes, these are specialized corollaries to the primary, fundamental and overarching purpose of God's self-revelation. Therefore, it is not vague and oversimplified to say that the purpose of God's Word is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ because all doctrine

points to and all behavior stems from the person and work of Christ. This bedrock purpose, must serve to anchor all other purposes. John makes this abundantly clear in his first epistle.

**John's Pastoral Intention:
Reveal Christ**

While combating enemies of the gospel in Ephesus, with all their doctrinal challenges and the sinful living they promoted, the beloved apostle reminds his flock about Christ. He does not focus intently on commands against specific behaviors nor does he offer a comprehensive polemic. Rather, he returns to the basics of what he had seen and touched concerning Jesus himself (1 John 1:1-2). His stated goal from the outset is to testify to the life that has been made manifest, the revelation of Christ as he had revealed himself to the apostles. For John, whether it is the refutation of false teaching or the reproof of aberrant behavior, all correctives are to be grounded in a proper understanding of the person and work of Jesus. The appropriate response to gross theological and behavioral error is to remember the person and work of Christ. This is John's strategy. He seeks to remind his readers of the truth concerning Jesus as he was first revealed by the apostles and as they first received him in the gospel.

John does not give them a new teaching. In the heat of theological conflict, John's foremost intent is that his flock should think biblically about who Christ is and how they have come to know him. In the throes of battle, he is pleased to remind his "little children" of the message they had heard from him, which is the same "message that [they had] heard from the beginning" (1 John 1:5, 3:11). Repeatedly, John's instruction is communicated in terms of what they already know, the truth of the person

of Christ and his work in the redemption of his people from sin and death and judgement. He tells them that they “have no need that anyone should teach [them]” for the Holy Spirit “teaches [them] about everything” (1 John 2:27).

It is here that the modern pastor must be greatly instructed, especially in regards to preaching. In a world of deception, false teaching, and compromised living, what his people need, is not a comprehensive strategy with a myriad of specific commands designed to address every imaginable issue. Rather, what they need is a strong reminder of who Christ is and what he has accomplished in the purchase of their salvation. “Both then and now the pastor’s role is not to invent or to be innovative so much as to be faithful to pass on and preserve the apostolic gospel message.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, contemporary culture esteems the pragmatic, values the expedient, and weighs everything on the merit of its practicality. The idea of enduring the uncomfortable practice of spiritual assessment and persevering through the slow process of sanctification does not appeal to those conditioned in a climate of immediate self-gratification. While individuals are looking for instant results producing temporal happiness, few accept the idea that pain is necessary in yielding eternal rewards. Pressed by culture, overwhelmed pastors abandon the idea of slowly building disciples by means of doctrinal preaching and intentional relationships. Instead, they concede to the popular demand for practical messages which instruct in proper behavior and promise maximum happiness. This approach may be well-intentioned and it may, at times, even appear

¹⁴Barry C. Joslin, “Getting Up to Speed: An Essential Introduction to 1 John,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 3 (2006): 11.

biblical, but having the appearance of wisdom, it has no real power (Col 2:23) for it guts the Scripture of its God-intended purpose. By catering to the felt needs of a consumer-driven spirituality, the modern church has substituted God's purpose of his self-revelation for the shallow purposes of man's self-fulfillment.

John's Pastoral Method: Preach Christ

The apostle John instructs pastors to avoid this trap. No stranger to conflict and pressure, John was fighting on two fronts: the exterior front of a pagan culture with its persecutions and the interior front of an arrogant faction of false teachers. This interior struggle against an early form of Gnosticism was tearing the church apart. Much to the confusion of the average believer, puffed up sophisticates were dismissing the apostles' teaching as primitive and simple. Clearly, the time in which John wrote was not much different than this present time. J. I. Packer explains:

[John's opponents] viewed the teaching – doctrinal, ethical, and devotional – that the apostles gave in their evangelistic and pastoral ministries as crude and misconceived. [They] rejected the Incarnation and the Atonement, reimagined Jesus as an inspired teacher of secret knowledge about spiritual powers, ascetic routines, and mystical moments, and called on believers to qualify as God's elite by embracing this revised version of their faith.¹⁵

As it is today, doctrine was seen as irrelevant and ethics were fluid, yet, John does not pen a response seeking to explain the rationale for and the societal value of the biblical morality. Instead, John focuses on preaching Christ for “the transformed existence of believers.”¹⁶

¹⁵Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, eds., *1, 2, 3 John*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 9.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 10.

Preaching Christ is two-fold. Prompted here by the beloved apostle, preaching should be two-fold. First, pastors should deliberately display and magnify the self-revelation of God before our hearers as displayed in the person of Jesus Christ. This task requires shepherds to both “testify” and “proclaim” concerning that “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). It is on these two tasks that John focuses when speaking of his responsibility to display Christ: “testify” (μαρτυρέω, v. 2) and “proclaim” (απαγγέλλω, v. 3).

The verb μαρτυρέω, “to testify” or “to bear witness,” does not simply refer to the communication of fact and truth, but to the provision of accurate and reliable, first-hand information. John frequently uses this terminology of “bearing witness” throughout his writings. Of the 76 times this verb is used in the New Testament, 33 are found in John’s gospel and 10 in his epistles.¹⁷ The verb also carries a legal/forensic sense as seen in both Matthew’s gospel and Paul’s defense speeches in Acts.¹⁸ In John’s case, he testifies that Christ is the life (1:2) and the light (1:5). He is declared to be the advocate of believers and the propitiation for their sins (2:1-2). He is faithful to forgive and cleanse (1:9). Throughout his epistle he reminds his readers of who Christ is, what Christ has done, and all that Christ has promised. Is it possible that the reason why many modern pastor has largely abandoned the theological for the practical, neglecting spiritual

¹⁷I. Broer, Horst Balz, and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. “μαρτυρέω” by J. Beutler.

¹⁸Ibid.

realities for tangible and visible ones, is because his experience is limited? After all, the preacher can only give an account of what he has seen and heard. He can only give witness concerning that which he has experienced. If the pastor has only witnessed (or has only recognized) the surface-level changes of behavior as generated by human systems and natural willpower, then that is where he will place his trust and to that he will give witness. However, if a man has seen the enduring transformation produced by the power of God's Word (in his life and in the lives of others), he will naturally testify to that power.

The second element of preaching Christ, *απαγγέλλω*, translated “to proclaim,” is also employed in verse three as the main verb of that sentence. While “to testify” references the facts of Christ's person and work, “to proclaim,” conveys its significance. This proclamation refers to “more than just a comprehensive announcement of God's will for salvation” and we should “understand the announcement itself as an effective power.”¹⁹ John trusts that his proclamation of Christ is, in itself, powerful to encourage, protect, and equip his fragile flock. In this declaration that John demonstrates that his confidence is in the Word of God and its power to work in the lives of God's people. He knows that these struggling believers can only endure by abiding in this declaration, which is the Word of God.

¹⁹I. Broer, Horst Balz, and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. “*απαγγέλλω*,” by J. Beutler.

John's Pastoral Purpose: Connect Christ

Preaching must connect the Christian to Christ. The chief aim of revealing Christ through preaching Christ is that the disciple is connected to Christ. This connection is the end of all Biblical application. When the believer abides in the Word of God and that Word abides in him, Christ himself abides in him (John 15:1-8, also 8:31-32). "To abide" speaks of the real and intimate connection God has with his children. The fruit of this connection is the application for which so many hunger. Biblical application, therefore, cannot be viewed as pragmatic behavioral adjustments that facilitate better relationships and successful living. True Biblical application must be understood as the supernatural result of being connected to Christ. True application is the fruit of abiding in the Word of God. With this understanding, John's example challenges the contemporary pastor to "testify" and to "proclaim" the message concerning Christ for this is how lives are changed. Although John diligently communicates a right portrait of Christ, he preaches not ultimately for the sake of right knowledge but that right knowledge transforms lives. Biblical preaching not only preaches Christ but impacts the Christian. John continually hammers home the reality that genuine faith, true knowledge, results in transformed living.

The conundrum for the modern man is that doctrine is out of vogue. Because doctrine is considered irrelevant to "real life," the popular contemporary climate of preaching has been set against all things "theological." By contrast, John shows that doctrine cannot be set in opposition to "practical truth." These two walk together as they feed one another in symbiotic fashion. Doctrine is the foundation for righteous living and

faithful practice displays, deepens, and develops sound theology. John champions this relationship as “he relates doctrinal truth to daily life, by weaving the two strands together into one cord of Christian orthodoxy.”²⁰ While John’s epistle is highly theological, his straightforward expectations on the lives of his readers are inescapable and are unmistakably tied to his doctrinal assertions. This dual theme is pervasive in his writings.

Every command of John’s epistle, every expectation on God’s people, is grounded in the theological doctrines he has declared. Because God is light, his children must walk as children of light, confessing their sin and trusting him for forgiveness (1:5-9). Because Jesus is our advocate and helper, forgiving our sin and cleansing us from all unrighteousness, his children obey his commands, keep his Word and walk in love, as Christ himself did (2:1-6). Because the world is temporary (2:17) and under the power of the evil one (5:19), the believer does not love the world or the things of the world (2:15-17). Because God’s children know Christ (2:12-14), have been anointed with the Holy Spirit (2:20), and know the truth (2:21) they are not deceived (4:1-6), nor are they given to sinful living (3:4-10). Instead, their lives are marked by righteousness (2:29), purity (3:1-3), love (4:7-12), and obedience (5:1-5). Preaching Christ connects the believer to Christ and being connected to Christ changes the believer.

Faithful living authenticates a Christ-connection. However, there is more to the relationship of doctrine and practice than simple cause and effect. This

²⁰David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters: Living in the Love of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 23.

connection-transformation relationship flows both ways. While connection produces transformation, transformation validates connection. Thus, this relationship is employed by John in a forensic sense as well. The cause (the knowledge of God through his Word) is so powerful and the effect (transformed lives) is so certain that the absence of any transformation serves as proof positive that knowledge of God is not present. Examples of this evidentiary application are clearly displayed throughout John's many if-then statements. For example, the fellowship believers have with one another is not only the result of the fellowship they have with the Father through the Son (1:3) but the absence of fellowship with the body of Christ indicates that there is no fellowship with the Father (2:19). Again, anyone who claims to know Christ will walk as Jesus did (2:6) and anyone who walks in opposition to the Lord's example shows evidence that he does not know him but is still lost in his sin (3:6). Ultimately, this relationship between revelation and transformation embodies the purpose God has for his Word. He speaks so that his children might know him and, in so doing, he transforms the lives of those who have come to know him. Though revelation and transformation possess clear implications to a watching world (multiplying the visible display of God to the world and leaving those who reject him without excuse), the direct impact of the Word is directed toward and most fully felt by believers. From the beginning, God's Word has been spoken for the purpose of revealing Christ and establishing relationship with his people. His Word should be preached to that same end today.

Paul: The Pattern of Biblical Application

God's Word is powerful to accomplish the reason for which he sent it. God's Word has been sent to reveal Christ and connect Christ with his people. Connecting with

Christ has an impact on the lives of his people for God constantly works in the lives of his people, “to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). The center-piece in this entire process in God’s Word. The Word of God is living and active (Heb 4:12); it works mightily in the lives of his children to save them (1 Pet 1:23), to sanctify them (John 17:17), and to equip them for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). Everything we need for life and godliness has been provided by God through his power and this divine provision is mediated through the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet 1:3) as given by his prophetic Word (2 Pet 1:16-21). Yet the question remains: how is it that God’s Word works in our lives? Once saved, what does it look like for God’s Word to sanctify and equip his people? Paul provides a few handles by which these issues can be grasped.

Second Timothy 3:16-17 provides a helpful description as to the inner workings of the Word of God in the lives of believers.²¹ This familiar passage has become the champion for the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture, speaking to both its integrity and authority. However, in this particular text, Paul is not primarily concerned in this text with the inspired and inerrant qualities of Scripture. He assumes agreement on these matters and appeals on the basis of them to communicate a different truth. Operating from his view of inspiration, Paul speaks to the sufficiency of Scripture for the believer. He confidently declares that because of the nature of Scripture, God’s Word is itself completely adequate “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). These four phrases outline a general framework concerning how Scripture works in the lives of the church.

²¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 795.

Although some scholars have divided these elements “into pairs relating to belief (positive and negative) and action (negative and positive),”²² Marshall rightly rejects such a division as artificial. Instead, he understands “teaching” to be a general term clarified by the three subsequent terms. While, Marshall appears to limit this three-fold working of the Word of God to the process of saving sinners, there is no need to warrant to limit its scope merely to the work of conversion. This same pattern (rebuke, correct, train) actively works in the ongoing sanctification of believers.

When Paul makes reference in verse 15 to the Scriptures, which are able to make believers “wise for salvation,” he does not insinuate that the Scripture’s only purpose is to bring people to the point of saving knowledge. Paul is declaring the Scripture’s sufficiency to instruct the believer as he grows in every aspect of salvation. The construction εἰς σωτηρίαν is employed elsewhere by Paul (Rom 1:16, 10:1, 10, 2 Cor 7:10, Phil 1:19) as well as by other New Testament authors (Acts 13:47, Heb 9:28, 11:7, 1 Pet 1:5, 2:2)²³ but only in Romans 10:10 is it necessarily limited to the initial act of conversion. In all other instances (except in two cases when referring to physical salvation) the context would be better served if it is understood to be addressing all things concerning salvation. God’s Word is sufficient, not only for salvation, but for every transformation.

²²Ibid.

²³George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 444.

God's Word Transforms the Believer

The Word of God transforms the way we understand sin. The first aspect of “teaching” is its reproof element. The noun ἐλεγμός, “reproof,” carries the idea of refuting error, whether in belief or practice.²⁴ Because God is revealed throughout Scripture as holy, pure, and righteous, sin positions man at enmity with God and subject to his judgment and wrath. Therefore, the first word of the gospel, in terms of response, is “repent.” This was the message of John the Baptist (Matt 3:2), and it was Jesus’ message (Matt 4:17). When the crowds asked, “What shall we do?” it was also Peter’s first word (Acts 2:38). Knowing God inescapably transforms the Christian’s attitude toward sin. Paul informs believers that sin is no longer to be their master (Rom 6:6); Peter declares that sinful ways are to stay in the believer’s past (1 Pet 4:3); and John states emphatically that no one who continues in sin has been born of God (1 John 3:9). More than being freed from sin (both its penalty and power) in order to live in righteousness, believers are not even to speak of what is done in secret, instead, they are to expose it. This transformation is a glorious about-face from treasuring, justifying, and concealing sin to abhorring, condemning, and exposing it. Therefore, biblical teaching and preaching that applies the Word of God will involve reproof. Exposing sin is a God-ordained use of Scripture and preachers cannot afford to ignore sin in an effort to be positive or palatable. Biblical application challenges sin, offering reproof, for God’s Word is useful for this purpose.

²⁴Ibid., 449.

The Word of God transforms the way we handle guilt. Paul’s second facet of teaching transitions from delivering rebuke to ministering in its wake. Expressed by *επανόρθωσιν*, and translated “correction,” this use of the Word of God involves the “setting right” of aberrant behavior.²⁵ An effective reproof carries the weight of accompanying guilt, an emotion we naturally avoid. The natural response for the sinner faced with guilt is to dodge, deny and deflect his way out of it. The believer, however, recognizes that his good God is not in the business of bringing guilt for guilt’s sake, but his purpose is much greater. Knowing this truth, the believer is encouraged to deal with his sin.

How should the believer “deal with” his sin? The gospel makes it painfully clear that sin cannot be atoned for by human contrition. Also, no human being is capable of making restitution for sin. Sin can only be expunged through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ expressed by repentance. Our only hope is the propitiation provided in Christ by God’s unmerited grace. So, after exposing our wrong, God’s Word offers the proper restorative, forgiveness for sins in Jesus’ name and the life-transforming power of the gospel. Correction is the second class of application.

Preachers and teachers of Scripture must never be content with mere reproof for the shepherd is not called to criticize or beat up the sheep but to lead them and feed them. Reproof is only valuable when coupled with correction. Pastors, like Paul, must rejoice not over the guilt and sorrow of reproof but for the repentance it produces that brings life (2 Cor 7:9). Indeed, the purpose behind the reproof and conviction is to

²⁵Ibid.

prompt repentance and reconciliation. Thus, guilt is transformed from a cul-de-sac of self-pity and death into an on-ramp of repentance unto life.

The Word of God transforms the way we approach life. The final role in this triad of teaching is “training in righteousness.” Instead of reacting against carnal failings, this function supplies an essential contribution to the development of God’s people, facilitating growth in godliness. Communicated by the noun παιδείαν, “training” involves both discipline and reprimand. More than conveying information, it is a process of instruction, practice and redirection. This training is not only intensive, but it is also to be set in the context of personal relationship. This relational quality is more apparent in other New Testament occurrences of παιδείαν, each involving the theme of sonship.²⁶ The author of Hebrews uses it in the context of the discipline of God’s children. Paul’s only other usage of it is in the context of fathers bringing up their children in the Lord. This focus on relationship echoes the emphasis John places on fellowship in his first epistle. The people of God gather in fellowship around the Word of God so that we can be trained regarding the ways of God.

This idea of community completely transforms the way believers approach life. No longer can believers exist in isolation from one another doing what feels right or what seems appropriate. Personal benefit and self-gratification quickly prove unsatisfying to God’s children. These motivations are insufficient. Having been reborn, Christians are given a new nature and adopted into a distinct community. In the context of this

²⁶I. Boer, Horst Balz, and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), s.v. “παιδείαν,” by G. Schneider.

community and in accordance with his Word, God's people are trained in his ways. They are trained "in righteousness."

However, this training does not happen naturally. "Training in righteousness" requires the supernatural working of his Word, for only his Word will prove sufficient for such training. At this point, all elements previously discussed—the power and purpose of biblical application – converge here at this point. This training is divine in its intention and therefore must also be divine in its means. His Word is righteousness revealed. His Word is the means by which the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgement. His Word is the sanctifying and transforming agent in the hearts, minds, and lives of His people. This training cannot be achieved through legalism, willpower, and determination but only through yielding to God's Word and resting in Christ's work. Though mankind tries to manufacture, systematize, and program spiritual fruit, these clever constructs of man will always prove woefully inadequate. His ways are not man's ways and his thoughts are not man's thoughts. His thoughts are higher and greater than ours (Is 55:8-9). The strength and wisdom of man will never achieve what God intends for his people, therefore preachers must yield to the authority, design, and sufficiency of the Word of God. God's Word, giving testimony to God's Son is the only means for the instruction of God's people. When the preachers and teachers abandon their own clever innovations and recognize the nature, purpose, and impact of God's Word, then, and only then, will the people of God be made "competent" and "equipped for every good work."

Conclusion

"True preaching," Chapell rightly observes, must involve application, but that application must be thoroughly biblical. In its presentation, explanation, and application,

true preaching must champion the Word of God. Those who preach cannot continue to serve God's Word in mere pretense. While pastors and church leaders speak of inerrancy, claim sufficiency, and affirm authority, if these core values do not impact their approach to and presentation of Scripture then every dogmatic assertion rings with a hollow tone. God's preachers must trust the Word of God for the accomplishment of his purposes. Preaching cannot be about temporary battles, causes, and agendas; it must be about his eternal glory and kingdom. Therefore, all instruction (reproof, correction and training) must flow from and return to the person and work of Jesus Christ. If it does not, it loses its anchor and is at risk of drifting off into a sea of subjective morality and personal fulfillment. Only in Christ is God revealed in all his glory and only Christ is the child of God transformed. This revelation and transformation is the purpose for which he has sent his Word and when his Word is applied in his way and for his purpose, it will be effective for he oversees it. The rains will come down from heaven and return without watering the earth before the Word of God fails to reveal Christ and change his people.

CHAPTER 3

PRINCIPLES FOR FAITHFUL BIBLICAL APPLICATION

The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men. . . . The glory and efficiency of the gospel is staked on the men who proclaim it. When God declares that “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him,” he declares the necessity of men and his dependence on them as a channel through which to exert his power upon the world. This vital, urgent truth is one that this age of machinery is apt to forget.¹

This cutting proclamation by Edward McKendree Bounds should pierce the heart of every pastor, preacher, and church leader today. Methods, techniques, and programs have not been ordained by God for the spread of the gospel. This task has been entrusted to “the men who proclaim it.” God has appointed evangelists, pastors, and teachers to the task of proclaiming God’s Word for the equipping of the saints and the evangelization of the lost. Yet, today’s church leaders stand in great need of repentance. Standing in the 19th century, Bounds exposes our contemporary twenty-first century dilemma. Modern church leaders have largely forsaken God’s design for gospel proclamation in search of the more sophisticated and scientific methods of culture. The quest for better methods has supplanted the God-given means for the proclaiming the gospel. A deficiency keenly felt throughout the world of contemporary preaching, especially regarding application.

¹E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 17-18.

Upon reviewing contemporary approaches to application in preaching, it is clear that many pastors are investing significant amounts of time and energy into the development and implementation of techniques, hoping to secure immediate responses and generate noticeable change. The source material for such methods appears to come primarily from the world, from business marketing strategies, communication models, and modern publishing techniques. This contemporary approach has produced rather destructive results, the least of which is not the corruption of the preaching act. Observing this pattern, Alistair Begg identifies seven ‘caricatures’ of preaching created by those who would cater to our modern culture. These include the cheerleader, the storyteller, and the psychologist.² This distortion, one hopes, stems from an appropriate, though misguided, desire to connect the biblical text to the modern listener. Whatever the motives may be, these current approaches must be reconsidered.

The modern preaching climate celebrates effectiveness, seemingly above everything else, and preachers, swimming in this sea of culture, have confused effectiveness with faithfulness. Believing that visible results reflect divine blessing and reasoning that immediate response is a sign of spiritual activity, effectiveness has supplanted faithfulness as the popular measure of success. This problem is exasperated when ministers of the Word set their hope on effectiveness and trust in technique and method. This misplaced hope severely undermines the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. As a result, large scores of evangelical preachers have ceased trusting (at least,

²Alistair Begg, *Preaching for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 16-21. Also identified are the conjurer, the entertainer, the systematizer, and the naked preacher or the preacher who would use the pulpit as a “confessional” in an effort to be “authentic” or “real.”

in practice) the efficacy of preaching. The faithful preacher must resist this modern love affair with immediate, visible, and measurable results.

But how does one measure faithfulness? And if faithfulness could be measured, would it matter in a culture that is fixated on results and enraptured with “success”? Every pastor must decide for himself that it does indeed matter. He must also determine that while faithfulness may not be measurable, it is recognizable and must be esteemed. Those who would pursue gospel-fidelity must accept that God’s working and his timing cannot be scrutinized and must also understand that faithfulness can exist apart from visible results. It is not in attendance numbers, book sales, or web traffic that faithfulness manifests itself, rather, faithfulness is evidenced in the attitudes and behaviors modeled by preachers and teachers. How one preaches will reveal where his confidence lies. The following four principles of application can anchor the preacher’s confidence in God’s Word and lay a firm foundation for faithful biblical application.

Faithful Biblical Application Must Be God-Centered

The egocentricity of man appears to be the lens through which he views everything. This cultural narcissism goes so far as to invade the Christian’s view of Scripture. “Because of our natural bent toward self, we tend to think that the Bible is a book about us.”³ Factor in the rise of postmodernity and the problem explodes exponentially. Hear the summary of Dr. Albert Mohler: “In a postmodern world, all issues eventually revolve around self. Thus, enhanced self-esteem is all that remains as

³Bernie van Eyk, “God-Centered Preaching,” *TableTalk* (April 2012): 24.

the goal of many educational and theological approaches.”⁴ Yet, if Scripture has been given as God’s self-revelation for purposes related to his own glory, then the preacher cannot afford to cater to the self-preoccupation of his hearers. Anthropocentric sermons may appeal to itching ears, but they deny the purpose of the divine author. If God’s Word is about God, then the preaching of God’s Word, in every element, must focus on him. In short, application must be God-centered.

The Crisis of Man-Centered Application

Much contemporary preaching, however, does not appear to be centered on God and his glory. Surveying popular sermon series, one might get the impression that Scripture was written so that individuals might secure for themselves personal happiness. In many circles, the Bible appears to have been reduced to a guide book as if a profitable and pleasant lifestyle can be secured by acknowledging some basic truths about God and submitting to a reasonable moral standard. This approach observes the cultural, relational, and societal ills plaguing the lives of people inside and outside the church, and consequently prompts well-meaning ministers seek to provide “biblical solutions” for these various issues. Unfortunately, all too often, an implicit message is communicated: “If you follow these steps and employ these methods, your marriages will be better, your children will behave, and your sin-struggles will be gone.” This culture war has done little more than fuel the publication of a myriad of books and the development of many cleverly-titled sermon series.

⁴R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 121.

While there is nothing wrong with seeking to strengthen marriages and equip parents and encourage Christians in their battle against sin, the pastor must be careful of the manner in which he speaks to these issues, seeking faithfulness in how he approaches and presents the Word of God. Too many pastors reinforce a self-centered narcissism and cultivate an egocentric hermeneutic simply in the way they handle Scripture and distill application. Indeed, much modern emphases and methods have proven destructive to the church and the gospel. Consider this evaluation of the contemporary church from Harry Reeder:

The contemporary church, in an effort to be relevant and connected, has in many cases become irrelevant and disconnected by accommodating itself to the demanded cultural narcissism. . . . Our local churches are viewed as religious “specialty shops” for life’s challenges. Gospel preaching has been perverted into self-esteem therapy or pep-talks, coaching us to worldly success or, even more astonishing, redefining the love of Christ in terms that preclude His displeasure with the impenitent self-centeredness in our lives. Our pursuit of personal happiness and gratification has superceded God’s call to be holy and magnify His glory. The first question of our new catechism is now, “What is the chief end of God?” The answer: “To love me and make me happy.”⁵

Preachers are guilty of communicating (usually unknowingly) that Scripture exists so that men and women might know how to succeed in all areas of life. While attempting to communicate biblical principles, the unstated message being propagated is that the Bible simply serves as our “answer book.” The necessary corollary to this treatment of Scripture reasons that God’s job is to secure happiness for his creatures. Even those who would never make such a statement still marginalize or outright abandon the glory of God simply by presenting Scripture in a manner that centers on the needs and desires of man.

⁵Harry L. Reeder, “Cultural Narcissism and a Titanic Lesson,” *TableTalk* (March 2012): 7-8.

The Casualties of Man-Centered Application

It might be argued, concerning this issue, that pastors should not to be chastised too much. After all, they do not intentionally reinforce this self-centeredness we find permeating the culture. They are merely products of their time, doing the best they can. That declaration might assuage the pastor of his guilt, hiding behind a curtain of good-intentions, but it cannot absolve him of his responsibilities. The situation is too egregious for such casual absolution. A man-centered, pragmatic approach to preaching reeks of arrogant indulgence and pastoral negligence. Among those who sit under its teaching, this usurpation of Scripture propagates unbiblical patterns of thinking and living. For those watching with a discerning eye, it reveals both an errant theology and an arrogant methodology.

Theologically, the doctrines of Scripture, Sin, Man, the Holy Spirit and salvation are all being undermined. Scripture is no longer seen as sufficient for the communication of God's desires and purposes. By mixing Scripture with all kinds of sociology and psychology, a shadow of doubt is cast over its authority. Presenting solutions that merely encourage the individual to enact particular "action steps" minimizes the nature of sin in the life of the individual. Moreover, this approach assumes that men and women can overcome sin in their lives by natural means, thereby ignoring Man's corruption. In such preaching, the Holy Spirit becomes marginalized, or merely given token recognition. Although the Holy Spirit may be recognized in the inspiration of Scripture, he is given only a perfunctory role in its application. Finally, popular approaches to application run dangerously close to teaching a works-based soteriology. While reducing the Christian life to a condition of human flourishing and elevating the

ability of Man to secure his own happiness, the contemporary church has reduced salvation to a standard of living within the grasp of human effort. Again, this trend in preaching is not simply unfortunate, it is damaging and possibly even damning.

Methodologically, a man-centered approach to application puts too much emphasis on the preacher. As soon as the preacher believes that the Word of God is less than sufficient to secure everything his people need for life and godliness, he finds himself in a position to be the one who makes the difference. The burden of change is placed on the preacher and his methods. This shift also results in crediting the preacher and his methods for any apparent “success.” So, in one fatal philosophical swoop, the preacher exaggerates his own importance and robs God of his glory. This mindset is not only arrogant but very dangerous, and pastors are more guilty than they realize. Every time a preacher assumes that a lack of response to his preaching can be remedied with better techniques, he reveals that his confidence is in techniques. Every time a pastor assumes that the “successful” preacher must be doing something that he himself is not, he discloses that he believes that faithfulness can be programmed. Whenever a minister of the gospel interprets seemingly fruitless seasons as a referendum on his ministry or ability, he exposes the self-centered root inherent in his approach to ministry and preaching. While there is an appropriate place for programs and an acceptable desire to cultivate increasing ability, the pastor’s confidence must never rest in these things. John Piper observed of Jonathan Edwards that his preaching flowed from a confidence in the sovereignty and sufficiency of God.⁶ Because the power of preaching is God, those who

⁶John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 78-79.

proclaim his Word must do so from a position of confidence in its sufficiency and not from a position uncertainty, seeking to compensate for its insufficiency.

The Benefits of God-Centered Application

In contrast to this destructive, man-centered approach to application, biblical application must be God-centered. Scripture, as God's self-revelation to his people, demands that biblical application be centered in who God has revealed himself to be. Also, as the Father has revealed himself to his children for the transformation of their lives into the image of Jesus Christ, biblical application must center on the transformation of God's children so they might know and reflect him. This plea to God-centered application does not deny that there are personal benefits to those who hear the Word of God, rather, it restores a proper perspective, intention, and motivation to that hearing. Above all else, the perspective of God-centered application cultivates a spirit of self-effacing humility by fixing the gaze of every man and woman on the great glory of God. Self-exalting humanity cannot be reminded too often that God does not exist to serve man and make him happy. Much to the contrary, man exists to serve God, to enjoy him and to glorify him forever. God's children must embrace this reality by joyfully giving praise and glory to God, while entreating others to give praise and glory to God. Whereas man-centered application relegates God to the margins, God-centered application instills humility and recognizes God's exalted position giving him appropriate honor. In view of this God-exalting perspective, man's obedience cannot aim at procuring divine blessings. While recognizing the good gifts of a holy God, the believer's obedience becomes directed toward pleasing God. The intent of the heart is

now to give joy to the heavenly Father. “Whether at home or in the body, we make it our aim to please our heavenly Father” (2 Cor 5:9). His children, redeemed and reconciled, want to “find out what pleases God” (Eph 5:10). Driving this God-pleasing intention is a motivation of love. Bryan Chapell addresses proper motivation stating that “believers need to serve God preeminently out of loving thankfulness for the redemption he freely and fully provides.”⁷ Knowing the love of God, and loving God in return, means that his children treasure him and trust him. This treasuring and trusting express themselves in whole-hearted joyful obedience. Ultimately, we cannot be motivated by greed or guilt, but we must forsake these lesser motivations and be prompted by grace.⁸

But does Scripture not provide principles by which people can manage their homes and navigate life’s problems? Yes, of course, and these considerations of biblical application must be addressed. However, the source from which all application springs and the end to which all application flows must be God himself. Because Scripture was written, ultimately, so that people might know God and have life through His Son, preaching, from introduction to conclusion, from explanation to application, must also serve that purpose. Faithfulness requires preachers to center their sermons on the person and purposes of God as revealed in the Scriptures, forsaking the idea that God’s greatest desire is to secure for individuals pleasure and prosperity.

⁷Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 219.

⁸Ibid.

Faithful Biblical Application Demands Thorough Exegesis

Unfortunately, God-centered application does not spontaneously appear in the sermon-preparing process. It demands thorough exegesis, exegesis that does not stop digging until sound, biblical application is unearthed. To this end, Douglas Stuart has aptly stated that application “should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process.”⁹ Until application has been made, exegesis is not complete. Chapell goes so far as to say that without application the preacher has no reason to preach.¹⁰ Of course, the very nature of Scripture heartily confirms this assertion. Scripture was not written for the mere sake of information, but to illicit a response. It was written for a purpose. Whether to prompt praise, infuse hope, call to repentance, or spur to good works, God has revealed himself with a deliberate objective. The prophets spoke, the apostles preached, and the epistles were written in order to secure particular ends for the glory of God. Doctrine and teaching aim beyond information to transformation. Likewise, all preaching must aim for deliberate application.

Clearly, application cannot be left to chance. Some preachers profess to leave application in the hands of the Holy Spirit, yet they would never approach the other elements of preaching in this manner. No preacher ever says, “I’ll just read the text and let the Holy Spirit explain this passage to my congregation.” More often than not, this

⁹David Murray, *How Sermons Work* (East Peoria, IL: EP Books, 2011), 111.

¹⁰Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 210.

placid approach to application is nothing more than laziness hidden behind a veneer of spiritual talk. Now, in the defense of pastors strained by a week of pastoral care and administrative responsibility, time for sermon preparation can be hard to come by. Yet, the pastor must resist fatigue and redeem his time so that he can labor over the text before his God and for his people. To quit exegesis before giving sufficient attention to application aborts the message of the text.¹¹ If application is not thoughtful and deliberate, it becomes confused and superficial. By default, the preacher resigns himself and his people to “the well-worn ruts of application he has travelled down time and again in the past.”¹²

Distilling Exegetical Application

Arriving at deliberate God-centered application necessitates thorough exegesis, specifically, a sound grammatical-historical approach to Scripture. This assumes a high estimation of God’s Word. Only those with a high-view of God’s Word, its inspiration and authority, will labor under the text for biblically faithful application. However, a high-view of Scripture is not enough to guard the preacher against inadequate application. Many pastors, even those who believe in the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of His Word, diligently employ a God-centered hermeneutic throughout the exegetical process only to abandon that same God-centered approach upon reaching the application phase. Yet, exegesis remains incomplete until the target of application has been exposed.¹³ Behind every text is the intention of transformation, and until the text

¹¹Michael Duduit, “Purpose-Driven Preaching: An Interview with Rick Warren,” *Preaching* (September-October 2001), 7.

¹³Murray, *How Sermons Work*, 111.

has been seen within the workings of that transformative purpose, exegesis remains incomplete.

The preacher cannot be haphazard in his approach to application; faithful, biblical application requires the diligent process of thorough exegesis. The preacher must consider not only the meaning of the text but the situational roots and desired effects of the text. Recognizing that “every passage or literary unit of Scripture has an intention,”¹⁴ he considers, “What did the Holy Spirit want to see *happen* in the lives of the first recipients of this portion of Scripture?”¹⁵ This intention can only be discovered by means of faithful and diligent exegesis.

Now, the manner in which preachers move from Bible study to exposition may differ, and many sound and profitable approaches have been offered as a means of distilling exegetical application. Theologians have spoken of principlizing the text,¹⁶ climbing “the ladder of abstraction,”¹⁷ picturing application as a funnel,¹⁸ and considering the “taxonomy of sheep.”¹⁹ Each of these methods are attempts to build a bridge from the first century text to the twenty-first century audience recognizing the

¹⁴Duduit, “Purpose-Driven Preaching,” 210-14.

¹⁴Winford Neely, “Applying Scripture to Contemporary Life,” in *The Moody Handbook for Preaching*, ed. John Koessler (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 59.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹⁶John MacArthur, “Moving from Exegesis to Exposition,” in *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically*, ed. John MacArthur (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 246.

¹⁷Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 23.

¹⁸Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon: Changing the Way Pastors Preach and Congregations Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 108-09.

¹⁹Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 185-87

sufficiency of God’s Word and focusing on the centrality of God’s purpose. For that reason, these methods are worthy of attention here.

John MacArthur lays a solid foundation for expositional preaching with his “principlization” approach, a simple process by which the expositor will meditate on the central meaning of the passage to determine a foundational principle. Considering questions such as “What is the primary message of this passage?” and “How does this truth relate to me?” MacArthur seeks to communicate the “big idea” of the passage and connect it to the lives of his hearers. In this, he models thorough exegesis, not for the sake of exegesis but for the purpose of “eliciting out of the text the truths that God put in Scripture and then pounding those truths into the minds of the congregation through some powerful communicative process.”²⁰

There are times when the direct application of the biblical text does not immediately cross over to the modern setting. Here, Haddon Robinson employs what he calls the “abstraction ladder” in order to “make sure the biblical situation and the current situation are analogous at the points I am making them connect.”²¹ When the text does not allow for a direct application (such as “Love your enemies” or “Do not commit adultery”), the preacher abstracts up the ladder to God asking, “What does this say about God?” and “What is the depravity factor?” Upon reaching the intent of the text, the principle, he then carries over that message to the modern audience, drawing appropriate application.

²⁰R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Faithfully proclaim the truth”—An interview with John F. MacArthur,” *Preaching* (November/December), 1991, 2-10.

²¹Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” 23.

As preachers labor to present the principles of Scripture, Jim Shaddix warns against making such application too specific. His “application funnel” illustrates how specific application limits relevance. At the wide end of the funnel, the theological and universal applications identify what the text says about God and how that truth relates to all people. By definition, these touch-points of relevance connect with the largest number of people. It is at these points, Shaddix insists, that the preacher should spend the most time because there he has the best chance of connecting with the most hearers. “The modern pulpiteer,” however, expends the most time and energy on “individual application” (at the narrow end of the funnel) and “the truth of God’s Word often is spilled out and lost in the process.”²² Although concern can be appropriately given to individual application (and the other more restrictive subgroups of community, culture, and generation), narrower application comes with great risk. Not only is there the risk of excluding other subgroups, but by giving overly specific application, the preacher risks unnecessarily narrowing Scripture’s relevance in the minds of his congregants. Many listeners may limit possible application only to that which is specifically mentioned, precluding their imagination from considering additional implications for their own lives.²³ It is for this reason that MacArthur suggests that preachers “be content with general applications.”²⁴

Finally, toward the end of distilling sound application from biblical theology, Michael Lawrence draws from the sixteenth-century English Puritan, William Perkins in

²²Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 109.

²³MacArthur, “Moving from Exegesis to Exposition,” 246.

²⁴Ibid.

order to develop a “shepherd’s taxonomy.”²⁵ It has become a standard preaching maxim that it is not enough for a pastor to exegete the text, but he must also exegete his audience. Meaning, of course, that as a pastor shapes his message, he must be faithfully grounded to the text and personally connected to his audience. Lawrence suggests that the pastor begin by viewing those in his congregation as belonging to each of the following three pairs: Christian or non-Christian; complacent or anxious; legalistic or licentious. From there, he encourages pastors to assume that everyone listening struggles with idolatry, self-justification, and love of the world. Finally, Lawrence identifies three kinds of errant sheep: those who are idle; those who are timid; and those who are weak. These realities, along with physical considerations (gender; age, socio-economic status, marital status, and educational backgrounds), can help the preacher remember the worlds of his hearers and the issues inherent to each one.²⁶

Faithful Biblical Application Aims for a Faith Response

The aim of God-centered, exegetically-sound biblical application should ultimately be what Wayne McDill identifies as “a faith response.”²⁷ While pastors discuss the many and varied purposes of preaching, “the fundamental objective of preaching remains faith.”²⁸ McDill explains, “The overarching aim of preaching is to call for faith in the hearer. . . the focus of preaching must be the object of faith, the person

²⁵Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 185.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 198.

²⁷Wayne McDill, *12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 187-98.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 188.

of God. The preacher enhances faith by pointing his hearers to God, his character, his capabilities, his intentions and his record.”²⁹

Indeed, McDill’s conviction reflects the central thrust of God’s self-revelation. In the gospels, Jesus is either commending people for their faith or reproving their lack of it (Matt 15:28; Mark 6:5-6; Luke 7:9).³⁰ The gospel of John was explicitly written so that his readers might have faith (John 20:31). The apostles wrote to churches inquiring about their faith (1 Thess 3:5), praising God for their faith (Rom 1:8), encouraging them to continue in faith (1 Pet 1:7) and charging them to contend for the faith (Jude 3). Abraham, the father of faith, was made righteous by his faith (Rom 4:1-5, referencing Gen 15:6). Contrast that with what the author of Hebrews tells us, that the word spoken to the children of Israel did not benefit them because it was not coupled with faith (Heb 4:2). Believers are commanded to “walk by faith” (2 Cor 5:7) knowing that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6). Indeed, “whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). The overwhelming testimony of Scripture indicates that preachers should aim for the building of faith in their hearers.

So, Scripture’s emphases on faith necessitate that all preaching aim for faith. But, how does the preacher increase faith in his hearers? The simple answer is: by means of the Word of God. Paul the apostle reveals that faith comes from hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). Consequently, if believers are going to possess a faith that overcomes the world, then preachers must preach the Word of God faithfully. It will not be

²⁹Ibid., 189.

³⁰Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 39-41.

moralism, therapy, or self-improvement that gives Christians victory over the sin in their lives and the trouble in their world. It will be faith (1 John 5:4).

Yet, just any faith will not prove sufficient. While this modern ecumenical culture applauds faith regardless of its object, it is the object of one's faith that determines whether or not his faith has any value. This culture, not only deems the object of faith irrelevant it is even considered unnecessary! Faith is spoken of in such a way that it seems that what many people have is faith in faith, and this has even crept inside the church. But the faithful preacher will point his hearers "to God, his character, his capabilities, his intentions and his record."³¹ Here is where all that has been said begins to come together: Proclamation that excites faith in the hearts of those who listen will center on God and elevate him in all his glory.

Faith Leads to Internal Transformation

A faith-response, however, must not be understood as a mere informational exchange resulting in the mental assent of truth and doctrine. Furthermore, to say that the goal of preaching for faith is life-change must not be confused with mere behavioral change. To aim for external conformity is too shallow a goal. The faithful preacher must target the heart, seeking internal transformation. When Paul pointed the Philippians to the obedience of Christ, it was not to shame or guilt or prod them to merely do as Christ did. Paul's intent was not mere external conformity, but internal transformation. Paul was displaying Christ's character, appealing to them on the basis of the salvation they had received by faith. Contemporary preachers must be challenged by Paul's example

³¹McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 189.

not to be content with mere conformity of behavior but to aim for transformation of the heart.

This transformational intention is the thrust of what Jim Shaddix calls “incarnational preaching.”³² Astutely identifying the modern distortion concerning what “relevance” involves, Shaddix attempts to rescue today’s preachers from the contemporary worship of modern application. Preaching sermons that target the external behavior while largely neglecting theology and doctrine has rendered pastors effectively powerless to produce any real change. In pursuing relevance, they have plunged into the abyss of irrelevance. Contrary to modern thinking, “life change doesn’t take place as a result of practical application. Life change takes place as individuals are transformed by biblical truth and then it is manifested in practical application.”³³ Again, it is not about compelling external change but cultivating internal transformation. Preach for faith and the heart is changed. When the heart is changed, the life will be transformed. Yet pastors commonly resist this fundamental purpose because of the tendency to fix our gaze on more immediate, more measurable, and more personally affirming purposes.

In the end, this is not a peripheral issue of methodology and preference, but it is a fundamental issue of faith. Will the preacher find fulfillment in being found faithful? Will he place his confidence in the Spirit of God and the Word of God? “Preaching for faith requires a foundation of faith in the preacher.”³⁴ When all is said and done, every

³²Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 101-20.

³³Ibid., 117.

³⁴McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 189.

preacher must decide if he believes the Word of God to be truly sufficient and efficacious.

John Piper tells the story of an experiment he performed one January Sunday morning. He felt led that day to “make a test.” Preaching the glory of God from Isaiah 6, he determined to make not one word of application. Piper later reports,

I didn’t realize that not long before this Sunday one of the young families of our church discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. It was incredibly traumatic. They were there that Sunday morning and sat under that message. . . . Some weeks later I learned the story. The husband took me aside one Sunday after a service. “John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God’s holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on.”³⁵

Jim Shaddix comments on Piper’s experience:

My only disagreement with Piper about his Isaiah 6 sermon is that I think he *did* do application, at least in the larger way it ought to be understood. He exposed the revelation of God about Himself, which obviously helped to form godliness in a hurting father, thus enabling him to victoriously navigate life’s garbage dump.³⁶

The way application “ought to be understood” is in light of God’s purpose for his Word. His Word has been given and preserved in order to reveal God for the inciting of faith and the transformation of character. Knowing God builds faith. Faith shapes character. Character determines behavior. This pattern of genuine life-change generally takes time and is not immediately observable. Therefore, preachers must forsake the prideful desire for validation that drives them to obsess over perceivable results. If God is trustworthy and if his Word is sufficient, then pastors must determine to labor in faith, praying for spiritual re-creation resulting in authentic transformation. The temptation to manufacture

³⁵Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 14.

³⁶Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 105.

morality is strong. The appeal of artificial application for the modification of behavior is attractive. But the pastor is commanded to preach the Word even when the people demand something else. It is when the preacher is tempted to something else that he himself must exercise faith in the power of God's Word. In this exercise of faith, God is pleased and only in this exercise will the preacher will be considered faithful.

Faithful Biblical Application Is Redemptive

If God-centered, exegetically-based, faith-building application is going to prove genuinely biblical, it must be presented in a thoroughly gospel context. Therefore, the final principle of sound biblical application is that biblical application must be redemptive. In the midst of all applying, knowing, and striving the preacher must firmly tether his teaching and his audience to the cross. The work of Christ in securing, revealing, and preserving salvation for his elect cannot be assumed or taken for granted. It cannot be left unstated. If the preacher does not keep the cross predominant in his life and preaching, many will become ensnared by the pitfalls of legalism, reductionism, self-righteousness, and superficiality. To avoid these traps the preacher must be careful to center his sermons on Christ's accomplished work, making the gospel, not assumed, but explicit.

“Be Good,” “Don’t Worry,” and “Do This”

Often, in an attempt to make intentional and measured application, the preacher loses focus on the gospel. Assuming the gospel, he obscures it. Having faithfully labored to mine the meaning of a text, he abandons sound hermeneutical practices in order to manufacture contemporary application. In doing this, he muzzles the

biblical authors from disclosing the impetus of their writing and instead gives his ear (and the ears of his people) over to inferior voices. These deceptive voices sing the sirens' song of humanistic philosophy, a song with at least three verses: "Be good"; "Don't worry"; and "Do this."

"Be good," declares the moralist verse. This moralistic approach presents application in terms of a mere ethical plea. While Christian proclamation may entail ethical values, such as integrity, justice, and charity, it is not moralistic. As is true with all three inferior approaches, the moralist verse is fatally insufficient. Reducing application to mere morality strips the gospel of its substance and power. Adding insult to injury, this approach also presents Christianity in terms that are largely indistinguishable from other religions. Most religious people (and even the non-religious) will agree that lying, cheating, adultery, and murder are wrong, but the Christian sermon must not be a sermon with which a Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist can fully agree. Simple exhortations to ethical behavior do not hold up the gospel in all its glory to save. Moralistic preaching does not make God look great. It condescends faith and the gospel (and ultimately God) into mere means for human flourishing. In this way, moralism centers on man and is not worthy of gospel proclamation.

The second verse, "Don't worry," brings out the therapeutic element. This approach seeks to provide comfort and encouragement. It seeks to assure the listener that everything is going to be okay. This "I'm okay; you're okay; everything will be okay" message is a false gospel of positive-thinking. Essentially, it seeks to infuse confidence that "things will turn around" if the individual will "continue to hold on" because, after all, "you can do it." Many times this therapy will be presented in religious terms which

have been emptied of any real meaning. Yet without tangible means, these exhortations are nothing more than hollow cheer sessions. The end-game of this approach is simply to lift up the listener, to provide him with a “shot in the arm” and get her through the week. Here, the gospel and faith are boiled down into a nebulous pool of sentimentality. Hollow faith, optimism, and positive-thinking are used to anesthetize the pain of living but no real hope is provided. The pastor must resist the therapeutic voice that seeks to present faith as a man-centered coping mechanism and must preach to build faith as a God-glorifying, hope-infused anchor.

The sirens’ final verse confidently asserts, “Do this.” This is the self-improvement approach and is generally presented in the format: x number of ways to achieve y . Whether it is “five ways to improve your marriage,” “seven steps to a peaceful home,” or “the fifty-one keys of effective communication,” this method of application plunges headlong into the deep end of man’s egocentrism. In addition to being rooted in the terminal philosophy of humanism, this self-improvement approach commonly presents sociological studies and cultural surveys as unquestionable authorities. So, man becomes both the ends and the means of this approach – striving for man’s benefit with man’s methods achieved by man’s efforts. For the sake of clarity, references to non-biblical sources can serve to make appropriate contributions to a message, but they must never be a primary source nor can they be presented as ultimately authoritative. To do so, over-esteems worldly authorities, elevating them over God’s Word.

Redemptive Preaching is Christ-Centered

Preaching is not to be a mere ethical speech, a therapeutical session, or a self-improvement seminar. Preaching is ultimately, a redemptive act. Redemptive preaching, also called Christ-centered, cross-centered, or gospel-driven, has at its core “the central realities of the person, character, and work of Christ.”³⁷ While preaching may have other secondary effects, Christ must be preeminent in all Christian proclamation. T. David Gordon provides this encouragement:

The pulpit is the place to declare the fitness of Christ’s person, and the adequacy of both his humiliated and exalted work for sinners. If such proclamation sharpens moral vision, convicts the complacent, or creates in us dissatisfaction with our current culture, so be it. But these occur as occasional results of Christ-centered preaching; they are not its purpose.³⁸

To avoid the humanistic, legalistic, and reductionistic pitfalls of the age, the gospel of grace and the provision of Christ must be center-stage, spotlighted, and lifted up. Appealing to human willpower has not only proven powerless, but it is faithless for it places man in the prominent position. Although regulations and commands “have indeed an appearance of wisdom. . . they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:23). Only Christ has the power to transform a life. While the believer strives, struggles, and labors through the process of his sanctification, he does so only in the strength that God provides. The faithful preacher will make much of what Christ has accomplished. He will not only remind his congregation of the Lord’s redemptive work but, in doing so, will awaken in them praise and dependency upon it. Redemptive

³⁷T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 91.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 70.

preaching, therefore, is very careful to anchor God's children to the cross where he secures the believer's holiness and empowers him or her to pursue godliness with an expectant joy. Therefore, all Christian proclamation must remind its hearers that they are completely dependent on Christ and indebted to his work for it is God who works in the lives of Christians "to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

Conclusion

There is certainly more that can be said about faithful biblical application, but nothing less. Biblical application must center on God and his purposes as displayed in his self-revealing Word. Sound application must rest on diligent exegesis, mining the riches of text and context. Preaching must sow the seeds of faith, feeding and cultivating it with the knowledge of God and his ways. Finally, these three streams of biblical application come together into a mighty redemptive river, exalting the cross of Christ and yielding in dependence to it.

It may be that modern attempts at biblical application fall short because of a deficient view of Scripture or a misunderstanding of the purposes of God. It may be that the humanistic culture of the day has spoiled the minds of many preachers so that sermons are shaped primarily by individualism and instructed by pragmatism. However, it is more likely, as James S. Stewart spoke decades ago, that "the disease of modern preaching is its pursuit of popularity."³⁹ The desire for instant approval and the need for validating results testify to the root of pride in the hearts of many preachers. Until that root is severed by the cross of Christ, preaching will remain more pragmatic than biblical.

³⁹Begg, *Preaching for God's Glory*, 29.

Until preachers are willing to die on the cross of faithfulness, impotent proclamation will remain standard. Church leaders intent on seeking glory from one another, cannot know the glory that comes from Christ (John 5:44). But, when God's shepherds forsake self and, like the good Shepherd, lay down their lives for the sheep, God's name will be more important than one's own and faithfulness will become the longing of the pastor's heart. When God's glory is displayed and his purposes pursued, Christ will be exalted among the nations and lost people will be drawn to him. When the people of God submit to his Word, they will rest in his provision, labor for his glory, and hope in his kingdom. May Paul's words chastise and encourage every man who endeavors to lead God's church and feed his flock, "pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for by so doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim 4:16).

CHAPTER 4

ELEMENTS OF THE MINISTRY RESEARCH PROJECT

This 15-week ministry project included an expository preaching workshop sponsored by the local Baptist association, a ten-week sermon series through the book of James, a pre- and post-series survey, a focus group consisting of area pastors, and a focus group comprised of church members. These elements were intended to accomplish the stated goals of the project: (1) to develop a deliberate, faithful, and gospel-honoring approach to application; (2) to develop, implement, and maintain practices in sermon preparation and presentation that give specific attention to developing intentional application; (3) to encourage Baptist pastors in the Palestine area to evaluate their approach to application; (4) to improve the measure of biblical application in the lives of the members of First Baptist Church, Elkhart.

Scheduling of the Elements

Although the project itself was conducted over a 15-week span, the planning and promotion of the associational workshop began no less than three months prior to the start of the project. Pastors were also recruited for the focus group no later than May, with the James series beginning in September. The total duration of the project was fifteen weeks.

The Associational Expository Workshop

For the edification and encouragement of pastors in the greater Palestine area, especially for those in the local Baptist association, a preaching workshop was scheduled and promoted to focus on making biblical application. Working closely with the executive director of the association and having established a time line for the project, a date was chosen with a mind to both potential attendance and the project's timetable. The location was chosen for its central location and accessibility. Having secured the venue and fixed the date, mailers, e-mails, and personal invitations were extended.

The material from chapters 2 and 3 of this project was prepared for presentation in three 50-minute sessions, allowing for periodic breaks. Upon arrival, each participant was asked to complete a brief questionnaire. This questionnaire consisted of short-answer inquiries, as well as three Likert-scale questions, concerning beliefs and habits relating to application. (A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.) The association provided lunch for those in attendance and everyone left with condensed notes of the material, a copy of John Piper's *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, and a copy of *The Glory of God in Preaching* by Alistair Begg.

The First Baptist Focus Group

In anticipation of the James sermon series, a discipleship class "Exploring Biblical Application" was promoted. The congregation knew the class was in coordination with the project, and 7 attended the initial orientation on September 2, where they received instruction regarding the weekly discussion and were given the pre-series survey. Desiring to have 10 to 12 participants, I recruited a few more. In total, a focus group of 10 individuals was established. Understanding the lives of those in the

congregation, a larger focus group was needed to insure adequate attendance week-to-week for profitable discussion. Depending on travel and illness, each week had between 5-10 participants. The participants had a list of 10 discussion questions and were asked to consider the questions prior to coming, providing summation statements on their sheets. (A copy of the discussion questions is included in Appendix 2 with modified questions included in Appendix 3.) The goal in each discussion was to establish a free exchange of ideas and opinions, allowing for an organic conversation driven largely by the group, their observations and questions. While the group would touch on each of the questions, it did so in no particular order. My role was simply to keep the discussion tethered to the issue of application and occasionally to redirect the conversation to deal with neglected questions. The goal in each meeting was to determine if and how application was being received by the congregation.

The Survey

A 26-question survey set up on a 5-point Likert scale was administered both to the focus group and to the congregation in general. (Copies of the pre- and post-series questionnaire are included in Appendices 4 and 5.) The goal of the surveys was two-fold: (1) to determine how well application was received by those attending First Baptist Church, and (2) to determine if those participating in the focus group were more likely to connect the Word preached to the Word applied. Therefore, questions anticipated the application points of the upcoming sermons. For example, question 16 which reads “Over the past few months, I have made a conscious effort to speak words that benefit those who hear them,” is intended to gauge attitudes and behaviors concerning the tongue, the focus of sermon 5.

The survey was administered twice, once before the James series (September 9th) and again, the week following the series (November 18th). For those not participating in the focus group, the survey was presented during the Sunday School hour. Thirty-nine surveys (10 from the focus group and 29 in general) were returned before the series began. After the James series was completed, 32 surveys were collected (9 from the focus group and 23 from the rest of the congregation).

The Pastors' Focus Group

A second focus group consisting of area pastors met bi-weekly. The original intent was to use targeted questions intended to evaluate the process of developing and communicating application – its intentionality and method and perception. It became clear during the first meeting that this was not be the best use of time. Therefore, future meetings each focused on a different principle of application. From week-to-week the goal was also to evaluate the four principles of application, relating them to the messages and searching for their presence and influence, asking of each principle if it is inherent or artificial, organic or cumbersome, helpful or obvious.

Synopsis of Sermons Preached

The sermon series, entitled “Authentic Faith,” worked through the New Testament epistle of James. Each message explored a distinctive mark of authentic faith with the intention of distinguishing biblical faith from cultural religion.

Sermon 1—Tested Faith (Jas 1:1-18)

The initial message of the series addressed the issue of suffering. In the midst of trial, all too often, the Christian's greatest hope is that the trial will eventually end. God desires far more for His children. God's children can joyfully endure trials knowing that the Lord is working His purposes according to His plan for their lives both now and into eternity. The tests that a believer endures serve, among other things, to prove his faith as genuine. Therefore, James exhorts his readers to endure suffering with joy and in hope.

Sermon 2—Energetic Faith (Jas 1:19-27)

If the believer is to have an enduring faith, a faith that will survive trials of various kinds, that faith must be empowered by something greater than human willpower. It must be fueled by God's Word for God's Word is the only power that can affect genuine and lasting change. An authentic faith is, therefore, a working, energetic faith empowered by the implanted Word of God through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Sermon 3—Merciful Faith (Jas 2:1-13)

All human beings have a proclivity toward favoritism. For various reasons and to varying degrees, there exists a natural inclination to prefer some people over others. Those who belong to Christ must recognize this tendency and resist it. God's people cannot yield to this natural bent of our fallen nature because it is evil; it corrupts the gospel, confuses our allegiances, and is contrary to love. Authentic faith is merciful, extending the gospel to all people.

Sermon 4—Living Faith (Jas 2:14-26)

James makes it clear that there are two kinds of faith. There is a dead, counterfeit faith and a living, genuine faith. Those who hold to the former are deceived and remain in their lost condition for a dead faith is powerless to save. Because only a genuine faith can save, it is imperative to distinguish between the two. Dead faith declares its sincerity; living faith demonstrates its authenticity. Dead faith is informed by facts; living faith is transformed by truth. Dead faith is resistant to the Word; living faith is responsive to the Word. Finally, in contrast to a dead, hollow, useless faith, living faith is an active and saving faith.

Sermon 5—Restraining Faith (Jas 3:1-12)

Every man and woman, boy and child, struggles with the tongue. God's people must be constantly aware of their words for they are employed all-too-often for evil intents and purposes. Unruly tongues yield unpredictable influence and wreak havoc in the lives of individuals and the corporate life of the church. By God's grace, however, God provides restraint for the unruly tongue by transforming its source – the heart.

Sermon 6—Humble Faith (Jas 3:13-4:12)

At the core of the Christian life is humility. Much of what James has warned his readers against up to this point (favoritism, submission, and speech) can be traced to the root of pride. If God's people are to reject self-exalting reason, resist self-gratifying pleasures, renounce self-serving associations, and refuse self-preserving defensiveness, they must cultivate humility. Humility is also central to possessing godly wisdom and

provoking God-honoring repentance. A church rich in faith will be a humble church, protecting godly community and slaying self-righteous hypocrisy.

**Sermon 7—Submissive Faith
(Jas 4:13-17)**

Planning is and will always be a part of our everyday lives. However, planning must be done in such a way as to avoid arrogance and recognize wisdom. Too often human plans are driven by greed and an attitude of omnipotence. The tendency is to forget that human ability is limited and that human life is brief; we are not ultimately in control. In contrast, planning should be an exercise of faith. In all their plans, believers must learn to operate from a position of humble dependency, dedicating their lives to pursuing His purposes.

Sermon 8—Enduring Faith (Jas 5:1-12)

Authentic faith is an enduring faith. In the throes of a corrupt and sinful world, believers must cling to faith in order to endure. Central to this enduring faith is the hope God's people have in the anticipated return of Christ. Fixing their eyes on this certain hope, Christians abide together in a gracious unity, encouraging one another and not grumbling against one another. Believers endure suffering joyfully because the Lord's presence abides with His people, even as they wait for Him. So, in the meantime, comforted by His presence and encouraged by His return, the people of God entrust their lives to Him. Every believer can endure knowing that Christ will return to rescue His people and establish perfect justice.

Sermon 9—Praying Faith (Jas 5:13-18)

Authentic faith prays, not merely to get or to plead, but it is how we live. At all times and in every condition, the believer's heart is directed toward God in prayer. It is how we operate in all circumstances. It also serves as a reminder of our connectedness to one another. God accomplishes much through prayer. Both around us and within us, He responds to the prayers of His people – His righteous people, cleansed and made righteous by the blood of Christ.

Sermon 10—Vigilant Faith (Jas 5:19-20)

The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation. It was never intended to be lived in such a manner. While we individually enter into God's people through repentant faith in the Lord Jesus, we become part of a community of faith. God is assembling a people for His own possession, one holy nation, one body. Believers must understand and appreciate our need for community, specifically for the accountability we have one to another. This accountability is everybody's responsibility. Moreover, the stakes are too high for this to be a casual endeavor. Souls hang in the balance. Sin is deceitful and this world is alluring. Our hearts are given to temptation. We need one another to nourish faith and to watch over souls.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Laboring in God's Field

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor 3:5-9)

Agricultural imagery is employed frequently throughout Scripture, so it is not unusual that the apostle Paul would refer to the Corinthian church as “God’s field.” In keeping with this metaphor, he also likens those who labor in this field as farmers (2 Tim 2:6). While this analogy is clear, the instruction in this may not be fully appreciated by many preachers. Just as the farmer cannot afford to be one-dimensional in his labor, the pastor cannot assume that diligence in one element of ministry will assure a successful harvest. The farmer does not presume that high-quality seed will realize its potential without faithful preparation of the soil. Neither does he expect a cultivated field to produce a crop apart from good seed. In addition to these concerns, there is to be constant attention given to irrigation and other care in an effort to secure a full harvest. Yet, in all of this labor, there remains many other elements beyond the farmer’s control. These realities are readily acknowledged with regards to earthly farming, and those who care for God’s field must set about their labors with the same multi-faceted approach. Unfortunately, all too often, those working spiritual fields become one-dimensional in

their labors, singularly focused to a fault. One group speaks of the soil, while another focuses on the seed, but seldom do these spheres intersect. Amidst the contemporary conversation concerning application in preaching, a vital element remains unattended because of a lack of vision. Application, as currently and popularly discussed, suffers from a perspective that is much too narrow. If preachers seriously desire to be effective, they must begin engaging one another in a more comprehensive discussion, challenging current approaches.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to develop a biblically faithful and gospel-honoring approach to application, most specifically in expository messages from the book of James at First Baptist Church, Elkhart, Texas. Evaluating this project hinges on the terms “biblically faithful” and “gospel-honoring.” Considering biblical faithfulness to be adherence to the message and intention of the biblical author, this project did indeed develop a faithful approach to application. The principles presented in chapter three demonstrate a clear priority to Scripture as they flow out of and point back to God’s Word, its message and its purpose. The second qualifier “gospel-honoring” speaks to a specific facet of being “biblically faithful.” In acknowledging the authority of God’s Word, these principles of application honor and serve the message of God’s redeeming love for sinners and His provision in Christ for their salvation. Therefore, the developed principles accomplish much toward the fulfillment of the project’s stated purpose. However, these principles prove only to be the foundation. Throughout the course of the project a more comprehensive understanding would be achieved.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

In that the project's four principles of biblical application successfully reflect a deliberate, faithful, and gospel-honoring approach to application in preaching expository messages, the primary goal of the project was accomplished. Approaching sermon development according to these principles, preachers can be guided toward biblically faithful and gospel-honoring application. Conversations with area pastors indicate these principles to be inherent in biblical preaching, serving well as reminders of the dependency and the responsibility preachers must maintain in relation to the Word of God. Also, the issues surrounding these principles were relatively easy to explore with the First Baptist focus group.

Regarding goal two, it seems little progress was made toward developing, implementing, and maintaining practices in sermon preparation and presentation with specific attention to developing intentional application. Yet, it would be a mistake to consider this goal a loss. As one would expect, central to the practice of developed methods is the issue of time. Unfortunately, my ability to protect budgeted time did not improve significantly, but having front-loaded a significant amount of exegetical work prior to the series, more time was available in weekly preparation to focus intentionally on points of specific application. However, this additional time did not go for that purpose. MacArthur's principalization approach and Robinson's "Ladder of Abstraction" focus on the identification and communication of general application.¹ Dever's "Application Grid," also, suggests a broader categorical approach to application as

¹Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 25.

opposed to the narrowed life-situation approach of culture.² So, with consideration to these perspectives, additional time was spent on more exegesis, language work, and commentary interaction. This investment of time proved profitable in the development of more comprehensive general application.

This tension between general and specific application was explored throughout the First Baptist focus group experience. While much of the application throughout the series was general in scope, group members overwhelmingly understood this general application to be specific for no other reason than they perceived a personal connection with the sermon. This served as a great encouragement: application does not need to be specific to be personal. This confirms precisely what Shaddix's application funnel illustrates, that more general application engages more people. Ironically, less time spent on specific application made identifying points of application more natural and less time-consuming. However, it would be a mistake to validate general application to the neglect of the specific. Specific application, when used, served well to help illustrate possible implications of general application and to communicate the far-reaching scope of general application. This observation was also evident throughout the focus group discussions. Therefore, various tools and helps may prove beneficial, but these tools should not be allowed to usurp the text.

The third goal targeted pastors in the Palestine area, especially those of the Dogwood Trails Baptist Association. The intention was to encourage them to evaluate their approach to application, working toward a biblically-driven and gospel-honoring

²Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 184.

approach. This goal was met in modest measure primarily through the Expository Preaching Workshop. Questionnaires revealed that the two dozen attendees were already largely predisposed to an expository approach. Pastors also expressed appreciation verbally for the encouragement they received to trust the Word of God as they labor in their congregations.

The second element targeting this goal, the pastors' focus group, yielded little fruit and proved largely ineffective. In the initial meeting, a perceived reticence to engage in the introspection necessary to investigate personal attitudes and practices toward application led to an adjustment in future discussions. The remaining conversations turned toward examining the proposed principles of application. Unfortunately, the attendance did not get above two (largely due to illness and personal schedules) with some meetings needing to be rescheduled completely. Of the nine pastors who committed to preaching through James and meeting bi-weekly, three followed through.

The project's final goal sought to improve the measure of biblical application in the lives of the members of First Baptist Church, Elkhart, Texas. Key to gauging this measure of biblical application was the survey administered prior to and following the James series. While the results of the survey showed modest shifts in belief and behavior, no significant conclusions can be drawn. While a few responses indicated positive change, both in the general population and the focus group, occasionally the shift appeared to be in an undesired direction. Even among the focus group, where there was clear interaction with the sermon and with its probable application, survey results were inconsistent. Therefore, any change after the James series among the survey respondents

is considered, for the purposes of this project, largely inconsequential. Considering the limitations of the project, this conclusion is not surprising, yet, the witness of this expected limitation is itself rather instructive. While the Word of God must be trusted to work in the lives of God's people, the evidence of that working can be slow and, many times, unobservable. There must be more to application than recognizing it or even agreeing with it.

Strengths of the Project

The most notable strength of the project is the development of the four biblical principles of application. The various approaches to application over the past several years has produced many helpful tools and rules concerning application, but not a clear philosophy. There has been much said in addressing important issues – what to avoid, what to be wary of and what to strive for – but not a comprehensive theology of application working itself out in succinct over-arching principles. While the authority of Scripture has been esteemed and the sufficiency of Scripture reinforced, there has not been systematic guidance given for the development of biblical application. The principles put forth in this project seek to do just that. They provide an approach to application which offers general direction, broad enough to allow for different techniques yet narrow enough to facilitate biblical fidelity.

The weekly focus group of First Baptist church members showed itself to be another significant strength. The group was both engaged and transparent, and, of our eleven meetings, eight had an attendance of seven or more. Beyond faithfulness in participation, the interaction among the members was considerably productive. Clarity was pursued and personal struggles addressed. The sermon, with its limits and

deficiencies, was made whole by the observations, questions, encouragements, and interactions of the focus group. Through this element of the project, the most valuable observation of the experience was made: the fellowship and accountability of the local church is key to life-changing application.

Weaknesses of the Project

The natural limitations in gauging application, concerning both time and extent, proved more substantial than anticipated. Though it was never assumed that significant change could be measured over a three-month period, measuring even superficial change presented significant challenges. I intended to compensate for these challenges by gathering a wide breadth of data and by limiting my conclusions to general observations. However, the project would have fared better had I limited the data to a deliberately smaller and well-controlled sample. Instead of accepting the subjective limits inherent to measuring application, I should have attempted to make the project as objective as possible. This weakness could have been minimized by a smaller well-defined group instead of compounded by the larger undefined group. In the attempt of surveying as large a group as possible, I effectually surveyed two scant-related groups in isolation of one another. Without knowing the make-up of the control group, a clear contrast is impossible to establish.

While the control group needed more coherency, the focus group needed more diversity. Being comprised of committed church members, many of the measured applications were already issues of general consensus among the group's members. The initial survey left little room for change, and while group discussion revealed

considerable interaction with the sermons, the impact of the sermons cannot be clearly gauged.

The pastors' focus group was the weakest part of the project. The half-day preaching workshop did not lend itself to much interaction; the project was designed to acquire feedback through the bi-weekly meetings. However, the pastors either did not or could not prioritize the bi-weekly meetings. As a result, the third goal was only realized to the extent that the workshop ministered to and challenged those who attended. Also, evaluation of the four principles was limited to the opinions of only a few pastors.

What I Would Do Differently

The area of greatest adjustment would be in the way the survey was used. Desiring to measure the ordinary listening experience of normal sermons, I had kept the survey sequestered from the rest of project, employing it as a "behind-the-scenes" indicator of change. It was considered to be a mere diagnostic, gauging the attitudes and the behaviors as reported by the participants. So, the survey was taken at the beginning and forgotten about until it was administered again ten weeks later. In retrospect, the survey should have played a more formative role. To begin with, I should have looked at the pre-series results right away and allowed the results to target issues during sermon preparation, identifying potential areas of change. Then, in both sermon delivery and small group discussion, application should have been clearly and deliberately communicated in terms echoing the survey questions.

Instead of adopting a "more-the-merrier" attitude concerning the larger survey group, I would have established a group of 12-15 to take the survey before and after the series. While this would have decreased the number surveys, there would have been a

clearer, more definable control group. If I was going to assemble the focus group again, I would attempt to secure one with more diversity. Acquiring some younger believers or some more marginal attenders for the sake of the project may also have provided for more measurable change and perhaps shifted the dynamic of the small group discussion.

Lastly, I would consider a different method of interacting with the pastors. Ideally, an extended preaching workshop with more dialogue, perhaps designating substantial time for Q&A sessions or inviting other viewpoints for roundtable-type forums. This may have allowed for more observable interaction with the issues-at-hand. If nothing else, there should have been a more effective way to receive feedback. I had hoped for more feedback concerning the four principles: are they valid, natural, awkward, superficial, necessary, etc.? As it was, I thought there would be feedback from six pastors over the course of the project, the feedback was limited to two or three.

Theological Reflections

Thankfully, over the past several years, the conversation surrounding application has shifted. More than just a part of the sermon, application has become the heart of the sermon. Yet, there are still more dots that must be connected. While many have contributed much with respect to application, there is more to be explored. Instead of speaking of application in terms of goals, intentions, and expectations, preachers and teachers must begin to think in terms of process. Conversations amidst the First Baptist focus group uncovered an unexpected element in biblical application – community. The spirit and progression of each focus group session exhibited a sweetness, an atmosphere of encouragement, and a hunger to see God honored as the lives of His people are shaped by His Word. In a very real way, the focus group became a laboratory for the “one

another” passages of Scripture, specifically those commanding believers to “encourage one another” and “spur one another on to love and good deeds.” This observation, more than speculative observation, is drawn from members of the focus group who had expressed the benefit they found in preparing for and participating in the group discussion. Clearly, cultivating a community into which the Word of God is proclaimed must be a key element to a faithful approach to biblical application. Therefore, the conversation surrounding biblical application is due for another paradigm shift. It must change from the ground up, starting with a re-defining of terms. No longer can application be considered merely as the end goal of our efforts. It must become more than the intention of our proclamation, more than Broadus’ “main thing to be done.”³

At present, the focus is primarily on issues of cause and effect. Much of what is being said about application concerns issues of relevance, communication, motivation, persuasion, and encouragement. In an attempt to see lives transformed, pastors and leaders have been looking for a particular catalyst, something that will spark change and facilitate growth. Some believe the answer is in familiar language, engaging media, or the familiar trappings of culture. Others insist the solution is to identify and remove perceived barriers, at times even to the point of compromising the message of the gospel. Still, there are those who have returned with renewed vigor to the power inherent in God’s Word for transforming hearts and lives. Of course, this final position is where the faithful preacher must stand. His confidence must remain in God’s word and not in the means of Man, but, even here, the conversation has remained in terms of cause and

³John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 165.

effect. The conversation must shift to an include process and context. It needs to incorporate issues of ecclesiology, fellowship, discipleship, and sanctification.

A renewed confidence in God's Word as His appointed means of transforming His people has prompted a renaissance of biblical preaching. This recovery is cause for great celebration. Yet biblical, expositional preaching is only the beginning of the process by which the Word of God connects with His people. Even when the sermon correctly identifies and effectively presents biblical application, application is not complete. In fact, it could be argued that it has only begun. Trusting the sufficiency of Scripture should carry us past considering the means of change to exploring the process by which these means must be applied. As the Word is preached, it begins working its way into the hearts and minds of the individual believer. The Word is internally processed and believers begin to wrestle and reason with the Word. This internal process then needs to become external. The church must cultivate a culture where conversations are initiated, assistance is offered, and accountability is established. In this climate, application will progress into transformation, revealing itself in outward demonstrations of faith. While these outward demonstrations are the goal of biblical preaching, preaching itself cannot accomplish them. God's Word can only be fully applied in the context of the church, believers walking faith together in mutual dependency and accountability.

Is this view of application as a process in context evidenced in the biblical text? This appears to be the testimony of Scripture as seen in the lives of God's people, most strikingly reflected in the New Testament's "one another" passages. When the apostles instruct their readers as to how they should treat one another, the intent is not

simply for individuals to behave rightly toward other individuals. Their instruction is far more comprehensive. Their intent is to develop a distinct community of faith, one that encourages, establishes, and reinforces a culture consistent with the character of God. For example, when John instructs his readers to “love one another” (1 John 3:11), he does not do so merely to secure appropriate affection in interpersonal relationships. His desire is that God’s people should be known as a people who love because God is love. Again, Paul commands believers to forgive one another because God has forgiven them (Eph 4:32). They are to become a people marked by forgiveness as a testimony to the forgiveness they have received. Finally, and most plainly, the author of Hebrews commands his readers “to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:24-25). This command serves as a most appropriate summary of all the “one another” passages. Believers are to encourage one another (Heb 3:13), instruct one another (Rom 15:14), and build up one another (1 Thess 5:11) so that the Word of God is displayed. Clearly, the epistles portray the local church to be instrumental in the application of God’s Word in the lives of His people.

This emphasis on community is not new. Just as a return to biblical authority is restoring biblical preaching, it is also transforming the modern understanding of the local church. Contemporary church planting strategies and ecclesiastical models have placed a great deal of emphasis on relationships. These two conversations must now intersect. Preaching is God’s appointed means for the delivery of God’s Word but God’s Word takes on real life in the arena of the local church. Pastors must understand that while preaching can teach and exhort toward biblical application, God’s Word cannot be fully applied apart from the local church and the relationships therein. Part of making

biblical application involves cultivating a culture in which application happens. This element is the missing link. We can no longer limit the issue of application to the realm of sermon preparation and presentation. The development of application must extend beyond hermeneutical and homiletical concerns; it is also congregational and pastoral. Thus, developing a deliberate, faithful, and gospel-honoring approach to application in preaching will, by necessity, extend beyond the personal disciplines of preaching and listening and address the corporate dynamics of fellowship and accountability. As important as it is to give attention to the seed sown, the soil must also receive proper attention to encourage proper growth.

The reality is that the work of cultivation is much less glorious, and unfortunately less satisfying, than the work of reaping. It is difficult and requires time and endurance. This leads into the second theological reflection: many modern pastors of the gospel are not geared for long-term ministry. Certainly this reality has many roots which are the topic of much speculation, but regardless of the whys, there is a wholesale need for the “re-wiring” of the contemporary minister. Preachers too often expect to see significant change in short periods of time. By measuring effectiveness over the short term, the long-term demands of ministry and proclamation are minimized and even despised. There is a reason why Paul made return visits to churches he had planted. There is a reason why he remained in contact through the writing of letters. It should be instructive to pastors to read Paul, Peter, and John as they speak of repeating themselves and reminding their readers of what they already know. Ministry cannot be measured by microscopic snapshots taken over short periods of time, rather, ministry must be gauged over years and even decades in order to get an honest and telling evaluation. The need to

train our hearts to engage in long-term ministry is great. Instead of looking for a quick fix, trusting techniques and innovations, pastors must labor in love, deepening their faith while seeking to deepen the faith of others. Preachers must forsake the pursuit of the golden tongue and seek instead to develop iron legs, valuing endurance over elegance. This simple shift in vision from that which is immediate to that which is anticipated will yield far-reaching and comprehensive benefits beyond imagination: conquering pride and discouragement in the hearts of pastors, building trust and faith in the lives of congregations, and establishing legacies and testimonies in the presence of communities.

Personal Reflections

Perhaps the greatest personal benefit received, pertaining to preaching, is the freedom to trust general application. In a cultural climate that cries out for relevance, practicality, and marketability there exists increasing pressure to give people something that pays immediate and tangible dividends, something they can simply plug into their lives for instant results. Yet speaking into people's lives does not require the calculated rifle shots of specific application but can be accomplished through wide blasts of general application. Coming into this project, I was seeking more ways to generate application specific to individual circumstances in order to speak into individual lives. What I discovered is that application is not generated as much as it is discerned. It does not come from outside methods or sources but it flows from the text and is distilled from more comprehensive exegesis. This knowledge has proven both encouraging and liberating. This is not to say that specific application has no merit. While the contemporary application-driven sermon is a dangerous construction of culture, specific application can still be beneficial when faithfully distilled and honestly presented.

In addition to the encouragement to trust general application, I am challenged to cultivate a culture in which application is pursued. Understanding that the Word of God produces change in the lives of God's people, I also recognize that change requires more than the preached Word. While God's Word is administered through preaching and teaching, it must also be administered through the accountability and encouragement of believers in fellowship with one another. The reason application has become difficult in the modern age is not because the Word has ceased to be relevant, nor is it because preaching is an antiquated method of communication. The greatest single cause of this application gap may be the elevation and isolation of the individual. If pastors want to attack the disconnect between God's Word and daily living, the answer is not in communication techniques and engaging media. The antidote to the individualism of our culture is to be found in the development of healthy congregations, weaving individual lives together into the unified fabric of local churches.

Conclusion

The importance of cultivating community among the people of God has been central in contemporary discussions of ecclesiology, and rightly so. Small groups and relationships, discipleship and accountability, have all been widely explored by church planters and growth strategists. These conversations rightly recognize the appropriateness of these developments and even speak of the benefits produced by them in the area of biblical application. Yet, the subject of community remains absent from the preaching conversation. If those seeking to cultivate community see the benefits for promoting life-change, why do those seeking life-change as a result of preaching not recognize the value and necessity of biblical community? The preaching conversation

cannot continue in isolation. The various conversations must begin to overlap; the preaching discussion but must draw from the community discussion and the discipleship discussion.

Within this dialogue, clarity must be developed. Much of the difficulty at present is the result of people trying to communicate while operating from different dictionaries. What is the difference between specific application and personal application? Is there one? How specific is specific application? If there is a difference, are people using the terms with distinction or interchangeably? Can application be one without being the other? These questions and others like them must be answered if the conversation is to move forward and be fruitful. Those engaging one another on these issues need to both speak with precision and listen with understanding. For starters, the confusion between specific and personal application must be recognized and a distinction established. Also, to further assist in this endeavor, perhaps the term “application” should be reserved for the general intention of the passage. Then, “specific application” could be understood as “implications” and presented as examples and illustrations serving general application. Here Robinson’s designations of necessary, probable, possible, improbable, and impossible will prove very helpful.⁴

Whether this distinction between application and implication is accepted or not, there must be some clarification of terms. This conversation is too important not to get right. To view preaching as the work of an individual speaking into the lives of individuals who individually apply the Word to their lives misunderstands the nature of preaching. While it is true that few would define preaching in such terms, it is, in effect,

⁴Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” 25.

how the preaching discussion has been approached. Preaching does not take place in isolation nor does listening happen in a vacuum. The context of the local church is not just a reality into which the pastor speaks, it is the machinery by which the Word works. This truth must move from the periphery of the conversation and into the forefront and preachers must begin to think more holistically. To provide a comprehensive picture of God's means and His methods, these related conversations need to be systematically integrated. Must preaching rest on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture? Of course. Do churches need to restore fellowship and discipleship to their proper prominence? Definitely. However, these elements and others do not operate independently, but interdependently. For preaching, the Word of God, sufficient for our message, must also be sufficient for our method. Therefore, the principles of biblical application presented in this project must be amended. A fifth principle must be added to account for the considerations of process and context. Application must be grounded in God's Word and His purposes, exegetically-driven, aimed at a faith response, and redemptive in purpose, but application must also be worked out in the community of the local church. We cannot give attention to the sowing of heavenly seed without properly cultivating the soil into which we sow. Careful attention to seed and soil, necessary cultivation, proper irrigation, and patient diligence are all required in tandem of the man who works earthly soil. How much more does God require the same from those who labor in His heavenly field?

APPENDIX 1

PASTORAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Pastoral Questionnaire

Name: _____ church _____

e-mail: _____ contact #: _____

age: _____ yrs in ministry: _____ current position: _____

of Sunday morning sermons preached (approx.): _____

1. Do you preach consecutive sermons through books of the Bible?
Usually Occasionally Not usually Never
2. As briefly as you can state it: what is the purpose/message of Scripture?
3. How do you discern/discover/determine a sermon's application? Do you utilize and tools, questions, techniques, etc.? If so, which ones?
4. How do you give application in your sermons? Can you give examples of some application points from recent sermons?
5. In your opinion, what best motivates people to change? (new information, commands, fear, hope, the promise of reward, pain, etc.)
6. How important is application in a message? Explain.

7. Indicate if you strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:

Application is too subjective and personal for a preacher to make any specific application in his sermon.

Strongly Disagree - - Disagree - - don't know - - Agree - - Strongly Agree

Stressing Application in a sermon encourages legalism.

Strongly Disagree - - Disagree - - don't know - - Agree - - Strongly Agree

The Biblical world is too far removed from our world to allow for any strong application.

Strongly Disagree - - Disagree - - don't know - - Agree - - Strongly Agree

APPENDIX 2

ORIGINAL FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Name: _____

1. What change did this message call for?
2. How did the message speak to your faith? beliefs? behavior?
3. Was the application general or specific? (Can you list possible applications?)
4. Was the application clear or vague? (How difficult was it to list possible applications?)
5. Was the application grounded in the biblical text?
6. Was the application necessary, probable, possible, improbable or impossible?¹
7. What, if anything, do you plan to change as a result of this message? Why or why not?
8. How do you plan to incorporate change (if you plan on incorporating change)? (What are your feelings, hopes, apprehensions concerning change?)
9. How was the application specific to this sermon? ...different from previous sermons?
10. Any comments concerning previous weeks?

¹Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership* 18 (Fall 1997): 25.

APPENDIX 3

REVISED FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE (MODIFIED 9/30/12 – EMPLOYED IN DISCUSSIONS 5-10)

Name: _____

1. What did this message call for?
2. How did the message speak to your faith?
3. Was the application general or specific (target not topic)? List possible applications?
4. Was the application clear or vague? (How difficult was it to list possible applications?)
5. How was the application specific to this sermon? ...different from previous sermons?
6. Was the application grounded in the biblical text?
7. How did the application relate to the text? (necessary, probable, possible, improbable or impossible)
8. How do you plan to live as a result of this message? Were any behaviors reinforced or challenged?
9. How do you plan to incorporate change (if you plan on incorporating change)?
(What hope did the message give you for changing and/or sustaining your lifestyle?)
10. Any comments concerning previous weeks?

APPENDIX 4

PRE-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

Circle your age-range:

less than 20 20-29 30-39 40-54 55-64 65-79 80+

Please indicate the number of years since you came to faith in Christ: _____

Are you a member of First Baptist Church, Elkhart? yes or no

If you are a member at another church, where? _____

Using the following scale, **write the number** that best expresses your opinion concerning the following statements:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

- ___ 1. Spiritual growth has more to do with knowledge than behavior.
- ___ 2. God's people have a responsibility to keep one another close to God.
- ___ 3. Life-change is most effectively realized through better habits and discipline.
- ___ 4. Unconfessed sin can be the source of much weakness & powerlessness.
- ___ 5. As long as what I say is true, it cannot be sinful.
- ___ 6. I am confident in my ability to apply the Bible to my life.
- ___ 7. I often hear a sermon and know how my attitudes, beliefs, and behavior should change.
- ___ 8. The church would reach more people in the world if it would do things more like the world.
- ___ 9. I know how to endure trials with joy.
- ___ 10. I consciously consider God's will when I make plans.
- ___ 11. Churches are stronger when the church members look alike and think alike.

- ___ 12. It is not my place to correct the sin of another person.
- ___ 13. Having faith is simply recognizing the truth of who Jesus is and what He did.
- ___ 14. I often hear a sermon and don't know what to do as a result.
- ___ 15. Only faith that produces lasting change can be considered genuine.
- ___ 16. Over the past few months, I have made a conscious effort to speak words that benefit those who hear them.
- ___ 17. The greatest hope I have in suffering is that it will eventually end.
- ___ 18. The wisdom of this world is opposed to God and His wisdom.
- ___ 19. I recognize that God has a purpose for all trials and suffering.
- ___ 20. Spiritual growth has more to do with behavior than knowledge.
- ___ 21. God's Word is the believer's power to affect change in his or her life.
- ___ 22. Conflict in the church shows a lack of love and humility.
- ___ 23. I consider God's purposes to be more important than my prosperity and comfort.
- ___ 24. The more diverse a church is the stronger it is.
- ___ 25. The church is a business and should be governed by business principles.
- ___ 26. Prayer can be hindered by sin in the life of the one praying.

APPENDIX 5

POST-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

Circle your age-range:

less than 20 20-29 30-39 40-54 55-64 65-79 80+

Please indicate the number of years since you came to faith in Christ: _____

Are you a member of First Baptist Church, Elkhart? yes or no

If you a member somewhere at another church, where? _____

Please circle which Sundays you have attended over the past 10 weeks.

- 9/9 - “Tested Faith” (James 1:1-18)
- 9/16 - “Energetic Faith” (James 1:19-27)
- 9/23 - “Merciful Faith” (James 2:1-13)
- 9/30 - “Authentic Faith” (James 2:14-26)
- 10/7 - “Restraining Faith” (James 3:1-12)
- 10/14 - “Humble Faith” (James 3:13-4:12)
- 10/21 - “Submissive Faith” (James 4:13-17)
- 10/28 - “Enduring Faith” (James 5:1-12)
- 11/4 - “Praying Faith” (James 5:13-18)
- 11/11 - “Vigilant Faith” (James 5:19-20)

Using the following scale, **write the number** that best expresses your opinion concerning the following statements:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

- ___ 27. Spiritual growth has more to do with knowledge than behavior.
- ___ 28. God’s people have a responsibility to keep one another close to God.
- ___ 29. Life-change is most effectively realized through better habits and discipline.

- ___ 30. Unconfessed sin can be the source of much weakness & powerlessness.
- ___ 31. As long as what I say is true, it cannot be sinful.
- ___ 32. I am confident in my ability to apply the Bible to my life.
- ___ 33. I often hear a sermon and know how my attitudes, beliefs, and behavior should change.
- ___ 34. The church would reach more people in the world if it would do things more like the world.
- ___ 35. I know how to endure trials with joy.
- ___ 36. I consciously consider God's will when I make plans.
- ___ 37. Churches are stronger when the church members look alike and think alike.
- ___ 38. It is not my place to correct the sin of another person.
- ___ 39. Having faith is simply recognizing the truth of who Jesus is and what He did.
- ___ 40. I often hear a sermon and don't know what to do as a result.
- ___ 41. Only faith that produces lasting change can be considered genuine.
- ___ 42. Over the past few months, I have made a conscious effort to speak words that benefit those who hear them.
- ___ 43. The greatest hope I have in suffering is that it will eventually end.
- ___ 44. The wisdom of this world is opposed to God and His wisdom.
- ___ 45. I recognize that God has a purpose for all trials and suffering.
- ___ 46. Spiritual growth has more to do with behavior than knowledge.
- ___ 47. God's Word is the believer's power to affect change in his or her life.
- ___ 48. Conflict in the church shows a lack of love and humility.
- ___ 49. I consider God's purposes to be more important than my prosperity and comfort.
- ___ 50. The more diverse a church is the stronger it is.
- ___ 51. The church is a business and should be governed by business principles.
- ___ 52. Prayer can be hindered by sin in the life of the one praying.

APPENDIX 6

SURVEY RESULTS

Table A1. Question 1

Question 1 – Spiritual growth has more to do with knowledge than behavior.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	3	8	7	4	3
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	6	2	2	0
Post-Series	0	11	5	4	0
Post-Series (focus group)	1	5	1	1	0

Table A2. Question 2

Question 2 – God’s people have a responsibility to keep one another close to God.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	0	0	15	13
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	5	5
Post-Series	1	0	1	7	13
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	6

Table A3. Question 3

Question 3 – Life-change is most effectively realized through better habits and discipline.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	3	1	11	12
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	2	0	5	3
Post-Series	0	0	1	16	3
Post-Series (focus group)	1	1	0	7	0

Table A4. Question 4

Question 4 – Unconfessed sin can be the source of much weakness & powerlessness.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	3	1	1	8	16
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	7
Post-Series	1	0	1	10	8
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	6

Table A5. Question 5

Question 5 – As long as what I say is true, it cannot be sinful.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	12	11	3	1	2
Pre-Series (focus group)	4	6	0	0	0
Post-Series	7	11	2	2	0
Post-Series (focus group)	6	2	1	0	0

Table A6. Question 6

Question 6 – I am confident in my ability to apply the Bible to my life.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	1	5	19	3
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	1	5	3	1
Post-Series	0	1	5	16	1
Post-Series (focus group)	1	0	2	6	0

Table A7. Question 7

Question 7 – I often hear a sermon and know how my attitudes, beliefs, and behavior should change.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	0	1	16	10
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	7	3
Post-Series	0	0	2	15	5
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	1	6	2

Table A8. Question 8

Question 8 – The church would reach more people in the world if it would do things more like the world.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	18	7	2	1	1
Pre-Series (focus group)	8	2	0	0	0
Post-Series	16	4	2	1	0
Post-Series (focus group)	8	1	0	0	0

Table A9. Question 9

Question 9 – I know how to endure trials with joy.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	3	12	13	0
Pre-Series (focus group)	1	3	2	4	0
Post-Series	0	0	12	11	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	1	3	4	1

Table A10. Question 10

Question 10 – I consciously consider God’s will when I make plans.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	1	4	18	5
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	2	7	0
Post-Series	0	2	4	14	3
Post-Series (focus group)	0	1	2	6	0

Table A11. Question 11

Question 11 – Churches are stronger when the church members look alike and think alike.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	5	15	4	4	1
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	2	7	0
Post-Series	6	12	4	1	0
Post-Series (focus group)	2	3	1	1	0

Table A12. Question 12

Question 12 – It is not my place to correct the sin of another person.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	4	14	4	2	4
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	8	1	0	0
Post-Series	2	11	6	0	3
Post-Series (focus group)	2	7	0	0	0

Table A13. Question 13

Question 13 – Having faith is simply recognizing the truth of who Jesus is and what He did.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	2	9	4	8	3
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	6	1	2	0
Post-Series	2	9	2	5	5
Post-Series (focus group)	0	6	1	2	0

Table A14. Question 14

Question 14 – I often hear a sermon and don't know what to do as a result.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	14	6	6	0
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	5	1	3	0
Post-Series	1	10	7	5	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	8	1	0	0

Table A15. Question 15

Question 15 – Only faith that produces lasting change can be considered genuine.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	6	2	11	7
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	1	1	3	3
Post-Series	0	2	6	8	6
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	3	2	4

Table A16. Question 16

Question 16 – Over the past few months, I have made a conscious effort to speak words that benefit those who hear them.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	0	5	21	2
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	2	3	4	0
Post-Series	0	0	1	22	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	1	7	1

Table A17. Question 17

Question 17 – The greatest hope I have in suffering is that it will eventually end.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	9	0	10	7
Pre-Series (focus group)	2	2	3	1	1
Post-Series	1	4	3	14	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	6	1	2	0

Table A18. Question 18

Question 18 – The wisdom of this world is opposed to God and His wisdom.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	3	3	10	12
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	6
Post-Series	0	0	3	8	12
Post-Series (focus group)	1	0	1	2	5

Table A19. Question 19

Question 19 – I recognize that God has a purpose for all trials and suffering.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	0	1	10	15
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	2	7
Post-Series	0	0	0	12	11
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	1	3	5

Table A20. Question 20

Question 20 – Spiritual growth has more to do with behavior than knowledge.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	8	10	7	2
Pre-Series (focus group)	1	2	4	2	0
Post-Series	0	8	6	8	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	4	3	2	0

Table A21. Question 21

Question 21 – God’s Word is the believer’s power to affect change in his or her life.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	1	1	0	13	13
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	8	1
Post-Series	0	0	1	13	9
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	5

Table A22. Question 22

Question 22 – Conflict in the church shows a lack of love and humility.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	7	4	14	3
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	3	1	5	0
Post-Series	1	2	7	12	0
Post-Series (focus group)	0	1	1	7	0

Table A23. Question 23

Question 23 – I consider God’s purposes to be more important than my prosperity and comfort.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	0	0	13	16
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	3	1	5	0
Post-Series	0	0	0	14	9
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	4	5

Table A24. Question 24

Question 24 – The more diverse a church is the stronger it is.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	5	15	6	2
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	1	5	2	1
Post-Series	2	4	10	4	2
Post-Series (focus group)	0	4	4	0	1

Table A25. Question 25

Question 25 – The church is a business and should be governed by business principles.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	11	12	2	2	2
Pre-Series (focus group)	4	4	1	0	0
Post-Series	6	12	2	1	1
Post-Series (focus group)	4	2	0	3	0

Table A26. Question 26

Question 26 – Prayer can be hindered by sin in the life of the one praying.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre-Series Survey	0	2	3	11	12
Pre-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	2	7
Post-Series	0	2	1	15	5
Post-Series (focus group)	0	0	0	3	6

APPENDIX 7

PASTORS FOCUS GROUP RESPONSE FORM

James' Group Response Form

Name: _____ church _____

e-mail: _____ contact #: _____

sermon text: _____ sermon title: _____

“Main idea”: _____

Outline:

hours of preparation: _____

Discussion Questions:

1. What commands were explicitly made in the message? implicitly?
(behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs)
2. On what grounds were these commands made? [exegetical question]
3. What did the sermon say about God? about Man?
4. How does that knowledge impact our behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs?
[compare answers to question four with those from question one.]
5. Did we point our hearers to the power of the cross or did we leave them to apply this message in their own strength?

APPENDIX 8

SERMON OUTLINES

Sermon 1 James 1:1-18 “Tested Faith”

- I. Christians are called to endure trials with joy. (vv. 1-8)
 - A. Because our minds are being focused on God’s purpose.
 - B. Because our souls are being settled on God’s plan.
 - C. Because our hearts are being fixed on God’s Treasure.
- II. Christians are called to endure trials in hope. (vv. 9-18)
 - A. We must resist the temptation to blame God.
 - B. We must recognize the enemy and battle against sin.
 - C. We must rejoice in the salvation we have been given.

Sermon 2 James 1:19-27 “Energetic Faith”

- III. God’s Word produces saving faith.
- IV. God’s Word empowers active faith.
- V. God’s Word exposes empty faith.
- VI. God’s Word reveals pleasing faith.

Conclusion: Our faith is dependent on and will grow in proportion to our abiding in Christ and in His Word.

Sermon 3 James 2:1-13 “Merciful Faith”

- I. We must recognize our tendency toward favoritism. (vv. 1-3)

- II. We must recognize the evil of favoritism. (v. 4)
 - A. Favoritism corrupts the gospel we are called to proclaim (vv. 5-6a)
 - B. Favoritism denies the battle we are called to fight. (vv. 6b-7)
 - C. Favoritism abandons the love we are called to show. (vv. 8-11)Conclusion: Authentic faith extends mercy. (vv. 12-13)

Sermon 4 James 2:14-26 “Living Faith”

- I. There are two kinds of Faith. (vv.14-17)
 - A. There is a dead faith that cannot save.
 - B. There is a living faith that does save.
- II. Dead faith declares its sincerity; living faith demonstrates its authenticity. (v. 18)
- III. Dead faith is informed by facts; living faith is transformed by truth. (v. 19)
- IV. Dead faith is resistant to the Word; living faith is responsive to the Word. (v. 20)
- V. Living faith is an active, saving faith. (vv. 21-26)

Conclusion: “We are saved by faith alone, but not a faith that is alone.”

Sermon 5 James 3:1-12 “Restraining Faith”

- I. James’ transitional reference to “teachers.”
- II. Be aware. Our tongues are slippery. (vv. 1-2)
- III. Be alert. Our tongues are influential. (vv. 3-5a)
- IV. Be warned. Our tongues are flammable. (vv. 5b-8)
- V. Be encouraged. Our tongues can be restrained. (vv. 9-12)

Sermon 6 James 3:13-4:12 “Humble Faith”

- I. Humility is central to possessing godly wisdom and rejecting self-exalting reason. (vv. 13-18)

- II. Humility is crucial to pursuing godly desires and resisting self-gratifying pleasures. (vv. 1-3)
- III. Humility is critical to promoting godly allegiances and renouncing self-serving associations. (vv. 4-6)
- IV. Humility is key to provoking godly repentance and refusing self-preserving defensiveness. (vv. 7-10)
- V. Humility is chief to protecting godly community and repudiating self-righteous hypocrisy. (vv. 11-12)

Conclusion: A church rich in faith will be a humble church.

Sermon 7 James 4:13-17 “Submissive Faith”

- I. We must avoid the arrogance of planning.
 - A. Do not ignore the limits of human ability. (vv. 13-14a)
 - B. Do not ignore the brevity of human life. (v. 14b)
- II. We must embrace the wisdom of planning.
 - A. Prefer the sovereign plan of God. (v. 15)
 - B. Prize the surpassing value of God. (v. 16)
 - C. Pursue the superior purpose of God. (v. 17)

Conclusion: In all our plans we must operate from a position of humble dependency as we dedicate our lives to pursuing God’s purposes.

Sermon 8 James 5:1-12 “Enduring Faith”

- III. Endurance is needed because suffering is a reality. (vv. 1-6)
- IV. Four Truths That Feed Endurance:
 - A. The Lord Will Return. (vv. 7-8)
Establish Your Hearts By God’s Power.

- B. The Lord Will Judge. (v. 9)
Encourage Your Brothers in God's Word.
- C. The Lord Will Guard Us. (vv. 10-11)
Endure Your Trials With God's Presence.
- D. The Lord Will Act. (v. 12)
Entrust Your Life in God's Hands.

Sermon 9 James 5:13-18 "Praying Faith"

- V. Prayer is a lifestyle. (vv. 13-14)
- VI. Prayer accomplishes much. (v.15a)
- VII. Prayer accomplishes nothing. (v. 15b)
- VIII. Prayer binds us together. (vv. 15c-16)
- IX. God hears the prayer of the righteous. (vv. 16-18).

Sermon 10 James 5:19-20 "Vigilant Faith"

- X. Understand your need.
- XI. Accept your role.
- XII. Realize the stakes.

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING BIBLICAL APPLICATION IN PREACHING THE BOOK OF JAMES AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, ELKHART, TEXAS

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013
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This research project explores the theology of application in biblical preaching and the various approaches and philosophies surrounding biblical application in expository messages.

Chapter 1 introduces the project's rationale and provides an overview of the project.

Chapter 2 develops a biblical theology of application in preaching. The prophet Isaiah provides insight into the power of biblical application. The epistle of 1 John is investigated with regards to the purpose of biblical application. Finally, the pattern of biblical application is seen in Paul's instruction to Timothy.

Chapter 3 presents four principles inherent to making faithful biblical application.

Chapter 4 details the conducting of the project.

Chapter 5 evaluates the project, concluding that even with a sound theology and a faithful approach to application, effective application is also largely dependent on the community of faith, the local church.

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