Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 27

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Application

Ephesians 1:11-22: A Theological Reading

The next text that we want to talk about in terms of theological analysis is Ephesians 2:11-22. I won’t read the text in its entirety and we’ve already referred to it for other reasons. We dealt with it at some length in terms of the Old Testament use in the New which is directly relevant to analyzing the text theologically and understanding where it stands within the overarching story of God’s redemptive acts in history on behalf of his people and all of creation.

But, I want to look at it again in a little more detail related to how we might read this text theologically. First of all, Ephesians 2:11-22 when you read it, you note a number of terms that emerge such as “reconciliation” is an important term, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into two entities that were formerly at odds with each other are now reconciled and brought together into a peaceful relationship and existence. The theme of the death of Christ, the theme of the people of God, again consisting of Jew and Gentile, and towards the end we find the theme of temple cropping up. So this is a story of God, through the death of Jesus Christ reconciling Jew and Gentile, two entities that formerly were at odds with each other, into a new people of God who actually function therefore as God’s temple, as God’s dwelling place. This theme actually within the book of Ephesians itself plays an important role in relationship to the very beginning of the book.

Back in Ephesians chapter 1, Paul tells his readers in this long section in chapter 1: 3-14 under one head that is Jesus Christ. So one of the things that Paul has done for his people through Jesus Christ is make known God’s intent, his will, and that is that eventually God intends to unite all things to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth together under one head and that is the person of Jesus Christ. This assumes some type of dislocation in the present creation, in the heavens and the earth that according to Genesis
1 and 2 owes itself to sin. So sin has entered the world and caused a dislocation. It has caused trouble, has caused fragmentation in the world and has caused hostility. God intends to restore all things in creation, in the heavens and earth, under the one head which is Jesus Christ.

Now where chapter 2 comes in is we have already seen this taken place this has already been inaugurated. In chapter 2:11-22 is an example of how God is already bringing about reconciliation on earth by reconciling two formerly hostile and dislocated fragmented parts of humanity Jew and Gentile into a new one new humanity, into a people of God. Now we’ve already seen that by a sustained allusion to the text of the prophet Isaiah. Paul intends to see this uniting of Jew and Gentile through the death of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s program of restoration. Isaiah’s anticipation of the day of those that were far and near, of Jews and Gentiles, will be included as God’s people. They will also come and worship God and become God’s people. Now that has been restored or now is inaugurated through the person of Jesus Christ.

However, we also see this language of temple especially in the later verses of Ephesians 2 where Paul shifts starting at verse 19. He shifts from speaking of nationhood and being citizens of the people of God to a household, but then he moves onto temple. In verse 20 he talks about how Jews and Gentiles equally belong to God as part of his household “built upon the foundation upon the apostles and prophets” which may reflect Isaiah chapter 54 and the language of restoration of Jerusalem built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. “In him, in Christ, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a wholly temple in the Lord, and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

So, putting this all together Ephesians 2 stands within the broader biblical theological narrative. Ephesians 2 recognizes the reconciliation and people of God and the work of Christ and his death on the cross, emphasizing temple imagery. This all stands within the broader overarching theological narrative of God’s intention to restore what was ruined at the fall. What caused the dislocation and fragmentation between God
and his people, between the people and other people? Now God expresses his intention to restore that throughout the Old Testament story in terms of a temple. The temple was the way God would restore his presence with his people and the prophetic anticipation in books like Isaiah where God expresses his intention to restore humanity, Jew and Gentile, into a new people of God and to rebuild his temple. In texts such as Ezekiel chapter 40-48 God’s intention is to restore his temple so that he can dwell in the midst of his people, so he can have a new creation. That story now is beginning to be fulfilled in Ephesians chapter 2 where God has now, through the person of Jesus Christ, as the story reaches its climax, through his death on the cross. Now the problem of sin from Genesis 3 that has caused this dislocation and fragmentation and has caused problems in God’s creation, now has been dealt with in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now God establishes a new humanity consisting of Jew and Gentile and now the humanity itself becomes a temple where God dwells through his Holy Spirit. So Ephesians chapter 2 plays a crucial role in this ongoing narrative but again it reaches its climax where most everything else does in the book of Revelation especially in chapters 21 and 22. There now you find the building of God, you find God’s temple which consists of the people in Revelation 21 and 22 consisting of Jew and Gentile. The pillars are the 12 tribes of Israel and the foundations being the apostles of the Lamb of the church consisting of Jew and Gentile. It is a place where nations now come and stream into the city under new creation and the key features now God in covenant relationship dwells in the midst of his people, his people temple. So, Revelation 21 and 22 is the ultimate climax of what one sees already taking place in Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 11-22, the ultimate dwelling of God with his people consisting of both Jew and Gentile in a new creation, his people temple.

So, I’ve given simply two examples of what is easy to do. This isn’t easy in every text and I don’t want to say every text has a direct relationship to the story but still as one studies the biblical text one must be alert to the theological themes that emerge from the text and one must be alert to how it might fit with the overarching theological story as part of the canon and coherent, canonical community that has come down to us in the
form of the Old and New Testament.

Those of you that are accessing this on the website will note on professor Hildebrandt’s website I have also put together a series of lectures on “The Storyline of the Bible.” That is meant to unpack and unfold in even more detail this overarching narrative story that emerges from the Old and New Testament canon. So, one might go to that for more detail. There are also a number of very helpful books on biblical theology or Old and New Testament theology or particularly the unified story of the entire Bible. One very brief text that I find helpful is a book by T. Desmond Alexander called *From the Garden to the New Jerusalem* and it does some similar things and traces themes from Genesis all the way to Revelation 21 and 22.

**Application and Hermeneutics**

What I want to do now is to move and discuss issues related to application or as some scholars call it “contextualization.” In my opinion the process of interpretation is incomplete for Christians until they respond in obedience in a way called forth by the scriptural text itself. That is until the Old and New Testament texts are contextualized to our own day and situation enabling Christians to respond in obedience as God calls forth in his revelation. Until that takes place, the process of interpretation remains incomplete. Again this stems from the fact that we confess that the Bible is nothing less than the very word of God and that God expects his people to conform to it and obey it and be transformed by his words. So this application or contextualizing God’s word for our modern day context and situation is simply an implication of the Scripture and also is an implication of the theology of Scripture for itself.

It’s important to understand that application is not just an add-on at the end of the interpretive process. It’s not just something to be tacked on at the end so that you do your interpretation and try to understand the text and when you’re done the last thing you do is tack on an application to show how it is relevant at the end of the interpretative process. I would argue that the application or what some would call “contextualization” is already taking place at the very beginning of the interpretive process as we are trying to
understand it for our own culture.

Even though we are trying to understand it in its original historical context we are still reading it as the Scripture as God’s word to his people. So we are already thinking of asking how we understand this in our own culture, in our own location. So the very goal is application that is conforming our lives to Scripture and being transformed by reading it. So we ask, how does the word of God continue to speak to God’s people today? The challenge is that we recognize on the one hand the ongoing reference of God’s word to his people because it is God’s word we recognize the ongoing relevance of Scripture while at the same time we recognize that Scripture was communicated in a very historical and cultural context. So we have to then ask how do take a text that which was produced in a specific historical and cultural context and how do we bridge the gap to continue to hear it between then and God’s people today who find themselves in a very different historical and cultural context.

**New Testament Demonstrates the Application of the Old Testament**

One of the biblical justifications for application is found in the text of the New Testament itself. A text that we consider for inspiration but simply suggests that the Bible calls for its own ongoing relevance an application to the lives of God’s people and we can point to a number of other texts. Perhaps one of the more significant ones is found in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is God breathed” that is the clearest text that refers to inspiration, but usually we stop there and we talk about the character Scripture as inspired and what that means but Paul’s attention is to articulate in the rest of verse 16 and 17 “all scripture is God breathed and is useful for instruction in rebuking and correcting and training in righteousness so that the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for good works.” The corollary of inspiration is the transformation of God’s people and the corollary of inspiration is equipping God’s people for every good work. So, in my opinion, the processes of interpretation is incomplete until not only until we are able to articulate clear areas of application but until we actually do it and until we actually allow Scripture to transform our lives. Until that happens, the process of interpretation has not yet run its course.
In my opinion also, I find application to be one of the more difficult aspects of interpretation to do well. I frequently have students ask me about how did you keep up your Greek and Hebrew and how did you apply X to Jesus or even what is the most difficult aspect of preparing sermons? I usually tell them is exegesis or interpretation I have found to be the easiest part (and I don’t mean that it was easy and I don’t mean there weren’t difficult texts that I had to wrestle with and were very very hard) but out of all the things that I would do in interpretation and sermon preparation I over and over again found that making good application is the most difficult aspect of interpretation.

But it’s important to recognize that first of all interpretation or contextualizing Scripture for modern day readers and listeners it’s important to recognize that it is first of all it must be based on sound interpretation of the biblical text in its original historical context as the author most likely intended it and as the readers most likely would have understood it. Interestingly, one model of this is actually reflected in a commentary series, one commentary series in particular which has generally successful results, the NIV Application Commentary series produced by Zondervan. It’s intentional about applying a specific methodology to providing application of the biblical text that is rooted in understanding the text in its original historical context.

**Errors to Avoid in Applying the Text**

But as with many of the approaches that we’ve talked about the first thing I want to do is discuss briefly some of the errors to avoid in drawing the application and some of these are rather obvious almost silly, others are sometimes more important. The first mistake, or the first error I think to avoid in drawing application is the neglect of the overall context that is the failure to place a New or Old Testament document in its literary and historical context. Often one of the dangers of misapplying biblical text or one of the reasons for misapplying biblical text is often a failure to recognize the literary or historical context of a biblical passage. I think too, one of the curses in my opinion are the verse and chapter divisions, especially verse divisions in the Bible. Again before I finish that an aside is verse division and the chapter divisions at least to me in my
understanding the primary value is that everyone can find the same place in the text. Can you imagine speaking to a group of a hundred people, trying to get them to find the same place somewhere in the middle of Genesis without chapter and verse divisions? So chapter and verse divisions are very important in helping us locate the right spot and helping us to find the right place that we want. Otherwise chapter and verse divisions would be a curse because one of the offshoots of them is the danger of treating verses in an isolated fashion. To treat verses as self-contained units as promises of God whose people or something like that or a verse or even a paragraph is treated as some self-contained unit in isolation from context at which it occurs historically or literarily.

**Philippians 4:13 and Haggai 1 Examples**

We’ve already given one example of how ignoring and neglecting context can lead us astray and one of the more popular example is the Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” If I take that verse in isolation one of the ways I might apply it is as we’ve said before when we discuss literary context in relation to this verse, one of the ways I might apply it is that Christ helps me to do an impossible job that seems impossible to me. God will enable me to do it, or God will enable me to persist and persevere through a difficult marriage, or God will allow me to tolerate a difficult relative, or God will allow me to pass an exam that seems impossible for me to pass. This maybe often used as an excuse for not studying. But the point is this verse is taken as a principle that gets applied to any situation that seems overwhelming and too difficult for me to accomplish then I’m reminded of the Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” However as we’ve already seen, the difficult thing with that is, when one looks back at the broader context the verses right before it, verses 11 and 12, Paul is clearly talking about his ability to live in any circumstance that is whether he has abundance or whether he is in dire need. No matter what the circumstance Paul is able to remain content, he’s able to respond appropriately and be content whether he has money or whether he doesn’t, whether he has abundance or whether he is in poverty. He is able to be content in any situation, and the secret is; he can do everything through Christ, that
is, he can live in any situation contently because Christ enables him to do so. So by understanding the broader context this makes a difference in the way that a text is applied.

To give a really silly example I always think of this one for some reason, this is just a silly example of a misapplied text, but I use it because this was serious, someone made a serious life decision based on reading this text. When I was in college in Denver Colorado, I heard a pastor speak one time who had just moved to Denver to become a pastor of a church that I was attending. I preached in his ministry and I don’t want to say that he was there on false pretenses or that God did not want him there or anything else, I don’t want to call that into question, but I do want to raise a question of how he got there. On the first Sunday he was there he read an interesting text from the book of Haggai, in the Old Testament chapter 1. And as he was basically giving some background as to how God had brought him out to Colorado to preach at this church he started at verse 3, Haggai chapter 1, “Then the Lord came through the prophet Haggai, is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses while this house remains in ruin” and the pastor proceeded to say as he read that verse he looked around noticed that he was sitting in a room with paneling on it. I think he was living in the state of Alabama in the United States at that time, but he was living in his home in Alabama and he was living in a house that had paneling on the walls. He kept reading and he got to verse 8, “Go up into the mountains.” He took that as a call to go to Colorado. So, he looked and the Colorado state was full of mountains, the Rocky Mountain State Park and now he found in Haggai a call for him to go to Colorado. Now again, I don’t want to question his move to pastor this church in Colorado, back then years ago, and I don’t want to suggest that God could not have led him there. But again the difficulty is that when you read Haggai chapter 1 its whole historical literary context is that God’s people, this emphasis to look around and they’re living in paneled houses, the whole point is that while their houses were suitable for living, the house of God the temple was in shambles. And so the call to go to the mountains in chapter 1 verse 8 is not a call to move, it clearly says to “go to the mountain to cut down timber so they can come back and build the house of God.” So this is not a
call for someone to leave your paneled house and go into the mountains to live, but it’s a call for God’s people to sit up and take notice, that while they live in comfortable surroundings, the house of God in shambles and it’s a call to rebuild God’s house, God’s temple and to give it priority in their lives.

So for any application to be valid must fit within its historical and its cultural and literary context. Any application must be consistent with how the passage functions within its context.

**Psalm 127:3-5 Example**

Another example that I was made aware of in a textbook by Craig Blomberg on biblical interpretation was a text that I’ve frequently heard read, for example at weddings or something like that. Psalm 127 3-5 is a reference to apparently building, having family or sons to having many sons and the virtue of having several sons as a heritage from the Lord. So verses 3-5, “sons are a heritage from the Lord; children are a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands warrior are sons born in one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.” Now often this verse is used as a justification for having large families, even a command to do so, especially the reference to “having a full quiver.” But the key is historically the last lines “they will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemy’s at the gate.” The significance is that the gate is a place where apparently one would do warfare or one would gather to decide legal cases. So perhaps in a day and age where mortality rates were much differently and perhaps higher today, having a large family would ensure safety against enemies and also ensure safety in legal situations. So this is not a call for everyone today to have a large family, and somehow it is disobedient to not have a large family. Instead, it needs to be understood inside its larger historical context. Notice the reference primarily to sons in this context; they would have been the ones that contended in the gate, not daughters. So this is more of a call for a large family to ensure safety against enemies, or a representation in legal affairs, not a command for everyone to have, especially today, to have large families. So simply make sure you’re your application is consistent with the broader historical literary contexts.
Failure to Recognize Salvation Historical Connections

Another error or mistake interpretation is a failure to recognize the salvation historical or redemptive historical structure of the Old Testament, and New Testament. That is we’ve already seen in our discussion theology that the Old Testament stands in relation to the New Testament as one of promise and fulfillment. So some texts find their fulfillment in the person of Christ in a way that shows that they’ve played a temporary role in the Old Testament. So we have to ask, how ultimately do we, when it comes to applying texts in the Old Testament, find their fulfillment ultimately in Jesus Christ?

For some texts such as food laws or sacrificial laws, we find that they are no longer applicable in the way that they stand in the Old Testament, but that they are only applied as they are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ in light of the new revelation that comes through Jesus Christ. So simply to look at the new food laws in the Old Testament that forbid eating certain types of food and to simply apply them straight across the board, as if we should also avoid those types of food ignores the salvation historical structure of the Old and the New Testament.

Neglecting Literary Genres

A third failure or error in application I think is to neglect the different literary genres that one does not apply for example narrative in the same way one would apply epistolary literature. Understanding the entire story and understanding the wider and broader literary context and how the story works, is essential to application. We saw that in relationship to Exodus 18, the story of Moses being told by his father-in-law Jethro not to try to do too much, but to delegate some of the cases. Moses is functioning as the judge of Israel but Jethro tells Moses you can’t handle all these. You handle the more important ones and delegate the smaller ones to other individuals. If all I did was read Exodus 18 I might be tempted to apply that in terms of delegating responsibility and how to run a business, and those may indeed be valid, I don’t know. But when you put Exodus 18 in its broader context we said it’s a story of how Moses is portrayed as a weak human being in response to a question: is the Lord really with us or not? The Lord must be with Moses or the Lord must be with Israel because Moses is just a weak human being. Moses can’t
do it, it must be God who is doing all these things, it must be God who is with his people. So Exodus 18 is more a reminder of the fact that God often showcases our weaknesses in order to make clear it is his power at work within us. So application needs to take into consideration the different literary genres and how that might make a difference in the way we read it.

**Insufficient Analogies**

A final one is insufficient analogies. That is the danger of trying to apply a text in a way where the analogy between the present situation and application is not entirely applicable to the original situation. That is, for example, to apply a text that refers to national Israel, to a nation such as the United States of America, is again to miss the fact that especially, this also takes into consideration the principle of the failure to recognize the historical redemptive structure of the Old and New Testament.

For example, as I have often heard done, take a promise made to Israel that God would bless them if they do that and to apply that straight across the board, for example if any nation, say the United States of America, in order for God to continue to bless them as his people or as a nation that they must do this and this. This misses the fact that God no longer shows preference to any one nation. God no longer relates to his people nationally, but now relates to them solely through the person of Jesus Christ. God’s people are now transnational and transcultural.

Another example is to take a text in the New Testament that refers to the institution of slavery, the relationship between a master and his slave and to apply them straight across the board and compare that to the relationship to an employer and employee. Not that there are not some ways to apply that and that there might not be some application but to simply be unaware of the differences is to rely on an insufficient analogy between our modern day employee employer relationship and our society and the ancient master-slave relationship.

So, what should we do? This is something we should have attempted to do from the beginning, we do not simply tack on application to the very end of the interpretive process. Instead, one possible suggestion is that we, and a very common method of
application is to extract and abstract a principle from the biblical text and then ask how that principle applies to the modern day situation and the modern day reader. This is very similar to the three aspects of translation where you have a source language, that is, the ancient language and understanding it in its original historical context followed by a message, that is trying to uncover the main message of the text and then communicating it in a receptor language in a way that will be understood by those who are reading the text in a receptor language, especially through the process known as a dynamic equivalent translation.

So in analogy to that we often find a three-fold process of application that looks like this: number one is to uncover the meaning of the text in its original historical context by studying the text in its original context. One might ask questions about the author’s original meaning. What most likely did the author intend? Through a careful study of the literary historical context in light of the meaning of the words and the grammar, and the literary genre is, what is the meaning of that text? How is it applied to first century readers? Then the second step is: what is the underlying cross cultural principle? What is the underlying meaning that transcends the specific original historical situation? What is the timeless principle or what are the timeless principles that arise from this text? And then third, corresponding to the receptor language in the process of translation is: what are or what isn’t appropriate or what are appropriate applications of this principle, or these principles for the modern day context and situation?

Again, in many ways that resembles the process of, especially association with dynamic equivalent translations of moving from the source language to the message and then communicating that message transferring it into a receptor language that will be understood by the majority of readers for whom it is intended.

1 Corinthians 8-9 Example

An example of how that might work could be found in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 and 9, one could study 1 Corinthians 8 and 9 in its original context this is the section of Corinthians where Paul calls on the Christians in Corinth to be willing to not eat meat
that had been offered to idols. Most of the times if you would have eaten meat in first century Corinth someone invites you over to eat or you decide to buy meat in the market place if you have the money to do so it would usually be that meat at some point had been offered to an idol. It was now being sold in the market place or now you go over to someone’s house to eat a meal and they are serving meat that had probably been offered earlier that day to an idol. Some of the Christians felt that it was okay to do that, and that idols are nothing and this is simply meat and I’m not participating in any idol worship in eating this I’m just enjoying some steak or whatever it is. Some Corinthians thought that it was okay to eat meat offered to idols while others felt that their consciences would not allow them to do that. They felt that it was wrong. Paul addresses those in Corinth who thought it was okay saying they should be willing to give up that right so not to cause another Christian to stumble, and what he means by that is not offending or making them feel bad but actually causing them to participate in that activity in a way that violates their conscience.

The principle then that emerges out of this text or could emerge out of this text is that Paul calls upon Christians then to be willing to give up their rights. The principle of this text would be to be willing to give up your rights for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So it is not to hinder the face of Christ or another Christian’s faith in Jesus Christ by causing them to participate in an activity that they know is wrong.

The application is without giving specifics in application then would be to ask what specific ways in our own day and age and in our own church context might we be in danger of ignoring this or of violating this. Probably it won’t be with eating meat, most of us do not live in societies, some of us might, but most of us live in societies where you go to the supermarket to buy meat that wasn’t offered to an idol. So this form of application will probably change, instead we will probably ask for more appropriate modern day analogies when it comes to this text.

So that threefold message is a very common one often known as principalizing, that is through study of the text in its original context by identifying the meaning or principle that transcends the context that may now be placed in or applied in a new
context. A principle or principles, most will not want to suggest that there’s just one. While there’s a lot of value in that approach, at the same time it’s important to recognize that it not be treated as a mechanical approach that a simple three step method is like a recipe that if you just apply the correct methods that the application just emerges naturally. For example, in my opinion much creativity and careful thinking must take place in order to arrive at valid applications.

**Valid Application**

But in addition to that I think perhaps to take that threefold approach in addition one must also recognize the more dialogical application or the more interactive nature of application. As I said at the very start of the application process one is thinking in terms of not only the meaning of this text in its original context but usually if you think about it, when you approach a biblical text one is interested ultimately in asking how does this text apply to the modern reader. Some have proposed that application is more interactive, that is, at the very start of the process one begins to study the biblical text in its context, but also one is alert to possible analogies and applications and the possible relevance of that text to people today. I think two other factors, any application of the biblical text whether I’m extracting principle that I will apply in subsequent situations, any application of the text must conform to at least two factors, that is, that the principle must be guided by the broader context of the book itself, that is there must be coherence in what is going on in the text with a broader contexts. Second, any principle and its application must be consistent with the intention of that text, with the purpose of that text. What’s the text trying to do?

For example, we saw this with when we talked about legal literature and the genre of law. One of the laws that one finds in the Old Testament commands the farmers not to harvest their fields out to the edge but to leave some of the crops standing. One might ask is a valid application that this is only for farmers and that they should not harvest all their crops or it’s consistent with its intention with the broader context that the intention of this law is the way the poor would be cared for in the midst. So that according to the intention of that command or that law I ask how can that principle or that intention of caring for the
poor in that law, how can that be applied in my situation, again looking for analogies that are consistent with that law. So those two factors, the principle that we derive must be consistent and guided by the broader context and also be consistent with and guided by the text.

So what might the process of application look like, first of all again as an interpreter I enter the world of the text, I try to make sense of the text and understand it through applying the methods of interpretation that we’ve discussed by trying to understand the text in light of its broader historical context, in light of its literary context, in light of its genre, in light of its theological context. I try to understand the text and enter the world of text and understand it in its own terms. As I do so and I understand the text I begin to see possible connections between the ancient worlds of the text and my own world. I begin to see possible overlap between the biblical world and my own world. But I continue to study the text and I continue to weigh these possible correspondences in terms of whether they conform to the broader context of the biblical text. Do they conform to the intention and purpose to that text? In essence in allowing the questions and insights that I gain from the text to be challenged by the biblical text itself, I’m allowing perspectives on the text to be shaped by a study of the text itself. So I continue to study the biblical text in its world, I seek to hear the message of the text. Finally, I then test any proposed application against whether it fits the context and whether it fits the purpose or intention of the text. So that is a little bit more of an interactive approach then just following a rigid three step study the text in its original context, extract the principle and then look for methods of application. But then taking that method and looking at it more as an interaction with the text or again I try to enter the world of the text and start to recognize and explore possible correspondences but continually test those by looking at the text and test correspondences and applications by the broader context and the intention and purpose of the text.

**Obedience Response is Crucial**

There is a final step that’s often missed in application and that is the reader must respond by obeying it. It’s not enough to uncover or to come up with applications of the
text until one actually responds by obeying it and allowing the text to transform one’s life. The process of interpretation has not yet been completed until it evokes a response in the reader that is consistent with the response that is called for by the text itself. A couple of additional features to mention when it comes to application is first of all I’m convinced that interpretation of the biblical text must ultimately be done in the service of the church of Jesus Christ. The ultimate context of our scholarship and interpretation is not the college or seminary and it’s not our learned Bible societies, although those can supply important checks on the work that we do. Ultimately our interpretation has to be shown to be relevant to the church of Jesus Christ. Scripture is meant to shape the community of the church to which I belong. So application more than just asking what in my own life needs correcting, it also asks how I live out Scripture in the context of the church, the people of God. So ultimately interpretation and application must take place within the context of the church and must be of service to God’s people, the church of Jesus Christ.

The second relation to this when we do that we discover that God’s community of believers is transcultural and spans the globe and is far broader then the limited historical cultural context in which I find myself. So that I must also listen to the voice of others who have interpreted and read the text and applied it to themselves, in order to help me see new ways of seeing things, or to help correct where I may have misunderstood or misapplied the biblical text. I find more and more since all my teaching has been in a North American context, the United States of America, that often it’s my foreign students who have helped me see blind spots in my own interpretations and applications of biblical texts. They help me realize that I interpret the text from a North American western middle-class white perspective, not that that is a negative or will necessarily cloud the text. Sometimes I find that those who come from a situation of poverty or oppression are in a position to better understand and apply the biblical text because I think they come from a situation that’s more in line with the original historical and cultural context that the biblical text is addressing. Therefore, they may be in a position to help me understand the text better, because they come from a situation closer and more analogous to that of the biblical text.
For example, I used to read the book of Revelation and its visions of suffering oppression and persecution, either not sure how to apply it, often I thought that this is something that really doesn’t apply to me but maybe someday later it will apply. I often applied it to the rather menial and occasional minor ridicules and inconveniences that I suffered. But from listening to those of my foreign students who have come from cultures where suffering and death for the sake of the Gospel or some were suffering oppression and death are a reality, especially at the hands of foreign oppressors, I began to read the book of Revelation in a new light. I read it not as a reference to my own occasional menial, trivial inconveniences but instead I began to read it from the perspective of others, that is, I begin to ask how might I be guilty of contributing to the suffering and oppressing of others. How can I alleviate the pain, suffering and the injustice that others are experiencing.

So I think it’s important again number one as we think about application to do our application and interpretation within the context of the church, to understand how the biblical text is relevant to the church of Jesus Christ. Second is recognizing the church of Jesus Christ is transcultural, as Revelation says the church consists of “people from every tribe and language and tongue and nation,” I need to interpret in light of my brothers and sisters and other cultures and countries, and how they are reading the biblical text as well. Indeed to listen because they might help me see through my own blind spots in interpretation and application.

So application then should not be seen as an add-on or something tacked on to the end of the interpretive process. It’s the very goal of the interpretive process. In some respects it starts at the very beginning of the interpretive process where I enter the world of the biblical text, I try to understand it in light of what the author was intending. But I start to consider possible areas of relevance to my own day. I try to uncover principles that may be able transcend the original historical situation and apply to my own situation. As I do so I must test whether it fits with the original historical, cultural and literary context, whether it’s consistent with the text and also whether it is consistent with the intention and purpose of the original text.
But all in all one must do this, one must apply the biblical text because the process of reading and interpreting the text is incomplete, is short circuited and stopped short unless one, not just explores areas of application, but unless one actually submits to the biblical text and allows it to transform us. Unless we respond to it in obedience in a way that is called forth by Scripture itself, we have not yet completed the process of interpretation.

What I want to do in the next session is kind of draw everything together and be able to perhaps put this together in a framework. In other words, what might an interpretive approach look like especially from an evangelical perspective? How might we integrate the methodologies and criticisms that we’ve talked about? What might an interpretive approach look like? And then we’ll also end by applying that approach, showing how it works in a couple of biblical texts.

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