

The Application of Scripture

by
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Introduction

In simplest terms, application means to refer biblical statements to the *practice* of an individual or set of individuals. There is certainly a tendency among Christians to over-apply Scripture. One reason for this is that Bible colleges and seminaries often teach prospective church leaders to apply Scripture to the daily lives of their congregation every time they preach. Such an approach is specious, and dangerous in the extreme. It produces confused Christians who tend to lift material out of its context and to ignore the intended truth that the Holy Spirit is presenting through the human authors. Furthermore, it ignores the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose job it is to bring *practical understanding* of Scripture to those who study it. It is not the teacher's function to apply Scripture, it is the Holy Spirit's.

Before applying a passage of the Bible to one's self or others, one must have followed correct procedures of interpretation. The first, and most basic principle of application is that interpretation ***must always precede*** application. To apply before interpreting Scripture leads to chaos and misunderstanding. Yet, such is almost the universal practice.

Sadly, much application of Bible texts ignores the time consuming practice of interpretation. No Christian should attempt to apply a passage until he has studied the passage and determined its meaning by the use of principles of interpretation that are legitimate, and that can be explained when someone questions his interpretation. Once he has interpreted correctly, then the student is free to apply the truth *as it was intended*, but he must be careful to apply it (or to refrain from applying it) to himself correctly before he attempts to use it in ministry for others.

General Principles of Application

To avoid the misapplication of Scripture, we will review a few of the rules of application.

- ◆ Do not apply a passage to individuals or groups that the original author did not have in mind. Several elements go into this determination: to whom is the statement spoken or written? to whom does the statement refer? to whom do the pronouns in the statement refer? These are basic elements of interpretation, but tend, because of their need to analyze the referent involved, to limit the application of a statement correctly.
- ◆ While a passage may be applicable in different situations, there is only *one correct* application of any given passage of Scripture. The idea that there is one interpretation but many applications has no foundation in truth. Only one interpretation and only one correct application of a passage of Scripture exists. This is the normal approach to application in all other areas of communication and God used normal communication principles when He gave information to man.
- ◆ Scripture may be applied *only* when an individual or group has the same relationship to God as the original recipient. Since there are no apostles today, we may not apply those passages to ourselves which were originally applicable to them. See 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 as an example.
- ◆ Passages in the gospels should never be applied outside the specific cultural and historical identification inherent in the passage. It is not legitimate to apply a general principle from a passage intended for specific application in an historical setting within one of the gospels.
- ◆ It is never legitimate to draw a principle from Scripture that was not purposed by the divine author. Unless a passage of Scripture *intends* to teach a general principle, the interpreter should not attempt to derive such a principle. Even if the principle underlies the passage, the passage is undoubtedly teaching an application of the principle, *not the principle itself*. It is up to the interpreter to decide whether that application is intended for him or his audience. For example, the principle of righteous living is taught throughout the Bible, but the means by which that righteous life is attained differs from household to household. While passages such as the Sermon on the Mount teach sexual morality, the means for meeting the requirement there differs greatly from the grace method taught by the New Testament apostles.
- ◆ Historical events occurred only once and cannot be repeated. The Day of Pentecost cannot be repeated in the life of the believer today. Nor can the last Passover feast that was observed by Christ and His disciples.
- ◆ Narrative passages are not to be applied to the individual directly. Narratives are for the purpose of showing God's working among people, and God may or may not be working the same way today. It is not the purpose of Biblical narrative to be made into an allegory and then applied. However, narratives can be used as illustrations and examples. Paul does so with those who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. But he did not, make the wanderings of Israel allegorical and then apply them to the Church. He did not make the sin in the wilderness somehow typical of Christian's sin today.
- ◆ There is no such thing as a "secondary" application. By "secondary application" we mean an application that ignores or violates the meaning of the text as determined by the literal, historical, grammatical procedure. The idea of primary and secondary application violates the correct single interpretation of a passage. One does not use some "secondary application principle" when using other forms of written or spoken communication. For example, one would not pick up a newspaper or magazine and attempt to apply the material to himself in a secondary manner. Secondary application is actually an attempt to use Scripture in any way that the reader wishes, rather than according to the principles of correct interpretation. We must believe what the Scripture says, not what we want it to say, or even what we have been taught that it says. Every believer is responsible before God to correctly approach and use the Bible.
- ◆ Passages applicable to people who are related to other ages and to dispensations given to other households are not applicable to people who are related to the present age and household. Since the believer is not under law today, we ought not apply those passage of the Bible which were intended for believers in the Old Testament who were under law. While a few (very few) practical passages in the Old Testament are not directly dispensationally related, most are. Only those practical passages which deal with the nature of the human condition as a whole can be applied to the believer today, and those passages are few indeed.
- ◆ The material from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John was not intended for the practice of the church, the body of Christ. Their material generally relates to the coming millennial state, the kingdom of God on earth. The only exception to this is the "Upper Room Discourse" of Christ in John 13-16, and even then, the believer must be careful, as some of the material was intended for the twelve disciples alone. Christ's earthly ministry was designed to be applied to Israelites (and some gentiles) who were looking forward to the kingdom, never, ever to the body of Christ.

The Application of Scripture

- ◆ The church is ***not*** the kingdom of God on the earth, and it is ***not*** the business of the church to “bring people into the kingdom.” Nor is the church to be confused with Israel, a common practice to day, it seems.
- ◆ The “Sermon on the Mount” and passages like it are not designed to teach Christians how to live. They are to prepare people for entering the millennial state (see Matthew 5:20). Such passages teach pre-kingdom law, and the Christian today is under no kind of law, but under grace.
- ◆ The Christian is limited in his application of Christian life truth to the epistles of Paul, John, Jude, and *certain passages* from the writings of Peter and James (both of these men wrote to early Jewish Christians, and have some material designed only for them). Also one may apply, with care, the *apostolic teaching* in the book of Acts (though not the *apostolic practice*, which was limited to the first century). However, some material in the epistles are intended for specific application to the original church recipients at the time of writing and ***may not*** be brought forward to today. The Epistle to the Hebrews is a special case. It was written to Hebrew Christians living in a transitional state. While many of the teachings in the book are true to the body of Christ generally, most are not, because they are addressed to believers living in an historical instance that has come and gone. Be careful with Hebrews. For more information, see my DVD’s on the Epistle to the Hebrews (available through gracealive.org).
- ◆ Passages that are intended for specific groups, such as fathers, may not be applied to others, such as wives or children. Many passages in the New Testament were written to specific individuals or classes of people, and the student may only apply them to himself when he is part of that class. This, of course, is common sense. Mothers are not fathers, men are not women, children are not their own parents, not every individual is a widow or orphan, and so on. These are obvious breaks on application. But there are other groups that are not so easily identified, and care must be taken. Some passages are only applicable to elders in local assemblies. Some passages were only applicable to Hebrews who became Christians during the first century (not those Hebrews who became Christians later). Some material written to certain churches was historically or culturally limited and only applicable to that church *at that time*.
- ◆ Therefore, before the student of Scripture applies a passage of Scripture to himself or others, he must think though the interpretation, and the elements that allow or disallow application of that passage. To do anything other is dangerous, and may mislead sincere believers into expecting results of an application that is not legitimate.

Application and Profitability

The author has had students who have stated that since all Scripture is profitable, it is all applicable. Those who make such assertions have not thought through the implications of their position. Many passages of Scripture were given for the purpose of general information, not for the purpose of direct application to the practice of the believer. Yet these passages are profitable, and are to be believed beyond question.

The fact that all Scripture cannot be applied equally to everyone in no way invalidates its authority over all believers. Christians must believe what it says, even when it is not applicable. Many of the Old Testament passages which are not for our practice do teach us truth about God, His nature, attributes, and essence. Some teach us about human nature, including those passages that relate to the sin principle coming into the world through Adam. And then there are all those Messianic passages which relate to the two comings of Christ, many of which will be applicable in the future, but are not applicable to us today.

We are not implying that the Old Testament is of no value. Indeed, we affirm that “all Scripture is profitable” and that we should study it all, and apply those portions to ourselves which God intended for us to apply.

Application and Authority

By biblical authority we mean the *right* of the Scriptures to determine the areas of faith and practice required of the individual believer. Misapplication of Scripture is, in fact, a denial that the Bible is authoritative for our practice. If we practice that which was not intended for our practice, we violate the communicative value of Scripture.

Several denials of biblical authority can be discerned in the practice of the modern church:

- ◆ The “no one tells me what to do” attitude is the argument from arrogance. This attitude, seldom expressed openly by Christians, finds its way into decisions when a person desires to practice something that they know is contrary to Scripture. Satan desires the Christian to act independently of God and His word (Romans 12:1-3), and the Christian must subordinate himself under the “mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:6) rather than assume an attitude of belligerent independence.
- ◆ The “we’ve always done it (or thought about it) this way” attitude is the argument from tradition. When tradition becomes a substitute for the correct interpretation and application of Scripture, tradition becomes the authority rather than Scripture. This is common among those who were raised in a particular denominational structure, or in a local church with particularly stubborn leadership.
- ◆ The “it isn’t practical in the modern world” attitude is the argument from practicality. Practicality is one of the most insidious ideas that people raise because it exchanges the methods of God for the methods of man. This argument is sometimes raised when correct biblical polity for the local church is presented, but it is also common in evangelism and missions. It is the “get the job” done attitude that is found in the “end justifies the means” practices.
- ◆ The “don’t make waves” attitude is the argument from timidity. The fearful are often discouraged when they know that the Bible teaches something different than what they see being practiced around them.
- ◆ The “I don’t care what the Bible says, this is what happened to me” attitude is the argument from personal experience (arrogance, part 2). This is particularly true today with the expansion of the charismatic movement. Rather than gain truth to be practiced from Scripture, charismatics often allow their emotional experience dictate how they interpret and apply Scripture. But this attitude is found also with Christians who have had particularly difficult life experiences.

The Extent of Authority

- ◆ Positively Stated: The entire Bible is authoritative for faith. We are required to believe it all, whether we understand it all or not.
- ◆ Negatively Stated: Not all Scripture is authoritative for practice to all individuals. Only those passages intended by God for a Christian to practice are authoritative for a Christian to practice. To practice material designed by God for a different group is analogous to reading other people’s mail, and paying other people’s bills.