

Putting the **TRUTH** to Work

**The Theory and Practice of
Biblical Application**

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I&R
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brows, to insist on his meaning or indicate its significance. Especially if the author is in no position to respond, readers have the ability to put texts to their own uses and can distort or pervert them. Nonetheless, this is not how we ordinarily play the game in written communication, especially when reader and writer hail from the same community, as is typically the case for Scripture. Writing does not elicit a response as directly as does conversation, but everything still has its purpose. Poetry ennobles. News reports inform. Lectures educate. Novels entertain. Essays shape opinion and policy. If, therefore, *all* language is purposeful, if people normally intend to do something with words, we must expect *biblical* language to be purposeful too.⁴

If the Bible were only ordinary language, it would all be relevant—even genealogies. But, of course, it is more than ordinary language. It is the true story about humankind, its plight and its redemption by the living God. It tells of God's redemption in every sphere of life, the spiritual, the physical, the intellectual, and the social. Just there, biblical genealogies are germane. Typical ancient Near Eastern genealogies were top-heavy with kings, gods, and heroes, but biblical genealogies are "bottom-dense" with lists of ordinary people. This reflects that God's plan was to create a "socially decentralized, non-hierarchical society" with interest in the "social health and economic viability" of its "lowest" units. And it suggests that we ought to strive for similar social effects today.⁵

A GENERAL THEOLOGY OF APPLICATION

One could lament the (apparent) clarity of 2 Timothy 3:16–17 since it functions as such a perfect proof-text for the relevance of Scripture that it permits us to ignore subtler evidence that all Scripture does indeed instruct in faith and righteousness. Later chapters will explore this evidence more thoroughly, but it is wise, early in our journey, to sketch a theology of application that further develops the twin goals of knowing God and conforming ourselves to him. We will note six themes, then explore Jesus' use (application) of the Old Testament at length.

4 The best defenses of the author and his intent are by E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

5 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 16–24, 152–53.

1. *Loving God.* The Bible is the story of salvation, the drama of a loving Father seeking estranged sons and daughters and restoring them to his loving family. After Adam's rebellion, God promises a child who will crush the deceiver who planted the thought of sin (Gen. 3:15). That child of Abraham will bless the world (Gen. 12:1–3); that Son of David will rule it forever (2 Sam. 7:8–16) until God fulfills the promise, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Jer. 11:4; 30:22; Ezek. 36:28; cf. Ex. 6:7). In Jesus the promise comes to fruition as he ransoms children from every nation and reconciles them to himself. The terminology varies, but the first theme of application is that God's prior love calls forth faith, obedience, and affection for the Father.⁶

2. *Responding to God.* When God acts and a biblical narrative records the event, the author usually pauses to report the response of the witnesses, whether it be faith, fear, penitence, astonishment, anger, or praise. By reporting how witnesses responded then, narratives indicate how readers should respond now. In the Gospels, some narratives explicitly commend faith (Matt. 8:1–13; 9:1–6, 18–36; 14:22–33; 15:21–28; Luke 7:36–50; 17:11–19; 19:1–10) or rebuke blindness (Mark 8:17–21). Others subtly lead readers to proper evaluations. When Jesus raises Lazarus, John juxtaposes the faith of Martha with the plots of the Jewish leaders (11:21–27, 45–53). Jesus also heals two chronically ill men by pools in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Both times Jewish leaders criticize the healing. Both times Jesus seeks the healed man afterward. But one betrays him to the authorities (John 5:1–15), while the other defends and believes in him (9:1–38).⁷ Get the point?

3. *Learning from biblical history.* Moses held Israel accountable to learn from her past. Each generation should see God's saving acts, recent or distant, as proofs of his covenantal love and authority and as summons

6 The idea that gratitude has no place in Christian life because it is a deficit motivation (based on owing something, rather than delight in giving it) conflicts with Heb. 12:28; Ex. 19:3–8; and Deut. 7:7–16. There are additional motives, but we do owe God obedience.

7 Whether the man from the pool of Bethesda was a traitor or a fool, he certainly identified Jesus to the authorities, who were incensed at the alleged violation of the Sabbath. Deliberate betrayal is at least a possibility.

to covenant loyalty. Thus, before entering Canaan, Moses told Israel that the covenant God made on Sinai forty years earlier “was not with our fathers . . . but . . . with all of us who are alive here today. The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. . . . ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt. . . . You shall have no other gods before me’ ” (Deut. 5:1–7). This is striking for, excluding Joshua and Caleb, all members of the desert generation were unborn or juveniles when Israel escaped Egypt. Moses knew that, of course, yet he says, “God made a covenant with *us*.” In the divine economy, a covenant with the fathers remains in effect for the children.⁸ Paul says Israel’s history applies to the church. “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us” (Rom. 15:3–4). Israel’s dismal history of wilderness failures warns us “to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6–11). Romans agrees with this principle, declaring that the accounts of Abraham’s justification and David’s forgiveness were not written for their sake alone, “but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness” through faith (Rom. 4:1–8, 23–24).

4. *Imitating God*. At creation, God made man and woman in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). In redemption he re-created us “to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Now we must be holy because he is holy, loving as he is love, just as he is just, merciful for he is merciful.

5. *Imitating Christ*. A believer’s life follows the contours of Christ’s. God destines us to become like Christ, “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29). Like Jesus we pass through hardship and tribulation before entering glory (Acts 14:22; Phil. 3:10–11). He says, “If

8 Notice multigenerational continuity again when each generation takes the first-fruits of Canaan to the house of God, confessing that God gave them the land. As the priest receives the gift, each Israelite must declare, “My father was a wandering Aramean and he went down into Egypt. . . . But the Egyptians mistreated us. . . . Then we cried out to the LORD . . . and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery. . . . So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . . He brought us to this place and gave us this land. . . . And now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me” (Deut. 26:1–11). Thus the past regulates Israel’s present.

anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34, my translation). He washes his disciples’ feet and declares, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example” (John 13:14–15). But our imitation of Jesus extends beyond suffering and service and sounds almost unlimited. “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matt. 10:24–25).

6. *The path of blessing*. A lesser and more easily misconstrued theme intimates that if communities and individuals do things God’s way, life ordinarily goes better. The world is set up to run God’s way; thus, “The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast” (Prov. 5:22). Again, “The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness” (11:5).⁹ Those who obey the law find freedom and blessing (James 1:22–25). Further, God rewards obedience and punishes iniquity. All will render an account of their good or evil. Psalm 34:12–16 joins both themes:

Whoever . . . loves life
and desires to see many good days,
keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from speaking lies.
Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
the face of the LORD is against those who do evil,
to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

The “blessings of obedience” motif runs strongest in wisdom literature, which stresses the value of God’s wisdom, whether gained from parents (Prov. 1–5) or from the word of God (Pss. 19, 119).

9 This theme appears in the law too. In Deut. 10:12–13 God gives Israel his commands “for your own good.”

But two caveats are in order. First, the righteous can still suffer for doing the good (1 Peter 3:14). Second, even believers can return to a performance mentality. Forgetting that our obedience is never meritorious, we take off the white robe given to us by Christ and struggle to clothe ourselves in the rags of our own righteousness. Yet, if we avoid persecution and self-righteousness, obedience ordinarily brings blessing.

JESUS' THEOLOGY OF APPLICATION

Jesus' Use of Scripture

Jesus' reading of his Scripture, the Old Testament, is an important guide to our use of Scripture. With such a rich topic, we must be selective. Therefore, while making other points, I will emphasize that Jesus' use of Scripture highlights its testimony to him.¹⁰ Further, his critiques of misuses of Scripture often pivot on a failure to recognize that testimony. We will see, therefore, that Jesus models theocentric application.

1. *Jesus and biblical law.* We anchor Jesus' legal use of Scripture in his affirmation that every stroke, every command of the law must be fulfilled (Matt. 5:17–20). His interpretations both deepen the demand and expand the scope of the law. He deepens the law's demand by addressing the motives behind overt sin (5:21–48). He bans murder and adultery, then forbids that we even harbor such thoughts. He rebukes narrow application of the law by applying it to new situations, such as dining habits and personal conflicts. When the Pharisees criticize Jesus for dining with sinners, he quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." When describing the way the church must resolve offenses, he uses Moses' law, "Every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16). When the Pharisees censure his Sabbath observance, he pronounces the prime purpose of the day, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

The conclusion of Mark 2 registers Jesus' egocentric use of the law. He is the Lord of the law: "The Son of Man is Lord even of the

10 This section owes something to Craig Evans, who divides Jesus' use of the Old Testament into the legal, the prophetic, and the analogical ("Old Testament in the Gospels," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. H. Marshall [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992], 579–90).

Sabbath" (2:28). He keeps it perfectly: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46). He interprets it definitively: "You have heard that it was said, but *I say to you . . .*"¹¹ Moreover, he invites those who cannot keep the law to turn to him for aid. He blesses the poor in spirit, who know their spiritual inability (Matt. 5:3). He offers his light yoke, in place of the heavy yoke of the law (11:28–30). He gives himself as a ransom for sinners (20:25–28).¹²

2. *Jesus and biblical prophecy.* Misconceptions about prophecy can impede our grasp of Jesus' use of prophetic Scriptures. We view fulfillment of prophecy as a proof of Scripture's veracity and God's sovereignty, and it is. Unfortunately, this "proof" concept leads some to regard prophecy as pious fortune-telling. The exact correspondence between forecast and event impresses readers; only God could orchestrate such agreements between prediction and history.¹³ This slightly misguided mind-set can generate a dead-end exchange in some Bible studies:

Q: Why did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey?

A: To fulfill Scripture.

Q: But why did he fulfill this Scripture at this time?

A: Because it was prophesied.

This kind of (un)reasoning is inert because it nearly gets things backward. To overstate slightly, Jesus did not do things because they were predicted; they were predicted because God ordained that he do them. The prediction did not cause the action as much as the future action caused the prediction. Predetermined by God outside time, the action was presented by God to the mind of the prophet before its time, so that when the time arrived, the action would be recognized as the will of God.

This fulfillment motif is also egocentric. Jesus often predicted the events surrounding his death, saying that they fulfilled Scripture (Matt. 21:4; 26:54–56; 27:9; Mark 12:10; 14:49; Luke 18:31; 22:37; John 13:18;

11 The Greek, *egō de legō hymin* is emphatic six consecutive times (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

12 Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), 180–83.

13 C. H. Dodd, *According to Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 127.

to him, if we respond to them humbly. So we live in tension. Knowing our weaknesses, we stand by God's mercy. Yet we strive to model Christlike virtue. We know God's power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 11–12).³⁵ Thus God solves the problem of infinite demand with his gift of infinite succor.

SUMMARY

This chapter has explored the courage, character, and credibility of interpreters. As before, the analysis begins and ends with God. Faith in the God who speaks grants interpreters the courage to speak boldly against the preferences of their generation. Moreover, when we aspire to adorn our messages with a life that even roughly resembles our rhetoric, we know that if there be any purity of aspiration, if there be any progress in conduct, it is a divine gift.

If God gives a passion to live the truth, two things follow. First, the desire to practice what we discover improves our ability to understand and do the word. The attempt to live the word verifies sound ideas and exposes faulty ones. When we look squarely at our failures, and seek to remedy them, authenticity pushes its way into our messages. Partial successes purge errors and disclose more truth. Second, a wise life is beautiful (James 3:13). Like a flawed diamond, even a flawed holiness attracts attention. It grants us a hearing in church and society. Even partial goodness draws those who seek refuge from the storm of human corruption and brokenness (Isa. 2:2). The first visible marks of progress will adorn our words. As Paul says, if we watch our doctrine and our life, we will save both ourselves and our hearers (1 Tim. 4:15–16). So a preacher is like a spiritual midwife, needing skill with the word and with people. Yet more than skill, he needs faith in God, who works in him to create courage, character, and credibility.

4

The Seven Biblical Sources for Application

My family moved to coastal North Carolina when I was fifteen. My next-door neighbor, also fifteen, delighted to show me the pleasures of life on the sound. One Saturday morning he ordered me, "Daniel, get you a basket and get on your bicycle. We are going oysterin'." Infected by his excitement, I obeyed, though I had no idea how I would recognize or collect the animals. We pedaled to a mud flat, a shell-covered inlet, at low tide. Hopping off, we ambled wordlessly toward the sun-dappled water. Waiting, watching, wondering for half an eternity, I finally broke the silence. "So," I asked, "where are the oysters? How do we get them?" My friend whooped and laughed. Bending over, he pried up an irregular shell and waved it at me. "Bud, you are standing right on top of them!" Indeed, thousands of oysters lay like half-sunken cobblestones around us, waiting for us to pluck them up.

Finding the relevance of Scripture should resemble the gathering of oysters. If we know where to look, there is an abundance in almost every text. Indeed, I believe most texts hold more potential applications than one coherent message could develop. The chief task, then, is not finding something to say, but fingering the one chief application that drives home the central theme of the text and arrays the subpoints around it.¹ Of course, genealogies, apocalyptic visions, and oracles

See 1 Cor. 1–4; 2 Cor. 10–13; and Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*, 50–53.

1 Sydney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eer-

against pagan nations prove more stingy than Romans or Psalms, but every text offers something on the life of faith.

Interpreters are the midwives of communication, hired especially for the difficult cases. The task of biblical interpretation, stripped to its essentials, is to mediate an ancient, authoritative message to audiences having difficulties grasping Scripture's meaning and relevance. Some interpreters think their task is one-directional, moving only from a text to an audience. But wise interpreters move the other way too, mediating the questions of their audience to the Bible. They know that most hearers approach the Bible with existential questions in hand. Thus interpreters can begin either with points the text generates, or with the questions people bring to it. This chapter presents seven ways that the biblical text generates applications. The next summarizes the four questions people bring to the text.

The Bible is not a set of instructions, but all of it is instructive. Every text is meaningful.² Biblical texts instruct us seven ways: through *rules, ideals, doctrines, redemptive acts in narratives, exemplary acts in narratives, biblical images, and songs and prayers.*³ This list partially overlaps the various genres of Scripture, but we are not thinking of genre analysis. Each passage fits into one particular genre, but most passages include more than one of the seven sources of application.

RULES

Rules summon obedience to specific commands. They require definite actions in narrowly defined cases. We might expect rules to be easy to apply, but they pose challenges if the specific situation they

mans, 1988), 154–84; Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 46–51.

2 Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 6; Richard Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), 313–14.

3 This list owes something to Richard B. Hays, who suggests the quartet of rules, principles, paradigms (which seems to cover all uses of narrative), and symbol world (which includes what I call doctrine, symbol, and prayer) in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), and “Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics,” *Interpretation* 44

regulate no longer exists. For example, Moses said that if a “bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death” (Ex. 21:29). But how many people own bulls? To the automobile-driving crowd the rule seems utterly irrelevant. If we ever own a bull that has the habit of goring, we will know *precisely* what to do. But few do, so we are tempted to ignore Moses’ rule.

Similarly, Paul tells the Corinthians that if an unbeliever invites them to a meal and tells them the meat has been offered to an idol, they should not eat it (1 Cor. 10:27–30). The rule is clear and relevant in cultures where people still worship idols, but how many Western Christians have been warned off a hamburger, “Before you start to eat, let me tell you . . .”? Even a simple command such as “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16) is complicated in North America by an unthinking consensus that it is passé. This entices us to ignore laws that fail to address familiar situations.

Of course, some rules do apply today just as they did two thousand years ago. For example, Jesus said that when one disciple sins against another, the offended party should go in private and correct him so as to win his repentance (Matt. 18:15). Again, Moses gave a relevant rule when he commanded judges to show no partiality and accept no bribe, since “a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise” (Deut. 16:19).

To apply Exodus 21, we must discern what, in our culture, resembles the case of the goring bull and apply Moses’ principle to it. By contrast, Matthew 18:15 is so clear and relevant that, exegetically speaking, there is little to say.⁴ But even here application entails more than stating commands. Teachers must also lead people through their objections and fears, through the obstacles that make obedience seem impossible. To put it another way, if Christians balk at rebuking a brother, the root may be a fear of rejection, an ugly scene,

(1990): 47–51. See also James M. Gustafson, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics,” *Interpretation* 24 (1970): 430–55; Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 1–15.

4 Matt. 18:16–18 has complexities that invite comment, but 18:15, by itself, is straightforward.

or a counterattack. These fears may overrun the desire to obey. When wise teachers proclaim such texts, they mention the impediments to obedience and motivate people to overcome them.

IDEALS

Ideals or principles guide a wide range of behavior without specifying particular deeds. Here is a sampler of ideals: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39); “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33); “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26; Heb. 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15–16); “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18).

Like rules, ideals need not have the form of a command. For example, God says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6; cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7), an ideal that puts human welfare ahead of rituals. A related saying, “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22; Prov. 21:3; Heb. 10:5), observes that it is better to do what is right immediately than to turn to God for mercy after failing. These ideals do not dictate specific action in a particular situation, but they guide a wide range of dispositions and deeds.

Ideals present their own challenges. For example, the principle “Honor your father and your mother” is simple *conceptually*. But the way we follow the ideal changes over the years. A four year old honors her parents by obeying them. A fourteen year old gives honor by obeying without rolling her eyes. A twenty-four year old honors by listening to her parents’ directives carefully before gently explaining that she must make her own decisions now. A thirty-four year old respects his parents by maintaining a relationship in the hectic years of a young family and career. At forty-four or fifty-four, the parent-child roles reverse, as parents give bizarre advice, succumb to quixotic fears, and refuse to take their medications. In this situation, honor means the child now begins to lead, but gently, respectfully, without demeaning the parent. No single rule can guide us through these transitions. We need meditation, wisdom, observation, godly examples, and prayer.

DOCTRINE

Doctrines state the cardinal truths of the faith, the fundamentals of a Christian belief system. The form for applying doctrinal statements

is, “If doctrine X is true, what follows?” Many judge doctrine to be impractical, perhaps because it is cerebral, perhaps because it seems that the only application is “Believe this.” But few things are more practical than a good theory.

Above all, good theories and doctrines possess great explanatory power. They enable us to see the world as it is and ourselves as we are. Doctrine lets us see the world God’s way—and few powers are more valuable. If we face one of life’s riddles, and turn it over and over, awaiting an answer, a doctrine will be near the root when clarity finally comes. The Christian instruction of children is largely a matter of explaining what the world is like. For example, a biblical doctrine of humanity is crucial. It explains why some people lie, break promises, and behave cruelly, and why others show kindness and concern.

For instance, when one daughter lamented that a friend had become insufferably bossy and proud immediately after winning a spot on a cheerleading squad, I applied the doctrines of sin and of creation in God’s image to help her understand and cope:

This is not entirely surprising for an unbeliever. Since we are created in the image of God, we all have a drive for significance. But your friend doesn’t know that. She has no sense of her identity and acceptance in Christ, so she has to find significance in something external, like cheerleading. Cheerleading gives her a new, higher status, and her fallen nature wants to get something out of it. That’s why she can’t handle her success.

Doctrine can also help children handle success without pride or confusion. If a child remembers that everything he has—both the raw ability and the desire to make the most of it—is a gift from God, pride evaporates. On the other hand, a self-effacing child is prone to deny or minimize her achievements. Here, too, we need doctrinal perspective. Parents might say to an excessively humble child,

It gives us such joy to see you using the gifts God has given you. We know you have never thought of yourself as a great student or athlete, but maybe God has given you more abilities than you realize. He has also sent people into your life who

have helped you develop those gifts—a coach who helped you fulfill your potential at soccer, and a math teacher who explains concepts well. Some people become conceited when they earn honors and we're glad you don't. But it's also important for you to understand that you have these gifts so you will know how to honor God and help others with them.

In another vein, as doctrines take hold, they slowly change us. We should ask, "How would my behavior change if it came into conformity with my professed beliefs?" How would the world change if the whole church acted on its beliefs?" When teaching doctrine, we should ask, "Who needs this doctrine most? In what times and settings? If someone were eager to put it into practice, where would he start? Who will resist, deny, or misunderstand it, and for what reasons?"

Let us return to cheerleading for a moment. If people are indeed created in God's image, the squad's sponsor will seek to turn down one candidate without demeaning her and approve another without suggesting she now has worth. Indeed, it is a constant challenge for everyone in authority—parents, teachers, managers, pastors—to learn how to deliver good or bad news, to children or adults, without giving wounds or causing pride.

Christians should also bear in mind that the promises of God are ultimately doctrinal statements, declarations of what God swears to do. When a judge says, "I sentence you to one year in prison," he means, "I decree and ensure it," not merely "I predict it." So God decrees and guarantees when he promises. That is, promises are more than predictions of what will happen. They are God's personal commitment to make things happen for those in relationship with him.⁵

REDEMPTIVE ACTS IN NARRATIVE

The central character in every Bible story is God, and some aspect of his redemptive purpose attaches to the main theme of every narrative. Therefore, while interpreters rightly draw moral lessons from

5 Christopher Wright says, "A promise is made to someone, whereas a prediction is made about someone" (*Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992], 65).

biblical history, theological lessons should come first. Thus the chief point of 1 Samuel 17 is not that David, a brave shepherd boy, slaughtered a giant, nor that we should be brave like David and slaughter our giants. Rather, both David and Goliath see their battle as a contest between their gods (17:43–47). When he cuts off Goliath's head, David says that the whole world will know "there is a God in Israel."

This will happen, David pronounces, because "the LORD saves, for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1 Sam. 17:47). Thus the moral lesson of the episode depends on David's grasp—and our grasp—of doctrinal truths concerning God's person and work.

When teaching narrative, therefore, we should focus first on the redeeming work of God and the divine self-revelation embedded in it. Old Testament narratives focus on God's covenants with Israel: his grace in establishing them, his faithfulness in upholding them, his justice and his mercy toward those who violate them. In some way, each gospel narrative points to Jesus' death and resurrection; some also hint at his restoration of all things. They also disclose the deity and the moral character of Christ—his compassion, righteousness, and wisdom.

Of course, narratives are not simply about God. They also recount faithful and rebellious responses to him. But even when men and women seize the stage, we should resist the temptation to hasten to use them as moral examples. Wicked acts are not just immoral; they constitute rebellion against God and his covenants. Likewise, noble acts are, above all, faithful responses to God's love as he initiated his covenants, endured infidelity to each one of them, and sent his Son to atone for our sins against him.

It is said that in a well-told tale "the whole story is the meaning," so that every element works together to produce the final effect.⁶ The whole story of the Bible is that God is redeeming a people for himself. The effect is to disclose the darkness of our hearts and misery of our condition, and to draw us to God's remedy.⁷

6 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), 73–75; see also Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 83.

7 We should note that some epistles and prophetic books have implicit and partial narratives. One can piece together a story from comments on half-reported events in epistles. Consider the conflict between Peter and Paul at Antioch

EXEMPLARY ACTS IN NARRATIVE

If some rush to draw ethical points from Scripture, others so fear moralism that they resist the idea of using narratives for moral lessons. But Jesus himself justifies the search for ethical principles from biblical narratives. In the temptation, his replies to Satan draw lessons from Israel's experience in the wilderness (Matt. 4:4, 7). Similarly, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus' Sabbath observance, he justified himself by drawing upon David's ritually illegal act in taking the priest's showbread when he fled from Saul. The needs of those on a divine mission, Jesus declared, take precedence over other moral obligations (Matt. 12:1–7).⁸

Biblical narratives generally show moral lessons rather than spelling them out. The books of Kings and Chronicles label the actions of kings "right" or "not right" before the Lord about twenty times, but otherwise the Bible rarely spells out its lessons. Instead of labeling things good or evil, it shows whether Israel was loyal or disloyal to the covenant and suggests comparisons with ethical precepts.⁹ Immoral actions sometimes violate biblical laws so clearly that even marginally skilled readers know to take warning. In the Gospels the portrait of religious impiety is so compelling that none need say, "Don't be like the Pharisees."

Israel's decision to make the golden calf in Exodus 32 illustrates the way narratives work. Since the law of Moses forbids the use of idols for worship (Ex. 20:4–6), we know the act is sinful. Moses' punishing Israel's revelry confirms our judgment. But the whole narrative shows the event to be more than a single sinful act. The people despaired when Moses long remained with God on Sinai. Lacking

(Gal. 2), and the tensions between John, Gaius, and Diotrephes (3 John). Narrative elements are scattered through the prophets. See, e.g., Isa. 7–8; Hos. 1; Amos 7. The debates between God and man even give Habakkuk and Malachi a narrative component.

8 Jesus even rebuked the Pharisees for failing to draw the lessons implicit in the text.

9 On the indirect ways for narratives to affect readers, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 81–89; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 114–30; Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 66–67, 75–100, 119–34.

faithfulness to the covenant, they asked Aaron to make them gods who would go before them (32:1). Aaron made an image of a golden calf, but steered the people to see the calf as a representation of the God who brought them out of Egypt. He even tried to turn the occasion into a festival to the Lord (32:4–8). He tried to avoid violation of the first commandment (no other gods) by tolerating a violation of the second (no images). But his plan failed. After the people offered their sacrifices, they immediately turned to revelry. The episode shows two things. First, Old Testament narratives invite their readers to compare the acts they see to the law of Moses. Second, the episode shows that sinful acts are not isolated misdeeds, for they rise from infidelity to God and covenant.

On the other hand, faithful acts in narratives can guide the life of faith. To return to David and Goliath, when David declares, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam. 17:37), we see the value of drawing on God's past faithfulness to meet present challenges. When David announces Goliath's doom, for "the battle is the LORD's," we sense the motivational power of faith (1 Sam. 17:47).

So biblical narratives do more than illustrate moral lessons. Some say we should never derive a moral lesson from a narrative unless another text states it explicitly.¹⁰ Perhaps, but it is more important to see that stories teach in ways that plain prose cannot. One lesson of David's victory is that a proper view of God stirs courage. But the story says it better.

Or take Solomon's journey into folly. It is one thing to say, "Beware of small acts of unfaithfulness," another to see Solomon's all but imperceptible compromises fester into virtual apostasy. Recall Deuteronomy's ban on a king's multiplication of wealth, wives, and horses (esp. Deut. 17:14–17). Then observe that Solomon first makes stalls for horses (1 Kings 4:26), then buys horses and chariots in Egypt (10:26–29), gathers mounds of gold and silver for the temple (chaps. 6–10), and finally acquires numerous wives (11:3). Once we notice this, it grips us

10 R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), 71–73; with more nuance, Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 330; Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 202.

more than the words “Beware of compromise” ever could. Straight assertions cannot match the power of narrative to embody truth.

BIBLICAL IMAGES OR SYMBOLS

The Protestant church makes such slight use of religious symbols that even the best known, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and laying on hands baffle some people. But the Bible is laden with symbols and symbolic actions, especially in the ministries of Jesus and the prophets.

Hosea married a prostitute (Hos. 1–3). Isaiah went about “with buttocks bared” for three years (Isa. 20). Ezekiel cut off his hair, chopped it up with a sword, and burned it with fire (Ezek. 5).¹¹ In their historical contexts, these acts required little comment. Jeremiah smashed a clay jar before the elders of Israel, signifying that, for her sins, God would smash Judah like that jar (Jer. 19). Later, King Jehoiakim countered Jeremiah with his own symbolic act, slicing up a scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecies and tossing it, a few lines at a time, into a fire (Jer. 36). Similarly, Malachi paints a word picture of Israel bringing blind and scabrous animals as sacrifices to the Lord. “Try offering them to your governor!” Malachi sneers, his words painting a thousand pictures (Mal. 1:7–8). These prophetic images shout, “God will judge. Be warned. Repent or suffer the consequences.”

The laws of Israel involve images too. Regulations concerning feasts depict fellowship with God. The system of animal sacrifice visually presents the principle that the wage of sin is death.

Like the prophets, Jesus used symbolic acts to punctuate some lessons. He dined with sinners to embody his acceptance of them. His symbolic deeds hint that he is the Messiah. He chose twelve disciples, representing the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, showing he is her peaceable king. He cursed a fig tree, a symbol of Israel, and cleansed the temple, acting as Israel’s judge (Matt. 21).¹²

Symbolic speech should be explained, but not too much. Better

11 For more on symbolic acts see chap. 8, p. 210. Miracles frequently have a symbolic aspect.

12 For Jesus’ symbolic words and deeds in his final week, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 489–519.

to leave room for imagination. Images capture the mind by making abstractions concrete. “God is compassionate and authoritative” is abstract; “God is our Father” is concrete. I once heard a sermon on sexual purity for teens based on Solomon’s imagery for a young woman: “If she is a wall, we will build towers of silver on her. If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar” (Song of Sol. 8:9). “Be a wall, not a door—and certainly not a revolving door!” was the speaker’s refrain. No one missed his point.

Biblical imagery creates what we might call an “aesthetic of application.” Take, for example, Proverbs’ picture of the sluggard:

The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road. . . .”
As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth. (Prov. 26:13–15)

Now that’s lazy, so lazy that Proverbs need not add, “Don’t be lazy; don’t be like the sluggard.” We get the picture! We either resolve, “I will never play the sluggard,” or ask, “Why do I look like a sluggard at times? How can I stop?” Here, too, the Bible does not *tell*, it *shows* the beautiful or ugly life.

Symbols and images may overlap with our prior categories, but have a life of their own. Consider the cross. Is it an element of the gospel narrative, a part of the doctrine of salvation, or a moral ideal (“Take your cross and follow me”)? Perhaps all three. Once someone knows the doctrine, meditation on the cross may spur sacrificial service as much as would a regular command. The cross also questions us. Are we willing to suffer loss for God’s cause? For any cause? Finally, it reminds us that God’s atonement covers us if we fail the inquiry.

SONGS AND PRAYERS

Though they have a narrower scope than the other sources for biblical application, songs and prayers have their own voice in shaping the life of faith. For example, we know that the Psalms teach believers how to praise God, but they also teach us how to lament, give thanks, and even express anger. They speak the language of the heart,

especially for the storms of life. The Psalms, Luther said, “teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies on the bottom of it. They instruct us to speak earnestly amid storms and winds of every kind. Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise?” Where does one find “more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation?” In the Psalter saints find words that fit their case and inform their emotional life.¹³ By meditating on them, we also learn to treasure gratitude, praise, humility, awe, justice, and righteousness.¹⁴ They invite us into a world that values something besides ceaseless activity. Biblical songs and prayers often contain doctrinal statements as well as symbols and ideals, yet their distinguishing mark—the direct address to God—gives them a special flavor.

Songs and prayers of praise may be most likely to touch the emotions or the spirit (not that the cognitive element is absent), but they have a second effect. If it is true that people learn to value what they behold, it is truer that people value what they praise. If we praise God for his justice, we prize justice. If we praise him for his loving-kindness, we cherish loving-kindness. By praising God for such qualities, we treasure them and are drawn to them ourselves.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIST

Two points should be made about our list of biblical sources for application. First, we do not claim that biblical texts generate applications in precisely seven ways, no more, no less. There are several ways to slice the pie. Seasoned scholars have presented shorter lists, especially when seeking simplicity.¹⁵ Indeed, one could subordinate the last two categories to the first five; in fact, only the first five get full development in this volume.¹⁶ Our list is longer to suggest the many modes

the Bible uses to convey spiritual and ethical truth. It appeals most directly to the mind and the will in doctrines and commands. It appeals to the heart and imagination more by narrative, imagery, and songs.

Second, while I believe Scripture instructs through rules, ideals, doctrines, narratives of redemptive and exemplary acts, images, and songs and prayers, this list is not a catalog of the genres of Scripture, such as prophecy, poetry, parable, and narrative. The genres of Scripture only partially overlap the seven sources. Specifically, genre analysis is a more restrictive task, with the goal of categorizing a book or a section of a book as law (e.g., Deuteronomy), history (1 Samuel), or prophecy (Isaiah). The problem is not that most books contain several genres (although they do). The issue is that a passage may precisely fit one genre yet incorporate several of the seven sources for application. That is, a doctrinal text may contain ideals and images as well as doctrine. A narrative will describe redemptive and exemplary acts, but doctrines, prayers, and rules may also be embedded in it.

To illustrate, Luke 11:1–13 is clearly an ethical discourse on prayer, but readers should look for more than guidance on prayer per se. Let’s closely examine some of the ways the text has relevance (see table 1).

Clearly, this text, divided into several lessons, offers several lines of application.¹⁷ It contains an ideal pattern for prayer. It invites readers to reexamine their concept of God. Perhaps they harbor the fear that God is stingy, reluctant to offer aid. Even if he were, Jesus says, they should not give up prayer. God is a father who takes pleasure in giving his children good gifts. The problem, if there is one, is that an excess of potential ideas threatens to obscure the main point in a plethora of lesser ones.

A RANGE OF OPTIONS

I hope that pastors and teachers will shift from the challenge of finding various applications to that of choosing the *best* among abun-

13 Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86), 35:255–56.

14 Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 45.

15 See note 3 for Hays, Gustafson, and Longenecker. They take up the synthetic task of creating a biblical ethic. I stress the exegetical task of gathering materials for an ethic.

16 I decline to dedicate chapters to the last two categories because (1) I have little to add to what I said about songs and prayers in *Getting the Message* (Phillips-

burg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), 239–42; and (2) though images function differently from regular prose, they do serve the other categories.

17 Luke 11:1–13 bears all the marks of a textual unit: one theme, one place and time, one set of characters, and distinctive language (such as the “God is Father” inclusio).

TABLE 1.
SEVERAL APPLICATIONS OF LUKE 11:1-13

Minor exemplary act: Jesus has a habit of praying. The disciples seek to pray as Jesus does.	11:1. One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."
This looks like a rule—whenever you pray, do it this way; but it is actually an ideal for prayer.	11:2-4. He said to them, "When you pray, say: " 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.' "
Image: God is Father and provider.	
Doctrine: He is holy, expects holiness. He provides. He is King; he forgives; he leads us through life.	

A parable—an image—compares God to a stingy neighbor. Jesus anticipates that some will be reluctant to pray because they doubt that God will bother to answer. The parable invites reflection on the image of God as a cold neighbor.

Even if he were cold, the story says, he would still answer your requests, either due to the petitioner's persistence or because a refusal to answer reasonable requests would shame him.^a

Doctrinally, the passage shows that God acts for his name's sake. Since God will not deny his people, his children should not fear.

11:5-8. Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of [his shamelessness], he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

Doctrine: "It will be given" means God will give.^b Therefore, this is a promise, a doctrinal statement about the way God proves his goodness.

11:9-10. "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

A second image compares God (accurately) to a generous father who gives all we need. We have a series of motives to pray that rests on doctrines about humanity, God the Father, and God the Spirit.

11:11-13. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

a I prefer the second interpretation, believing the Greek indicates that the man inside the house rises and gives bread, not because of the knocking of the man who asks for help, but because of the desire to avoid the shame of violating social norms that require him to grant the urgent and reasonable request. See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner, 1963), 157-59, esp. n. 28; Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 125-33; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 465.

b When a passive verb does not specify the agent (no "it will be given by _____"), one should supply the name of God. It has been omitted according to the Jewish custom in the New Testament Era of avoiding use of the name of God if possible. Called the "divine passive," this construction appears over one hundred times in the New Testament. See Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 11; Robert Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1995), 63-64.

dant options. We will see in the next chapter that there are actually far more than seven paths for application. Specifically, while texts generate applications seven ways, people invite applications by asking four types of spiritual or ethical questions: questions concerning their duty, their moral character, their goals in life, and the need to discern the truth among competing worldviews. Since we can join all four questions with any of the seven avenues for texts, the result is not eleven

but, theoretically, twenty-eight areas to examine in searching for the relevance of a text (fig. 11). Of course, some categories, such as duty and rule or discernment and doctrine overlap, so that there are actually fewer than twenty-eight options. Still, it may help visual thinkers to portray all the options on a grid, as long as we view it as a guide for interpretation rather than a rigid template.

To sample how the categories might work together, take the begin-

FIG. 11.
TWENTY-EIGHT OPTIONS FOR RELEVANCE OF A TEXT

	Duty	Character	Goal	Discernment
Rule				
Ideal				
Doctrine				
Narrative (redemptive acts)				
Narrative (exemplary acts)				
Image				
Song or prayer				

ning of the *ideal* prayer, "Father, hallowed be your name." It is certainly our *duty* to open our prayers with concern for God's nature and honor. The category of *character* urges us to ask, "What kind of person is able to begin her prayers with petitions for God's glory and kingdom rather than her personal concerns, whether petty or great?" Jesus also suggests that we place God's honor ahead of our ambitions and needs. Further, it takes *discernment* to see that it is right to begin with God's glory and cause rather than our own. This is not to imply that every passage contains dozens of applications of every sort. Many of the slots will be empty for any text. But there are many options. An ideal, for example, can instruct us regarding our character and goals, not just our duties. Again, an image can affect our sense of duty or our goals, not just our discernment. Thus the seven sources and the four questions interact in various ways.

SUMMARY

Most biblical texts offer several lines of application. They typically manifest two or more of the seven ways a text can generate applications. Further, we can develop any of them through the four types of questions people ask. As a result, teachers should rarely struggle to find an application for a passage they cover. More likely, they should toil to find the central points among dozens of lesser ones. They should struggle not to *find* oysters, but to decide which ones to keep.

5

The Four Aspects of Application

In too many churches, people hear the same applications, in much the same words, week after week. Week by week they hear that they should pray more, evangelize more, serve more; be more holy, more faithful, more committed. Contaminated by traces of legalism, such messages grow dull and predictable. If the preacher's ultimate crime is to promote heresy, the penultimate crime is to make the faith seem boring. The problem rises largely from a tendency to equate application with telling people what to do. But application involves more than issuing commands (fig. 12).

According to our model for application, interpreters are mediators, responsible both to bring the Bible to the people and to bring the people to the Bible. Bringing the people to the Bible means showing them that the Bible answers their questions. Ethicists have long organized the moral questions people have in four categories. People ask, and the Bible answers, these four essential questions:¹

1 My schema owes something to Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 35–65; and Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 15–45. The Bible does address the four areas outlined, yet this is not the only way to slice the pie. Since Aristotle, inquiry has stressed duty, character (or virtue), and goals. With the rise of pluralism, relativism, and postmodernism, we need a fourth category, the ability to discern which voice to trust in the maelstrom of world-view options. See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984); and *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).