

Doriani, Daniel M. *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001. 342 pp. \$18.00.

Purpose

"This book is for those who want to cross a river representing barriers to the communication of God's word wrought by the passing of time and changes in cultures and language." (12). "The goal, then is to steer between naïve optimism and critical skepticism. The naïve optimist says bridge-building is too intuitive to require serious study. The critical skeptic judges it impossible or unnecessary to build bridges at all" (32).

Entire books on sermon application are hard to find; mostly what can be found are chapters on application. Homileticians focus on communication, exegetes focus on meaning, ethicists on principles, and application falls through the cracks. Doriani seeks "to fill the gap and to tread the seam between academic and pastoral theology." (ix).

Putting the Truth to Work is necessary because application takes skill, intuition, and method. Thus, "theoretical study is justified." Like learning to play baseball, an introduction to rules and equipment is necessary, but then on to the game. Skills are developed as the preacher watches others. If the preacher's goal is excellence, he must "find a coach and become a student of the game" (39, 40). This book is needed in that its author coaches preachers through its pages. The book is also necessary because "much of this book explores ways of putting Paul's promise" that Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16, 17) to work in our lives and sermons (41). Finally, it is necessary because, "while . . . serious scholars have begun to consider it, publications on the subject remain

rare" (viii). In a footnote the author lists several recent book-length efforts. D. A. Carson agrees: "There is not much written that deals thoughtfully and creatively with the theory and practice of applying Scripture to today's world" (back cover). The burden of the author is that the unashamed proclamation of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection "is the remedy for sin; it supports the most fundamental application, the call to faith in the risen one" (50).

Summary

Chapter 1 discusses the nature of biblical sermon application. The prime issues for an excellent approach to application are three: "The goal of application is (to) lead people to know God and conform themselves to him. . . . The nature of application . . . has a definite but permeable boundary with the exposition of Scripture. . . . The center of application is not *commanding* (author's emphasis) but expressing truth so that its relevance is obvious." Chapter 2 addresses God (and Christ)-centered application: "The prophets anticipated him, the apostles looked back to him, and he continually pointed to himself as he handled the law, prophecy, and biblical themes. In doing so, he declared himself greater than Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Jonah, and Solomon; greater than the temple and priest, David and the kingship. He is the great prophet, the final judge, the wisdom of God." Jesus, the prophets and apostles declared this, and preachers today must restate it (58). Jesus is in all the Scriptures (Luke 24; John 5). He is ubiquitous, unique, and unavoidable! Chapter 3 exhorts, "Faith in the God who speaks grants interpreters the courage to speak boldly against the preferences of their generation." Those who interpret and proclaim God's word must do so with "courage, character, and credibility" (80). Chapter 4 develops seven ways that biblical texts generate sources for sermon application. The struggle will not be to find applications, but to find the central ones among lesser ones. Or, to say it in a slightly different way, the problem in application may be "that an excess of potential ideas

threatens to obscure the main point in a plethora of lesser ones" (93). Chapter 5 continues the discussion by instructing on four aspects of application. Expressed in questions, they are as follows: What is our duty? What is noble character? What goals must we pursue? How is right discerned from wrong? Chapter 6 give the theological reasoning for the valid use of the four questions introduced in the previous chapter. Practical suggestions as to the use of the questions are offered. The goal of this chapter is to equip preachers "to expand their concept of the relevance of Scripture" and "the way our questions generate applications" (155).

After the Interlude, Chapter 7 works out a plan for applying biblical narrative. Preachers will tend toward anthropocentric messages unless they focus of God's activities and human responses to them, so that preaching can "progress toward theocentric yet diverse applications" (188). Guidelines for applying narrative texts are covered in Chapter 8. First, narratives tell the Lord God's story of redemption. Second, narratives summon responses. Third, "The Bible takes no interest in free-floating moral stories." Fourth, "narratives suggest when the author intends a protagonist to set a precedent." Fifth, there are limits to imitation. Honor design, do not spiritualize incidentals, and let the complete story instruct the hearer/reader (211-212). Chapter 9 contains a plan for applying doctrine. Doctrine is devalued in our day, yet it is vital to join doctrine to practice for the building up of the church. The relevance of doctrine is found in meditative more than in methodical processes (239). Chapter 10 addresses sermon application of ethical texts. There are four processes: determine the meaning for the original audience by way of exegesis; find the principles as originally given and transfer them to today; avoid "soft legalism" by considering character, goals, and discernment, not just duty; and lead hearers to God (259). Chapter 11 covers various issues in the application of ethical texts. "This chapter develops an earlier claim (Chapter 6) that Christians can present duties and give concrete

guidance without descending into legalism" (278). Chapter 12 is about Christ-centered sermon application. We can "hope for application that is deep, varied, and specific, yet God-centered and grace-oriented" (304). Preachers have known the aspects of application . . . "and rue our perversion of all" of them (304). Chapter 13 deals with the matter of selecting a preaching text. Short texts are easily taken out of context and are prone to "subjective and moralistic application." Long texts try to accomplish too much. Select texts that bring whole stories and whole ideas. Text selection is both art and science. There is more than one way to do it, in many cases. In any case, wisely choosing a text aids precision in interpretation and application (319).

Critical Assessment

Dorani's purpose is worthy: to help preachers "to cross a river representing barriers to the communication of God's word wrought by the passing of time and changes in cultures and language" (12-13). The gap is formidable, both chronologically and geographically, between the Old and New Testament prophets and apostles to the preachers and hearers here and now. To provide the tools for application, as the author does in his book, is laudable. The "tools" of guess work and neglect will not serve to bring the water of application out of the well of the Bible. The author did accomplish his purpose. Just a glance at the table of contents shows that he has a workable plan for bridging the gap between "then" and "now."

Dorani states, "The center of application is not *commanding* (author's emphasis) but expressing truth so that its relevance is obvious" (39). Haddon Robinson says something similar: "A sermon touches life. It demands practical application. That application, though, need not always be spelled out." He goes on to illustrate by imagining that a friend borrowed his car, got a flat tire, and called for instructions on how to access the spare tire and the key for the wire rim. After giving his friend those instructions, he does not have to say, "Now I exhort you, change the

tire."¹ I agree with Robinson that the preacher does not always need to "spell out" the application. I disagree somewhat with Doriani that the preacher need not command but should rather express truth so that its relevance is obvious. At times the center of application *is* to issue a command. And Doriani's "expressing truth so that its relevance is obvious" is not always going to happen, especially in evangelistic preaching where the natural man cannot comprehend the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). Obvious relevance is also less likely to happen in such a post-modern, biblically illiterate, anti-authority culture as ours. A seminary professor told me that if I let my light shine, people will be unlikely to see my example and give glory to the heavenly Father (Matt 5:16) unless I help them make that connection. The exception might be if the connection is as obvious as in the spare tire example above.

Five times the author used the word "egocentric" to refer to Jesus: Jesus' use of the law (48), His fulfillment motif (49), and to describe "Jesus' critique of Jewish misinterpretation of Scripture (which) shows the same theocentric and egocentric character" (51, see also 280). A dictionary definition of "egocentric" is, ". . . limited in outlook or concern to one's own activities or needs."² Surely a better word is available, one that does not border on irreverence and perhaps imply that our Savior is limited and self-absorbed in His behavior and in His very character.

Two vital topics, the priority of prayer and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, were given little attention in the book. In the Index "Holy Spirit" merits only one mention (137), and attention to prayer does not fare much better (91-93, 96)

In his book *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, Sidney Greidanus fills in some of the gaps in Doriani's book. Whereas Doriani does not address sermon theme as it relates

¹Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 296.

²<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dictionary>. Accessed online on July 3, 2013.

to application, Greidanus instructs that, "A final function of the sermon theme is that it provides direction for the application of the sermon."³ Whereas Doriani has little to say about authorial intent as it relates to application, Greidanus (quoting Stuart) states, "Unless you are convinced that it is the intention of the Scripture that it be applied in a certain way, no suggestion as to application can be confidently advanced."⁴ Whereas Doriani does not address continuity and discontinuity, Greidanus reminds the reader that discontinuity must be seen

in the context of the all-encompassing continuity of one faithful covenant God, one covenant people, and one kingdom history. This all-embracing continuity provides the bridge across the historical-cultural gap. We can make use of that bridge by spotting analogies (another area Doriani does not emphasize) between the church addressed then and the church today.⁵

Finally, whereas Doriani addresses the need to bring out the not-so-obvious relevance of Scripture—How do imprecations, genealogies, travel records, visions of dragons, etc., teach, rebuke, correct, and train as 2 Tim 3:16-17 promises (41)?—Greidanus states, ". . . biblical texts are God's word *addressed* (author's emphasis) to his people and, therefore, already applied and relevant. Hence preachers today need not transform an objective entity in a relevant word but need only transmit a relevant message from the past to the present."⁶

Doriani's emphasis on bridge-building complements Chapter 4 of John R. W. Stott's classic book, *Between Two Worlds*.⁷ I appreciated the present book, and will rely on it for years to come. The author's call to courage, character, and credibility is encouraging and timely (80).

³Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 140.

⁴*Ibid.*, 166.

⁵*Ibid.*, 338.

⁶*Ibid.*, 182.

⁷John R. W. Stott. *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 135-179.