

# **No Longer Second Class Sermons: Redeeming the Topical Sermon's Reputation through Application**

Heather Joy Zimmerman, ThM  
Dallas Theological Seminary  
Heather.joy818@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

“Preach a topical sermon; then repent for a year.” While this attitude reflects devotion to expository preaching, it also represents neglect of evangelical topical sermon scholarship. This paper aims to redeem the reputation of topical sermons by proposing a methodology for application that utilizes both pericopal and biblical theology. This paper examines background in homiletics, hermeneutics, and theological method before proposing a method of wedding biblical and pericopal theology in developing application for topical messages.

## **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Topical preaching suffers a bad reputation. With the (valid) emphasis on expository preaching, topical sermons have become like death and taxes –certain, inescapable, and thoroughly unwelcome. Scholars have said, “Preach a topical sermon; then repent for a year.” Although this attitude reflects a crucial evangelical devotion to expository preaching, it also represents neglect of evangelical topical sermon scholarship. While many evangelicals prioritize expository preaching, topical preaching persists in even the faithful expositor's pulpit. A community crisis arises. A new church program needs explaining. A theological error or sin needs specific attention. And so the preacher ever so briefly holds his breath, preaches a topical sermon, and washes his hands clean until the next unavoidable excuse for a topical message.

While still submitting it to the headship of expository sermons, topical sermons have redemptive elements to embrace –from their ability to address current events to their ability to correct doctrinal misunderstanding. Perhaps the greatest advantage of the topical sermon involves specifically addressing issues in our world. Topical preaching does not merely demand the listener care about the things of the Word; it shows that the Word speaks into the cares of our world.<sup>2</sup>

In light of this unapologetic apologetic for scholastic study of topical preaching, the topical sermon needs serious surgery. Topical sermons are disparaged because of their difficulties and, too often, their deficiencies. Frequently, a preacher will have in mind a topic, proof text his

---

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to Dr. Darrell Bock, Kymberli and Travis Cook, Yuri Doroshuk, Amy Gannett, Dr. Abe Kuruvilla, Dane Miodov, and Carol Zimmerman for their assistance on this paper.

<sup>2</sup>In light of biblical illiteracy and cultural engagement, Darrell Bock consistently notes we need teaching not only “from the Bible to life” but also “from life to the Bible.”

opinion on the topic, and exhort his audience to carry out a specific point of application not reflected in any of the texts cited.

A gateway to topical sermonic improvement is application, where many of the deficiencies are actualized. Application in topical sermons must derive from a proper theological move and must legitimately empower the listeners to live in response to this theological thrust. This paper aims to demonstrate how biblical theology should be combined with pericopal theology to lay a better theological foundation for more faithful application in topical messages.

First, we must clarify definitions of “topical” sermons and of “application.” Since the application process begins with the “theological move,” we must secondly discuss the process of moving from the text to theology, including pericopal theology. After a brief discussion of biblical theology, we will analyze how the preacher may combine pericopal and biblical theology to improve topical sermons by producing applications more faithful to the thrust of the text. Finally, we will discuss how to form and evaluate potential points for application.

#### TOPICAL PREACHING: A DEFINITION

Before proceeding, we must first define what we mean by “topical preaching.” Confusion remains around what is meant by “topical” preaching. Is a topical sermon distinct from textual preaching? Can a topical sermon be expository? Does a topical sermon use one biblical text to address the issue, or does it exposit from multiple canonical texts?

Unfortunately, the topical message has received only a few academic attempts at clarity.<sup>3</sup> In perhaps the most helpful definition from a hermeneutical perspective, Timothy Warren states, “*Topical expository preaching finds its message in two or more different texts or units in their individual contexts that share a common subject.*” This use of multiple texts drives the purpose of this paper –much has been written about the interpretative process for developing application from one text; however, we must examine this process for sermons using multiple texts.

With topical sermons thus defined, we must clearly define application in hermeneutics and in homiletics before discussing application in topical messages.

---

<sup>3</sup>Mathewson distinguishes the topical from the textual and expository sermons. While his topical sermon definition parallels Warren’s definition, he says a textual sermon “takes its topic and main points from ideas in the text, but the development of those main ideas comes from sources outside the immediate text.” An expository sermon “takes its topic, main points, and sub-points from the immediate text.” See Steven D. Mathewson, “Verse-by-Verse Sermons that Really Preach” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicator*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 407-412. See also Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). While this distinction is helpful pragmatically, it is also debated.

## SO WHAT? UNDERSTANDING APPLICATION

Long before the term was hijacked by so-called smart devices, the term “application” has been employed and debated in both hermeneutical and homiletical circles, with insufficient interaction between the two circles. Grant Osborne rightly observes, “Homileticians have failed to provide a strong hermeneutical foundation for application.”<sup>4</sup> Application in homiletics has typically looked at the specific imperative the preacher gives to the audience with little thought to the hermeneutical process for how this action is derived from the theological move.

### *Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and in Homiletics*

In hermeneutics, application (also called “contextualization”) is typically the final part of the interpretive process.<sup>5</sup> Duvall and Hays are quick to distinguish application from “meaning,” defining meaning as, “what the author intended to communicate through the text.”<sup>6</sup> A synthetic definition of application is: the contextualization of meaning for a new situation.<sup>7</sup> As a missionary must take meaning to a new cultural context, so the exegete and preacher must appropriate the message of Scripture for himself and his audience.

In homiletics, application is defined similarly, however, with a different emphasis and nuance. David Murray defines application as “process by which the unchanging principles of God’s Word are brought into life-changing contact with people who live in an ever-changing world.”<sup>8</sup> Broadus defines application in a sermon as “that part, or those parts, of the discourse in which it is shown how the subject applies to the persons addressed, what practical instructions it offers them, what practical demands it makes upon them.”<sup>9</sup> Most homiletical definitions regard

---

<sup>4</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IVP: 2006), 410.

<sup>5</sup>However, there are a few who debate whether application even belongs in proper hermeneutics. See Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application,” *TMSJ* 8/1 (Spring 1997): 83-105, in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLA Serials*, [database online] Ebsco; accessed August 14, 2017.

<sup>6</sup>J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 236. This is also reflected by the ongoing interaction with E.D. Hirsch on the difference between “meaning” and “significance.” His discussion of “implication” does not receive sufficient attention. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967). See also Don Sunukjian’s distinction between “application” and “relevance.” Donald R. Sunukjian. *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 106.

<sup>7</sup>This builds off the view of “application” as inseparable from contextualization. See Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 25-26.

<sup>8</sup>David Murray, *How Sermons Work* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books USA, 2011), 108.

<sup>9</sup>John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, rev. Vernon L. Stanfield. 4th ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 167.

application as the part(s) of the sermon which practically demonstrates how the message of the text is to be lived out today.

As application in both hermeneutics and homiletics derives from the development of the theological move, it is important to examine the move from exegetical study to theology. Particularly in topical preaching, poorly developed application often derives from a poorly formed theological move.

### *Methodology for Developing the Theological Foundation for Application*

The application process begins with the development of the theological move. Various approaches are debated for the move from historical/grammatical/literary study to the theological message. In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, four methods are proposed for making this move: Kaiser's *principilization* method (by which, the interpreter moves up and down the "ladder of abstraction"<sup>10</sup> to state the timeless theological "principle" behind the text and apply), Doriani's *Redemptive-Historical* approach (which, building upon principilization, cautiously utilizes casuistry,<sup>11</sup> genre distinction, biblical narrative, and redemptive history to move to application), Vanhoozer's *Drama of Redemption* model (here he not so much proposes an actual method but an analogy of theatric "drama" for interpretation, challenging the interpreter to look for how the message translates, modulates, and resonates),<sup>12</sup> and Webb's *Redemptive Movement* model (it builds upon principilization through studying the ancient social context and the canonical corpus to determine how biblical texts show incremental movement toward an ultimate ethic).<sup>13</sup>

Each method has elements to contribute to the preacher—the concept of the "ladder of abstraction," the importance of genre distinction in study, the analogy of actors and script in genre, and how biblical ethics interacts with the original social situations. Using these elements produces a balanced interpretive methodology. However, since each of these methods interacts with principilization, this method warrants closer examination.

---

<sup>10</sup>See brief description of the "ladder of abstraction" below. For further reading, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. "A Principilizing Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 24.

<sup>11</sup>Doriani defines "casuistry" as "the art of resolving particular cases of conscience through appeal to higher general principles, especially when principles seem to be in conflict or when a new problem has emerged." His use of casuistry is critiqued, however, as another form of principilization. Daniel M. Doriani, "A Redemptive-Historical Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 75-210.

<sup>12</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama of Redemption Model: Always Performing?" in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 151-199.

<sup>13</sup>William J. Webb, "A Redemptive-Movement Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 215-248.

*Excursus: Principilization and Pericopal Theology*

Principilization preaches. This remains the method's great appeal. Typically, the topical sermon aims to present biblical principles on a given topic. Thus, it is worthwhile to critically analyze the process of principilization.

Kaiser defines principilization as when “scriptural principles are abstracted from the biblical text that supplies the proper foundation for meeting modern questions that do not have a direct biblical answer.”<sup>14</sup> He instructs the interpreter to go up the ladder of abstraction to determine the ultimate “principle” behind the text, in order to go back down the ladder to apply it to today. Others advocate this approach in the “hermeneutical spiral,” a “principilizing bridge,” or specifically in developing application.<sup>15</sup> The principilization method aids the interpreter in moving from the text to that which is transcendent to contextualizing the meaning for a particular audience. However, this approach faces strong criticisms.

While principilization has been useful in understanding the need to bridge the gap from “then” to now and the need to identify transcendent truth, it assumes the naiveté of modernism that the preacher can completely separate herself from her culture when deriving that truth.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, principilization uncritically prioritizes propositional statements over other forms of communication.<sup>17</sup> Further, propositional principles often focus primarily on behaviors, neglecting how Scripture should shape our minds and affections.<sup>18</sup> Since the goal of biblical preaching is transformed lives, the preacher's purpose is not to help the audience understand the proposition behind the text; she must help her listeners encounter the wonder and beauty of the text in such a way that motivates them to live in response to the text.

With this aim, Abraham Kuruvilla has presented “pericopal theology” as an alternative to the principilizing method. More broadly than principles, Kuruvilla's approach seeks out the “divine precepts, priorities, and practices of God's world.”<sup>19</sup> It focuses on “what the author is *doing* with

---

<sup>14</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 82.

<sup>15</sup>See: Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 420. See also Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 43-44; 238-239, and Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). He provides a helpful series of questions for developing principles on page 54.

<sup>16</sup>Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 161-164.

<sup>17</sup>Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change: Understanding and Responding to God's Word* (Federal Way, WA: World Vision, 2005), 68.

<sup>18</sup>Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 67-68.

<sup>19</sup>Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 117.

what he is saying”<sup>20</sup>—how the theology of the pericope is formed by the author and how the theology of that pericope develops the message of the biblical book.

At a superficial study, it appears Kuruvilla merely replaces the “principle” with the “theological thrust of the text.” However, he explains key differences below:

The difference between the two approaches may be summarized thus: in the ‘principilizing’ hermeneutic, the *principle* is antecedent to the text (and the text is often considered reducible to that principle *behind* it); by the theological hermeneutic espoused in this work, the *text* gives rise to the world/theology (and the text is irreducible to that world *in front of it*).<sup>21</sup>

His method goes deeper than semantics. The theology of the pericope cannot be boiled down into a statement; the text’s theology is a transformative force to be communicated throughout the sermon as the preacher invites the listener to encounter the text and respond.

Pericopal theology is a vital contribution to both preaching and hermeneutics. It avoids elements of principilization, prioritizes the functional literary unit of the “pericope,”<sup>22</sup> and develops generalizations more faithful to the unit of text. While pericopal theology is instrumental for expository sermons, it has yet to be applied significantly to topical sermons. With the use of multiple pericopes in topical messages, the preacher must utilize biblical theology in conjunction with pericopal theology.

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR TOPICAL SERMONS

The relationship between biblical and systematic theology remains one of the most undefined theological relationships. Exhaustive definitions of biblical theology are beyond the scope of this paper. However, two very broad understandings of biblical theology are relevant to this discussion. First, biblical theology is discussed as the means by which an interpreter seeks the grand theological narrative of Scripture.<sup>23</sup> The precise narrative itself is debated, with various focuses on redemption, the *imago Dei*, and others. Still, this approach is useful for the preacher to understand how a given pericope contributes to the grand narrative of Scripture (though

---

<sup>20</sup>Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text*, 129.

<sup>21</sup>Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text*, 199

<sup>22</sup>However, here we must use caution to not elevate the “pericope” as high as the “principle,” for pericope divisions are subjective. Likewise, we do not know how many pericopes the original audience heard in one sitting.

<sup>23</sup>This is perhaps the most common scholarly view of biblical theology. However, major debates in biblical theology include the following: methodology, grand narrative or multiple thematic approaches, and specific points of emphases. For one comprehensive yet accessible work, see Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

caution is necessary to not superimpose that narrative unqualified upon every pericope, since the formation of that narrative is not inspired).

A second approach to biblical theology, while not consistently deemed “biblical theology” in the proper academic sense, involves analyzing in concentric circles the biblical development of a theology of a topic. This differs from systematic theology in that this approach begins at the level of the pericope. The interpreter then seeks how a given author develops a theology of the topic at hand through the book. If the biblical author has written additional books, these are used in the next concentric circle to determine how the biblical author develops theology of the topic at hand. Next, books in the same section of Scripture (for example, the epistles) and, finally, followed by Scripture as a whole. Unlike systematic theology, this approach pays particular attention to how different portions of Scripture (with attention to the biblical historical narrative) develop this topic over time in light of the covenants, incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, spread of the Church, etc.

Both of these approaches to biblical theology are useful for the preacher, particularly in topical preaching. If she has not done so, the preacher must devote time, study, and thought to her own biblical theology. This (sometimes) subconscious biblical theology will shape all her sermons. Once this study has been conducted, the topical preacher may better understand how each individual pericope used in the sermon contributes (in its canonical/salvation-historical place) to this grand narrative(s).

Likewise, the preacher should utilize the second approach to biblical theology in topical messages.<sup>24</sup> When one studies how much the given passage is a relevant contribution to the theological biblical development of the topic, the preacher can critique the true relevance of each text for the sermon. Study of how a specific verse(s) contributes to the theology of the pericope helps us see how that entailment contributes to the theology of a topic. For example, studying how Colossians 1:15-16 contributes to the Christology of Colossians should inform how we use these verses to develop a sermon on the Trinity. Likewise, how 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 contributes to the theology of the body in 1 Corinthians should shape how we use 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 in a sermon on gluttony or lust. Further, the preacher can then determine to structure the topic logically by nature of the topic or as it develops in the canon. These approaches to biblical theology must be combined with pericopal theology to form a solid theological foundation for the application in topical sermons.

---

<sup>24</sup>Charles H. H. Scobie writes a particularly helpful discussion of using biblical theology in preaching, specifically topical preaching. See Charles H.H. Scobie, “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 449-465.

## METHODOLOGY FOR TOPICAL SERMONS

### *Combining Biblical and Pericopal Theology for Topical Sermons*

As a structure is only as sound as its foundation, the application of a message only has the potential to be as sound as its theological thrust. So, how does the preacher utilize both biblical and pericopal theology when multiple texts are in play? First, he must find the theological force of each potential passage in use. While an isolated verse will have a different “significance” than when read in light of the pericope, it is the preacher’s duty to guard against “proof-texting.” Richard writes, “Proof texts become pretexts for whatever *we* want to say to our people, rather than receiving what *God* says on a particular matter and turning them into the structure of the sermon.”<sup>25</sup> Further, this step ensures the teaching on the specific verse is faithful to how that verse functioned in its original pericope.

Second, if the given verse(s), in light of the pericopal theology, still contributes to the topic, note what this passage specifically offers regarding the topic at hand compared with the other texts under study. The preacher should determine the unique contribution of each text to the discussion. What aspect of this topic does the verse address? Does it reveal God’s perspective or the human perspective? Does it provide a positive or negative (or neutral) example of interacting with this topic? Does the passage instruct us how to think, feel, or behave? Does it have individual and/or corporate implications?

Third, note how the genre shapes the contribution of the text. If it is a narrative, one must note how the text is being used by the author before classifying it as a prescriptive, negative, or (neutrally) descriptive example. Is Sarai’s complicit “submission” to Abraham’s lie (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18) a prescriptive model of submission for wives today? How should Gideon’s “fleece” (Judges 6:36-40) or Abraham’s journey from Ur (Genesis 12:1-9) be used in a sermon on faith?<sup>26</sup>

Beyond narrative, the preacher must analyze if this text provides a biblical promise or command. If so, how does that promise or command relate to a contemporary audience? Further, what elements of this text were unique to its setting in Jewish history (the covenants, law, etc.)? How does this text relate to us today?<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 200.

<sup>26</sup>Any passages could be utilized. However, the theology of the biblical books provides insight on whether these narratives function as prescriptive examples, negative examples, or merely descriptive of a situation that does not carry the theological weight of the book.

<sup>27</sup>Note: this is not a question of *if* the text relates to us today but *how* it does. Some interpreters dismiss any ceremonial laws as not relevant or applicable to the believer today. However, if all Scripture is the inspired word of God, there are theological elements of every law relevant to today. Kuruvilla has a terrific discussion of this in third chapter of *Privilege the Text*, entitled “Divine Demand and Faithful Obedience.” Naturally, this element may be influenced by the preacher’s position on the spectrum of the Dispensational/Covenantal discussion.

Fourth, examine how the author develops the topic/theme throughout the rest of his biblical work(s), using the second use of biblical theology. This may reveal other passages relevant to the conversation, or it will at least put the text at hand into the context of the author's theology and development of the topic (For example: how is "faith" developed in Genesis or the Pentateuch? How is human dignity addressed in Corinthians or the Pauline Epistles?).

As you utilize multiple texts, note which patterns emerge and, if possible, let the biblical patterns shape your emphases on the topic (for a sermon on "having an eternal perspective" the patterns of faithfulness and hope emerge from texts like Jesus' parables of the servants; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 or 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11). This analysis helps the preacher critically think through how he will utilize each text in the sermon. Should the sermon borrow diction from the verse as a literary allusion? Is this pericope serving as an example or illustration? Does this text show God's perspective on the topic? Finally, note how that individual text fits within the grand narrative of Scripture. Analyzing each text used in the sermon utilizing both pericopal and biblical theology will ensure a firm foundation for accurate application.

### *Methodology for Deriving Application from the Topical Theological Thrust*

We must now move from theology to application. Unfortunately, the preacher often fails to subject application to the same level of study and scrutiny as exegesis. The process for applying in topical messages is not drastically different from the process used for expository messages; however, evaluation of the application is much more crucial here.

As mentioned above, the process of application begins with developing the theological focus. Once that has been determined, examine the key elements of the original situation. Once these elements are identified, the preacher then must look for contemporary scenarios that contain these elements, thinking through the diverse demographics of the listeners.<sup>28</sup> This move is difficult with multiple texts in a topical sermon since multiple situations are at play. Hence, one approach to application in topical sermons involves deriving application from only one text. However, comparing and contrasting the different situations helps the preacher study how the topic contextualizes to different situations.<sup>29</sup> For example, in the command to "Love God," the situation Deuteronomy 6:5 in differs from the situation in Matthew 22:37. Both texts command the listeners to love God with everything. The canonical repetition shows the importance of this command; however, the parallel circumstance of love as a response to revelation of God may be applied to the contemporary listeners. If each of the texts of a topical sermon already have generally parallel situations in play (forbidding deception, etc.), application may take place on a

---

<sup>28</sup>Adams, *Truth Applied*, 48. Other scholars emphasizing the move toward parallel situations include Osborne, 432.

<sup>29</sup>Jack Kuhatschek provides three situational options for applying a principle: "an identical situation, a comparable situation, and an entirely different situation." See Jack Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 67-68.

broader level (without getting bogged down with exceptions/controversial situations like Rahab's lie, etc.).<sup>30</sup>

After determining which texts will supply the application, there are two forms of application the preacher may express. One form of application aims to help the listener envision a concrete situation in his life and determine how he should live in that situation in response to the biblical text(s). This type of application coaches the listener through identifying a parallel situation in her life, understanding how the Bible speaks to this situation, and resolving a form of action plan to carry out.<sup>31</sup> This form of application helps the listener enter the process of applying Scripture herself. For example, when the listener encounters a specific temptation in his life, he should think a certain biblical thought and apply a resistance strategy based on this method.

The second form of application, needing significant further study, involves providing a very concrete basic step to form a habit.<sup>32</sup> The end goal is not the specific behavior but how the repetition of the behavior will shape the actions, affections, and attentions of the participant. A sermon on materialism may urge the congregants to change their password on Pay Pal or Amazon to something that will remind them to pause before they buy something. A sermon on "putting on Christ" may challenge the congregation to put reminders in their closets to "put on Christ" every morning. This latter method of application must be prefaced so that the audience understands that the captivating complexity of the biblical text is not reduced to a mere password on a computer; rather, the listener should know that developing this daily habit is meant to have a longer-term effect on how the believer grows in Christlikeness.

A mix of both of these forms of application throughout the preaching calendar enables the audience to develop life-transforming habits and to understand how to live in the complexity of our world in the light of the compelling "force" of Scripture. A topical sermon that clearly communicates the aim of the application will solidify the legitimacy of the application and will develop the reader's ability to respond both to pericopes of Scripture as well as to a synthesis of Scripture's teaching on a topic.

Once the application points are made, the preacher must evaluate each of the potential application points. The preacher must critically think through each element of application to ensure its legitimacy to the text, consistency with the theological thrust, and relevancy to the audience. By putting this meticulous care into constructing both the theological message and the

---

<sup>30</sup>Note: It is important when constructing "parallel" situations that the preacher also be sure to ask "how is the audience different from us today." This should serve as a sort of "check" after the theological move to ensure that even at the level of application, the text is handled faithfully. Ramesh Richard provides a good discussion of this. See Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 14.

<sup>31</sup>Fuhr and Kostenberger make a case for "multiple scenarios" of specific application to show the range of how "this text *might* relate to us today." See Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology*. (Nashville: B&H, 2016).

<sup>32</sup>This section derives from a conversation with Abraham Kuruvilla. He notes the need for not only rhetorical study in persuading life change, but also a greater need for homileticians to employ the psychology and sociology of life-change in methodology for application.

application points, the preacher may ensure that the topical sermon is not merely a necessary evil alternative to expository preaching, but it is an occasionally poignant sermon to show the Word speaks into the cares of our world.

## CONCLUSION

For too long, topical sermons have served as the unwelcome step-sibling of expository messages. The passionate devotion to expositing the Word of God has led to an evangelical scholastic snobbery toward study of topical messages. However, topical sermons have the powerful potential to demonstrate that we can carry the concerns of our life to a Word that speaks powerfully into our cares.

Developing faithful application not only demonstrates to the topical cynic an apologetic for occasional topical sermons, but biblically faithful application in any sermon equips the people of God. Combining pericopal and biblical theology in developing the theological message of the topical sermon lays the foundation to ensure legitimate application. Care for crafting application focuses the sermon on developing life-change. As Karl Barth writes, “Every sermon must also take the form of application. An exposition, no matter how true to the text, will die away ineffectually in a vacuum if there is no possibility of a responsive echo from those who hear it.”<sup>33</sup> A due diligence to carefully crafting application in topical messages invites our listeners to a “responsive echo” in the everyday cares of our world.

[\(return to Table of Contents\)](#)

---

<sup>33</sup>Karl Barth. *Homiletics*. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991). Never mind the fact that he disparages sermon introductions and claims the presuppositions for sermon introductions are heretical.