

## THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF PREACHING AND APPLYING THE WORD: ELLEN G. WHITE'S PERSPECTIVE IN RELATION TO THE EVANGELICAL VIEW POINT

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### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to investigate the contemporary evangelical literature on preaching and the published writings of Ellen G. White, in order to answer two important questions: (1) What is the general tenor of her writings in relation to the present evangelical point of view concerning the necessary components of preaching? (2) What is the importance of personal application in preaching as echoed in recent homiletical literature and White's writings? However, it is imperative that before these two queries are broached, the picture of abuses in preaching must first be understood.

### Abuses in Preaching Then and Now

The term 'dis-exposition' is used in the field of homiletics to express abuses in preaching. We may have had such an experience as listeners, whereby a biblical text is read but nothing further is said about it. It is a natural feature of dis-exposition not to engage the text and its context; no attempt is made to convey the true meaning of the passage.

Dis-exposition invites many abuses to the text. Both Peter Adam and Kent Hughes point out several of these.<sup>1</sup> First, there is the de-contexted sermon. This occurs when the Scripture is wrenched from its surrounding context and mistakenly applied. An example of this is the use of Rev 11:10 as a Christmas text: "And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another."<sup>2</sup> The preacher completely ignores the last part of the verse, "Because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth." That does not sound like a merry Christmas!

<sup>1</sup>Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 102-03; Kent Hughes, "The Anatomy of Exposition: *Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 44-58.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted all scripture references are from New American Standard Bible.

Second is the lensed sermon. The preacher sees every text through the lens of a favorite theme: psychological, therapeutic, political, chauvinistic, social, or domestic, to name a few. Regardless of what the text says, the preacher ends up preaching “his/her” theme. To put it colloquially, he “rides his hobby horse.”

Third is the moralized sermon whereby each sermon has a moral. For example, in Phil 3:13 the apostle’s phrase “one thing I do,” is stretched to teach the importance of goal-setting. Thus, personal and professional goals become the centerpiece of the sermon. The last part of the verse, outlining Paul’s primary purpose is ignored, “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the fourth type of dis-exposition, the doctrinalized sermon, the Scriptures are used as proof-texts for the doctrinal preferences of the preacher. Every sermon champions his particular theological leaning.

The fifth abuse may well be called silenced sermons. The preacher actually preaches on details that the Scripture does not address. The sermon goes something like this: “Now the Bible does not tell us how Mary felt, but we can be sure she felt this way. Therefore, we ought to feel the same.” We may have even heard sermons preached from the animals’ perspective at Jesus’ birth.

While these five abuses are disconcerting, a very common type of dis-exposition occurs because of the “homiletics of consensus.” In this type of preaching, the preacher determines the congregation’s needs from the pollsters’ analyses of felt needs, and then bases his preaching agenda on those feelings. Certainly, all biblical exposition must be informed by, and sensitive to, perceived needs. But the problem of preaching only to felt needs is that our deepest needs often go beyond our perceived needs. In addressing this important matter, William H. Willimon, dean of the chapel of Duke University writes:

Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners? At the very time those of us in the mainline, old-line, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these “biblical preachers” were becoming “user-friendly” and “inclusive,” taking their homiletical cues from the “felt needs” of us “boomers” and “busters” rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible. I know why they do this. After all, we mainline-liberal-experiential-expressionists played this game before the conservative evangelical reformed got there.<sup>3</sup>

After warning against allowing the world to set our homiletical agenda, Willimon concludes by saying, “The psychology of the gospel—reducing salvation

<sup>3</sup>William H. Willimon, “Been There, Preached That,” *Leadership Magazine*, Fall 1995, 75-76.

to self-esteem, sin to maladjustment, church to group therapy, and Jesus to Dear Abby—is our chief means of perverting the biblical text.”<sup>4</sup>

White never used the homiletical term ‘de-exposition’ but in her writings she certainly points to some of the abuses mentioned above. For example,

In order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices, some will seize upon passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half of a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite. With the cunning of the serpent they entrench themselves behind disconnected utterances construed to suit their carnal desires. Thus do many willfully pervert the word of God. Others, who have an active imagination, seize upon the figures and symbols of Holy Writ, interpret them to suit their fancy, with little regard to the testimony of Scripture as its own interpreter, and then they present their vagaries as the teachings of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

White regards this process of homiletical de-exposition as willful perversion of the Word of God. As such, it includes the following faulty preaching practices: (1) using passages out of context, (2) quoting a text to prove a point, (3) imagining symbols and figures, (4) interpreting texts to suit one’s opinion, and (5) presenting personal vagaries as teachings of Scriptures.

Again, in *The Story of Prophets and Kings*, White points out the faults of present-day preaching. She admonishes church members in general, as well as those who stand to preach, to avoid the pitfalls of de-exposition.

The words of the Bible and the Bible alone, should be heard from the pulpit. But the Bible has been robbed of its power, and the result is seen in a lowering of the tone of spiritual life. In many sermons of today there is not that divine manifestation which awakens the conscience and brings life to the soul. The hearers cannot say, “Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the Scriptures?” Luke 24:32. There are many who are crying out for the living God, longing for the divine presence. Let the word of God speak to the heart. Let those who have heard only tradition and human theories and maxims, hear the voice of Him who can renew the soul unto eternal life.<sup>6</sup>

### True Components of Preaching

Dis-exposition is a serious problem that deserves careful thought. The abuses described above are increasingly dominating pulpits. Such approaches to Scripture are not going to be replaced quietly and easily. Therefore, it is necessary, especially

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>5</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 521.

<sup>6</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Story of Prophets and Kings* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1917),

for Seventh-day Adventists, to expound the true components of biblical preaching in the writings of Ellen G. White since she is seen as a prophetess and founding member of the denomination. This investigation will be seen in the three classical rhetorical categories of *Logos*, *Ethos*, and *Pathos*. These terms will not be used in their strict definition. Nevertheless, these categories, broadly understood and given Christian qualification, provide helpful approaches to the published writings of Ellen G. White in relation to the contemporary evangelical literature in homiletics.

### ***Logos: The Preacher's Conviction about Scripture***

Biblical preaching is preaching in service to the Word. To do this, a preacher must believe in the authority of Scripture and recognize the inseparability of the Word and the Holy Spirit. It presumes a belief in the authority of Scripture; but there is more, namely, a commitment to biblical preaching is a commitment to hearing God's Word. Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God only as long as they speak His Word. Preachers are not only commanded to preach, they are commanded specifically to preach the Word.

#### The Authority of Scripture

White adheres to the position that the authority we attach to Scripture will determine the weight and prominence we give to Scripture in our preaching. For a preacher to present biblical sermons, he or she must recognize the infallibility, the sufficiency, and the potency of Scripture.

*Infallibility.* Biblical exposition comes only from those with a high view of the infallibility of Scripture. White recognizes the Bible as the infallible Word of God. On December 15, 1885, she expressed her high regard for the infallibility of the Bible.

When God's Word is studied, comprehended, and obeyed, a bright light will be reflected to the world; new truths, received and acted upon, will bind us in strong bonds to Jesus. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. Man is fallible, but God's Word is infallible. Instead of wrangling with one another, let men exalt the Lord. Let us meet all opposition as did our Master, saying, "It is written." Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.<sup>7</sup>

Three years later she held the same position,

<sup>7</sup>Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:416.

Had the Bible been received as the voice of God to man, as the book of books, as the one infallible rule of faith and practice, we would not have seen the law of Heaven made void, and the swelling tide of iniquity devouring our land.<sup>8</sup>

Over two decades later, she held the same consistency, explaining the authority of Scripture when people recognize its infallible nature,

In order to exercise intelligent faith, we should study the Word of God. The Bible, and the Bible alone, communicates a correct knowledge of the character of God, and of his will concerning us. The duty and the destiny of man are defined in its pages. The conditions on which we may hope for eternal life are explicitly stated, and the doom of those who neglect so great salvation is foretold in the most forcible language.<sup>9</sup>

She concludes by pointing to the result of not recognizing the Scripture as the infallible Word of God. Thus,

As men wander away from the truth into skepticism, everything becomes uncertain and unreal. No thorough conviction takes hold of the soul. No faith is exercised in the Scripture as the revelation of God to man. There is nothing authoritative in its commands, nothing terrifying in its warnings, nothing inspiring in its promises. To the skeptic it is meaningless and contradictory.<sup>10</sup>

The summary of White's position on the authority of Scripture is in the introduction of her famous book *The Great Controversy*. She balances the importance of explaining and applying the teachings of Scriptures. Observe the following:

In His Word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience. . . Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His Word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the Word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings.<sup>11</sup>

*Sufficiency.* While a high view of the infallibility of Scripture is essential to biblical preaching, it is not enough by itself. The preacher must wholeheartedly believe in the sufficiency of Scripture as well as embrace Scripture's own claim about this matter. He or she must be personally convicted as was Moses, "Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, with which you shall

<sup>8</sup>Ellen G. White, "The Faith that Will Stand the Test," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 10 January 1888, para. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 22 September 1910, para. 2.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>White, *The Great Controversy* (1888), vii, viii.



command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life" (Deut 32:46,47). Such a belief is essential to a preacher's heart. The Scriptures were life to Moses and food to Jesus (Matt 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4; Deut 8:3).

White saw a historical connection with the reformers concerning the sufficiency of Scripture. She claims, "The grand principle maintained by Tyndale, Frith, Latimer, and the Riddleys, was the divine authority and sufficiency of the Sacred Scriptures. . . . The Bible was their standard, and to this they brought all doctrines and all claims."<sup>12</sup> In commenting on the deep conviction of the reformer John Trask's view of the sufficiency of Scriptures, she underscores "the sufficiency of the Scriptures as a guide for religious faith" because he believed "that civil authorities should not control the conscience in matters which concern salvation."<sup>13</sup> White is grounded in this truth for she maintains, "As we search the Scriptures we find ground for confidence, provision for sufficiency."<sup>14</sup>

*Potency.* Combined with a high view of the infallibility of Scripture and a belief in its sufficiency, we need confidence in the Bible's potency.<sup>15</sup> The Bible makes precisely this claim for itself in Heb 4:12-13:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

God's Word can penetrate the hearts of the greatest sinners of our age. It can cut away our own religious façade, leaving us flayed, exposed, and convicted. His Word is so powerful that as He wills, it will pierce anyone.

In her writings, White never uses the word *potent* as far as the Bible is concerned. Instead, she employs the simpler term, *powerful*. Relating it to preaching, she strongly expresses the belief that the Bible possesses power to change people's lives through the working of the Holy Spirit. She elucidates, "In the preaching of the word there must be the working of an agency beyond any human power. Only through the divine Spirit will the word be living and powerful to renew the soul unto eternal life."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1884), 4:173.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>14</sup>Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1964), 228.

<sup>15</sup>John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1974), 283, illustrates this in a conversation between the warrior-heroes Mr. Great-heart and Mr. Valiant-for-truth.

<sup>16</sup>Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1952), 64.

### Inseparability of the Word and the Holy Spirit

In addition to recognizing that the Word has authority, it is also important to recognize that the Word and the Spirit are closely connected. In a 1995 article in honor of British preacher R. C. Lucas, Australian OT scholar John Woodhouse makes a compelling argument for preaching based on the inseparability of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. He says, "In biblical thought, the Spirit of God is closely connected to speech."<sup>17</sup> He concludes, "Precisely for this reason Scripture is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness: it is in the Word that God Himself speaks today. Therefore, the surest way to recover the 'living' Word of God is to recover preaching that truly expounds the Scriptures."<sup>18</sup> When the Word of God is expounded, there the Spirit speaks.

Similar sentiments of the inseparability of the Word and the Holy Spirit have been expressed by White. Note the following statement:

You have the word of the living God, and for the asking you may have the gift of the Holy Spirit to make that word a power to those who believe and obey. The Holy Spirit's work is to guide into all truth. When you depend on the word of the living God with heart and mind and soul, the channel of communication will be unobstructed. Deep, earnest study of the word under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will give you fresh manna, and the same Spirit will make its use effectual.<sup>19</sup>

White explains the process that occurs when a preacher proclaims the Word of God under the supervision of the Holy Spirit to the avid listener. She reminds,

It is the efficiency of the Holy Spirit that makes the ministry of the word effective. When Christ speaks through the minister, the Holy Spirit prepares the hearts of the listeners to receive the word. The Holy Spirit is not a servant, but a controlling power. He causes the truth to shine into minds, and speaks through every discourse where the minister surrenders himself to the divine working. It is the Spirit that surrounds the soul with a holy atmosphere, and speaks to the impenitent through words of warning, pointing them to Him who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Further, she advocates that the Spirit plays a major function in preaching. To her, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of power to make preaching a life-changing force. She writes at length,

<sup>17</sup>John Woodhouse, "The Preacher and the Living Word: Preaching and the Holy Spirit," in *When God's Voice is Heard*, ed. Christopher Green and David Jackman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 55.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>19</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1901), 6:163-64.

<sup>20</sup>Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), 155.

The preaching of the word is of no avail without the presence and aid of the Holy Spirit; for this Spirit is the only effectual teacher of divine truth. Only when the truth is accompanied to the heart by the Spirit, will it quicken the conscience or transform the life. A minister may be able to present the letter of the word of God; he may be familiar with all its commands and promises; but his sowing of the gospel seed will not be successful unless this seed is quickened into life by the dew of heaven. Without the co-operation of the Spirit of God, no amount of education, no advantages, however great, can make one a channel of light. Before one book of the New Testament had been written, before one gospel sermon had been preached after Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit came upon the praying disciples. Then the testimony of their enemies was, "Ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine." Acts 5:28.<sup>21</sup>

### **Ethos: The Preacher's Integrity**

Simply put, *ethos* is who the preacher is. It is his or her character. *Ethos* has to do with the condition of his/her inner life and with the work of the Spirit within, especially as it relates to preaching. Biblical preaching is enhanced when the preacher invites the Holy Spirit to apply the text to his/her own soul and ethical conduct.

### **The Preacher's Character**

Phillips Brooks, the well-known Episcopal bishop of Boston and author of the famous hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem," touched on this subject with his definition of preaching in the 1877 *Yale Lecture on Preaching*. He said, "[P]reaching is the bringing of truth through personality."<sup>22</sup> He then elaborated,

Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 671-72. See also Ellen G. White, "Who are the Sanctified?" *The Signs of the Times*, 28 February, 1895, para. 4, "When the Spirit of God moves upon the heart, it causes the faithful, obedient child of God to act in a manner that will commend religion to the good judgment of sensible-minded men and women. The Spirit of God illuminates the mind with the word of God, and does not come as a substitute for the word. The Holy Spirit ever directs the believer to the word, and presents its passages to the mind, to reprove, correct, counsel, and comfort. It never leads its possessor to act in an unbecoming way, or to manifest extravagant and uncalled-for developments that bear not the least resemblance to that which is heavenly, and lower the standard of what is pure and undefiled religion in the minds of men."

<sup>22</sup>Phillips Brooks, *Lecture on Preaching* (Manchester, VT: James Robinson, 1899), 5.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.



In the early 1900s, William Quail carried the idea further by asking rhetorically, "Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it? Why no, that's not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that."<sup>24</sup>

White also stresses the importance of the preacher's character. She insists that living preachers should reflect the character of the Chief Shepherd. This is her advocacy:

The same Bible that contains the privileges of God's people, and his promises to them, sets forth also the sacred duties and solemn obligations of the shepherd who has charge of the flock of God. By comparing the living preacher with the divine picture, all may see whether he has the credentials from heaven, likeness of character to him who is the Chief Shepherd. God designs that the teacher of the Bible should in his character and home life be an illustration of the principles of truth which he is teaching to his fellow-men.<sup>25</sup>

She further emphasizes that a preacher should possess the same characteristics manifested by the Good Shepherd. She also points out that motive is an indicator of character. She writes convincingly,

All the shepherds who work under the Chief Shepherd will possess His characteristics; they will be meek and lowly of heart. Childlike faith brings rest to the soul and also works by love and is ever interested for others. If the Spirit of Christ dwells in them, they will be Christlike and do the works of Christ. . . . The motives which prompt to action give character to the work. Although men may not discern the deficiency, God marks it.<sup>26</sup>

#### The Preacher's Affections

However, nothing is more powerful than God's Word when it is expositied by one whose heart has been harrowed and sanctified by the Word that is being preached. The Puritan Williams Ames said it exactly:

Next to the evidence of truth, and the will of God drawn out of the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation. To this purpose it is very profitable, if besides the daily practice of piety we use serious meditation and fervent prayer to work to those things upon our own hearts which we would persuade others of.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Paul Sangster, *Doctor Sangster* (London: Epworth, 1962), 271.

<sup>25</sup>White, *Gospel Workers*, 243.

<sup>26</sup>White, *Testimonies for the Church* (n.d.), 4:377.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Art Lindsley, "Profiles in Faith, William Ames; Practical Theologian," *Tabletalk* 7:3 (June 1983): 14.

Self-appropriation of the truth preached will strengthen the preacher for preaching, such that it may be said, "His sermon was like thunder because his life was like lightning."<sup>28</sup>

Jonathan Edwards also addressed the matter of affections. He did not use the word as we do, to describe moderate feelings, emotions, or tender attachments; by affection, he meant one's heart, inclination and will.<sup>29</sup> He questions, "For who will deny that true religion consists in a great measure in vigorous and lively actings and the inclination and will of the soul or the fervent exercises of the heart?"<sup>30</sup> He then goes on to demonstrate from Scripture that real Christianity deeply impacts the affections that shape our fears, hopes, love, hatred, desire, joys, sorrows, gratitude, compassions, and zeal.<sup>31</sup>

White, in an 1881 article that discusses the disciple John, places similar emphasis on the importance and necessity of the preacher's affection. She comments insightfully,

John's affection for his Master was not a mere human friendship, but the love of a repentant sinner. . . . His love for Jesus led him to love all for whom Christ died. His religion was of a practical character. He reasoned that love to God would be manifested in love to his children. He was heard again and again to say, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another . . ." The apostle's life was in harmony with his teachings. The love which glowed in his heart for Christ, led him to put forth the most earnest, untiring labor for his fellow-men. . . . He was a powerful preacher, fervent, and deeply in earnest, and his words carried with them a weight of conviction.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, sermon preparation involves humble, holy, critical thinking. It allows the truth to harrow the preacher's heart. It involves asking the Holy Spirit for insight; it includes on-going repentance; it demands complete dependence on God.

### **Pathos: The Pastor's Passion**

The preaching event must also be an exercise in Spirit-directed *Pathos* or passion. A false passion may have subtle roots. Martin Lloyd-John observes,

<sup>28</sup>Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper, 1960), 161, quoting Cornelius A. Lapide, *The Great Commentary of Cornelius A. Lapide*, trans. Thomas W. Mossman (London: John Hodges, 1876), 1:317.

<sup>29</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, repr. ed., (Edinburgh, U.K.: Banner of Truth, 1994), 24, explains, "This faculty is called by various names; it is sometimes called the inclination; and, as it has respect to the actions that are determined and governed by it, is called the will; and the mind, with regards to the exercises of this faculty, is often called the heart." Cf. pp. 24-27.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 31. Cf. pp. 31-35.

<sup>32</sup>Ellen G. White, "Sanctification, the Life of John," *Second Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 15 February, 1881, par. 4.

A man prepares a message and, having prepared it, he may be pleased and satisfied with the arrangement and order of the thoughts and certain forms of expression. If he is of an energetic, fervent nature, he may well be excited and moved by that and especially when he preaches the sermon. But it may be entirely of the flesh and have nothing at all to do with spiritual matters. Every preacher knows exactly what this means. . . . You can be carried away by your own eloquence and by the very thing you yourself are doing, and not by the truth at all.<sup>33</sup>

White, with a similar emphasis, reminds her readers that many preachers have preached Christless sermons and have not been affected themselves, by the truth they present to the people. With a rebuking tone she says,

The preaching the world needs is not only that which comes from the pulpit, but that which is seen in the everyday life; not only Bible precepts, but Christlike characters and heaven-born practices; the living, loving disciples of Jesus who have felt that it was more precious to commune with Jesus than to have the most exalted positions and praise of men; hearts that are daily feeling the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, that are made strong and tender by inward conflict and secret prayer, and whose lives though humble are eloquent with holy deeds--these are the kind of workers that will win souls to Jesus. In our ministry we must reveal Christ to the people, for they have heard Christless sermons all their lives.<sup>34</sup>

#### Passion and Personality

Passion may be demonstrated not only in the highly animated dynamics of the preacher; it can be equally present when the preacher talks quietly and slowly, calmly and measurably.

According to John Piper, Sereno Dwight asked a man who had heard Jonathan Edwards preach, if Edwards was an eloquent preacher. His reply is testimonial,

He had no studied varieties of the voice, and no strong emphasis. He scarcely gestured, or even moved; and he made no attempt by the elegance of his style, or the beauty of his pictures, to gratify the taste, and fascinate the imagination. But, if you mean by eloquence, the power of presenting an important truth before an audience, with overwhelming weight of argument, and with such intensesness of feeling, that the whole soul of the speaker is thrown into every part of the conception and delivery; so that the solemn attention of the whole audience is riveted, from the beginning to the close, and impressions are left

<sup>33</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-60), 2:266.

<sup>34</sup>Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (Hagerstown, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1993), 17:73, 74.

that cannot be effaced; Mr. Edwards was the most eloquent man I ever heard speak.<sup>35</sup>

In 1897, White wrote about the need for preachers to be passionate in proclaiming the truth as well as in correcting errors. She warns that preachers must not neglect “the duty of speaking words of warning to those who are erring,”<sup>36</sup> not necessarily with a multitude of words, but with a readiness “to open the Bible, and according as circumstances shall require, read reproof, rebuke, warning, or comfort to those who listen. He should teach the truth, rightly dividing the word, suiting out portions that will be as meat in due season to those with whom he associates.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Necessity of Personal Application

While those committed to biblical preaching, including Ellen G. White, are convinced of the truth and the power of the biblical text, many are unclear as to the preacher’s responsibility, both in explaining and applying the meaning of the text to the lives of people. We will focus on the latter.

### Objections to Application in Preaching

Contemporary evangelicals are not the only ones who have struggled with this matter. Karl Barth, reflective of his transcendent view of God and theology of revelation, questioned if it was indeed possible for anyone to apply Scripture to life. He insisted that being faithful to the text and also true to life in this age is “a serious difficulty” that has “no solution.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, the task of bridging the gap between the Bible and life today remains in the hands of God alone. For Barth, application in preaching is merely talking about the text and contemporary life; he believes that God must bridge the gap between the two. In short, application is inferential, not direct. An individual’s response results from an encounter with God Himself, regardless of the preacher’s work.

Charles G. Dennison criticizes any emphasis for application in preaching because many do so by attempting to find a point of contact between the text and the audience. He comments, “Rather than seeing the hearers of the Word called and placed by grace within that Word and its flow of the drama of salvation, this approach, as unintentional as it may be, allows the contemporary situation to determine the Word’s relevance.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Cited in John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 49-50.

<sup>36</sup>Ellen G. White, “Preach the Word,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 28 September 1897, para. 10.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Karl Barth, *Prayer and Preaching* (London: SCM, 1964), 108.

<sup>39</sup>Charles G. Dennison, “Some Thoughts on Preaching,” *Kerux* 4 (1989): 8.

John MacArthur Jr., though not opposed to the preacher developing general application in his sermons, rejects any obligation to do so, and downplays the need for sermon application, arguing that the Word of God has inherent power.<sup>40</sup>

### The Need for Application

Despite the above criticisms and objections, we are convinced that biblical preaching is most effective when it includes direct and explicit application to the lives of people. Indeed, the Holy Spirit uses human means to accomplish both tasks in the preaching event. This view is supported by leading authorities on preaching. Haddon W. Robinson notes, "Many homileticians have not given accurate application the attention it deserves."<sup>41</sup> John A. Broadus, in his seminal work on expository preaching says, "The application in a sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but it is the main thing to be done."<sup>42</sup> Jerry Vines laments that the "subject of application in the work of exposition has not received sufficient attention."<sup>43</sup> Harold T. Bryson predicts that "more than likely the concern for relevancy of the text will produce more books on application or interpretation and more emphasis in sermons on applying the biblical text to life in today's world."<sup>44</sup> Jay E. Evans is even more forceful, "Is application necessary? Absolutely."<sup>45</sup>

White strongly stresses the need for application in preaching. She agrees that exposition should not be the only concern of the preacher; application of truth to the

<sup>40</sup>John MacArthur Jr., "Moving from Exegesis to Exposition," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard Mayhew (Dallas: Word, 1992), 300.

<sup>41</sup>Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 89. He adds, "No book has been published devoted to the knotty problems raised by application" (*ibid.*, 90).

<sup>42</sup>John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, new and rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 210. John F. Bettler, "Application," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 332-33, envisions an even greater role in application: "Application, no matter how skillfully structured or helpfully delivered, must never be viewed as an 'add-on.' It is not a skill to be developed merely as part of a good preaching repertoire. It is not frosting. It is rather the cake—the entire enterprise, from picking a text to post-sermon discussions, must be understood as *application*."

<sup>43</sup>Jerry Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 97. J. I. Packer, "From the Scriptures to the Sermon," *Ashland Theological Journal* 22 (1990): 49, admits that pulpits are weak in practical preaching.

<sup>44</sup>Harold T. Bryson, "Trends in Preaching Studies Today," *Theological Educator* 49 (Spring 1994): 119.

<sup>45</sup>Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 32. His convictions are thus because he views preaching as heralding. "It is not mere exposition. It is not lecturing on history—even redemptive history. It is not 'sharing.' It is authoritatively declaring both the good and the bad news of the Bible. It is forcibly bringing home to God's people God's message from God's Word." *Ibid.*



lives of the hearers is equally important. She indicates, "It is not enough that we merely give an exposition of the Scriptures. . . . We are not to merely open the Bible and read something to the people and then go away out of the desk and carry no burden of souls with us."<sup>46</sup>

### Defining Application

What is application in preaching? Several definitions exist, each with its own merit. Broadus defines it as "part, or those parts, of the discourse in which we show how the subject applies to the persons addressed, what practical instructions it offers them, what practical demands it makes upon them."<sup>47</sup> Ramesh Richard sees application as moving the "audience from just receiving to exhortation and implementation of God's truth."<sup>48</sup> Adams stresses the pertinence of "scriptural truths" so that people "not only understand how those truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and perhaps even eager to implement those changes."<sup>49</sup> David Veerman asserts that application is "answering two questions: *So what?* and *Now what?* The first question asks, 'Why is this passage important to *me?*' The second asks, 'What should I do about it today?'"<sup>50</sup> Wayne McDill claims,

Application is more than just taking the sermon truth and attacking the congregation with it. Application presents the implications of biblical truth for the contemporary audience. It is a call for action, putting the principles of Scripture to work in our lives. It deals with attitudes, behavior, speech, lifestyle, and personal identity. *It appeals to conscience, to values, to conviction, to commitment to Christ.*<sup>51</sup>

As such, sermon application may be either descriptive or prescriptive. In the first place, it appropriates the principles of Scripture to contemporary life, pointing

<sup>46</sup>Ellen G. White, "The Minister's Relationship to God's Word," in *Sermons and Talks* (Hagerstown, MD: E. G. White Estate, 1990), 62. Cf. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1944), 337-38.

<sup>47</sup>Broadus, 211.

<sup>48</sup>Ramesh Richard, *Scripture Sculpture: A Do-It-Yourself Manual for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 116.

<sup>49</sup>Adams, 17.

<sup>50</sup>David Veerman, "Sermons: Apply Within," *Leadership* 11 (Spring 1990): 122. He indicates that application is not (1) additional information, giving more facts in the sermon; (2) mere understanding since grasping the sermon or scriptural content mentally is far different from the ability to apply it properly in one's life; (3) the same as relevance because listeners need specific and concrete admonitions; (4) to be equated with illustrations. *Ibid.*, 121-22.

<sup>51</sup>Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 187 (emphasis mine).

out examples of obedience and disobedience and the results that follow;<sup>52</sup> in the second place, the preacher may use Bible truth as guidelines for behavior.<sup>53</sup>

### **Hermeneutics and Application**

Some evangelical scholars distinguish between hermeneutics and exegesis.<sup>54</sup> In such a view, hermeneutics involves only the explanation of a passage of Scripture; at that point its task is complete. However, the preacher as an interpreter of the biblical text must move beyond what a passage of scripture meant then, to what it means now. As such, hermeneutics as a process includes application as well. In other words, the preacher must apply the biblical text in order to complete the task of hermeneutics. Yet leading authorities in this field acknowledge that

Despite the importance of application, few modern evangelical scholars have focused on this topic. In fact, most hermeneutics textbooks give it only brief coverage, and many major commentary series only mention application with passing remarks to help readers bridge the gap from the biblical world to the modern world.<sup>55</sup>

In their opinion, while proper application is dependent upon establishing the meaning of a text, “the process of interpretation is incomplete if it stops in the land of the meaning.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, “the goal of hermeneutics must include detecting how the Scriptures can impact readers today.”<sup>57</sup>

White admonishes those who listen to preaching to diligently study the Scriptures and weigh the interpretation proclaimed in the homily. She insists that people should not be “content with the interpretation given by those whose business it is to proclaim the word of God. Ministers who thus educate the people are themselves in error.” In fact, it is on “by searching the Scriptures [that] we are to know God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent. The Bible has not been given for the benefit of ministers only; it is the book for the people . . .”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Ibid. He adds, “The implications of biblical truth are thus used as a measure for life, not to tell the hearer what he should do but to show him what is actually taking place.”

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. “Our hearers want to know in concrete terms how they are to live out the implications of biblical truth.”

<sup>54</sup>V. C. Pfitzner, “The Hermeneutical Problem and Preaching,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (1967): 348, comments on the relationship between these two concepts.

<sup>55</sup>William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 403.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 401.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>58</sup>Ellen G. White, “The Bible to Be Understood by All,” *The Signs of the Times* 20 August 1894, para. 02.

### The Gap between Then and Now

As noted above, those who object to application in preaching voice their most strident objections to the gaps between the biblical text and the contemporary audience. In their zeal to defend the timeless and transcendent nature of the Word of God, they tend to ignore the very real differences between the world of the Bible and that of the hearer today. However, to ignore application for fear of rendering the Word of God unapproachable or incomprehensible is a needless fear. To be certain, the need to study and contextualize certain cultural references is obvious, and so should be the need to make contemporary application. The chasm between these two worlds may be bridged by application.<sup>59</sup>

Sidney Greidanus addresses this thorny issue by appealing to the use of Scripture in different stages of redemptive history. His conclusion is well taken,

The sermon, therefore, still consists of explanation and application—not because the Word is objective, but because the Word is addressed to the church at one stage of redemptive history while the preacher must address this Word to the church at another stage of redemptive history. The Word, to be sure, is addressed to the church of all ages, but this confession should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that it is first of all directed to a particular church at a certain stage of redemptive history. There is, certainly, continuity in redemptive history; there is continuity in the church of all ages; but the discontinuity between then and now should not be overlooked.<sup>60</sup>

John R. W. Stott views preaching in terms of bridge-building. Accordingly, the enormous cultural changes that have occurred since the Bible was written have caused a “deep rift . . . between the biblical world and the modern world.”<sup>61</sup> He writes compellingly that the preacher’s responsibility is to build bridges that “enable God’s revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of men and women today.”<sup>62</sup>

We have to be aware of the “amazingly contemporary”<sup>63</sup> nature of the Bible and at the same time, note that its relevance is not always apparent. We can therefore agree with Nolan Howington’s claim, “To make biblical truth clear, there

<sup>59</sup> This ‘distance’ between the context of the Bible and the contemporary setting may be observed in four areas, namely, time, culture, geography, and linguistics. Since translation and exegesis are legitimate means to bridge the ‘distances’ between the text and us, then application of the text is legitimate as well. Cf. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, 13-18.

<sup>60</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970), 158.

<sup>61</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 138.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Stott, 141. See too Keith Willhite, “Audience Relevance in Expository Preaching,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (July-September 1992): 356, “Nothing is more relevant for human beings than the revealed Word of the living God.”

must be explanation; to make it relevant, there must be application.”<sup>64</sup> In the same vein, Vines notes, “To fail to make practical application of the Word of God is to do injustice to the Bible’s purpose. God’s truth is timeless. God was thinking of us when He wrote the Bible.”<sup>65</sup>

Scripture is relevant precisely because it has the ability to speak to issues faced by contemporary human beings despite the distance between both worlds. Stephen F. Olford correctly notes, “It would be safe to say that there is no part of Scripture that is unrelated to some aspect of faith and life.”<sup>66</sup> The preacher, therefore, should take note of Walter C. Kaiser’s understanding of the Bible’s ability to address the needs of people today.

The relevancy and adequacy of the Bible to meet the needs of a modern age are easily demonstrable. In fact, sermons that feature the latest pop psychology or recovery plan are settling for less than they could or should. In almost every contemporary issue the Church faces today, she would have been better off a thousand times over had she gone with a systematic plan to go through the whole Bible in an expository way.<sup>67</sup>

Application is necessary in preaching because of the distance in time, culture, geography, and language between the text of Scripture and the preacher. Nevertheless, the preacher does not need to *make* Scripture relevant. He/She must, however, *demonstrate* its relevance; that is, he/she must appreciate the task of “transferring a relevant message from the past to the present.”<sup>68</sup>

Bridging the gap between these two worlds is a matter of properly applying the message of a given passage to the preacher’s audience.<sup>69</sup> It is not an easy task for the preacher, but one that is essential in order to fulfill the demands of the sermon. All preachers do well to connect with Stott’s passion in,

Praying that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to bridge the chasm; who struggle to relate God’s

<sup>64</sup>Nolan Howington, “Expository Preaching,” *Review and Expositor* 56 (January 1959): 63.

<sup>65</sup>Vines, 96.

<sup>66</sup>Stephen F. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 256.

<sup>67</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Crisis in Expository Preaching Today,” *Preaching* 11 (Sept-Oct 1995): 8. William Ward Ayer, “The Art of Effective Preaching,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (Jan-March 1967): 31, makes a similar call, “The man behind the sacred desk must have studied to show himself approved as he handles the truth, adapting it to the needs of today, needs which are basically the same as for all days, but especially for our day when surface situations have been so radically changed in a rapidly changing world.”

<sup>68</sup>Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 158.

<sup>69</sup>Willhite, 356, believes that the preacher must also take aspects of argumentation into consideration when bridging the gap.

unchanging Word to our ever changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture and pertinent to today.<sup>70</sup>

### Benefits of Application

Application benefits the congregation in at least five ways: (1) Listeners are urged to respond as a result of hearing the demands made upon them by the biblical truth presented in the sermon; (2) application is holistic, involving mind, will, and emotion; (3) Christ-likeness is developed in the listeners; (4) moral discernment in an amoral environment is developed; and (5) the hearers grasp the biblical message as relevant to their contemporary needs.<sup>71</sup>

It is along these lines that White makes the following claim:

Through the application of the truths of the Gospel, men become laborers together with God. But those who while claiming to believe the Bible fail to practise the truth it contains, are blind and can not see afar off. This is why so many men and women live at cross-purposes with God. They do not live and work upon the Gospel plan of addition. Their religious experience is dwarfed.<sup>72</sup>

Application is the vital link between God's eternal Word given in antiquity and the concepts of men and women in the present.<sup>73</sup> Preachers do not need to discuss the option of "needs-based preaching" because the biblical revelation is more than adequate to touch hearers across the spectrum of humanity. The role of the preacher is to make biblical truth plain enough for listeners to understand its meaning and to demonstrate its relevance.<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

*Logos, Ethos, and Pathos* are the key components of biblical preaching. As a preacher, White strongly advocated that the Bible is wholly infallible, totally sufficient, and very potent. She was convicted of the need for biblical preaching, in which the Word of God dominates one's being, inviting the Holy Spirit to winnow the soul in order to conform one's life to the truth that is preached. God's

<sup>70</sup>Stott, 144.

<sup>71</sup>Hershael W. York and Scott A. Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 70-84.

<sup>72</sup>Ellen G. White, "Our Duty as Christians," *The Signs of the Times*, 12 September 1900, para. 06.

<sup>73</sup>Howington, 63, understands this role of application, "The preacher will throw the light of divine revelation upon human need and will present the resources of grace that are sufficient for that need. His sermons will thus disclose the vital relation between the passage and actual life. Though the setting of the text is ancient, the living word through it speaks to personal need and in the present tense."

<sup>74</sup>Louis Lotz, "Good Preaching," *Reformed Review* 40 (Autumn 1986): 38, poetically describes preaching that succeeds both in explanation and application.



Word must come out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation. When she stood to preach, she did so with a passion that evoked itself in great earnestness. In her life and ministry she combined the *logos*, the *ethos*, and *pathos* of preaching the Word.

For White, application is inherent in the work of biblical preaching. It is impossible to preach a true biblical message without relating the biblical text to the contemporary hearers. Application is not only central to hermeneutics; it is the mechanism that bridges the gap between the world of the biblical text and the world of the preacher's audience. However, she cautions readers against viewing application as a human endeavor alone. It is definitely not a task to be undertaken apart from the preacher's assurance of the inherent power of God's Word and the ultimate role of the Holy Spirit to apply that Word to human hearts. As daunting a task as it may be, application is requisite in preaching so as to fulfill the purpose of changing lives.

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