Biblical Hermeneutics
Application of Biblical Teachings

I. The importance of applying the teachings of the Bible.

A. The ultimate goal of all Bible study is a changed life. Bible study should not stop with simply knowledge about the teachings of the Bible. It should change our beliefs, attitudes and actions.

B. Scripture emphasizes the importance of application of the teachings of the Bible.
   1. James 1:22-25: Blessing comes from obedience to the Word, not merely knowing its teachings.
   2. 1 Cor 10:6: the experiences of others are recorded in Scripture for our example so we will avoid similar mistakes.
   3. Rom. 15:4: Everything written in Scripture is to instruct us. It is relevant for today.
   4. Matt 7:21-27: Those who really know Jesus show it by obeying His teachings. Parable of building your house on the rock stresses obeying the teachings of Jesus.
   6. 2 Tim 3:16-17: All Scripture is given for teaching (right doctrine), reproof (correcting wrong ideas), correction (pointing out wrong behavior) and training in righteousness (showing right behavior). Both intellectual and behavioral changes are part of the legitimate use of Scripture.

C. Gordon Fee: “The proper aim of all true theology is doxology. Theology that does not begin and end in worship is not biblical at all, but is rather the product of western philosophy. In the same way, I want to insist that the ultimate aim of all true exegesis is spirituality, in some form or another. And I insist on this because of my conviction that only when exegesis is so understood has the exegetical task been done in a way that is faithful to the intent of the text itself.” [Gordon Fee, Listening to the Spirit in the Text (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 5]

II. What is application?

A. Application asks “what difference will the teachings of this passage make in my life?”
   1. What should Christians do?
   2. What should I do and what I will do?

B. The correct interpretation is unchanging, but applications vary for different cultures and individuals.

C. There are multiple levels of application:
   1. Application is built on the foundation of exegesis – the interpretation of the meaning of the text. Exegesis focuses on what the author was saying to the original audience.
   2. Timeless principle: Teachings from the passage that require beliefs and actions that are valid in any period of history and any culture.
      a. Principles are the bridge between interpretation and application.
      b. Many mistakes are made by leaping too quickly to application without finding the principles.
   3. Cultural Application: How the teachings of the passage should be applied in the modern time in your specific culture.
      a. Contextualization involves making the teachings of the Bible relevant today in a particular culture, even when the problems and situations are different than those in the biblical culture.
      b. It is often expressed “Christians ought to...” or “we ought...”

Copyright © 2013 Dr. Harry Hahne
4. **General personal application**: What you personally **should** believe, think, feel and do in order to implement the principle in your life. This focuses on the overall needs for change in your life at your present stage of spiritual growth. It is often expressed in the form “I ought to...”

5. **Specific personal application**: What you **will do right now** to apply the teachings of the passage in your current situation. This is expressed in the form “I will do...”

D. Personal applications should be **measurable and specific**.

1. **Measurable**: You will be able to know if it has happened.

2. **Specific**: Involves **concrete changes**:
   a. **Definite actions**
   b. **Goals** for attitude and behavior change
   c. An implementation plan for how to change these attitudes and behaviors

3. The implementation plan helps you move beyond vague, general applications to specific applications that change your life.

4. Example: Don't simply say “I need to be more loving”. Ask the Lord to show you someone in your life you can exercise love toward and decide how you will do.

E. Focus on 2-3 principles and develop specific applications and implementation plans for these.

F. Phil 4:6-7

1. **Principles**:
   a. We need to trust God and pray with thanksgiving in every situation.
   b. When a believer prays with thanksgiving in his heart, asking God to help him with a distressing situation, God will give supernatural peace that will help him not to be as anxious and to focus his mental thoughts on positive things.

2. **General cultural application**:
   a. This is a perennial human problem, so the general application would be similar in all cultures.
   b. Yet you should still focus the cultural application on the current situation in a particular culture.
   c. General cultural application focuses on:
      (1) Where a group falls short of the teaching of the biblical passage
      (2) What it would look like if they implemented the principle.
   d. Example: You are the leader of the youth group in a church in a poor community, in which many families are recent immigrants. Many people are fearful and uncertain about their future.
      (1) Their needs:
         (a) to bring their specific fears and anxieties to God and ask him for their daily needs.
         (b) to thank God for small hidden touches of his grace and care for them.
      (2) How you can help bring about change:
         (a) Lead this group in a prayer walk through their community to pray for specific needs that they see and to thank God for small, hidden blessings that they take for granted.
         (b) Commit to pray regularly for them that God will give them grateful and faith-filled hearts that are full of God’s supernatural peace.
   e. Example: Men nearing retirement need to come to God with prayer and gratitude rather than anxiety as they consider how God will care for them as they age.
3. **General personal application**: I need to trust God more when I am in pressured situations and stop being anxious.

4. **A specific personal application**:
   a. I have several major exams and papers due in the next 2 weeks and I am not sure how I will get them all done. I will trust God and not be anxious during this time.
   b. **Implementation plan**:
      1. I am going to pray daily, asking God for special peace during this time and thanking God for the pressure I am under.
      2. I will memorize Phil. 4:6-7
      3. When I am tempted to become anxious I will recite Phil. 4:6-7 and pray acknowledging to God that I need His supernatural peace.

III. **Determining timeless principles**

   A. Principles are teachings that are valid in any period of history and any culture.

   B. **Some passages state the general principle in the context**.

      1. **1 Cor 8:4-13**
         a. In a pagan society like Corinth, meat available from many butchers had been sacrificed to idols.
         b. Since there is only one God (vv. 4-6), eating this meat is a matter of indifference (v. 8).
         c. Yet some Christians who had come out of pagan background associating eating this meat with the pagan rituals that they had been a part of. They felt that eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol was to participate in idol worship and they felt guilty (v. 7). Even worse, for some this might be an initial step back into a pagan lifestyle.
         d. If eating this meat would cause a fellow believer to stumble in his faith and get involved in sin, it is best to avoid it. (V. 13)
         e. The principle is stated in v. 9: **Although Christians have freedom, they have to consider how their actions affect others**. If your actions would urge another believer to do something that would violate their conscience, then it is better not to do it for the sake of your brother in Christ.

   C. **Some passages describe a cultural application of a broader principle**.

      1. Not eating idol meat is a cultural application of the principle of not using your Christian freedom in such a way that leads your fellow Christian into sin (1 Cor. 8:9).
      2. The application of this principle would be different in another culture.

   D. **Asking why the author made the statement may help you arrive at the principle behind the statement**.

      1. **Gal 5:2-3**:
         a. Paul says if you are circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you.
         b. Yet in v. 6 he says circumcision really does not matter. Paul had Timothy circumcised when he thought it would help his ministry in a Jewish area.
         c. The reason must go beyond the physical act of circumcision. V. 4 says “you are trying to be justified by Law”. The issue is that the Galatians were trying to keep the Law of Moses to be justified and the circumcision was an outward sign of initiation into the Old Covenant.
         d. So the point is they were turning to another means of salvation than through faith in the work of Christ. (cf. Gal 3:3)
         e. So the principles are:
            1) No one can be justified by keeping the Law.
            2) We are not to earn our acceptance with God by human effort but it comes through faith.
E. **Often multiple levels of principles are at operation in a given statement**.
   1. Paul's rebuke of the Galatians for being circumcised was based on several levels of principles:
      a. Circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant and the Law.
      b. No one can be justified by keeping the Law.
      c. No one can be justified by any type of human effort.
      d. Human effort in salvation denies the work of Christ.
   2. Often the most visible level is the lowest, which pertains to the immediate situation (items a, b).
   3. The higher level principles (items c, d) are often the more timeless principles.

F. **Determine the principle in a way consistent with the literary genre**:

   1. **Didactic passages** (letters, sermons) may have timeless principles in nearly every clause or even phrase. Ask if the teaching is a cultural application of a broader principle or a permanent command.

   2. **Narrative** passages suggest applications from the overall pattern. Don't draw principles or applications from every individual verse. Ask if the behavior of the character is a good example to emulate, a bad example to avoid or simply part of the dressing of the story that teaches a broader principle about God's work in the world.

   3. **OT laws**: Have they been fulfilled in Christ (and thus no longer binding), broadened, narrowed or annulled in the NT or affirmed in the NT as still binding on Christians under the New Covenant?
      a. Casuistic laws are examples of a broader principle. So look for the principle behind them.
      b. Apodictic laws are general rules already. Application determines how to apply them in appropriate contemporary situations.

   4. **Prophecies and apocalypses**: Determine whether the predictions were fulfilled in the prophet's own day or in later history. Do they pertain to Christ's First Coming, Christ's Second Coming or in other eschatological events. Look for principles about God's methods of working that are always relevant. Prophecies exhort the reader to ethical behavior. Make sure the commands are valid under the New Covenant.

   5. Are **proverbs** absolute truths or gnomic statements (general patterns that are true “all things being equal”)?

   6. **Poetry** is often gnomic or based on a personal experience. It may include prophetic material or types of Christ (e.g. in the royal psalms). The rules of interpreting narratives, proverbs and prophecy are relevant for poetry.

   7. In **genealogies** the teachings are broad and drawn from the overall pattern. They may also suggest applications based on the pattern of God's providence, grace or concern for individuals.

G. **Some suggestions for separating cultural-bound applications in biblical passages** (based on Fee and Stuart, pp. 71-73):

   1. Distinguish the central core of the teaching of the Bible from what is dependant upon it or peripheral.

   2. Distinguish what the Bible sees as inherently moral from what is not. E.g. Paul's sin lists never contain cultural items.

   3. Note the consistent and uniform witness of the Bible and where various passages differ. The differences may reflect differing applications of principles. E.g. the retention of money (Acts 4:28-5:11; Lk 12:33 vs. 1 Tim 6:17-19).
4. Watch where the passage distinguishes specific applications from principles. E.g. 1 Cor 11:2-6: Although he appeals to divine order of creation (principle), the issue of head coverings is a cultural application, since he repeatedly appeals to “custom” and “practices” (v. 6, 13-14, 16).

5. Ask what cultural options were open to the writer. If the cultural situation of the time had only one option it is more likely to be culturally relative (e.g. slavery).

6. Where the passage strongly disagrees with the culture of the time, the teaching is more likely to be absolute (e.g. homosexuality). The opposite is not true: if it agrees with culture it may or may not be relevant.

7. Look for issues that interact with a cultural situation, but a differing cultural situation lead to a different application today. E.g. Rom 13:1-7 might be applied differently in a democracy than an absolute monarchy, because part of the way democracy works is for citizens to work to change bad laws and remove bad leaders.

8. Humbly recognize that there is room for disagreement on these issues, because of the ambiguity of Scripture and the difficulties of application.


IV. Determining cultural applications

A. Cultural applications are how the teachings of the passage should be applied in the modern time in a specific culture.
   1. Where do people in a cultural group fall short of the principles taught in this passage?
   2. How would they look different if they applied the biblical principles?
   3. The ability to critically analyze your culture in light of biblical teachings is an important hermeneutical skill.

B. When our life situation is identical to the biblical one, the application is the same.
   1. Eph 6:11-12--Although he uses first century cultural language of a Roman soldier to express the concept, the principle is directly applicable.
   2. Heb 13:5--Money is always an object of passion.

C. When our life situation is comparable but not identical, the application needs only slight adjustment to accommodate a genuinely equivalent situation.
   1. This requires that we do our exegesis well.
   2. 1 Cor 9:14--Although we do not have apostles, the principle applies to missionaries and pastors. This is corroborated by other passages (1 Tim 5:17-18).
   3. 1 Cor 8, 10-- A comparable cultural situation to not eating meat sacrificed to idols might be abstaining from drinking alcohol when it might cause an alcoholic brother to slip into his former habit.
   4. In order to be truly comparable, all key elements must be comparable.
      a. In the idol meat issue, the key elements are:
         1) We must be free in Christ to do either action (1 Cor. 8:4-6, 8-9).
         2) The person with a weak conscience thinks it is a sin to do the action (1 Cor. 8:7).
         3) If a person did the action it would be a stumbling block to someone else by tempting them to sin (1 Cor. 8:9-12).
b. The parallel is not complete if a fellow Christian would only be offended by our action. For example, a man with body piercings or tattoos is not comparable. Someone offended by this is not likely to be tempted to go out and get piercings or a tattoo! The issue is whether it will encourage another Christian to commit an act which they feel is wrong because their conscience and will are weak.

D. **When our life situation is essentially different than the biblical one, the principle must be applied in new ways to our situation.**
   1. Identify the key elements in the principle and look for ways to apply it to our cultural situation.
   2. Gal 4:9-11
      a. Paul criticizes them for turning back to former practices, by observing months, seasons and special days.
      b. The issue is not simply celebrating special days or religious holidays, which are indifferent (Rom 14:5-6).
      c. The real issue is legalistically assuming that observing these days makes a person a better Christian and earns favor with God.
      d. For us this might mean feeling that God will not accept us if we miss a quiet time one day or do not give a certain amount of money.
   3. Acts 17:16-34
      a. While in Athens, Paul presented Christ both in the Synagogues and in the public marketplace.
      b. In NT times, the marketplace (agora) was a common place for social interaction and discussion of ideas.
      c. It would not be faithful to the biblical principle simply to witness in the mall, since the mall does not have the same social function today.
      d. Some closer cultural parallels for places of social interaction in which we could witness: University campuses; coffee shops and even bars (often part of a restaurant); Internet discussion groups (a key modern “marketplace” for discussing ideas).

E. Application often involves applying the principle in ways that were not implemented in the Bible.

F. **The right choices in many situations cannot always be determined by appealing to a single passage or direct teaching.** A biblical mindset integrates multiple biblical principles and has the wisdom to apply the implication of the combination to new situations.

G. **Determining culturally relevant applications requires examining our culture in light of biblical principles.**
   1. It requires correctly understanding the principles.
   2. It requires finding the elements of our culture that violate those principles.
   3. Then it requires thinking through ways to implement the biblical principles to address these cultural problems.
   4. Application requires sensitivity to culture, an ability think critically about one’s culture and the ability to apply biblical principles in new ways while holding faithfully to the principles.

H. Most commentaries are weak in the application area, since their main task is explaining the meaning of the text. Some commentaries focus on application: *NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan), *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP) and *The New Testament Commentary* (IVP)

V. **A suggested procedure for determining personal applications.**

A. **Pray that God will show you specific areas of your life that need to be changed.**
   1. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin. (Joh 16:8)
   2. The Holy Spirit illuminates the Word of Truth so we see how it applies to our lives. (1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 4:4-6)
3. The Holy Spirit applies the Sword of the Spirit to our hearts to change us. (Eph 6:17; Heb. 4:12-13)

B. **Summarize all principles in the passage**, both doctrinal and practical. Always based your applications on the principles.

C. **Select several areas from this list of principles in which you need to grow**: attitudes to change, promises to claim, truths to believe, false doctrines to correct, commands to obey, examples to follow, sins to avoid. This is your **general personal application**.

D. **Brainstorm possible applications for each principle**.
   1. List more than you have time to do, so you can select the best ones.
   2. Think about all areas of your life: relationships (family, spouse, friends, church, non-Christians, neighbors, co-workers), work, hobbies, recreation, ministry, goals, values, motivations, emotions, ideas.
   3. List possible ways that you could implement the teaching of the passage in one or more of these areas of life. These are **potential specific personal applications**.

E. **Evaluate which applications are highest priority**. Pick 2 or 3 to begin implementing.

F. For each priority application area, summarize your **general personal application**:
   1. Where do you fall short of the teaching of the passage?
   2. What do you need to believe, think, feel and do in order to implement this teaching in your life?
   3. Write a paragraph reflecting on the needs in your life in these areas.

G. Determine a **specific personal application** to put each of these applications into practice.
   1. What **will you do right now** to apply the teachings of the passage in your current situation?
   2. Determine a **specific implementation plan** for how you will put this into practice.
      a. What specifically will you do? With whom or in what situation?
      b. How will you do it?
      c. When will you do it?
      d. This plan should be measurable and specific.

H. **Do it!**

VI. Practice developing specific, measurable applications:

A. 1 Thess 1:8
   1. Principle: We need to speak the gospel boldly to others around us.
   2. Need: I am afraid to witness and do not do it much
   3. List some specific, measurable applications.

B. Luke 18:1-8
   1. Principle: We ought to pray always and not get discouraged or give up when answers do not come as quickly as we would like.
   2. Need: I don't pray as much as I should and I tend to give up quickly.
   3. List some specific measurable applications: