

The Relationship between Meaning and Application

Kenneth J. Coughlan

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What is “Application?”

According to Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, the “golden rule” of biblical interpretation is to “extend the same courtesy to any text or author that we would want others to extend to our statements and writings.”¹ When we make a declaration, we have a particular intended meaning in mind. The biblical authors (and God via inspiration) are no different. Every biblical text has a specific meaning behind it, and it is the job of the interpreter to find that meaning.

“Application,” therefore, refers to application of the *author’s* intended meaning. It is taking that original meaning and bringing it into modern times. In the process, we must be careful to protect the integrity of the original meaning. If we were to spiritualize, allegorize or typologize the text when it is not clearly and explicitly called for by scripture, then we would be violating Köstenberger and Patterson’s “golden rule.” People often object that someone has “twisted their words” or “taken them out of context.” If we do not appreciate it when our own words are twisted, then it is especially important that we not do twist God’s word.

One “Meaning,” Many “Applications?”

Even acknowledging that biblical texts have only one intended meaning (that of the author), some people may argue that many different applications can be derived from that meaning. Generally speaking, however, this is not the case. Bearing in mind that there is only one meaning, it will be rare if more than a single application can be derived from it. If the

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 58.

meaning is broad, then it is possible that there may be more than one appropriate application. However, if the meaning is narrow, the application will likely be narrow as well.

If an interpreter claims to have found multiple applications from a narrow text, it may be as a result of an improper enlargement of the author's intention. In other words, if we spiritualize the words, we may be able to use this new, spiritual meaning to arrive at multiple applications. But if that spiritual meaning was not the author's intended meaning, then we have engaged in improper eisegesis rather than exegesis. We have imposed our personal meaning on the text rather than deriving meaning from the text.

The Distinction Between Lessons and Application

When seeking to discover whether a piece of scripture has a contemporary application, we should begin by looking for any differences between the setting of the passage and that of our modern culture. Once differences are identified, we should do the same in regard to commonalities. If we find ourselves evaluating a piece of Scripture in which the scenario faced by the characters in the text is vastly different from anything we reasonably may face today, then we should look to see if there is an underlying principle contained in the passage that still could be applicable.² However, we must not be over eager to find such a principle. There are passages which have no modern application.

Take, for example, God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.³ This command came after God promised to make Abraham into a great nation *through* Isaac.⁴ In this

² Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 787.

³ Gen. 22.

⁴ Gen. 12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:15-19.

context, it should have been clear to Abraham that Isaac could not die (that is, if God was true to His word and would bring about a nation through him). Thus, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, He was testing Abraham's faith in the covenant He had made with him. Nobody today has such a covenant with God (and recognizing the progression from the Abrahamic Covenant to the New Covenant, it seems unlikely that God would utilize a similar covenant again now that the New Covenant era has arrived). Thus, there is no modern application of this passage to our lives today.

However, that does not mean there is nothing for us to learn from these events. There is a difference between "application" and a "lesson." God calls us to have faith in Him.⁵ While the passage has no specific application for us because of the vast differences between Abraham's circumstances and our own, Abraham still stands out as a shining example of faith for us. We can look to Abraham in order to understand the degree of faith that God wants us all to demonstrate. Thus, even when a passage has no modern application, that does not mean that there is no lesson to be learned from it.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is the job of the interpreter to first seek out the author's intended meaning. Once discovered, then we must look for differences and similarities between the biblical and modern setting to decide if a passage has any contemporary applications. We must be careful when seeking application not to allegorize, spiritualize or typologize the text when it is not called for. Not every text will have a modern application. In those instances, we can still investigate

⁵ "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Eph. 2:8-9 (NIV).

whether there is a lesson which God wants us to learn from the passage, even if the passage cannot be directly applied to our current culture and setting.