

## Hitchhiking with Richard Hays: Toward greater faithfulness in application.

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### PRÉCIS

*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard B. Hays supplies a thoughtful hermeneutical basis for applying the New Testament in ethical decision-making. This paper explores how his four modes of appeal to Scripture might clarify application in preaching. By considering Hays's four modes and Daniel Dorani's improvements upon them, readers will be invited to consider an approach to application that heightens validity without becoming mired in excessive complexity.

### THE CHALLENGE IN FOCUS

Homiletical texts are not without valuable insights on the subject of application. Yet for the beginning preacher these thoughts would seem to be either too much or too little; i.e., they may assume the preacher knows how to apply the text or they offer detailed guidance that asks more of the neophyte than may be reasonably expected. Though a preacher may aspire to grow into the sort of balanced perspective they offer, a simpler starting point is often needed. Those who coach beginning preachers may be, as I have been, looking for better means to help them achieve validity in application; an approach that is not simplistic but is elegant enough to be transferable and memorable. More to the point, application needs to emerge from defensible exegesis in ways that are trustworthy despite the complexity of handling multiple genres. Guidance needs to be offered that is not formulaic, yet helps preachers faithfully discern the response called for in the text they are expounding.

### RICHARD B. HAYS: A STARTING POINT

In the light of this perceived need, I was grateful to discover Richard B. Hays's category entitled *Amodes of appeal to Scripture* (Hays, 1996, p. 208ff).

Theologians may appeal to Scripture as a source of the following:

- \$ *Rules*: direct commandments or prohibitions of specific behaviors.
- \$ *Principles*: general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about actions are to be governed.
- \$ *Paradigms*: stories or summary accounts of characters who model exemplary conduct (or negative paradigms: characters who model reprehensible conduct).
- \$ *A symbolic world* that creates the perceptual categories through which we

interpret reality. (We may distinguish for analysis two different, but correlated, aspects of the New Testament=s symbolic world: its representations of the human condition and its depiction of the character of God.)@

As a guide, these modes of appeal to Scripture have several advantages. They distinguish what may often be seen as distinguishable in Scripture, once we are alert to the differences. They are not so numerous as to be forgettable. They build in the expectation that application will be different depending upon which of these lies before us. That is, they raise antecedently the issue of how the text functions. Walter L. Liefeld wisely exhorts us to match the *function* of the passage to the *needs* of a congregation.@ (Liefeld, 1984, p. 106). This is important at a very basic level. As Vanhoozer reminds us, “Wittgenstein himself believed that many, if not most, philosophical problems arise out of confusions concerning the way language is being used. In particular, he resisted reducing the many things people do with language to any one function (e.g. referring or ‘picturing’ the world).” (Vanhoozer, 2002, p. 32).

Nevertheless, as these modes of appeal to Scripture stand, they fall short of our homiletical needs. Obviously, biblical preachers are interested in the Old as well as New Testament. Scripture is not merely given to teach ethics. These limitations of Hays=s categories in a book on New Testament ethics reflect his purposes in that text. David Kelsey similarly wrote of uses of Scripture in relation to doctrine (Kelsey, 1975, p. 4), but that too was a limitation of the project, not of the ways Scripture can be used.

But there are more substantive concerns. Not all rules found in the Bible apply equally or in the same ways. Principles are notoriously difficult to discern as Ramesh Richard notes (Richard, 2001, Appendix 5). Paradigms give us models, positive and negative, yet the preacher needs guidance in how to discern what part of the example is to be followed (or avoided) and whether the example should be seen as normative or merely illustrative. Hays=s fourth mode, *Asymbolic world*@ is, for me, the least satisfactory nomenclature of the four because it could too easily leave the impression that what we see around us is the Areal world@ and that the conceptual world of biblical theology and anthropology is something less. That this is not Hays=s intention is clear from statements such as the following concerning homosexuality.

To take the New Testament as authoritative in the mode in which it speaks is to accept this portrayal as >revealed reality,= an authoritative disclosure of the truth about the human condition. Understood in this way, the text requires a normative evaluation of homosexual practice as a distortion of God=s order for creation.@(Hays, 1996, p. 396). So, for Hays, the symbolic world is the real world. Yet to avoid having to explain this, I would substitute another term for this fourth mode, were I to take this approach to fostering validity in application.

So, as it stands, Hays helps us with application by employing categories that move us in the direction of discernment when we read and seek to apply a text. His valid distinctions between

ways we may legitimately appeal to the Bible remind us that although all of Scripture is inspired and useful, not every text is intended for the same use. To be more helpful, his categories need some amendment. As I climb in with Dr. Hays, I discover he already has a hitchhiker.

#### DANIEL DORIANI: A WORTHY HITCHHIKER.

One evangelical pastor and teacher to take up this challenge is Dr. Daniel Doriani. He extends Hays's list, in two dimensions (Doriani, 2001, p. 82, note 3). He notes seven biblical sources for application, namely, rules, ideals, doctrine, redemptive acts in narrative, exemplary acts in narrative, biblical images or symbols, and songs and prayers. Doriani admits his list could be shorter and acknowledges a partial overlap with the genres of Scripture (Doriani, 2001, Pp. 92-93). In the hope of pointing preachers to the best among possible applications, Dr. Doriani then suggests four questions that may be addressed to any of his sources of application, i.e., questions concerning their duty, their moral character, their goals in life, and the need to discern the truth among competing worldviews. (Doriani, 2001, p. 94). With sources on one axis, and questions on another, this creates a grid-like guide for interpretation yielding, at least theoretically, twenty-eight options for relevance of a text. Subsequent chapters thoughtfully develop this way of pursuing the best application qualifying, extending and nuancing it so as not to foreclose on valid application or to open the flood gates to unjustified ones. This book serves us by helping us to think in more than one dimension as we apply Scripture. Yet as I hitchhike with Dr. Hays and listen to Dr. Doriani offering directions, I find myself squirming in the back seat. Dr. Doriani is going where I would like to go, but he is, as it were, taking the whole trip in one day. I--and my students--need the journey broken into smaller parts. We need a way of arriving at validity in application that helps the beginning preacher--or the seasoned preacher who is open to remedial tuition--to observe how the text itself points to warranted applications.

#### A SIMPLER HITCHHIKER

As indicated, my own journey down this road seeks validity in application, transferability, and memorableness. The risk is that by simplifying Doriani's categories while maintaining the two dimensions of how Scripture speaks and where hearers need change, I will lose something crucial and thereby compromise validity. This risk suggests to me a slightly different approach that seems in practice to have some advantages. It retains the benefits of the seminal insights of Hays and the clarifications of Doriani without allowing them to become so cumbersome as to be overwhelming. I suggest six questions, asked by the interpreter to encapsulate the results of exegesis before beginning the process of sermonizing, questions that garner the fruits of study for the purpose of application. These questions can be posed of the text even by the beginning preacher who can learn not to move forward to crafting a sermon until the questions have been satisfactorily answered. The more experienced Bible student may get deeper answers but not

fundamentally different ones.

Before asking the questions of the text, the person preparing to preach will make a thorough study of the preaching portion using all the tools of exegesis available. He or she will observe context, genre, setting, words, grammar, syntax, connectives, repetitions, images, characters, narrator, structure, editorial comments, and whatever else is there, reading the text humbly, repeatedly and prayerfully. Then the preacher will ask the following questions:

*1. WHAT IS THIS TEXT, FUNCTIONALLY?*

The answer may be: It is an example. It is a command. It is an explanation, a rebuke, a testimony. The answer will not be, It is a poem; or, It is a story. Of course, the text may well be a poem or narrative, but these answers only tell us its genre, not its function. Earlier, while exegeting the text, the preacher may have observed, for instance, that the verbs are in the imperative mood. Even if he failed to notice this in the process of exegesis, this first question forces him, before he moves forward, to acknowledge that the verbs are imperatives. Such verbs tell us that we have a command, a challenge or a directive of some sort. So, an accurate answer to this first question already aligns the preacher with the intent of the text. It alerts him or her not to make teaching into an exhortation or an explanation into a rebuke, for instance. To the extent that the preacher is aware of Hays's modes of appeal to the text or of Doriani's seven sources of application, these will open his eyes to possible answers to the question, but the text itself will authenticate whether he has answered well. Sometimes, a valid preaching portion will be more than one thing functionally. It may, for example, be the statement of a doctrine together with a reason for believing it. It may be an exhortation coupled with a blessing for obeying it. It may be a warning reinforced by a consequence of neglect. Whatever the text is functionally, we need to know it, in order to let the text speak in ways that are in keeping with its nature.

*2. WHAT IS THIS TEXT ABOUT? WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS TEXT?*

Haddon Robinson discusses how the subject relates to the big idea of a sermon (Robinson, 2001, pp. 35-46). The second and third questions I propose here are adapted from his approach and force the preacher to consider and articulate what Dr. Robinson recommends, though I don't mean to use the word "subject" in quite the technical sense he does, "the complete, definite answer to the question, 'What am I talking about?'" (Robinson, 2001, p. 41). I am content for the answer to remain slightly more general since, as we will see, subsequent questions refine it on the basis of what the text itself requires. A paragraph will likely mention various things, but one of these will be the dominant one. The preacher must keep looking at the text in its context, its conjunctions, repetitions, and contrasts, indeed all its parts, until one subject emerges as primary, and everything else builds toward it, is parenthetical to it, flows from it or, in some other discernible way, gives it center stage. The answer to this second question may be as simple as the word *Prayer*, as in Luke 11:1-13, or more detailed such as *Aglorifying God in the last days*, as in 1 Pet 4:7-11. This question forces the preacher to come to a tentative conclusion concerning what is the main thing the writer is addressing in this text. (Ideally a valid preaching portion has

been selected before exegesis began. But it may be that in answering this question the preacher discovers that he or she has tackled too lengthy a passage. In that case, the text will have several ideas that do not build as readily toward, or flow as neatly from, a single idea contained within the text. The solution is to take either a smaller text that does address a single subject, or, ironically, a larger one that adequately subsumes the original text underneath itself.) This question is more challenging to answer in lengthy narrative preaching portions than in most paragraphs in the Pauline corpus. Sometimes an editorial note will supply the clue. Whatever the genre of the text, it has a subject. The preacher's duty is to discover it and preach about that subject.

### 3. *WHAT IS THIS TEXT SAYING ABOUT THIS SUBJECT?*

The answer we propose to the previous question is almost inherently dissatisfying. It is more or less vague and general. This third question must be answered for the preacher's remarks to constitute an exposition of this text. His task in preaching is not to tell us what he, the preacher, knows about prayer; it is to state what God wants us to understand about prayer from Luke 11, or whatever his text may be. To answer this question, the preacher must understand how everything else in the text relates to what is dominant. Sometimes, seeking a valid answer to this question will force the preacher to admit that he has not accurately answered question two. That is, it may emerge that in fact the real subject was something formerly thought to be just part of an argument, or in some other way just a member of the supporting cast. Upon further reflection, some textual hint tips the scale, and another subject emerges and takes center stage. Defensible answers to this third question yield specificity in preaching, specificity that is one of the hallmarks of helpful application.

### 4. *WHAT RESPONSE DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT SEEM TO WANT FROM THIS TEXT?*

This question is predicated upon the conviction that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness or some combination of these or other valid purposes. 2 Tim. 3:17 supplies the basic framework for applying all biblical texts since the four profitable uses mentioned there are logically connected to all Scripture. (v. 16). The other valid uses of Scripture we may postulate are ways these four intentions are achieved and are specific to the text being expounded. Each passage has a unique contribution to make to the goals of edification of the church and sanctification of individual believers. (1 Cor. 14: 4; John 17:17). The preacher prayerfully seeks to discern what that contribution is and to articulate it in terms of the listener's intended immediate and long-term response. The word *Response* is used intentionally for two reasons. First, it helps us to include responses that are attitudinal, intellectual, emotional, or social as well as the individual actions often associated with the word *Application*. Second, it leaves room for the on-going work of the word of God in the believer. As 1 Thess. 2:13 reminds us, *And we also thank God continually, because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God which is at work in you who believe.* (Emphasis added). Placing this question here, before the preacher engages in sermonizing itself, underscores the primacy of application. Bryan Chapell goes so far as to say that *Application justifies the exposition.*

(Chapell, 1994, p. 201). John Carrick makes a solid case for the indispensable place of imperative alongside the indicative in preaching (Carrick, 2002, pp. 82ff). So, already, the preacher concludes that when this message from God is heard and received as from God, it is aimed at producing, for instance, repentance, hope, encouragement, insight, worship, reverence, godly fear, anticipation, humility, joy, holiness, obedience or any number of other responses that are consistent with the larger purposes of sanctification and edification. The textual clues that reveal the passage's purpose may not be within the confines of the preaching portion, but will be inferred from the context.

#### *5. HOW DOES THIS TEXT ELICIT THAT RESPONSE?*

There may be many biblical ways to evoke an appropriate response. The expositor's task is to notice-- at least in the first place-- how the text being expounded seems to be designed to achieve its intended purpose. The preacher's means of bringing a response from his listeners may not be identical to the strategy of the biblical writer, but until it has been noticed and considered carefully, the preacher should not hasten to use other rhetorical means to achieve the text's intended outcome. Answering this question involves observing *how* each part of the text relates to what one considers the subject. The other parts may be examples, as, for instance, in the case of Hebrews 11 where we see examples of faith. The other parts may be commands to be obeyed or perils to avoid. As often as not, however, they will not fit neatly into a single category, but will be parts of an argument, details of a narrative, elements of dialogue or some combination of these or other things. The preacher may be tempted to see a sermon outline prematurely. It is better to wait patiently on the text to disclose its own interior logic. If we have accurately discerned its function, subject, content and purpose, we will not be disappointed in seeking how that purpose is to be achieved. Naturally no single text will tell the whole story on the subject it addresses. If it did so, other texts that address the same subject would be unnecessary. Nevertheless, the power of the Scripture portion at hand lies in its uniqueness. This text contributes to the message in God--ordained ways that even though repetitive are not redundant. When we discover its contribution we preach the message with the authority that this text supplies. Some listeners will respond to the ways this text makes the case for holiness; others will be moved to action by other texts. The richness of the biblical canon ensures variety of impact.

#### *6. HOW DOES THIS TEXT CONTRIBUTE TO THE LARGER DRAMA OF REDEMPTION?*

Context is crucial not only to interpretation. It must also shape our application. This sixth question forces the preacher to place the text in the biblical story line insuring that the sermon will be distinctively and appropriately Christian. Needless to say, this question presupposes prior conclusions concerning how the two testaments relate, the relationship between law and gospel, the nature of prophetic anticipation and fulfillment and a host of other matters beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that every valid preaching portion does in some way contribute to the drama of redemption and the preacher must try to discover whether it is part of setting the stage for the incarnation, showing the need for atonement, giving a visual aid of

redemption, clarifying the believer's present limitations in light of the coming consummation or some other defensible purpose within the canon. The preacher who has answered this question is less likely to commandeer a passage to serve his own agenda. He is less likely to forget that all Scripture testifies of Christ.

This question will perhaps incline the preacher away from a search for timeless truths and toward historical, culturally rooted instances that make the truth of God concrete, believable, specific. To put it in other words, the mode of *paradigm* is often more helpful than the mode of *principle*. To be sure, Scripture contains principles, but perhaps not as many nor the ones many preachers imagine. Better terminology about how a text is functioning (our question 1) helps us think more clearly about how our text supports the larger message of the Bible (our question 6). For instance, a precept is a general rule intended to regulate behavior or thought: moral precepts (New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. "precept"), is a narrower term than "principle" which is defined as a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as a foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning: the basic principles of Christianity (New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. "principle"). To my mind, the word principle complicates matters because the fundamental truth of Christianity is not a proposition but the Triune God Himself. All truly biblical principles, such as the just shall live by faith, or man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God are subordinate to Him and do not function independently of Him. Preachers sometimes preach as if the principles they discern in Scripture have a life of their own. The concept of a precept on the other hand has a conditional element built in to it. The reader expects its validity to hinge upon how the hearer relates to God. This final question inclines the preacher to employ the analogy of faith and the analogy of Scripture, i.e., to do biblical theology. In so doing, it points again to application, but sets up roadblocks to shortcuts.

Once the preacher has asked and answered these questions, he still needs to consider his listeners both as individuals and as part of the local community of God's people. He still needs to clarify the shape of his message, how he will illustrate, conclude and introduce it. But before immersing himself in those homiletical tasks, he will have asked questions that forge a connection from the text as it lies open before him and the applications toward which his sermon moves. The wider and deeper his experience of the Bible, of theology, and of the spiritual life, the better his answers to these questions will be. Yet even the beginner can ask these questions and discern answers that help him or her draw from the text what is actually there and use it for the purposes for which the Spirit of God put it there, in ways that are congruent with its own means of achieving those purposes.

I appreciate the ride from Richard Hays and especially the added direction from Daniel Doriani. I have not reached my destination, but I press on. If you would like to hitch a ride with me, you are more than welcome.

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