

Cross-Eyed Application:
Equipping Preachers to Urge Faith-Based, Text-driven Obedience

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Abstract: We preached with more confidence *before* we read Robinson's lament over his early attempts to apply Scripture: "The awful thing was I said in the name of God what God was not saying" (2005, p. 309). This paper explores one of two dangers that lurk at the door of application: (1) application that is not faith-based; (2) application that is not Text-driven. The concept of Cross-eyed application safeguards against these two preaching perils, the first of which is addressed below.

While we are confident that whatever God has said is relevant, the pastor's ever-present danger is rendering null and void the gift of God's relevant revelation through misguided application. When we speak of application we are referring to any time in the sermon when we call for a response of faith-rooted obedience to the theological meaning of the Text. In Haddon's article, "*The Heresy of Application*" (2005, pp. 306-311), he suggests that errors are most likely to creep into sermons at the level of application. Decrying his own early experience in applying Scripture, Haddon laments, "The awful thing was I said in the name of God what God was not saying" (2005, p. 309). Haddon's concerns are realized in the presence of two dangers that await every preacher at the door of application.

The first danger involves the preacher moving his *people* away from *dependency* on the power of God in their attempt to implement Scripture. This occurs anytime we ask people to respond to God apart from faith in Christ. Application is insidious when obedience is called for that is not based first in an affirmation of what God-in-Christ has accomplished for the Believer. Take, for instance, an attempt to apply Ephesians 5:25-33

to the married men in our congregations. If we say, “Husbands, go out and love your wives...”, without first connecting their obedience to faith in what Christ has done for them, we run the risk of moving those men away from dependency on the power of God in their attempt to implement Scripture. In doing so, we may be unknowingly moving those men towards short-lived moral instruction.

Whereas the first danger involves the preacher moving his people away from dependency on the power of God in their attempt to implement Scripture, the second danger involves the *preacher* moving away from biblical authority. That occurs whenever a pastor instructs his people to do what God’s Word has not said to do. This error can take two forms. One form of error is when we tell our people to respond to God’s Word in a way that the Text of Scripture did not intend. For instance, this often occurs when preaching in Old or New Testament narratives. Often application will stem from following the actions of characters in the story. Take for instance a popular application from Mark 2:1-12, the story of Jesus healing the paralytic who was lowered to Him through the roof by four men: “Bring your unsaved friend in need to Jesus.” Although this is good advice and might even be taught in some other Scripture, that’s not the point in Mark 2:1-12.

The second form of the error of moving away from biblical authority is when we tell our people to respond in absolute terms to God’s Word in a way that is only a possible implication of the biblical truth. Haddon writes, “Too often preachers give to a possible implication all the authority of a necessary implication, which is at the level of obedience. Only with necessary implications can you preach, ‘Thus saith the Lord’” (2005, p. 309). Let’s take another look at Mark 2:1-12. A possible application of this story might be: “When you are in need of physical healing, go to Jesus who will heal you.” While the possibility is certainly there that Jesus may physically heal someone, we can’t say absolutely that Jesus *will* do that if they go to Him. In this kind of application, the possible is posed as the absolute or necessary one.

Both of these dangers consistently threaten pastors’ attempts to accurately apply the Scriptures to their lives and the lives of their hearers. We’re proposing that avoiding these pitfalls can be accomplished through faith-based (combats the first danger), Text-driven (combats both forms of the second danger) application. What follows is our attempt to combat the first danger of applying the Scriptures in such a way that we may be moving ourselves and our folks away from dependency on the power of God.

Cross-eyed *Interpretation*: The First Look of Application

The first step in avoiding the danger of moving ourselves and God’s people away from dependency on His power in the application of Scripture is to begin to understand the connection between our application and our hermeneutic. It is our understanding that, while it may be true that heresy is *verbalized* at the level of application, it is *conceptualized* at the level of interpretation. The first assurance that application will be sound is to build application on a solid foundation of cross-eyed (Christ-centered) interpretation. We believe that in order to discover what God is *saying to us* from a particular preaching portion of the Bible (Old or New Testament) we need to ultimately

identify how that preaching portion connects to and is interpreted by the grace of God in Christ. McCartney and Clayton write, “Individual verses must be understood in their immediate historical and literary context, and may as individual verses have little to do with the messianic expectation. But as part of the whole, they do relate in some way to the Christological goal of this redemptive history” (2002, p. 48).

Let’s go back to Ephesians 5 for a moment and ask how that preaching portion (vv. 25-33) connects to and is interpreted by the grace of God in Christ. A Christ-centered interpretation does not simply point out the fact that Christ and His sacrifice for the Church is contained in the paragraph. A Christ-centered interpretation does not simply utilize Christ as our example (which is the way in which He is portrayed in the preaching portion: “just as Christ also loved the church...”). Because our preaching portion is itself an application of Paul’s theological statements contained in chapters 1-3, we will interpret 5:25-33 in a way that reflects a life transformed “according to the power that works within us” (cf. Ephesians 3:20b; cf. also Eph. 3:7, 16). This means that husbands who have been transformed through faith by the grace of God in Christ have the supernatural desire and ability to obey or apply that Text: “Husbands, love your wives...” (Eph. 5:25a).

From this attempt at cross-eyed *interpretation* we have provided the first look at cross-eyed *application*. The Christ-centered interpretation above demands a response of faith-rooted obedience. Therefore, we will first urge people to believe that faith in Christ has transformed them and can continue to transform them. Then, when we urge them to obey the command to love their wives just as Christ also loved the church, their obedience will stem from the foundation of their faith.

Cross-Eyed Application: Asking the First Question, “Do we believe?”

Now that a cross-eyed interpretation is in view, *what will we tell the people to do* in light of the biblical Text under consideration? As our heading shows, the first thing we tell the people to do is *believe*, which is the essence of cross-eyed *application*. The following verses show that the clear call of Scripture is to build obedience on the foundation of the obedience of faith.

The prophet, Habakkuk wrote in **Habakkuk 2:4**: “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith.” Faith is the foundation of the life of the righteous. There can be no righteous lifestyle without faith in Christ.

In **Galatians 3:2-3** Paul writes: “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” The correct answer, of course, is that the Galatian Believers received the Spirit by hearing with faith and it was foolish for them to attempt to be perfected without faith. Here we discover that sanctification, or growth into Christlikeness, is faith-driven.

These verses teach us that faith is an essential part of sanctification. Faith is the foundation for all Christian living because faith embraces and declares real the Kingdom of God (including all the promises of God). The Believer who *believes*, exhibits attitudes and actions consistent with citizenship within the kingdom of God. This is different from mere behavior modification that can be accomplished without faith in the Gospel.

We have benefited from Timothy Keller's distinction between a morally restrained heart and a supernaturally changed heart (2003, p. 58). The difference between a morally restrained heart and a supernaturally changed heart might be described by the analogy of two people responding to the message: "Stop getting drunk." The person with a morally restrained heart will seek to stop his drunkenness to avoid the negative consequences of his actions. The person with a supernaturally changed heart will seek to stop his drunkenness as a result of having believed in the Gospel. He will repent of his sin and turn towards Christ as the object of his desire and source of his satisfaction. The morally restrained person has come to the conclusion that his present life will be better without being under the influence of alcohol. The supernaturally changed person has come to the conclusion that his eternal life with Christ is more desirable than life under the influence of alcohol. Our contention is that many Christians are being urged to obey apart from faith in Christ which means they are rendering sub-Christian obedience.

The following verses emphasize this connection between faith in Christ and all *truly* Christian obedience:

Romans 1:5 "through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake,"

Romans 16:26 "but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to obedience of faith;" John Piper explains faith in terms of obedience to the Gospel from 1 Peter 1:22ff: "The truth in view here is the word of God, the gospel of v. 23—all the hope producing truth that we have been looking at in this letter. Obedience to this truth is faith. What the gospel demands is faith. Therefore faith is obedience to the gospel" (Piper, 1994).

2 Corinthians 9:13 "Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for *your* obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all." Notice that it is the Corinthian Believers' confession of the gospel of Christ that leads to their obedience. Confessing the Gospel is synonymous with believing the Gospel and this believing contains a demand that is only satisfied through obedience.

In **Hebrews 11** there are 23 occurrences of the concept of "by faith" obedience or "through faith" obedience or "in faith" obedience. This is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he wrote in **11:6** "And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The Believer who obeys is convinced that God is a rewarder of those who seek

Him and that His reward is far greater than the promise that disobedience holds (or as the Hebrews writer put it, far greater than the pleasures of sin for a season). We will not lie if we believe that the reward of God is greater than what we expect to gain from lying. Put positively, we will render faith-driven obedience—truth-telling—because we believe that the promises of God are better than what the lie can deliver.

Can you see why we want to begin the formal application stage with the question, “*Do we believe the Gospel?*” The first response to God’s Word is affirming or reaffirming our faith in what Christ accomplished for us (living a perfect life, dying a substitutionary death, being resurrected from the dead, ascending to the Father in heaven, and dispensing His Spirit from heaven to Believers—the entire redemptive package). It is faith in the Gospel that is the starting point for all other acts of obedience.

We would add that without faith in Christ, a person will not render Christian obedience because Christian obedience demands a person first have their hope in the promises of God-in-Christ. Hebrews 6:11-12 read, “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” The same concept is found in Hebrews 11:13 “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

Listen to Scott Hafemann’s understanding of this concept: “The reason for this unity of faith and obedience as two aspects of our one response to God is that the promises of God are always organically linked to corresponding commands. Every *command of* God is built upon a *promise from* God. Therefore every divine call to action (obedience) is, at the same time, a divine summons to trust in God’s promises (faith). The promises of God are commands in disguise, and vice versa. God commands what he commands because he promises what he promises. . . . Disbelief always shows up as an act of disobedience, since every promise carries with it a command. Every time we disobey God it is because we are not trusting him” (2001, pp. 86-87).

It is our understanding, therefore, that every act of disobedience is first and foremost an act of unbelief. This means that if we want to attack disobedience, then we must first attack the presence of unbelief. It is clear from Jesus’ interaction with His disciples that unbelief was a major hindrance to their effectiveness in living for and serving Him (i.e., obeying or applying the Scriptures). For instance, there are six occurrences in the Gospels of the Greek term, *ovligo,pistoj* (*oligopistos*), which BADG interprets as someone being “of little faith/trust” (1979, p. 563; cf. **Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Luke 12:28**).

Taking the first three examples, for example, notice that Jesus did not say: “you of little *perspective*” or “you of little *courage*” or “you of little of *focus*.” Yet in those three occasions the disciples did lack perspective, courage, and focus. But, according to Jesus, what they really needed was faith in Him. While sermon applications might urge new

perspective, greater courage, and clearer focus, only perspective, courage, and focus born of faith in Christ produces real Christian obedience that pleases God.

If, on the other hand, we want to foster obedience, then we must first foster faith. In the chapter entitled, *Preaching for True Holiness*, Pelton suggests that, “We normally do not fight specific temptation and sin at the point of belief” (2005, p. 313). Rather, like so much ineffective medicine we treat the symptoms of the problem (behaviors) without treating the disease (unbelief).

According to Jesus in John 15:1-6, bearing fruit, which we understand to be an obedient lifestyle, is accomplished through abiding in Him, the true vine. John’s purpose for writing his book is that his readers would believe with a life-giving faith (cf. John 20:31). Chapter 15 of John’s Gospel provides a graphic metaphor of life-giving faith. The difference between being alive spiritually and bearing fruit and not being alive spiritually and not bearing fruit is abiding in Christ or not abiding in Christ (v. 4). We take it that abiding is believing that results in life in His name. Apart from abiding/faith in the Vine, we cannot do anything that is the result of a supernaturally changed heart (fruit bearing in this context). Without faith in Christ, we cannot truly respond to the biblical text, i.e., apply it to our lives. Adams asserts, “Application brings Christ into the center of a message as the One who makes the difference in life (1990, p. 41). In his chapter entitled, *Application Without Moralism*, Chapell concurs: “[The Christian’s] primary power is the faith God has put in them...by virtue of their union with him they have power to do what God requires” (2005, p. 294).

Let’s examine faith’s impact on obedience in the following example: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Eph. 4:31). To attack disobedience, we first attack unbelief. This means we attempt to point out the kind of unbelief that causes a professing Believer to not put away anger. Any Believer who does not put away anger, for instance, does not believe that *s/he* has been shown kindness and tender mercy from a holy God through the cross of Christ. The Believer who doesn’t put away anger doesn’t believe that God has sufficiently dealt with sin on the cross and will deal with it in final judgment. To foster obedience to this instruction, we must first foster faith in the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice to pay for our sin and the sin of the one toward whom we’re angry. An attempt to apply Ephesians 4:31, then, involves the continual fight against unbelief and sin and the continual pursuit of faith and obedience on the part of a professing Believer.

The Scope of Cross-Eyed Application

If the first appeal to parishioners is to faith in Christ, the scope of cross-eyed application is broad enough to include every listener, Believer and unbeliever. Let’s first begin with a look at how this appeal to faith in Christ includes unbelievers. Take, for example again, an attempt to apply Ephesians 4:31, “Let all...anger...be put away from you...” This instruction was originally designed for every person in “church” that Sunday. An unbelieving listener may be confronted with his violation of this biblical instruction (i.e., he knows he’s angry at times). He may even feel that he wants to control his anger, but

as we've shown above, obedience is faith-based. If the application of this Text does not begin with an appeal to faith in Christ, then this Text which was designed for the Church only applies to the Christian. However, when cross-eyed application is presented from Ephesians 4:31, the unbeliever will hear a call to faith in Christ. This application applies directly to his spiritual condition—he needs justification. The call to obedience in Ephesians 4:31 exposed his sin which is rooted in unbelief. Cross-eyed application calls him to believe and that faith in Christ gives him the desire and ability to obey this biblical instruction. In this case the unbelieving listener has experienced justification and sanctification as a result of Ephesians 4:31 being applied cross-eyed.

Readers who are experimenting with or fully engaged in a seeker-sensitive approach to preaching should sense the applicability of cross-eyed application for their audiences. You are trying to reach non-Christians with messages that are relevant to their place in life. Putting away anger is certainly relevant to where many live, but the call of Scripture is not simply to put away anger for the sake of personal and relational health. God is calling every hearer of Ephesians 4:31 to put away anger because this type of anger is a mark of unbelief in the work of Christ, an unbelief that has eternal consequences. Therefore, on that basis, you can actually call unbelievers to repentance and faith.

The same call to obedience which exposes the unbelief of the unbeliever and his need for *justification* also exposes the potential unbelief of the Believer and his need for *sanctification*. As we've argued above, urging Believers to believe the Gospel is the key to their obedience or application of the biblical text. In his sermon on Romans 1:16-17, Piper even takes this a step further, arguing that the Gospel actually saves Believers: "The gospel saves believers because the gospel keeps believers believing. (See 1 Peter 1:5)." (Piper, 1998). This means that cross-eyed application leads the Believer towards *sanctification* or growth in Christ. Johnson explains, "The preaching that builds people toward spiritual maturity does not take them beyond Christ. Rather, it takes them more deeply into Christ, so that their thoughts, attitudes, values, desires, reactions, words, and behaviour are transformed by their death with Christ to sin and their resurrection with Christ to life and righteousness" (1997, p. 161).

Keller's philosophy of preaching helps explain why cross-eyed application is always needed for Christians:

At the heart of Redeemer's ministry and its philosophy of preaching to post-modern audiences is the conviction that 'the gospel' is not just a way to be saved from the penalty of sin, but is the fundamental dynamic for living the whole Christian life—individually and corporately, privately and publicly. In other words, the gospel is not just for non-Christians, but also for Christians. This means the gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is not accurate to think 'the gospel' is what saves non-Christians and then what matures Christians is trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our mind, heart, and life by believing the gospel more and more deeply as our life goes on (2003, p. 56).

The sanctification of Believers begins and ends with faith-rooted obedience to the Gospel of Christ.

The Impact of Cross-Eyed Application

If the scope of cross-eyed application is broad, then its impact can be described as mercifully severe (Bruce Waltke uses the term, “severe mercy” in describing how God brought Joseph’s brothers to confession and repentance in Genesis 42ff.; 2001, p. 550). Cross-eyed application that urges faith in Christ creates a weekly opportunity for listeners to declare their allegiance to Christ as Lord and King. This kind of application is merciful because it eliminates the frustration of parishioners who have entered the worship service already defeated by sin and unbelief.

Think, for a moment, what happens to a parishioner in that spiritual condition being urged to respond to some sermon application, such as “put away anger...” Best case scenario is that they will leave church trying harder to put the Scripture into practice and may even succeed in modifying their behavior for a time. But, as we said earlier, their “success” may be leading them further away from dependence on Christ and His grace. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day are a great example of what behavior modification (morally restraining the heart) can do. Doriani writes, “Our disobedience condemns us, but without gospel motives, our ‘righteousness’ will too” (2001, p. 8). Worse case scenario is that they immediately sense that, not only can’t they seem to do what Scripture is demanding, but they do not even want to (they lack the desire and the ability and only experience more frustration). In both scenarios, the missing element of faith in the Gospel is addressed through cross-eyed application.

Cross-eyed application is severe, however, because obedience to the Gospel is not easy and to ignore it results in eternal judgment. In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus instructed His listeners to “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

From the example above, putting away the sin of anger is much more serious than avoiding ulcers and damaging interpersonal relationships. Like every biblical instruction, the decision to obey or disobey carries eternal significance for the life of every listener. For the Believer cross-eyed application exposes the fact that deliberate disobedience is tantamount to denying the faith. For the unbeliever, cross-eyed application exposes their unbelief and condemnation (cf. **John 3:18** “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”).

Conclusion

When we consider what is at stake, it is fair to say the way to application holds dangers for the preacher seeking to be accurate and relevant. As we have seen, the most

fundamental of these dangers is the potential for a pastor to move his people away from dependency on the power of God in their attempt to implement Scripture. The failure to connect obedience with empowering faith leaves the congregation with the burden to obey in their own might. Furthermore, it breeds deception in their hearts, leading them to think they are pleasing God when in fact “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

We sense a primary source of this peril is the misunderstanding that eternally relevant application can be found in historical grammatical interpretation that does not culminate in Christ-centered theology. A kin to that error is the practice of calling for behavior modification alone thinking it can satisfy the real goal of application. This wrongly placed confidence threatens the evangelical pulpit with the potential for historically accurate, intensely practical, but lifeless preaching. This is the error of the Pharisee and every other legalist that sees morality as the final goal. Jesus said to those first century preachers in John 5:38-40 “You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You study the Scriptures because in them you think you have eternal life; it is these that bear witness of Me, and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” Note that Jesus does not condemn their commitment to obey Scripture. He condemns a view of obedience to Scripture that is void of faith in Him. That is why in our effort to apply the text to our hearers, the first question we must ask is, “*Do you believe?*”

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