

Preaching Ethical Issues: How Far Do We Go?

Greg Trull, Ph.D.
Corban University
Evangelical Theological Society

Introduction

Meet some friends. Jim has a full life running his own business, but has a passion for his volunteer ministry. Liz stays busy as a mom of two young active kids. Allen spends most of his days with legislators, lobbying for those he serves. Fred ministers at a rural church, loving and shepherding his people. Ann is the quintessential mother of a large family. All very different in personalities and places in life, yet all have come face-to-face with the biblical teaching on life. What can and should a mom, a businessman, a minister do to protect the life of the unborn? To what action should the pastor call them? How does the Scripture practically apply in the arena of social ethics?

Basic Application Models

According to most evangelical hermeneutic books, application ought to be characterized by three main components. First, application should flow from the author's intent as discerned from proper interpretation. Second, application should build on elements shared between current readers and original hearers.¹ Third, application should flow either from explicit normative directives or from implicit normative principles. McQuilkin illustrates this when he states that we should obey if something is explicitly declared the will

¹ Note the discussion by Grant Osborne in *Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), 332-338.

of God or if not explicitly declared, it is demanded by clear biblical principle and other teaching.²

Building on the above foundation, hermeneutics writers have suggested specific rubrics for discerning application from Scripture. Hall exemplifies a common approach by saying that application answers five questions: 1) Is there a sin to be forsaken? 2) a promise to be claimed? 3) an example to be followed? 4) a command to be obeyed? 5) a stumbling block to avoid?³ Similarly, Hendricks develops application through relationship. He suggests the reader relate truth to new relationships to God, self, others, and the enemy.⁴

Likewise, homiletics writers have offered foundational constructs for application development. Robinson uses the image of a ladder. We must climb the “abstraction ladder.” First we climb up in abstraction “to reach the text’s intent.” Here he refers not to authorial intent specifically, but to a general theological principle based on what the text teaches about God and humanity.⁵ The expositor ought to climb the ladder until the principle is equally true for biblical and modern audience. Sunukjian also argues for application from a common principle base. “Our goal is to visualize scenarios that might realistically occur in the listener’s life, to picture some person, event, or circumstance in their everyday world where the biblical

² Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, revised ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 342.

³ Terry Hall, *Seven Ways to Get More from Your Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 50-1. Many versions of this abound. i.e. Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 304-308.

⁴ Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 297-8.

⁵ Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application” in *The Art and Craft of Preaching* ed. by Haddon Robinson and Craig Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 308.

truth would have some bearing.⁶ “An application pictures a specific situation in your listeners’ lives that is equivalent to the one the biblical author is talking about.”⁷

While these basic models represent helpful structures for discerning and developing biblical application, certain circumstances in our day stretch the bounds of basic models. As faithful expositors of the Word, we want to find equivalent situations between the past and the pew, but can we always? What is the biblical equivalent to embryonic stem cell research? Robinson correctly states that the goal remains to discern true biblical authority for our practical applications. “Too often preachers give 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.’”⁸ The discovery and discernment of these “necessary implications” remains the primary goal of an expositor. This task takes on heightened significance in arena of social ethics.

A survey of current social ethics books reveals a need for application discussion as well. Social ethics writings, especially in areas such as abortion and euthanasia, focus on delineating and defending the biblical position on the issue. The reader comes away with a clear cognitive understanding of the debate, but little guidance for action.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the process of application development moving from ancient biblical texts to current social issues. Because the issue of abortion consistently dominates the evangelical social ethics agenda and produces a wide range of personal responses, it will serve as a case study in authoritative application.

⁶ Donald Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 111.

⁷ *Ibid*, 120.

⁸ Robinson, “Application,” 309.

Foundational Categories for Application

Application may stem from the three types of biblical statements. First, Scripture records beliefs to be received by the hearer, i.e. “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (Rom 3:9). Many of these couple with direct commands (“You were bought at a price, therefore honor God with your body.” [1 Cor 6:19]). In these cases, the application flows from the command itself. However in cases without associated commands, the hearer must ascertain any implied action. Second, perhaps the simplest is the direct command requiring obedience from the hearer. “Love the LORD your God...” (Deut 6:5) or “Be kind and compassionate to one another...” (Eph 4:32) move the action closer to the hearer by delineating the expected response. Certainly some direct commands require adjustment in order to produce appropriate obedience (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything” [Col 3:22]), but the broad application remains clear. Third, Scriptures record actions to be considered by the hearer, i.e. David’s slaying of Goliath (1 Sam 17). The hearer must decide the reason the specific action is recorded and what response is implicitly expected. Each of these categories will be considered more fully and then in relation to the complex social issue of abortion.

Required Beliefs

The Scripture lays a theological foundation for our actions. The reality about our God and ourselves moves us to live in light of that truth. When it comes to social issues, the Bible certainly speaks to our moral base. Because Yahweh is the only true God, we love Him with all our heart, soul and strength. All we do reflects our devotion to Him. So then what do we do when biblical moral beliefs collide with our culture? How far do we go to be obedient?

The first answer to applying a received belief is the prohibition of any act that would not reflect that belief. To obey is to avoid actions and attitudes in contradiction to that truth. This personal congruity stands behind calls such as Paul’s in Ephesians to “live worthy of the

calling we have received” (4:1). His subsequent list of prohibitions of immorality, dishonesty, anger and bitterness are expected applications. To live worthy of the holy calling is to avoid these sins. So here, as well as in social ethics, a believer must personally abstain from actions that contradict a biblical belief.

The second answer to applied obedience from required beliefs stems from recognizing that truth is more than a personal responsibility. To fully obey is to convey that belief to others. God gave us His truth as a legacy to pass on to future faithful generations. Moses declared to Israel that Yahweh was the only true God (Deut 4:39; 6:4). That truth called for personal congruity in absolute devotion to Him (6:5). Part of that congruity showed in the instruction of subsequent generations the truth about God (6:7-9). The Church also receives the command to pass on the truths of the faith (2 Tim 2:2) as a part of receiving the truth of salvation (1:9). If we have received eternal truths, Scripture compels us to communicate them to those who follow.

The third answer to applied obedience brings the most challenge. How far does one go to positively act on a biblical belief? For example, we believe that creation is the Lord’s and we live as stewards. Therefore we avoid abusing creation (aware of the size of our carbon footprints) plus we teach the biblical value of creation. Then what? Does stewardship obedience require joining the Sierra Club? Becoming a locavore? Recycling? The complexities of social issues heighten the difficulty of responding to this element of the answer. A look at a key abortion text shows this clearly.

Psalm 139 beautifully reveals the value of life within the womb. Verse 13 declares God “creates” our inmost beings. The word rendered “create” (יָרָא) connotes God’s personal work in bringing out this new life (cf Gen 4:1). It is coupled in parallelism with “weave”

⁹ A “locavore” is someone who for the sake of the environment eats only locally-produced food.

(139), an image depicting His intimate involvement in producing life in the womb. One can almost picture the skilled fingers of God crafting a new life in the womb. The magnificence of God's work moves the psalmist to praise Yahweh for His fearful and wonderful works (139:14). The psalm's vivid portrait of God shaping life in the womb harkens the reader back to God's original creation of Adam and Eve. The biblical truth is that fetal life is as important as the first human lives. So then how far do we go in preaching to demand action stemming from this belief? What actions does this belief require?

To apply the biblical truth concerning life in the womb begins with believers refusing to end life through abortion. Further, it necessitates parents and churches teach this truth about life. This much is clear, but what then? Does the Scripture lay an obligation on believers to defend life and if so, to what length? Direct commands in Scripture suggest additional application steps in social issues.

Direct Commands

Typically the most easily applied biblical texts are those that specify an action. The complication comes in applying an ancient specific command to a contemporary complex issue. Technological chasms exist between the two worlds. In addition, moving from dictatorial to democratic governments introduces new challenges for application.

The key application question is what specific contemporary action is demanded by a general biblical command. Like received beliefs, the first part of the answer concerns the negative. Any action a believer may commit or consider that violates the general command is sin. For instance, the Scripture commands us to gather for worship and encouragement (Heb 10:25). A believer who fills his schedule with everything except worship clearly violates the general command. The second part of the answer concerns positive obedience. How often do we meet? How long? At what point have we fulfilled obedience? At what point is obedience

still partial and insufficient? These qualitative questions take on additional complexity when considering social ethical issues.

Similarly, how one obeys a negative biblical command demands two answers. First, the obvious application is to not break the command. We don't steal; we don't lie, etc. But, on the other hand, does the prohibition demand a positive response as well? Does it have application to our parenting responsibilities or to our duty as Christian citizens? How far do we go to help others to obey or prevent others from breaking the command?

Two biblical commands directly affect the abortion issue and surface the application question: Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39; Gal 5:14; Jms 2:8) and do not commit murder (Gen 9:6; Exo 20:13).

From early Christian history, leaders argued against abortion as a violation of the second greatest command. *The Didache* connects the direct command to love our neighbor to the prohibition of abortion.¹⁰ The Scripture commands us to love other people. Evangelicals have demonstrated that the Scripture teaches a person's life begins at conception.¹¹ Therefore the command to love our neighbors extends to preborn neighbors. The prohibition of murder in Exodus 20 goes hand in hand with this command. If one obeys the positive command, this prohibition will also be honored. This then represents obedience to a general command by avoiding specific actions that would violate that command. Obeying by not violating seems clear enough, but other than not personally aborting a child, are there other implicit applications? What actions should Christians take to love their neighbor by protecting the unborn? Political protest? Physical intervention? A look at the

¹⁰ i.2 and ii.2. See *The Apostolic Fathers* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 149-50.

¹¹ See Ps 139 above plus other discussions, for instance, John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 47-72. Walter Kaiser, *What Does the Lord Require?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 105-16; Scott Rae and Paul Cox, *Bioethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Edwin Hui, *At the Beginnings of Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); Randy Alcorn, *Why Pro-life?* (Portland: Multnomah, 2004).

recorded actions of four believers who interceded in their culture suggests key principles to guide our preaching applications.

Recorded Actions

Since the culture and technological gap widens on the subject of many social ethics issues, the Bible reader does not find exact matches in the historical sections of Scripture. However, some biblical events do provide parallels for possible responses to societal issues. The following events illustrate believers' responses to societal issues. The individuals themselves were not directly affected by the issue, yet intervened on others' behalf.

Esther: The Responsibility of Position. God worked silently behind the scenes to bring Esther into a position of authority, moving her from peasant to queen. He had her taken to Susa (2:8), granted her favor in the eyes of Hegai (2:9), and drew the king's attention and approval to her (2:17). When the Jews faced genocide at the hands of Haman, Mordecai reminded Esther that perhaps she had come to her royal position so that she might intervene to save her people (4:14). For her to refuse to intervene would result in God's employing other means to save, but she and her family would perish rather than be protected (4:13-14). She would suffer consequences for not acting when her position demanded she do. So Esther had moral responsibility to intervene because of her status and capability. This principle rises elsewhere where in Proverbs wisdom demands that one act on behalf of another when that one has the capability to do so. "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act" (3:27). Waltke concludes that the proverb means one in need has "a moral claim upon your assistance" if you have the ability to help² The Law also reveals this guiding principle, calling on God's people to rescue even the ox of their enemies if they can

¹² Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 10-15* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 267.

save it (Exo 23:4). So then whether by means of position, resources or circumstance, the Scripture calls on the obedient to intervene on behalf of the needy.

As we proclaim the Scriptures on issues concerning social ethics today, we may rightfully call to action those with particular capacity to respond. Obedience in this case links to personal position and influence. Christian elected officials cannot hide behind their constituents' wishes when voting or working on issues of justice, morality or life. They must exercise their commitment to the Lord first to the full extent their position allows. Likewise, the Christian electorate cannot shirk the responsibility to acknowledge biblical ethics on their ballot. The specific demanded application on a social ethical issue is determined in part by the hearer's capacity and circumstance. In a democratic society, Christians have the authority to petition, to peacefully protest and many other potential expressions of their convictions. When convictions meet circumstances, churches and preachers must be willing to cross the bridge linking biblical teaching to civic opportunity.

John the Baptist: The Responsibility to the Standard. John served to pave the way for Messiah. He primarily preached the coming of the kingdom and the King (Matt 3:1-12). The anticipated kingdom demanded repentance to prepare one's heart for receiving. Within that role, John also set an example of moral Christian protest.

John confronted a secular government official with the moral standard of the biblical Law. Herod was in an adulterous relationship with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Two relevant observations rise from this text. First, John engaged in protest against tolerated immorality. Herod Antipas was not Jewish but Idumaeon, son of Herod the Great. The beginning of Jesus' ministry focused on presenting Himself to Israel as their Messiah (cf. Matt 10:6), yet John the Forerunner voiced the Scripture's opposition to this Gentile leader's lifestyle. Second, John condemned Herod on the basis of Torah, specifically Leviticus 18:16

which prohibits the marrying of a brother's wife as long as the brother lives. So John, as a part of his proclamation ministry, confronted a secular official with God's moral standard.

John's example illustrates believers voicing biblical standards in the public arena. John recognized that the moral code contained in the Law extended beyond Israel to include all humanity. He confronted a moral flaw in a governmental official. This bolsters the calling of believers to public expression of their moral convictions by voice or vote. Is it in the realm of legitimate ministry to condemn social failures such as euthanasia, homosexual marriage and pornography? The Gospels esteem John's attempts to proclaim righteousness in the public square.

John's confrontation may affirm the legitimacy of churches and Christians voicing biblical morals in protest of government personal and political choices. These activities may include Life Chains,¹³ One Man One Woman campaigns,¹⁴ or other efforts to politically promote biblical moral standards.

John's example brings to light an additional aspect of upholding the biblical standard. Any actions taken in response to a social issue must reflect positively the Gospel message. John's challenge of Herod's immorality matched his call of repentance to the Jews. His ethical issue confrontation harmonized with his evangelistic calling. Elsewhere in the New Testament, especially 1 Corinthians, makes clear that the reputation of Christ and the clarity of the Gospel claim highest priority in Church life. Paul proclaims that he does not exercise his rights as an apostle if that would in some way undermine the Gospel. His focus remains on reaching those without Christ (1 Cor 9:15-25). Earlier, he calls the Corinthians to a similar commitment when he argues that their personal desires should yield to the reputation of the

¹³ See www.lifechain.net.

¹⁴ See Issue Analysis section of the Focus on the Family site www.citizenlink.org.

Church in the world (1 Cor 6:1:1-7). Similarly, in chapter 14, believers are called on to pursue the gift of prophecy over the gift of tongues. One key reason for this command is concern that unbelievers would properly understand the truth (vv. 23-25). If God's holy standard compels us to speak to the culture's ills, then that message must direct our culture to the hope of the Gospel. Some actions taken to promote Christian ethics may in fact undermine the Gospel message. Some abortion protesters have bombed clinics. Some have utilized offensive graphic pictures of aborted babies likening abortion to the actions of the Nazis and the Klad.

Amos: Responsibility to a Call. Unlike John and Esther, who were both compelled in part by circumstances to intervene in a political system, Amos was compelled by a singular reason, a divine call. God had led Esther to a position of influence, influence that she was compelled to utilize in order to rescue innocent lives. Herod's frustration and fascination with John put the Forerunner into a unique place to condemn immorality in a government official. By contrast, Amos was minding his own business when the Lord mobilized him to confront the social sins of a nation (7:14-15). Herding sheep and piercing figs had not strategically placed him in a position of influence. Yet God chose him to publicly challenge a depraved culture.

Amos' ministry primarily focused on calling the nation to repentance for their social injustices. The central oracles (chs. 3-6) highlight the social maladies within Israel.

The poor were oppressed and even sold into slavery. The rich had summer and winter palaces crammed with ivory-inlaid art and furniture, great vineyards for choice wines, and precious oils for hygiene and perfume. The women, fat and pampered "cows of Bashan" drove their husbands to injustice so they might live in luxury. Justice was a commodity to be purchased.⁶

¹⁵ See for instance the Center for Bio-ethical Reform at www.abortionno.org.

¹⁶ William Lasor, David Hubbard and Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 245.

So Amos stepped out of the pastures into the palace to deliver Yahweh's message of justice and judgment.

What makes Amos exceptional in some ways is his unique calling. Many of the prophets seem to be natural choices due to influential political connections (Jonah or Isaiah), priestly functions (Ezekiel or Jeremiah) or unusual giftedness (Daniel). Amos apparently, possessed none of these, and yet was called of God to act. His example reminds the expositor that God may of His own sovereign prerogative call one of our hearers to serve in a unique capacity. Not every call of application is a general call for all to rise up, but perhaps a community reminder that the Lord may single out an individual for a special assignment. At times the preaching of the Word opens the door to a single heart for an exceptional response. Our preaching on life and other social issues should include casting a vision of what one called believer can accomplish. How many ministries began with one response to a gigantic need?

Barnabus: Going Beyond. At a time when the early Church faced financial struggles, some believers went beyond basic obedience. Barnabus exemplified this spirit by selling a field and giving all the money to the church (Acts 4:36-37). That his generosity was not obligatory is made clear by Peter's confrontation of the lying Ananias (5:4). His giving was not morally required. Barnabas' actions represent what Feinberg calls "supererogatory obedience."¹⁷ Out of devotion he went beyond the demand. Admittedly, Barnabas does not represent a believer confronting a social ethical issue, but he does represent a type of believing response that has implications for preaching applications on ethical issues today.

Supererogatory obedience expands the application palette for the expositor. While one may not biblically demand that believers show this extraordinary commitment, an

¹⁷ Feinberg and Feinberg, p. 20.

invitation to extravagant devotion may encourage an inclined heart to deeper service. A substantial gift from the wealthy shows generosity, but a sacrificial gift from the poor shows devotion. To call on the available to reserve time to serve in a soup kitchen is expected, but to have busy executives and multi-tasking moms show up is exhilarating. Part of helping listeners apply the Scripture ought to be introducing a variety of avenues to express devotion beyond obedience. The expositor appeals not to obedience and duty, but to love and opportunity.

Putting the Application Puzzle Together

No cookie-cutter approach will effectively spell out every specific application from a biblical text to a social ethics issue. The complexities are too great and our circumstances vary too much. However, some suggestions may be made using responses to abortion as an example. Expositors must call on all believers to receive the truth on ethical issues and avoid any action that would violate that truth. Further, all believers must utilize advantages their personal positions allow to influence culture with the truth. For some, obedience will require significant acts, for others rare and small actions. Expositors must also issue an invitation for those whom the Lord may single out by special calling and to those who will reach out by personal devotion. Remember our friends.

Ann has eight children in her house, ranging from toddler to teenager. Getting breakfast on and kids to school seems supererogatory. Yet as a busy, sometimes harried mom, she has faithfully taught her children the value of life and its implications for abortion. When given the opportunity, she votes to support life issues and signs petitions voicing her support. She has obeyed the Lord. Allen recognized the position of influence he held. He rightly believes his access to legislators compels him to talk to them about bills on abortion, euthanasia and stem cell research. He knows to obey is to speak as his capacity allows. Fred became personally convicted about the death behind the door of their local abortion clinic.

He could not escape it. Fred joined an Operation Rescue effort to blockade the clinic and give out abortion fact pamphlets to girls they tried to stop from entering. When arrested for trespassing, he turned down pro bono offers to defend him. He served time in county jail instead. For Fred, he'd rather have a record than not respond. Jim was different than Ann or Allen or Fred. Bold by nature, he was already deeply involved in a Christian protest ministry to confront abortion acceptance at state universities. Many days he spent witnessing, arguing and debating among sometimes open sometimes angry college students. Jim quit the ministry however when they began picketing churches for not joining their in-your-face protests. He feared it sent the wrong message to unbelievers. Liz had not been active in any pro-life ministry. Then she had her own kids. Her love for her own kids spilled over to kids and moms at risk. "It's crazy I know to do something at the busiest time of my life, but I want to start a ministry to these moms and kids." A year later, more than fifty at-risk moms and their kids thank her for exceptional love. All demonstrate obedience to the truth about life, some at the basic level, some by yielding to responsibility of position or calling, and some by conviction and compassion.

The goal of this paper has been to discover guidance and encouragement for expositors to call hearers to biblical action in social ethics today. May an uninvolved listener never say, "I would have, but you never asked."

Morally Obligatory for All Believers	Morally Obligatory for Some Believers	Morally Supererogatory for All Believers
---	--	---

**Direct
Commands**

Truth applied
negatively by avoiding
acts that violate
commands or beliefs

Truth applied positively
by teaching beliefs and
commands to others

Truth applied positively
by yielding to Gods' call
or taking advantage of
position or opportunity

Truth applied positively
in varying degrees

Truth applied positively
in varying degrees

**Required
Beliefs**

Specific Applications Guided by Gospel Concern

Morally Obligatory
for All Believers

Morally Obligatory
for Some Believers

Morally Supererogatory
for All Believers

Direct Commands

“Love your neighbor as
yourself”
“Do not commit
murder”

Truth applied
negatively by avoiding
acts that take unborn
life

Truth applied positively
by teaching value of life
to others

Truth applied
positively by yielding to
Gods’ call to pro-life
ministry or by using
personal position to
protect life, or by using
circumstance to
protect life

Truth applied positively
through exceptional
service or sacrifice

Truth applied positively
through exceptional
service or sacrifice

Required Beliefs

Life/personhood begins
at conception
Unborn life has
divinely-assigned value

Specific Applications Guided by Gospel Concern:
Value of life highlighted, opportunity for forgiveness
offered, honor of Christ and Church Upheld