

“In an age where preaching can easily drift towards either purely academic explanation or shallow pragmatism, Richard calls us back to the heart of faithful ministry: helping God’s people hear the Word and live it. *Apply the Word* is both deeply biblical and refreshingly practical. Drawing on decades of pastoral experience, Richard shows how the preacher’s task is not simply to explain the text but to shepherd congregations by carefully applying its implications to real lives and real situations. This is a wise and generous book – written by a preacher for preachers. I am grateful for it, will be adding it to our London City Mission recommended reading, and gladly commend it to pastors, teachers and anyone who wants to see the Scriptures shape the life of the church more deeply.”

Efrem Buckle, Director of Training and Mentoring,
London City Mission

“Richard Coekin wisely reminds us that application is one of the most important – and perhaps the most difficult – parts of preaching. This book is full of interpretive wisdom and practical guidance. Whether they agree with every conclusion or not, preachers young and old will be challenged and helped by this timely exploration of a neglected topic.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church,
North Carolina

“This timely and insightful book will help preachers fulfil their God-given responsibility. Through deep biblical reflection, memorable illustrations and his decades of ministry experience, Richard provides pastors with a guilt-free resource that will equip us to teach more effectively what accords with sound doctrine. This book is for the good of the church and the glory of God. Buy it, read it and live it.”

Lee McMunn, Senior Pastor, Trinity Church, Scarborough,
Assistant Bishop, Anglican Mission in England

“In an age of easy access to countless online sermons and powerful AI engines, preaching that applies God’s Word to a specific context and local congregation is especially important. Richard’s engaging book will help equip you to do that. It will both fire up your convictions and sharpen your skills.”

Murray Anderson, Senior Pastor, Gracefields Church,
Cape Town

“Imagine a book that could help you preach sermons that are not only true to the Scriptures but actually sing, so that congregations’ lives are transformed and changed by the great Word of God. This is the book! Full of pearls of wisdom from a man who has dedicated his adult life to mastering the art of genuinely communicating to people the living truths of God, it’s worth the time to read and digest. And, dare I say, it’s well applied into preachers’ lives.”

Andrew Heard, Senior Pastor, EV Church, Sydney, Chairman,
FIEC (Australia)

“In this short and accessible book, Richard puts his finger on a key weakness of much contemporary expository preaching, namely the lack of appropriate application. On the one hand, some preachers reject the need for application at all, whereas others strive so hard to make their sermons relevant to their hearers, they make applications which aren’t derived from the text. In contrast Richard Coekin makes a strong and compelling case for the necessity of application which discovers and proclaims the necessary implications of the text for our lives. Not only does he identify the need for thoroughly biblical application, he provides preachers with practical guidance on how to do it, which is rooted in the doctrine of Scripture, biblical theology, contextual cultural awareness and pastoral

sensitivity. He writes with disarming honesty about his own growth as a preacher, sharing past mistakes and the experience of over three decades of fruitful ministry, but also draws on the wisdom of great preachers, past and present. This is a book which will help every preacher, no matter their experience, ensure they are not just rightly explaining God's Word but bringing it to bear upon the hearts and lives of their hearers."

John Stevens, National Director, FIEC (Britain)

"One of the enduring challenges in faithful preaching is learning how to move from explaining the text to applying it wisely to the lives of our hearers. What a blessing to the church that a book has been written to address this! In *Apply the Word*, Richard Coekin meets this challenge head on with pastoral clarity, theological conviction and the seasoned wisdom of many years in Word ministry. I have had the privilege of knowing Richard personally and of benefiting from his ministry – his passion for faithful exposition of the text and practical application to the hearers, shines through these pages. This book will serve preachers well, helping them bring God's Word to bear faithfully and fruitfully on the lives of God's people."

Harrison Mungai Macharia, Executive Director, iServe Africa, Pastor, GracePoint Church, Kikuyu, Nairobi

"It's rare to be able to get help from a seasoned pastor who is both an unusually gifted preacher and an unusually astute encourager of fellow preachers. As someone who has benefitted personally from the fruit of Richard's pulpit ministry and wise counsel, I am glad to see this book in print. In it we find both principled guidance on how to approach the great task of preaching, as well as practical help for getting on

with it. I'm praying *Apply the Word* will bear much fruit for the strengthening of pastors and the feeding of Christ's flock."

Santhosh Thomas, Vicar, St Andrew's Wimbledon, London

"Preaching God's Word is at the heart of what brings about the salvation of God's people and their subsequent transformation in Christlikeness. Knowing how to do that in a way that is faithful to Scripture and relevant to the people in front of them is an essential skill for any preacher. *Apply the Word* unpacks the necessary tools for this and warmly commends the need for preachers always to be growing in how they apply the Word of God to the local church. A great resource for new and established preachers alike."

Rachel Sloan, Director of Women's Ministries, FIEC (Britain), Women's Ministry Coordinator, Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh



Contents

Preface.....	1
Introduction: God’s Word Is Sufficient But People Need Help	5
Part 1: Why Is Application So Necessary?	
1: Application Is God’s Purpose for Scripture.....	19
2: Application Is God’s Reason for Preachers	33
3: Application Is What Congregations Need.....	49
4: Application Needs Time in Both Preparation and Delivery	63

**Part 2: How Do We Ensure Our Applications
Are Faithful to God’s Word?**

5: Respect the Human Author’s Evident Intentions.... 79

6: Apply Old Testament Texts Only as They Are
Fulfilled in Christ 97

7: Distinguish Abiding Principles from
Circumstantial Contexts 111

**Part 3: How Do We Ensure Our Applications Are
Helpful to God’s People?**

8: Consider the Social Context and Spiritual
Health of Our Hearers..... 123

9: Remember Who You’re Talking To..... 143

**Part 4: How Do We Bring This All Together
in Practice?**

10: Preparing a Sermon..... 163

11: Crafting a Sermon 181

12: Prepare to Preach 197

Concluding Reflections..... 207



Preface

I'm sixty-four. For more than thirty-five years I've enjoyed the immense privilege of regularly preaching God's Word to God's people for God's glory. My joy in regular preaching has felt a bit like my wife's pleasure in cooking for our family – labouring to prepare countless healthy meals for the people she loves. While my sermons have rarely been Michelin Star, since the Bible is “the word of his grace which can build you up” (Acts 20:32), it's been incredibly rewarding watching God grow and multiply our church family in Christ by the power of his Holy Spirit through his Word.

I've now reached the age where my Kenyan friends affectionately call me “Mzee” (“old man”) and I've been set free to concentrate on mentoring pastors and their teams with Reach Ministries. I can reflect on my own journey in preaching over the years, and the challenges familiar to every preacher in applying the complex variety of Bible

passages to the complex variety of people sitting in front of us. I mean, what does Zechariah's night vision of a golden lampstand fuelled by olive trees, or Paul's public spat with Peter about his socialising, really mean for the young nurse or retired taxi driver in our church today?

I can look back on decades of helping younger preachers develop their approach to application. After encouraging them with those priceless twin principles – “There's always next week” and “The first thirty years are the hardest” – different preachers have needed different kinds of help. There's no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all process for producing brilliant applications. But there are some tried and tested principles explored in this book which I pray will help busy people – seasoned Bible-teachers and next-generation preachers and pastors alike – to clarify the implications of their text for their listeners, without inventing false promises and fake rules which don't come from God's Word.

I can also reflect upon the range of different approaches to application I've heard from godly and gifted colleagues and preachers in different contexts far and wide, as well as some spurious and exploitative misuse of the Bible. Or, more often, well-intentioned but overly therapeutic applications seeking to create a relevance which has little basis in God's Word. For example, a sermon I heard recently managed to apply Elizabeth's blessing of Mary in Luke 1 – a passage about Jesus and not us – as a reassurance that God's Spirit will speak to us in the midst of our trauma. And another from Luke 2, where Simeon

holds Jesus in his arms, as a challenge to us to wait for Jesus expectantly, patiently and usefully, when the text celebrates how Jesus is the consolation of Israel bringing salvation and revelation to the nations.

In both cases, good pastors were trying to create relevance by talking about *us* when the passage is speaking of *Jesus*. This may result from a therapeutic man-centred instinct or, more often, from defaulting to an allegorical, character study approach. I think such preachers would welcome some help in how to apply what the Bible text is about to their hearers.

On the other hand, over the past few years, I've also become a little alarmed by apparent scepticism towards any need to work at application at all, emerging from a well-meaning but problematic claim, "The Bible applies itself." Preaching would certainly be a lot easier if we didn't need to work at our application. But since correctly handling the Word of truth includes *both* explaining what the text says *and* exploring what it means for our hearers, we should learn to apply God's Word as well as we possibly can. My burden is simply to explore wisdom in how to *apply* the Bible to people's lives with the same care as we need to *exegete* what it says.

Sermons which neglect the applications God intends from his Word can leave congregations confused, frustrated and bored, as if presented with a plate of half-cooked potatoes, pork and beans – hard to enjoy and impossible to digest. The pendulum in our preaching needs, therefore, to avoid two extremes: one extreme is

spurious application unrooted in the Bible, and the other extreme is academic analysis of the text to the neglect of the lives of people listening. Congregations need a healthy diet of teaching which flows from faithful exegesis into fruitful application in their lives.

I certainly don't claim to be an expert lecturing other preachers. I'm a fellow traveller and older brother in arms with preachers everywhere doing their best to "correctly [handle] the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). But I'm persuaded a practical guide to expository preaching including application is sorely needed. So I hope to serve the next generation of preachers by sharing what God has taught me over the years.

Experience proves how vital such application is for spiritual growth in individuals and churches. While remaining fiercely committed to the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture, and to the Holy Spirit's role in helping believers understand and respond to God's Word, my longing is for pastors to not only teach sound doctrine but as Jesus' apostle says, "teach *what accords with* sound doctrine" (Tit. 2:1, ESV). My prayer is that this book will help preachers at every stage of their ministry to do this well – for the salvation of many, the growth of the church, and the glory of God.



INTRODUCTION

God's Word Is Sufficient But People Need Help

Modern medicines are marvellous. They can cure countless ailments and infections – but only when appropriately prescribed. Currently, two drugs very commonly prescribed in the UK are Omeprazole for acid reflux and Amlodipine for high blood pressure. But, of course, Omeprazole won't help anyone with their high blood pressure and Amlodipine won't help someone with their reflux. This is where doctors come in.

My wife, Sian, is an experienced doctor who has worked for over thirty years in our local medical practice, one of the biggest in London. Her job is to examine and listen to patients, diagnose their underlying needs, and prescribe them appropriate treatments and medication, or refer them to a specialist who can (and she's very good at it).

In God's creation, the power of healing is in the medicine, but it is only effective when wisely prescribed.

While we do need academic scientists to research the properties of medicines in their laboratories, we also need the skills of medical practitioners who know both the properties of available medications, and how to prescribe them wisely according to the needs of their patients. A doctor who wildly prescribed the same medication to all their patients, without bothering to diagnose their particular needs, could cause catastrophic harm.

Now God's Word is supremely powerful for spiritual healing. God Almighty speaks through his written Word to save and transform his people – to cure our sickness from sin. He *says* the same thing in each and every passage to the whole world. But what he has said will have different *implications* for different people according to their circumstances.

So in our preaching, we are, to some degree, the spiritual equivalent of doctors. We do need gifted scholars in the academy to research the finer points of etymology, syntax and idiom in the Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic texts of the Bible, and to write academic articles and commentaries for the rest of us. We may ourselves want to pursue such research to some degree. But if we are a church pastor or preacher, we are not primarily like the laboratory research scientist, but more like the community doctor.

To be sure we need to carefully research our text. A pastor doesn't just need an *office* to manage ministries, but a *study* to mine the Scriptures. Realising chapters 2 – 7 of

Daniel are in Aramaic and arranged in a chiasm, all of which support Daniel's resolve not to defile himself in chapter 1, profoundly affects how we preach any part of that section. Spotting the four participles in Paul's prayer for the Colossians to walk worthy of Christ (bearing fruit, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened, giving thanks) will profoundly shape our sermon on Colossians 1:9-14.

But preachers who teach a passage like a scholarly commentary or lecture will bore and frustrate ordinary hearers. And preachers who neglect to consider, or clumsily misdiagnose, the spiritual condition of their congregations, may not only fail to help their listeners as they might, but seriously damage God's children. For example, preaching all of Christ's letter to the seven churches in Revelation, as if all the messages apply equally to every congregation, will involve accusing, condemning and threatening many godly Christians with all the terrible consequences of the sins of Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis combined!

This is where *Apply the Word* seeks to help. This book explores some of the principles and then the pastoral wisdom needed to wisely apply God's Word to God's people for their spiritual health. As doctors benefit from in-service training and development, I pray this book will help preachers of every kind on the front line of ministry. This includes better understanding of both the amazing properties of God's Word in all its textual variety *and* the diversity of needs in our congregations so we can better

love them. It involves recognising sources of application in the text such as aspects of God’s character to trust, commands to obey, attitudes to avoid or behaviours to embrace. And it involves considering how we assess the needs of our hearers. And always so we may serve God well in nurturing the health of his church family through preaching his marvellous Word to his beloved children.

But what is application? And what role does it play in preaching?

Defining application

I once invited Kanishka Raffel, an Australian preacher I greatly respect (and now Archbishop of Sydney), to speak to our church senior staff about preaching.

I began by asking, “Kanishka, how would you define preaching?”

He answered carefully, “Preaching is the careful explanation of the text of God’s living Word,” and paused. My heart sank at this somewhat stunted definition. I needn’t have worried. He continued, “... *applied* for hearers to believe the gospel of Christ and come to God in repentant faith to live lives of worship expressed in love for God and neighbour – not just for the transfer of information, but for the salvation and transformation of his people.”

As an experienced and effective church pastor, Kanishka was clear congregations need the Scriptures *applied* to them; that preachers and teachers must, “teach what *accords* with sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1, ESV).

But the terms “applied” and “application” are used differently in different circles, and carry lots of anxiety baggage in some Christian tribes and debates. So a working definition may be helpful at this point. In this book:

“Application means teaching the necessary implications of God’s Word for the lives of the hearers.”

Application is more than just the ethical and behavioural *principles* captured within a text, for we are concerned with the *implications* of those principles for the lives of different people listening.

It’s important to remember, applications are often not about what we should do, but about trusting and celebrating what God has done for us in Christ. This is what the Bible is primarily about. But celebration of God in Christ does have significant implications for our lives.

So, for example, it’s good application of Elizabeth’s blessing of Mary in Luke 1, to celebrate how “my Lord” was born to Mary to reveal God and redeem us to him, and then to explore what difference this makes to our lives in the coming week. And it’s good application of Luke 2 to celebrate how Jesus is the “consolation” of God’s people bringing us “salvation” from sin and “revelation” for all nations. And then to explore how his salvation impacts our fear of death, and how his revelation impacts our approach to our spiritual confusion. Such applications of the text call us to believe and rejoice in what God has done

for us in Jesus our Lord and Saviour, and then to consider his impact upon our daily lives.

But we do need to be careful

Application is vital, but a note of restraint is also required. Application does not include coercively demanding particular responses which are not explicitly required by the text, even if they are part of a range of possible changes an individual might make. The need for application is not an excuse for preachers to become overly directive, indulging in controlling “heavy shepherding” or even pastoral abuse.

Congregations need their pastors to feel able to *commend* godly behaviours *commended by the text*, and *condemn* ungodly behaviours *condemned by the text*, but to distinguish between what God’s Word plainly requires and their own suggestions for how to respond.

By way of illustration, imagine a family on their way home from church. That morning’s sermon had centred on Paul’s words in Philippians 4:8-9, “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things”. The family agreed the pastor was right to challenge them on how much time they spent mindlessly scrolling through godless nonsense on their phones. But they were very unsure about the pastor then declaring all godly Christians should unsubscribe from Netflix because of “all the moral filth promoted by it”.

Of course, the passage doesn't mention either phones or Netflix. Are both applications really the necessary implications of the text? While reflecting on our social media consumption is plainly a valid implication of the Philippians 4 instruction to fill our minds with "excellent or praiseworthy" things, to then pressure everyone to unsubscribe from Netflix was going a step too far – it is not a *necessary* implication of the text. The family agreed to hear his challenge to be more discerning in what they watch – but not to feel obliged to imitate the pastor's personal decision about what this text meant for his life (unless they were indeed finding themselves unable to avoid "moral filth" on Netflix).

Preachers can reasonably challenge their congregations to make concrete and practical changes, and make suggestions of possible ways to do so, but should avoid being too prescriptive where God's Word is not. They should not impose their own personal decisions on others, but distinguish between *the necessary implications of the text for the hearers*, and their own suggestions of possible ways to respond in our daily lives.

Again, Bible passages often address a mix of behaviours and attitudes. In Ephesians 4:31, we are told to, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." We can and must declare *behaviours* condemned by God's Word as wrong in all generations and contexts, and practise restorative discipline in church to those who are stubbornly unrepentant. Here it's pretty easy to apply some of these

behavioural commands with certainty: we must stop brawling and slandering other people. Full stop.

But other sins are *attitudes* of the heart and not always expressed in the same behaviours. “Bitterness”, for example, has many possible expressions. Application therefore needs to be more cautious here. A preacher might helpfully make suggestions of where the sin of bitterness can emerge in our lives but avoid making overly directive demands for specific responses.

This book aims to help preachers develop a healthy discernment between what will be legitimate and loving application of the Bible and what really isn’t appropriate biblical correction but illegitimate and unloving coerciveness. Therefore, we are defining application as drawing out the “necessary implications of God’s Word for the lives of the hearers” – but not dictating specific responses where the text does not explicitly or implicitly do so.

Some heavyweight support for application

In the great seventeenth-century Westminster Confession, paragraph six begins, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture ...*”¹

1 The Westminster Confession of Faith, paragraph VI, emphasis added.

This phrase, “good and necessary consequence”, mandates theological reflection and application to life – which in a sermon is what we call application. For when we think about it, we cannot actually live by the verses of the Bible without *drawing conclusions* from those verses for life today. We’re often doing this instinctively without realising it. This deductive approach is not only vital for weighty matters like formulating the doctrine of the Trinity, but for daily following Jesus in how we behave towards God, our families and work colleagues.

We cannot hope to respond to contemporary demands of the LGBTQI+ lobby to wear rainbow lanyards at work, discuss our children’s use of their mobile phones, decide whether to leave our genetic research profession to train for gospel ministry, answer the Jehovah’s Witnesses at our door or choose whether to march in support of renewable energies, without application. Because no Bible verse explicitly addresses any such presenting issues, they all require the *application* of Bible passages.

In the realities of living for Christ today, our congregations need our help in applying God’s Word to their daily lives. We have not taught Romans faithfully simply because our hearers can quote the theme and aim of the book, if there is no consequent commitment to cross-cultural mission with God’s gospel of imputed righteousness in Christ which Romans commends. And we certainly cannot be content if, after hearing our sermons, our listeners are left wondering what to do with what they’ve just heard.

In his standard text on preaching homiletics, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon W. Robinson observes, “In the past, homileticians did not give accurate application the attention it deserved. While that has changed in recent years, many of us may still fail to give enough time and thought to the knotty problems raised by application.”² In my opinion, such attention is still sorely lacking. Evangelical conferences and books repeatedly call us to “preach the word”, but few help us to do what follows – namely, “correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2) – which is application.

Returning to the opening analogy about medicines being prescribed by doctors, there is no doubting the incredible capacities of our medicine cabinet, the Bible. But there are often serious questions to be asked about the quality of clinical care by the spiritual doctors prescribing them – by us, the preachers. For this we all need training in handling God’s Word, in *both* our exegesis *and* our application.

I really don’t claim to be an expert and am conscious of my own failings as a preacher (I’ve shared some of these throughout this book). When drawing on my own experience, which my editor insists is helpful, my aim is certainly not to set myself up as some kind of ideal, but to pass on what, by God’s grace and the input of many godly preachers, I’ve learned over the years.

2 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Baker, 2005), p. 55.

None of us is an ideal preacher – and certainly not when we start. We develop over time, and adapt to different cultural contexts. And it's deeply comforting to know God loves to use us in our weakness. For, “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). We're always only works in progress. And the last thing I want to do is discourage preachers who are doing their best, especially early in their ministry.

But this does not diminish our responsibility to work hard at the application part of our exposition. This book aims to serve preachers and teachers in the front-line trenches everywhere. It is intended to help in the vital second stage of preparing our expositions – to move from explaining the text into applying the text. My dear brothers and sisters who preach or teach, I am on your side. This book is *for* you. It aims to help you apply the Word – to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” – to preach and not just lecture, to help your listeners not only *hear* God's Word but *live* by it, for the growth of your church and to the glory of God.