

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 7

Applying Scripture

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

We all know that in ordinary life we write down some things for temporary use and others for very long-term use. Well, for followers of Christ, there's certainly one book that will never grow obsolete: the Bible. Generation after generation, the people of God have cherished the Scriptures — and we should, because the Bible has a lot to say about living for God in every place and in every age. Jesus looked at the Bible as the Word of God that would remain the standard for God's people until all is accomplished. And as his followers, we do the same.

This is the seventh lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Applying Scripture." In this lesson, we'll suggest some approaches to application that are very useful in making the original meaning of Scripture relevant for modern audiences.

In this series, we'll define the process of application as:

Appropriately connecting the original meaning of a biblical document to contemporary audiences in ways that impact their concepts, behaviors and emotions.

Since this definition makes use of our earlier definition of original meaning, it may be helpful to recall that original meaning is:

The concepts, behaviors and emotions that the divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience.

We need to understand what the author truly said, and then we can make the application. The application must come from the meaning of the passage, and knowing that original as far as we can helps us to understand, are we in the same theological position as the original hearers of this? Are we under the Mosaic covenant? Are we under a certain covenant? And therefore, understanding the original setting, history, theological and contextual helps us then to properly understand it. We now know whether we need to bring that meaning through the finished work of Christ since we are now under the finished work of Christ.

— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Now, the process of application isn't always easy, because we have to account for significant developments that have taken place between the times when the Bible was written and our own day. But the goal of the process of application is the same now as it was when Scripture was first written: to impact the concepts, the behaviors and the emotions of God's people according to the will of God.

The most important distinction we can make between original meaning and application is that our investigation of original meaning focuses on the impact Scripture was intended to have on the concepts, behaviors and emotions of its first audiences. But the interpretive process of application is concerned with how the modern audience should be impacted on all these levels.

The original meaning of the text is critical to our application because it's the inspired and authoritative meaning of the text. So, the proper modern application of a text must always be faithful to its original meaning. At the same time, our modern applications also have to go beyond original meaning in some sense, because they have to take into account modern times, cultures and individuals.

Knowing the original meaning of a biblical passage helps us to apply it to our own lives because we recognize that a key component to its original meaning is understanding its original purpose, that is, the change that God designed that text to accomplish in its first audience, in its first readers, in the light of their situation, in the light of their frame of reference, how much of Scripture they knew at that point or had access to, in the light of the trials, the temptations that they were facing. That was God's application to them. The meaning really was serving the purpose of effecting his Holy Spirit's sanctifying purpose in their lives. Well, the Spirit's purpose in their lives is in continuity with the Holy Spirit's purpose in our lives. So, the more we can understand their situation, their need, and therefore the purpose for which God gave that text in the original setting and to the original audience, that sets a trajectory for how the Spirit intends to apply that text in our life, in our situation. And that should be our guide as pastors, preachers, teachers in the way we apply the text. We ask how did God intend it to make a change, to make a difference in their lives then and then how does that carry over into the Holy Spirit's purpose in conforming us more and more to the image of Christ today?

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Our discussion of the process of application will touch on three issues: First, we'll consider the necessity of application. Second, we'll examine the connections between the original meaning and modern audiences that make application possible. And third, we'll take a look at some of the major developments that have taken place between the times when the Bible was written and life today. Let's begin with the necessity of application.

NECESSITY

Listen to how James talked about the necessity of application in James 1:21-25:

Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:21-25).

James taught that it's not enough to know what Scripture says. In order to benefit properly from Scripture, we have to be impacted by it; our concepts, behaviors and emotions have to be changed. This kind of application is absolutely necessary for every believer if we want to receive the blessings of God. But what about the process that leads to this result of application? Is it really necessary to exert the effort to determine how our concepts, behaviors and emotions should be impacted?

Well, the best way to make the Scriptures relevant and applicable ... to one's everyday life is to think about the context in which the values of Scripture, or the teaching of Scripture, or the theology of Scripture applies. And again, it kind of depends on the kind of text that I'm dealing with, but usually there are attitudes that are important in Scripture — why we think about God, the way we think about our neighbor, the kind of compassion that I'm supposed to show, that kind of thing — that tells me how I'm supposed to live. And those values are very important. I think when we tend to study the Bible as a history book or an abstraction in terms of its theology and we don't add the ethical dimension of what the passage is calling us to do and be as people, we have a problem. But if we keep the relational, ethical dimension of Scripture which runs all the way through it very much on the table, then virtually any passage can have an application that calls us to think more sensitively about the way we live.

— Dr. Darrell L. Bock

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul demonstrated the importance of searching for contemporary application with these words:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

In the context of this chapter, Paul was reminding the Corinthians that the books of Exodus and Numbers told stories about the judgments that the Israelites of the Exodus suffered because they had rebelled against God. And in this verse, he took the necessary steps to apply these stories to the church at Corinth.

Paul applied the Old Testament stories to the New Testament church both by taking into account connections or continuities between the original audience and his Corinthian audience and by considering developments or changes that had taken place between Moses' day and his own day.

On the one hand, Paul connected the two audiences by urging that these stories "were written down as warnings for us." It wasn't difficult for Paul to make this connection. Exodus and Numbers had originally been written for the second generation of the Israelites of the Exodus from Egypt. They were written to warn these people not to repeat the failures of the first generation. So, Paul focused first on a similarity between the Corinthians and the original audience: the Corinthian church was in danger of failure. So, these stories warned them just as they had warned the original audience.

On the other hand, Paul qualified his application by noting important developments that had taken place since the time of Moses. Israel's failures happened to the first-generation Israelites, but they were written down for Paul's audience and all other believers. The scriptural record turned the Old Testament experiences into examples and warnings for the church, "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come."

The expression "the fulfillment of the ages" is one of many ways New Testament writers distinguished the period of the New Testament from the period of the Old Testament. With these words, Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians had the benefits of developments in redemptive history that the original audience of Exodus and Numbers did not have. The Corinthians were living over 1,000 years after Moses. They weren't on a journey from Egypt to Canaan like the original audience; they were on a journey to the new heavens and new earth. The fulfillment of the ages had come on them. As a result, Paul's application for the Corinthians had to account for those developments. And Paul highlighted these differences throughout the rest of 1 Corinthians 10, where he warned the Corinthians not to fail in their personal Christian lives or in their relationships in their church.

Paul's application of the Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers to the Christians in Corinth reflects the basic process that takes place every time we apply the Scriptures. Application must always take into account both the connections between original and modern audiences and the developments that have taken place between them. We need to recognize these connections and account for these developments if we're to make appropriate applications of the Scriptures to our lives today.

Now that we've seen the necessity of application, let's turn our attention to the many connections or continuities between the original readers of biblical books and modern audiences.

CONNECTIONS

It's the connections or continuities between ancient and modern audiences that make biblical texts relevant for modern people. And there are countless ways to describe these continuities.

In this lesson, we'll divide these connections into three main categories. First, we'll see that both audiences have the same God. Second, they live in a similar world. And third, they're the same kind of people. Let's look at each of these categories, beginning with the fact that both audiences have the same God.

GOD

The Scriptures are clear that there is only one God to whom all audiences of Scripture owe their loyalty and obedience. And as traditional Christian theology teaches, God is immutable, meaning that he doesn't change. Since God is immutable, and since loyalty and obedience to him are universal obligations, there are strong connections between the impact Scripture was intended to have on its original audience and on its modern audience.

To say that God's immutable means that he's unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes and promises. So, his being, his nature, his essence, his perfections, the degree to which he possesses those characteristics, his purposes, what he has determined to do, and his promises, what he's told us he'll do. So, God's unchanging in those ways. That's not to say that God doesn't relate to us in a dynamic, relational, personal way. So, he listens to our prayers, he grieves over our sin, he delights in our faithfulness. And so, it's been said that God is essentially immutable, but relationally mutable. There's a degree to which he adapts what he's doing to our relationship with him, while at the same time maintaining his essential attributes.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That's the term that you'll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated "unchanging." And that's really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in our world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still-point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever? I think it's this profound

psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid, that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea... We find our strength in this immutable God.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

The biblical concept of divine immutability doesn't imply that God is inactive. In biblical terms, an inactive god is a worthless idol. But the God of Scripture is constantly interacting with his creation in real and meaningful ways.

Traditional Christian theology has rightly insisted that there are three critical aspects to God's immutability. First, God's eternal counsel, or ultimate plan for history, is immutable.

Eternal Counsel

Although different Christian traditions understand God's eternal plan differently, we should all agree that everything God has done, is doing, and will do is part of a unified plan. God knows everything, and he is using that knowledge to direct history toward the ends for which he created it. As God said in Isaiah 46:10:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).

And as Paul explained in Ephesians 1:4, 11:

He chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world... In [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:4, 11).

Paul made it clear that God has a plan that covers everything. And this plan has existed since the time when he "chose" or predestined believers to salvation. Of course, different traditions interpret the concept of predestination differently. But what is beyond question is that God predestined before he even created the world. Predestination was just part of his eternal counsel. And this counsel is immutable because God causes everything to conform to it.

The immutability of God's plan assures us that if we look closely enough, God's ways in ancient times accord with his ways today. At some level, God's will for his ancient people and his will for us are similar because they both fit within his one immutable purpose for his creation.

In the second place, God is also immutable in his character. His essence, persons and attributes never change.

Character

Now to be sure, God reveals different aspects of his character more prominently at some times than others. Sometimes he displays his mercy, sometimes his wrath. Sometimes he reveals his omniscience and other times he hides it. But the full range of his attributes — his eternal nature — always stays the same. That's why in James 1:17, James referred to God as:

The Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

God's immutable character helps us see that there will always be significant connections between the original meaning and modern application of Scripture. When a particular passage spoke about one divine attribute, the original audience was always expected to understand that attribute within the context of God's other attributes. In much the same way, modern audiences are expected to apply the emphases of every Scripture in ways that never disregard any of God's attributes. For this reason, the immutable attributes of God always form a measure of similarity between original meaning and modern applications.

In the third place, God is unchanging or immutable in his covenant promises. God will fulfill everything he has ever sworn in covenant.

Covenant Promises

Sometimes Christians make the mistake of thinking that everything God ever says is a promise. But the reality is that God only promises when he takes a vow, or makes a covenant, or swears an oath. As we read in Numbers 23:19:

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? (Numbers 23:19).

When God promises, his word is immutable. Otherwise, he's free to change his mind. Consider Genesis 15 where God said he would make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars. Abraham was thankful for this offer, but he still asked God to make the blessing certain. So, God responded by making a covenant with him.

In cases, though, where God hasn't made a promise, his words are best understood as threats of curse and offers of blessing. For instance, recall that in the book of Jonah God threatened to destroy Nineveh, but then he relented when its people repented. Without question, God changed his mind about destroying Nineveh at that time. But he didn't break any promises when he spared them. Covenant promises are those things God has sworn to do by covenant oath.

Every revelation of God in Scripture assumes that God will keep his covenant and his covenant promises. The original audiences were supposed to understand every passage of Scripture in this light, and modern audiences should do the same. We should

have absolute confidence in God's unchanging promises. And his offers and threats should motivate us to obedience.

Now that we've seen that we have the same God as all the first recipients of Scripture, let's look at the fact that we live in a similar world.

WORLD

Throughout the ages, philosophers have wrestled with whether the world is stable or changing. Common experience tells us that, in many ways, both are true. God's creation is always changing, but many features of the world have remained constant for every audience of Scripture. When we apply the Scriptures to our day, we need to keep both of these truths in view.

There is an old adage that says, "history repeats itself," and we understand that current events often resemble events that took place in the past. Like the original readers of Scripture, we live in a world created by God. And though we've fallen into sin, we've also experienced God's redemption. God's faithful people in the Old Testament faced opposition from other people and from demonic powers, and we face similar opposition today. They depended on God's help to overcome; we depend on his help too. We can also see the stability of what we often call the regular patterns or laws of nature. When the Scriptures speak about the rising and setting of the sun, human sickness, the need for food and water, and countless other things, it's obvious to us that we live in a similar world to the one inhabited by the first audiences of Scripture.

And even in more specific and narrow ways, we find important parallels between the world of the original audiences of Scripture and our world. For example, the Ten Commandments given to Israel in Exodus 20 provided essential background for the lives of God's people in the rest of the Old Testament. These same commandments were used again to guide the lives of his people in the New Testament. And as Paul taught in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, these same commandments continue to guide the church today.

In a similar way, God's choice of David as the head of a permanent dynasty for God's people provided the historical background for God's kingdom in the Old Testament, as well as the background for Jesus' kingship as the great son of David in the New Testament. And as we learn in places like Revelation 22:16, the church continues to serve Jesus as our King and Lord because of his permanent rule as the Davidic king.

As examples like these illustrate, the connections between our world and the worlds of Scripture's first audiences can help us determine the proper modern applications of the Bible.

Now that we've seen that all audiences of Scripture have the same God and live in a similar world, let's consider the connections that exist because we're the same kind of people.

PEOPLE

There are at least three ways in which modern people are very similar to the people who first received the Scriptures. First, all human beings, no matter when or

where they live, are sinful images of God. Second, we suffer religious divisions. And third, humanity still includes the same classes of people. We'll explore each of these similarities, beginning with the fact that all human beings are sinful images of God.

Sinful Images

In passages like Genesis 1:27, we're told that when God created humanity, he created us in his image. Among other things, this means that all human beings are rational, linguistic, moral and religious vice-regents of God.

At the same time, all human beings have also fallen into sin. Humanity today no longer uses our rational, linguistic, moral and religious capacities to glorify God the way we should. Unbelievers act as if they aren't required to submit to God's rule. And even believers fail in their loyalty to him. As Solomon said at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:46:

There is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).

In systematic theology, you know, there is this teaching known as total depravity. And what that means is that in the totality of man's being, in his thinking, feeling and behavior, it's all been tainted with sin so that there is that basic assumption that everything he does, he does it in defiance of God's commandments and holy standard. So yes, there is such a thing as a sinful nature. And the Bible talks about how basic of a problem that is, especially in relationship to God.

— Dr. Luis Orteza

One of the great questions that is asked especially these days in anthropological and sociological studies is whether human beings have a sinful nature. And over the years, again and again, theories about human education, human development, human learning have foundered on the rock of original sin, because the fact is all of us have a fallen nature... That means, in fact, that we humans are controlled by a selfish desire for accomplishment, achievement, possession, and that thing warps everything we do. You cannot understand human behavior if you assume that humans are naturally good. In fact, as you look at the history of the race, you have to say, no, we're not naturally good; we're naturally evilly self-centered. The fascinating thing about the Bible, however, is it also at the same time says, we are created in the image of God. And that, in my mind, is the wonder of the biblical view of humanity, because many other anthropologists and sociologists, recognizing the presence of evil, will say, "Oh, human beings are incorrigibly hopelessly evil; we're just the most aggressive

of the apes, that's all." And the Bible says, "Oh no, we are fallen, but we are marred in the image of God."

— Dr. John Oswalt

All recipients of Scripture, whether ancient or modern, share the same sinful nature. And in one way or another, the original meaning of every portion of Scripture addressed this human condition. We are all images of God that have been corrupted by sin. Because we share these qualities with all the original audiences of Scripture, these similarities can help us draw meaningful modern applications from every biblical text.

Besides being sinful images of God, the original and modern audiences of Scripture are also similar because we both suffer religious divisions.

Religious Divisions

From the time the first Scriptures were inspired, it has always been the case that readers of Scripture have fallen into one of three religious groups: unbelievers, false believers, and believers. Unbelievers are people who make themselves the enemies of God by refusing to submit to him. This division of humanity includes all those who haven't heard of God's special revelations to Israel and the church, as well as many who have. False believers make superficial commitments to God. They may have the external appearance of believers, but they don't have true faith, and as a result they aren't redeemed from his eternal judgment. By contrast, believers are people who make sincere, faithful commitments to God and who are thereby redeemed from sin and saved from God's eternal judgment.

In general terms, the modern applications of Scripture to these three religious groups should be very similar to the original applications to these same groups. For unbelievers, the Scriptures were first designed to restrain sin, to expose their lost condition, and to call them to saving repentance; in modern application, we do the same. For false believers, biblical texts were designed to restrain sin, expose their hypocrisies, and call for saving repentance; in modern application, we work toward the same goals. For believers, biblical texts were designed to restrain their sin, to warn against failure, and to lead them toward grateful living in the grace of God; and as modern Christians, we apply the Scriptures toward these same ends.

In addition to being sinful images and suffering religious divisions, the original and modern audiences are also similar because the same classes of people continue to exist throughout history.

Classes

Human beings can be classified in many different ways. For example, we might be classified according to particular traits or attributes we have. Some people are old and others are young; some are male and others are female; some are rich and others are poor;

some are powerful and others are weak; and so on. We can also be classified according to our relationships with other people. We might be parents, children, siblings, masters, servants, friends, or just about anything else. Or we can be classified according to what we've done, like heroes and criminals; or according to our jobs, like pastors and farmers. And the same thing was also true of the original audiences of Scripture.

In fact, many portions of Scripture are specifically directed toward particular classes of people. We find passages that focus on people who are angry, or loving, or lazy, or repentant, or rich, or poor. We also find passages that specifically address people identified as husbands, or wives, or children, or deacons, or thieves, or employees.

Because these same classes of people exist in every age, they form meaningful connections between the original audience and all subsequent audiences. And these connections help guide our application. Ancient and modern rich people can draw similar applications from passages about wealth. Ancient and modern leaders can draw similar applications from passages about leadership. And so on. All our efforts to apply the Bible to our lives can be helped by recognizing that we share these kinds of connections with the first audiences of Scripture.

Now that we've explored the necessity of the application of Scripture, and considered some important connections between the original and modern audiences, let's turn our attention to the developments between the original and modern audiences that should influence our application.

DEVELOPMENTS

Many people who carefully read and study the Bible say that it sometimes seems foreign, as if it came from a different world, and there's a very real sense in which this is true. The books of the Bible were written long ago. They were written in languages that most of us don't read, and to cultures that are very different from our own. And our own personal lives are also vastly different from the lives of people in the original audiences of Scripture. So, in one way or another, we need to account for all of these factors when we apply the Bible to modern life.

In a later lesson, we'll look closely at specific ways to account for these kinds of differences. So for now, we'll simply identify three major kinds of developments that have occurred since Scripture was inspired, and that need to be considered in our modern application of biblical books: epochal, cultural and personal developments. Let's look first at epochal developments in redemptive history.

EPOCHAL

Christians have frequently summarized the Bible's perspective on world history in three stages: creation, when God first made the world; fall, when humanity first committed sin and was cursed by God; and redemption, the period following the Fall, in which God redeems us from our sin. Soon after Adam and Eve fell into sin, God began a

long, slow process of redemption. And throughout the millennia, he has mercifully built his kingdom of redemption within and alongside the cursed creation.

Many theologians have recognized that the progressive nature of God's rule over creation has resulted in periodic developments that create discontinuity between the various epochs mentioned in Scripture. Perhaps the most obvious epochal development occurred between the Old and New Testaments. But theologians also commonly identify epochs according to God's various covenants throughout the Bible, especially those associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament, and with Jesus in the New Testament.

For instance, the laws regarding atoning sacrifices required different things at different points in redemptive history. In Moses' time, they required sacrifices at the tabernacle. In Solomon's day, they required sacrifices at the temple. In the early New Testament, they required Jesus' death on the cross. And in the later New Testament, they ceased to be offered altogether.

When we read the Old Testament in particular, as believers today — after Christ has died and rose again and is ready to come back — the way we understand and apply Scripture at times has to be different than the way the Old Testament folks perhaps applied it. But, of course, there are also many other times in which we don't really have to make any adjustments at all... So take for example the sacrificial system. We no longer have to offer sacrifices because Christ is now our sacrifice. So there is very little application in that sense. I don't have to go to the temple ... to the nearest temple to slaughter an animal and lay my hands on the animal so that the animal can bear all my sins. So, yes, there are times in which where we are today in redemptive history changes the way we would apply Scripture.

— Dr. Daniel L. Kim

It's so critical that we take stock of where a passage occurs in redemptive history relative to where we sit in redemptive history as we interpret and apply that to our lives, because it's quite clear that some passages in their redemptive historical context involve a different economy, a different administration of things than our own context. I'll just give one simple example — the sacrificial system in the Old Testament... The passages in the Old Testament about animal sacrifice are not irrelevant to us, but they are relevant precisely to the degree that those sacrifices have been fulfilled in Christ. So when we read those texts, our conclusion is not, oh, I've got to find a lamb, a bull or a dove somewhere, but I need to look to Christ for the covering of my sin. And so in many ways — that's just one obvious example — but in many ways as we read the Scriptures, we need to take stock of the fact: oh, this is taking place in the old covenant aspect of the administration of redemptive history. We no longer live in a

theocracy, for example, so there are things that would have been true for the life of Israel that are not true for our lives as believers today. We always want to keep in mind not only the immediate grammatical context of a passage but its redemptive historical context as well so we can make proper application to believers in our position of the post new covenant reality.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

In many ways, biblical history is like a growing tree. Every tree grows from a seed, becomes a sapling and eventually develops into a fully-grown tree. Everything that tree will become is contained in the initial seed. But over time the tree has to grow and develop in order to become fully mature.

In a similar way, redemption has grown and developed throughout biblical history. And we have to account for these developments as we apply the Bible to our lives. This developmental model teaches us that the whole Bible is relevant and authoritative for us, but also that older revelation must always be applied in light of later revelation.

With this understanding of epochal developments in mind, let's explore the idea of cultural developments that distinguish our cultures today from the cultures directly addressed in the Bible.

CULTURAL

In thinking about the cultural developments between the original and modern audiences of Scripture, we need to recognize both similarities and differences. With regard to similarities, we need to ask questions like “What cultural patterns do we face that closely parallel Abraham’s experience?” and “How is our culture like David’s?” And with regard to differences, we need to ask questions like “How has human culture significantly changed from the ancient societies of the Old Testament?” and “What customs and practices are different?” The answers to these kinds of questions have important implications for the way we apply Scripture today.

The culture in which the Bible was written was clearly very different to our own. Many of us are not living in agrarian, rural economies. Some people are, but for us in the West that’s certainly not the case. And so we’ve got to make some transitions. And nor are we living 1000 B.C. where business was done in the city gate outside Bethlehem — read it in the book of Ruth. And you know how you conducted a legal contract in those days? Well, you took off your shoe and you kind of did a handshake based on that. Well, of course, that’s bizarre. We live in a different culture where you sign contracts and you have different agreements. Different cultures will have different ways of doing business, of conducting a relationship between men and women. All kinds of things will have different cultural expressions. We just

have to be sympathetic to that and realize the Bible had its own way of doing things. We live in cultures where things are done differently. However, the Bible has given us principles of how we should do our business; we should do it with integrity. You can read that from the book of Ruth. And so we have to apply the principle of moral integrity in our business dealings, even if we don't take our shoes off as they did.

— Dr. Peter Walker

As we think of our own current situation and compare that to the time of the original audience, we have to recognize that there's been at least 2,000 years back to the time of the New Testament and often 3,000 or more back to the time of the Old Testament. So, there can be differences, cultural differences, that remove us from the experience of the original audience. One of the most obvious is that technology has dramatically changed. So, for instance, we're a highly visual culture, a culture that's used to a rapid pace of communication, a culture that is very enveloped in using technology to communicate to others. And in antiquity, just thinking 2,000 years ago, when John wrote the book of Revelation, he did so as a cyclical letter where one person was going to carry it from community to community. This probably took a period of many days as he traveled from church to church to church. There wasn't that kind of instant communication. Another aspect of that, that is very evident also as you think of the book of Revelation, is the book of Revelation was primarily meant to be heard. So, at the very beginning of the book it says there's a blessing that's pronounced on the one person who reads and the many who are hearing, which is indicative of the way it was originally understood, which was, a person read the entire book all the way through to an audience. For us, it's very easy to slow down as we read through the book of Revelation. We can stop and meditate on a verse and try and understand whatever it means. Whereas, for the original audience, 22 chapters just came flowing over them. So, the experience of the book is quite different. And I think one of the repercussions of that is the original audience of the book of Revelation probably was overwhelmed, could not figure it all out, and at some point had to less worry about figuring out the details and instead understand the general intent of the whole and to allow the whole to really speak to their own affections. And the images really begin to touch one more and more in terms of our own heart reality instead of being able to figure out everything. So, there's one example of how that cultural difference can really change our understanding and our approach to reading Scripture.

— Dr. David W. Chapman

Besides epochal and cultural developments, we also need to pay attention to personal developments that distinguish people today from the original audiences of the Bible.

PERSONAL

There are considerable similarities between the people of the Bible and people living in our contemporary world, but we need to recognize that there are also many differences between modern and ancient people. And if we hope to apply biblical texts properly, we have to take these personal variations into account.

For example, we need to ask questions like “How do our personal lives compare with those that we see in the Bible?” “What roles do we have in society?” “What is our spiritual condition?” “How are we serving the Lord compared to this character or that character?” “How do our thoughts, actions and feelings compare to those that we see in biblical writers?” By taking account of the variations between ancient people and modern people, we can better understand how to apply the Bible to the specific circumstances of our own lives.

Identifying the epochal, cultural and personal developments between the original and modern audiences of Scripture may be the most challenging aspects of applying the Bible to our times. But if we do it carefully, it will go a long way toward helping us apply the Scriptures in ways that are honoring toward God, responsible toward others, and suitable for our time.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on applying Scripture, we’ve explored three basic factors that can help us connect the original meaning of the Bible to our modern situations. We’ve spoken of the necessity of making modern applications of Scripture. We’ve discussed the connections between the original and modern audiences that help us determine how to apply Scripture. And we’ve considered some of the developments that have taken place since the days when Scripture was written, paying particular attention to the ways these developments might obligate us to adapt our applications for contemporary audiences.

We always need to remind ourselves that the Scriptures were not written to be set aside by later generations. On the contrary, they were written for God’s people to love and obey throughout all of history. And for this reason, the Bible is just as relevant, just as true in our time as it was when it was first written. We have to assess the developments that have taken place between biblical days and our own, but when we do, we can discern the will of God not only for his people in the past, but also for his people living today.

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GLOSSARY

application – Appropriately connecting the original meaning of a biblical document to contemporary audiences in ways that impact their concepts, behaviors and emotions

believers – People who make sincere, faithful commitments to God and are redeemed from sin and saved from God's eternal judgment

covenant promises – Things God has sworn to do by oath

epoch – A distinct period of time in history; in theology, a period of time established by divine revelation and characterized by a substantial and long-lasting transition that distinguishes it from other periods of time

eternal counsel – God's eternal plan for the universe, established before his work of creation

false believers – People who make superficial commitments to God and may have the appearance of believers but don't have true faith and aren't redeemed from eternal judgment

immutable – Term meaning "unchanging"; used to express the unchanging nature of God's character and perfections

original meaning – The concepts, behaviors and emotions that Scripture's divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience

Ten Commandments – Commandments given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai; expressions of God's eternal law that transcend all culture and times; also called the *Decalogue*

unbelievers – People who make themselves God's enemies by refusing to submit to him, including those who have not heard of God's special revelations to Israel and the church and many who have