

Honoring Haddon Robinson¹

For the purpose of our meeting, some reflections have been shortened. If you wish to read a complete copy of the included reflections, go to the website cited in the footnote.

Reflections from pastors on lessons they have learned from Haddon Robinson.

Ken Shigematsu – Pastor of Tenth Avenue Church in Vancouver, British Columbia

Several years ago, I was in the Boston area visiting my alma mater Gordon-Conwell. I walked into the office of my former professor, Dr. Haddon Robinson, and asked, "Have you had any new insights about preaching recently?" He replied, "I've discovered that our brain works on a ten-day creative cycle. So, if a person wants to prepare their best sermons, they need to begin their preparation at least ten days in advance. This will ensure a person will hit their creative peak somewhere in that cycle." That simple, yet powerful idea revolutionized my approach to sermon preparation.

Up until that time, I had typically prepared my entire sermon on the Thursday before the Sunday that I was to preach. I felt an enormous amount of pressure to come up with something creative on Thursdays, and I dreaded that day. With all the anxiety, I experienced regular "sermon block."

Thanks to Haddon's insight, instead of preparing my Sunday sermon on the Thursday before, I began to prepare the message two Thursdays before, so that I would have a ten-day runway. Spreading out the work significantly reduced the pressure and my anxiety. The longer runway also gave more time for my creative ideas to emerge and I found that—for the first time—I began to enjoy the sermon preparation process, and it felt more prayerful.

Also, Haddon Robinson made us write out our sermon manuscripts, but did not allow us to take notes into the pulpit. He said when we are reviewing our sermon if we keep forgetting something—it likely doesn't fit into the vertebrae of the sermon itself so we're better off dropping it.

Haddon taught me that it takes three to five minutes for a thought to develop in a listener's mind. So in any given sermon you can only have six or seven movements.

This may be more obvious: Haddon spoke about the communication "law of primacy and recency." What you say first and last in a sermon will be most memorable and therefore most important.

Mark Mitchell – Pastor of Central Peninsula Church in Foster City, California

One thing I learned from Haddon is that it is okay to reuse a sermon.

¹ Christianity Today, <http://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2017/july/honoring-haddon-robinson.html> (Accessed August 15,2017)

After I had been preaching at my church for over 20 years, I was considering making a change, and seeking his advice. He asked me, "How many sermons have you prepared and preached over the years?"

I wasn't sure the exact number, but I told him, "Hundreds." He then asked, "You mean you have hundreds of sermons you've only preached once?" I sheepishly replied, "That's correct." He then said something to the effect of, "That's a waste of a good sermon!"

I had always felt that re-using a sermon was a bit like serving guests reheated leftover food. Not according to Haddon. As it turned out, I stayed put at my church, but after almost 31 years there, he freed me up to pull one out of my archives once in a while.

Hershael York – Pastor of Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfurt, Kentucky

When, in my early twenties, I heard Haddon Robinson preach on a *Preaching Today* cassette tape and subsequently encountered his book, *Biblical Preaching*, it was like reading Copernicus and discovering that the sun did not revolve around the earth, but the other way around. Haddon Robinson taught me the primacy and, ultimately, the sufficiency of the text. The question to be answered was not how to say *my* big idea but how to preach that of the *author*. It was a lesson I learned well and have dedicated my life to practicing and promulgating.

- “Know your purpose before you start writing your sermon!”
- “Land the plane! The sermon should be just long enough to get the necessary thing said ... If the congregation knows you will quit when you're finished, they will put up with a great deal.”
- “An effective introduction must do three things: capture interest, surface need, and orient to your material. If they don't itch, they won't let you scratch!”
- Probably my most-quoted Haddonism: “A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew. You must understand an idea to explain it clearly.”

Bryan Wilkerson – Pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts

Haddon taught me to let the text govern the sermon, not just in terms of content—true expository preaching—but in terms of mood and movement. A narrative text should preach like a story. A sermon from the Psalms should make us weep or wonder. And a prophetic text should hit us right between the eyes.

For me, Haddon elevated preaching to an art form, worthy of my very best effort. Not only for the glory of God, but for the good of listeners desperate for a word from God.

Ryan Welsh – Pastor of Redeemer Church in Bellevue, Washington

I remember one of the first things I heard Haddon Robinson say. It was the first day of my first class with him. Along with 16 other students, we had been D.Min. students for less than a day. Most of us choose Gordon-Conwell so we could learn preaching from Dr. Robinson. Someone in the class asked, "With so many different styles of preaching what is your view as to the most beneficial?" Haddon said, "Well ..." and then paused

for a couple seconds while looking at the ground to gather his thoughts. It became clear to me over time that this is classic Dr. Robinson. He was a master with words and was never in a rush to say something after one second what could be said better after two. After a thoughtful pause, he said, "There is no such thing as styles of preaching. There is effective communication of God's Word and ineffective communication of God's Word. If you want to call them styles, be my guest, but I'd rather call one preaching and the other talking to yourself."

Bryan Carter – Pastor of Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas

In July 2008, our E. K. Bailey Preaching Conference hosted a luncheon to honor Dr. Haddon Robinson as our Living Legend because of his vast contributions to the preaching community throughout his lifetime. I will never forget his session during the conference where he taught the centrality of insuring that every message builds a bridge from the original audience to the audience of today. I learned from Dr. Robinson the importance of investing the time and energy to have a thorough understanding of the Scriptures in its original context first before attempting to apply the text to the lives of people today. Dr. Robinson's writings and teachings have inspired me and many others to invest our lives in biblical preaching, he was a model, mentor, and masterful proclaimer of the gospel.

Steve Norman – Pastor of Central Wesleyan in Holland, Michigan

Haddon Robinson wrote a chapter, in the book *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, titled "Bringing Yourself Into the Pulpit." Though he identifies six warnings for preachers, here are the three that I've carried with me for the last twenty-five years.

On inappropriate self-disclosure

"Presenting a personal unresolved conflict, of any kind, tend to focus people's attention on you, the preacher, rather than on their own condition. ... If ministers do that in the pulpit, a congregation loses the sense that God's word has been offered to them. ... The preacher has used the audience for his own therapy" (132).

As preachers, our primary currency is words. As verbal processors, some of us use words to sift and sort through our own thoughts, feeling, and trials. To be sure, the pulpit is not the place where every challenge is sanitized and we only discuss our personal crises when they are tied up in neat little bows. That said, for Robinson, the pulpit is not the counselor's couch. Ultimately, it's not where we go to receive aid, but where we stand to offer it.

On the danger of turning-point stories

"When we relate dramatic turning-point stories, we give the impression that whenever God acts, he does so with the impact of lightning. Most people's actual experience with God, then, seems to be mundane, anticlimactic, unglamorous, unreal ... the true skill in life lies in faithfully handling the ordinary" (135).

Everyone knows a preacher with a penchant for the glory days. Their personal illustration ‘Greatest Hits’ list includes: dramatic victory stories, miraculous encounters, spectacular prayers, and supernatural fireworks. Robinson isn’t denying that these stories are true, it’s just that for the ordinary listener, they aren’t always helpful. If our “best story” moments inadvertently disempower the listener for a life of day-to-day faithfulness, we’re not serving anyone well.

On the Danger of Subtle Self-Promotion

“My stories must illustrate. I must avoid the other agenda that makes myself look too good or too wise. Love overlooks a multitude of homiletical sins, but once people lose confidence in your integrity, your ministry is severely damaged.”

“Any time we make ourselves look holy or shrewd, it’s good to test our motives with the hard question: Why am I using this? To illustrate a point? To elevate my standing? To identify with the people? Any of these may be legitimate and necessary, but self-promotion usually backfires.”

“An illustration should illustrate the truth, not elevate the speaker.”

Our job is to offer the truth in the text as a gift to the people of God, and stay as close to the ground as possible along the way. Haddon reminds me that I need to be aware of how and when my own personal insecurities might seek to hijack the sermon. It requires a constant state of vigilance; they always seem to emerge in new ways and forms.

Haddon’s wisdom has been a gift to me these last few decades. May God give us the grace to use the decades we have left to apply it in our pulpits.

Bryan Chapell – Pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois

What distinguished Biblical Preaching from the other books is its sage simplicity. Expressing simple truths in clever ways or profound truths in difficult ways is not particularly difficult. But expressing profound truth in simple terms is the mark of homiletical genius and the great contribution of Haddon Robinson to the field of evangelical preaching. Others are as committed to faithfulness to Scripture, and others are as informed in the disciplines of communication. Haddon brings these distinctions to the preaching task as well as any other scholar, but what distinguishes his work is the way that his great pastoral wisdom is compressed into terms so plain.

Students of preaching often read Haddon’s work and say to themselves, “Of course,” or “That’s just common sense,” not realizing that Haddon has just demonstrated for them in writing the goal for which they should strive in preaching: making great truths accessible to all.

A preacher once introduced another by saying, “I love Dr. Smith because he is not so concerned that we know that he knows the Word; instead, he is more concerned that we know the Word.” For similar reasons I love Haddon Robinson. His greatest concern is that others know God’s Word.

Jeffrey Arthurs – Professory of Preaching and Communication at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts

“Less is more.” A sermon can’t say everything, so quit trying. Going into depth on a few concepts results in more impact than covering many concepts quickly. Related to this: “Every good sermon flirts with heresy” (because a single sermon can’t say everything).

Prayer. I learned this simply by watching him. He prayed regularly and naturally. His daily tasks were upheld in prayer.

Don’t forget the little guy. Haddon was kind and gracious to “unimportant” people.

Jeremy M. Kimble – Assistant Professor of Theological Studies at Cedarville University

I can still remember being in Bible college and taking my first preaching course my junior year. By that point I had taught several times in the student ministry back at my home church and preached once in an evening service. I came into this course green and eager to learn, aware of my inexperience and inadequacies.

After our first class, I marched down to the bookstore to purchase textbooks for various classes. The main required text for my preaching course was Biblical Preaching, by Haddon Robinson. Little did I know how formative this book would be in my preaching ministry. Three distinct lessons come to mind.

First, Robinson helped me understand the formation of an idea. Every idea, he said, contains a subject and a complement. The subject describes what I am talking about, while the complement articulates what I am saying about what I am talking about. I recall reading this chapter and going through exercises in class to force us toward clarity in our thinking. This was essential since, to cite another insight I derived from Robinson, a mist in the pulpit equals a fog in the pew. Robinson was insistent on clarity, and I have come back to this basic lesson again and again as I continue to unveil the truth of God’s Word.

Second, Haddon Robinson is perhaps most often associated with the concept of the “Big Idea.” Every passage contains a big idea, it is our responsibility as preachers to understand what that big idea is and then to communicate it to our audience in a compelling manner. The distillation of that one sentence is a key exercise as a biblical text will say many things, but we are attempting to follow the author’s intention carefully and communicate that intention. To this day I toil and labor over identifying the big idea of the text, and I owe that emphasis to Robinson.

Finally, Haddon Robinson made a faithful, sure-footed apologetic for expository preaching. I grew up in a church where pastors faithfully preached through books of the Bible verse-by-verse. I simply took for granted that everyone preached this way, but I soon discovered that was not the case. Robinson cemented my convictions on this matter. The big idea is textual, our outline is textual, and our task is to help our people understand and apply the text.

Dennis Hesselbarth – On staff at Livingstones Associates

Dr. Robinson's quiet yet driving passion for making the Scriptures accessible to the average person changed my preaching. Haddon insisted that, in a simple clear way, our sermons show how we gleaned the meaning of the text, so the listener could see it for themselves, and most importantly, themselves learn to read and interpret the bible.

Quoting Greek and Hebrew, he noted, might impress our audience, but it wasn't going to help our audience learn to interpret the Scriptures for themselves.

I still laugh thinking about one memorable exchange in homiletics class at Denver Seminary. Greek and Hebrew supposedly in hand, we were to do our own translation of our assigned text, exegete it, then prepare a sermon. With sermon in hand, we now interacted with Haddon about the process.

He reminded us that the underlying Greek or Hebrew grammar was part of the "skeleton," the exegetical research underlying our message, but the message itself, putting the "flesh" on the big idea of our passage, needed no Greek or Hebrew bones gruesomely sticking out!

Then, almost as an afterthought, Haddon said something like, "Besides, anyone who thinks they can discover in the original languages some deep truth inaccessible to the English reader is fooling themselves. Our English translations are excellent."

The class wise guy's hand shot up. "Then why do we have to go through all the pain of learning Greek and Hebrew?" (Remembering this is what makes me laugh. We were all thinking the same thing!)

Haddon paused. Then he said, "All the original languages do is make us a more careful observer of the text. It might add some color or emphasis. But the truths expressed are evident in the English. We don't want to ever give the impression that someone who doesn't know Greek or Hebrew can't understand the bible for themselves."

Haddon Robinson's passion went beyond preaching. His passion was equipping people to engage with the God of the Word through the Word of God. Preaching was just a means to that greater end. I've never forgotten that.