

The Worlds *of the* Preacher

NAVIGATING BIBLICAL, CULTURAL,
AND PERSONAL CONTEXTS

FOREWORD BY BRYAN CHAPPELL

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In honor of
Haddon W. Robinson
1931–2017

Contents

Foreword by Bryan Chapell ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction: A Tribute to Haddon Robinson xv

■ *Scott M. Gibson*

1. The Worlds of the Preacher 1

■ *Haddon W. Robinson*

2. The Preacher and the World of the Old Testament 15

■ *Steven D. Mathewson*

3. The Preacher and the World of the New Testament 37

■ *Duane Litfin*

4. The Preacher's Personal World 53

■ *Scott M. Gibson*

5. The World of Ethnic and Cultural Issues in Preaching 73

■ *Matthew D. Kim*

6. The Worlds of the Listener 89

■ *Jeffrey Arthurs*

7. Preaching in This Present World 107

■ *Patricia M. Batten*

8. The Mission of Preaching in This World 115

■ *Victor D. Anderson*

9. The World of History and the Task of Preaching 129

■ *Scott Wenig*

10. Preaching to a Culture Dominated by Images 145

■ *Donald R. Sunukjian*

Afterword: The Worlds of the Preacher 161

■ *Scott M. Gibson*

Contributors 163

Foreword

BRYAN CHAPPELL

I was the “up and comer.” Haddon was the reigning master. We were invited by a publisher we shared to a college campus for a joint project that would combine our instruction in one of the first-ever digital educational programs designed to teach preaching remotely.

Prior to that project I had never met Haddon Robinson. I had read, quoted, and admired this respected seminary president, homiletics professor, and author of *Biblical Preaching* (probably the most widely distributed homiletics textbook in history), but I had not enjoyed his company. I wasn’t sure what to expect. His writings were filled with wisdom but presented with remarkable clarity—almost deceptively simple without being simplistic, plain yet able to inspire with poignancy. So I was not sure which Haddon Robinson I would meet: the plain preacher or the sage professor. I met both.

The technology experts took care of putting our homiletical ideas and teaching methods into digital formats, audio recordings, computer figures, and animated vignettes. Our books were sliced, diced, and enfolded into a single, comprehensive preaching course that looks primitive today (kind of like an early *Pong* video game), but it was cutting edge at the time. There simply was not enough memory capacity in most personal computers to run anything more sophisticated, and we were pioneering with theology software that now seems about as advanced as *The Lucy Show* when compared to the latest *Star Wars* film.

The one concession our engineers were able to make for designing a “human” touch into the software was allowing Haddon and me to make a brief video statement of the emphases and priorities of our books. By this time, I had been teaching preaching for several years, but my main book on preaching had only recently been published. Haddon was far more experienced as a preacher and academic, and his book was being used worldwide, establishing him as the premier teacher of preaching for that time.

I wondered how anything I would say could hold a candle to whatever he was going to say in our short video clips. So I focused hard on memorizing the preface to my book, trying to look intelligent and sound important as I recited into a TV camera the formal purposes of expository preaching with academic precision and doctoral tones. “Not bad,” I thought, when I had finished. “At least I won’t come across as dumb.”

But then it was Haddon’s turn. I don’t remember the exact words that he said, but I remember how he said them. He looked at the camera, smiled, and spoke as though he were addressing a friend across the kitchen table. There was no pretense, no professorial puffery, no high-sounding oratory. He did not say “God” with three syllables and did not worry about presenting his ideas with perfection. He was quite simply as natural, caring, and human as any teacher I have ever seen in expressing his love for God’s Word, his regard for the calling of preaching, and his care for the preachers we were preparing to instruct for a lifetime of proclamation.

When he was done, I confess that my first thought was, “I wish I had done that.” Because of that moment and Haddon’s example, I learned that I could do exactly that in the many future occasions I would have to further the work of homiletics in which we co-labored. The example of a senior statesman in my field who was so confident of the power of the Word and the strength of his thought that he could afford to be straightforward and caring in expression stuck with me. I am forever grateful to Haddon for that understanding of what it means to be a man of God as well as a professor of preaching.

Though I had been a teacher of preachers for years, I learned the reality of ethos from Haddon that day in a way that I had not previously grasped. We communicate more when we speak with plain truth and compassion for others than we do when we speak with ornateness and concern for our reputations. That’s why the apostle Paul would write, “Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12 KJV), an expression of both boldness and clarity, echoing the ancient biblical ethic of presenting the Word of God “clearly” so that God’s people can understand and act upon it (Neh. 8:8).

All these truths I knew in my head, but Haddon's writing, preaching, and visible example now made such truths more real. I realized more than ever that it is better to be understood than worshiped. Communicating the significance of God's Word is far more important than communicating our significance. The grace that has bought us and holds us is more than sufficient to establish our standing before the Lord, so that we can always afford to put the priorities of God's Word and the needs of his people above concerns to establish our own regard.

I am grateful for far more from Haddon Robinson than that single example of godly testimony and character. He was the most influential teacher of preachers for a generation, and to a good end, because he valued the proclamation of the Word above himself and valued the understanding of God's people above the badges of his own reputation. I am thankful for this book that honors his work and his legacy because I know they have been built not merely on a flair for public ministry but on a commitment to God's Word and loving people that Haddon lived daily and personally.

Acknowledgments

There are many who help make a book like this. Thank you, contributors, for your diligent work and for your influence in the field of homiletics. We all stand with gratitude on the shoulders of Haddon Robinson.

Thank you, Bryan Chapell, for writing the foreword. Your words are insightful and true. We all owe a debt to Haddon for his incredible legacy.

Thank you, Dianne Newhall, who served Haddon Robinson as his faithful administrative assistant and who years ago transcribed “The Worlds of the Preacher” lecture that Robinson delivered at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary during a summer conference. Lady Di, I continue to be grateful for your willing help—which even surpasses your tenure at the seminary. Grateful for you!

Many thanks to Torrey Robinson and Vicki Hitzges, Haddon’s son and daughter, who granted permission to use “The Worlds of the Preacher” lecture as the opening chapter of this book. Your generosity and foresight allow many more preachers to learn from your father’s contribution to preaching, which will enrich their own preaching as well.

One could not write with appreciation about Haddon Robinson without acknowledging the immense contribution to Haddon’s life made by his wife, Bonnie. Bonnie Robinson is a gem who added luster to the ministry given by God to Haddon. They shared this ministry with grace. Thank you, Bonnie!

Robert Hosack and the team at Baker Publishing Group are an incredible bunch. Thank you for your commitment to preaching and to the publication of books that further the field. Thank you for your guidance and help in the production of this book. You are appreciated more than you know.

Finally, I thank Rhonda, my wife. She is a solid, steady anchor in my many worlds. Her love is immovable and her support unwavering. Her astute edits to my contributions in this volume enrich what I wrote because of her careful eye. More than this, her love and commitment to Christ are demonstrated in beautiful markers of maturity in her life. She shows me every day what it means to live as a mature disciple of Christ. Thank you, Rhonda. I love you and thank God for you.

Introduction

A Tribute to Haddon Robinson

SCOTT M. GIBSON

This book recognizes the profound contribution Haddon Robinson has made to the field of homiletics. Over his many years of teaching preaching, Robinson delivered his notable lecture “The Worlds of the Preacher.” In this lecture, master of divinity and doctor of ministry students listened to Robinson encourage them to gain a 360-degree view of the worlds in which they preach. The lecture did not stay in the seminary classroom. Robinson delivered it at preaching conferences, distinguished lectureships, and Bible conferences.

When Haddon Robinson stepped up to preach, he came with his Bible in his hand and his sermon in his heart. He shared the text and he shared himself. Even though we did not see any paper notes, he had and will continue to have a noted effect in the field of homiletics. This introduction would be remiss if it did not include a sketch of Robinson’s life, along with his contributions and commitments to preaching.

■ Beginnings

Haddon William Robinson was born on March 21, 1931, to William Andrew and Anna Robinson, immigrants from Ireland. They made their home in the

Mousetown district of Harlem, described by *Reader's Digest* as one of the most dangerous areas in the United States.¹

Haddon's mother died when he was ten. He became what we now refer to as a "latchkey child," raised by his father. His father was a dedicated Christian who worked during the afternoons and evenings. Haddon's grandfather had come to faith as an adult. While staggering home drunk one night, he passed a church and heard them singing:

There is life for a look at the crucified one.
There is life at this moment for thee.
Look, sinner, look unto him and be saved,
Unto him who died on the tree.
Look, look, look and live
To him who died on the tree.²

When he heard those words, Haddon's grandfather was converted and gave his life to Christ, and later became a lay preacher. Haddon's son, Torrey, comments to his sons in the dedication of the book that he and his father wrote together, *It's All in How You Tell It*:

By God's grace, that story, that faith was passed on to your great-grandfather, to your grandfather, and then to your father. Now that story has become your story.

It is our prayer that your children and your grandchildren may know the truth of that story as they see it lived out in you.³

Yet the truth of the gospel came to Haddon not all that gently. The rough neighborhood in which the Robinsons lived had its influence on the young boy. He associated with a gang. One night his gang was gathered for a rumble. Somehow, the police were tipped off and arrived on the scene.

A policeman approached the group in which Robinson was a member. He searched the boy and found that he had an ice pick tucked away in his clothing. "What do you plan to do with this?" barked the officer. "Chop ice," said Robinson. The officer pushed him and sent him sprawling. That night

1. Bradford Chambers, "Boy Gangs of Mousetown," *Reader's Digest* 53 (August 1948): 144–58. A shortened version of Haddon Robinson's biography is found in my introduction to *Making a Difference in Preaching: Haddon Robinson on Biblical Preaching*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 11–15.

2. "There Is Life for a Look at the Crucified One," a hymn written by Amelia M. Hull.

3. Haddon W. Robinson and Torrey W. Robinson, *It's All in How You Tell It: Preaching First-Person Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 3.

changed young Haddon Robinson's life. He left the gang, which was no doubt an answer to his father's prayers.

During this time he came into contact with John Mygatt, a Sunday school teacher at the Broadway Presbyterian Church in New York City. Robinson went there to play basketball, but he got a lot more than a few good shots. Mygatt made the Bible lessons exciting.

John Mygatt loved his class of boys. He was one of the few people from the church who came to the Robinson home to visit. The Sunday school teacher made a lifelong impression on the boy from Mousetown.

Sometime during his early teens Haddon Robinson prayed the sinner's prayer and gave his life to Christ. An exceptionally bright young man, he left for college at Bob Jones University at age sixteen. While in college he became interested in preaching, spending Friday evenings in the library reading books of sermons and books about preaching. At graduation, he received the top award given to a senior for preaching. He delivered a sermon on John 3:16.

In 1951, following college, he went to study at Dallas Theological Seminary and married his college sweetheart, Bonnie Vick.

During his final year at Dallas Seminary, Robinson taught informal classes in preaching since the seminary did not offer courses in homiletics. He left Dallas in 1955 for the First Baptist Church of Medford, Oregon, where he was assistant pastor. Robinson planned to be an evangelist, but after only a few years in Oregon, the leadership at Dallas Seminary asked him to come back to teach preaching at the school. He spent nineteen years at Dallas. While there, Robinson completed a master of arts degree at Southern Methodist University in 1960 and a doctorate of philosophy in speech communication at the University of Illinois in 1964.

In 1979 he became president of Denver Theological Seminary, and in 1980 he published his celebrated textbook on preaching, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, now in its third edition. Over 250 Bible colleges and seminaries use the book. The first edition sold more than 150,000 copies.⁴

After twelve years at Denver Seminary, Robinson was invited by Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary to become the Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching. He held the position from 1991 to 2012. Additionally, he served as president of Gordon-Conwell from 2007 to 2008.

Over those years he taught hundreds of neophyte preachers in the master of divinity program. In addition, he mentored scores of seasoned preachers in the doctor of ministry program. He wrote articles on preaching and

4. Karen Steele of Baker Publishing Group, email to Scott M. Gibson, October 19, 2004.

continued an active preaching schedule. In 1996, a major study conducted by Baylor University listed Haddon Robinson as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world.⁵

As a teenager Haddon Robinson scribbled the following in his diary about the preacher Harry Ironside: “He preached for an hour and it seemed like twenty minutes; others preach for twenty minutes and it seems like an hour. I wonder what the difference is?” Robinson spent the rest of his life trying to answer this question. We see it in his web of influence as a redeemed person in his passion for preaching, his teaching of preaching, and his publications about preaching.

■ *Biblical Preaching*

Robinson’s book *Biblical Preaching* was welcomed in 1980 with enthusiasm. One reviewer stated:

Robinson has made a very helpful contribution to the teaching of the art of expository preaching. . . . A serious reading of this discussion and practical testing of its counsels should enhance the ability of the exegetically qualified and theologically informed preacher to expound Scripture to God’s glory, the salvation of sinners and the edification of Christ’s church.⁶

Another reviewer, aware of Robinson’s insights and the significance of his contribution to homiletics, wrote:

When you read this book you will want to have pen and pencil in hand so that you can mark the many “I wish I had said that” kind of statements it contains. You will also want to mark portions to which you will want to return later for further reflection.⁷

The reviewer continues:

Beginning with the establishment of the identity of expository preaching and showing that, while most conservative preachers give assent to it, in reality they do not practice it, Robinson walks the preacher through the steps necessary to prepare sermons that truly are expositional/expository. Probably the unique

5. “Baylor Names the 12 Most Effective Preachers,” Baylor University, February 28, 1996, <https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=1036>.

6. Carl G. Kromminga, review of *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, by Haddon W. Robinson, *Calvin Theological Journal* 16, no. 2 (November 1981): 288.

7. Paul R. Fink, review of *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, by Haddon W. Robinson, *Grace Theological Journal* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 149–50.

contribution that Robinson makes to the process is the concept of stating the sermon “idea” in subject and predicate form. While this is not new to the field of rhetoric (it can be traced back to Aristotle), few homiletics have related the concept to sermon preparation.⁸

In *Biblical Preaching*, Robinson wrote:

Those in the pulpit face the pressing temptation to deliver some message other than that of the Scriptures—a political system (either right-wing or left-wing), a theory of economics, a new religious philosophy, old religious slogans, or a trend in psychology. Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.⁹

He continues later, “First, and above all, the thought of the biblical writer determines the substance of an expository sermon.”¹⁰ He considers the process of exposition to be that of a philosophy rather than a method. He comments: “Whether we can be called expositors starts with our purpose and with our honest answer to the question: ‘Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?’”¹¹ “Ultimately,” writes Robinson, “the authority behind expository preaching resides not in the preacher but in the biblical text.”¹²

Fifteen years later Harold Bryson acknowledged Haddon Robinson’s basic philosophical commitment to the Bible and to preaching what the Bible says. He observes:

Haddon Robinson, writing in 1980, proposed a substantive idea for expository preaching. Robinson said expository preaching was “the communication of a

8. Fink, review of *Biblical Preaching*, 150.

9. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 18. Regarding gender-specific language, Robinson reflects in the second edition, “I’ve also changed my language to reflect my theology. God doesn’t distribute his gifts by gender. Both women and men have the ability and responsibility to communicate God’s Word. I have always believed that, but the language in my first book reflected a distinct male bias. To those women who have used my book in spite of that, I express my thanks for their grace. In this revision I hope I have demonstrated the fruits of my repentance.” *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 10.

10. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd ed., 5.

11. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd ed., 5.

12. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd ed., 7.

biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.” According to this definition, expository preaching was more a philosophy than a method. The expositor’s paramount concern was for the message of the text and how to communicate that message.¹³

Michael Quicke likewise affirmed Robinson’s premise. Quicke wrote, “Robinson correctly states that expository preaching ‘at its core is more a philosophy than a method.’”¹⁴

However, Robinson acknowledges that a step-by-step process is necessary—that is why he wrote his book. Notice the title of the book. It is called *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. By following a stage-to-stage approach, Robinson guides the preacher in the application of the philosophy. Robinson offers a clear process for sermon development. He acknowledges that such an approach is necessary—and may be surprising—to the preacher. He observes:

My Aunt Ginny was one of the great cooks of the twentieth century. That wasn’t solely my verdict. All the members of our extended family share that opinion. On Thanksgiving or Christmas we would all assemble at Aunt Ginny’s house to enjoy a world-class dinner, arguably the finest feast served in New York City that day. The turkey, the stuffing, the potatoes, the gravy were all superb, but the crowning moment of the meal came when Aunt Ginny served her desserts. If there is a Platonic ideal of mince or pumpkin pie, Aunt Ginny’s came as close to it as any chef on earth.

You cannot imagine how stunned I was, therefore, to learn that my Aunt Ginny used cookbooks. In fact, she confessed that she got her piecrust recipe from Betty Crocker. And, furthermore, she didn’t seem repentant! I thought that no world-class cook would ever take advice from someone else. Why would she follow a formula concocted by Mrs. Crocker when she could follow her own instincts for making desserts? But my Aunt Ginny was a modest woman. She knew she didn’t know everything there was to know about cooking, and other devotees of the stove and oven could help her to excel.

Ministers can learn a lot from my Aunt Ginny. No matter how long we’ve been crafting sermons, none of us has achieved perfection. All of us can still learn from others. A preacher or a teacher would do well to read at least one

13. Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 25.

14. Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 28.

book on preaching every year. To coin a commercial phrase, we need to think about preaching again for the first time.¹⁵

At this writing, *Biblical Preaching* is in its third edition, continuing to establish its place in the teaching of preaching. Haddon Robinson's contribution to the field of homiletics is invaluable. But Robinson's commitment had an end in mind: connecting the Bible to listeners.

■ Connecting the Bible to Listeners

Haddon Robinson encouraged preachers to link Sunday morning's world with Monday morning's world. Sermons are to be applied to their listeners. He comments, "We should forget about speaking to the ages, therefore, and speak to our day. Expository preachers confront people about themselves from the Bible instead of lecturing to them about the Bible's history or archaeology." He continues, "Effective application thrusts [an expositor] into both theology and ethics."¹⁶ Robinson acknowledged that connecting the dots to application is not always easy. He reflects on one of his sermons:

It was a disastrous sermon. A church in Dallas invited me to preach on John 14. That's not an easy passage. It is filled with exegetical questions about death and the Second Coming. How do you explain, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself"? How is Jesus preparing that place? Does Jesus mean we won't go to be with him until he comes back? What about soul sleep? I spent most of my week studying the text and reading commentaries to answer questions like these.

When I got up to preach, I knew I had done my homework. Though the issues were tough, I had worked through them and was confident I was ready to deliver solid biblical teaching on the assigned passage.

Five minutes into the sermon, though, I knew I was in trouble. The people weren't with me. At the ten-minute mark, people were falling asleep. One man sitting near the front began to snore. Worse, he didn't disturb anyone! No one was listening.

Even today, whenever I talk about that morning, I still get an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach.

What went wrong? The problem was that I spent the whole sermon wrestling with the tough theological issues, issues that intrigued me. Everything I said

15. Haddon W. Robinson, foreword to *Preaching with Relevance: Without Dumbing Down*, by Keith Willhite (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 12.

16. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd ed., 10, 11.

was valid. It might have been strong stuff in a seminary classroom. But in that church, in that pulpit, it was a disaster.

What happened? I didn't speak to the life questions of my audience. I answered my questions, not theirs.¹⁷

Being aware of one's listeners was an important consideration for Haddon Robinson. Not only did he believe that the preacher is to be biblically driven, but he also wanted the sermon to be listener focused. This commitment to application and relevance is a principle that drove Robinson for decades. He wanted the sermon to make a difference in the lives of his listeners.

To remind him of his listeners, Robinson kept for decades this bit of doggerel on a plaque on his desk:

As Tommy Snooks and Bessie Brooks
Were leaving church one Sunday,
Said Tommy Snooks to Bessie Brooks:
"Tomorrow will be Monday!"

For Robinson, the Bible did not stay in the long ago and far away. The preacher must show listeners how the truth of the text makes sense today. He asserts, "All preaching involves a 'so what?' A lecture on the archaeology of Egypt, as interesting as it might be, isn't a sermon. A sermon touches life. It demands practical application."¹⁸ He continues: "In the final analysis, effective application does not rely on techniques. It is more a stance than a method. Life-changing preaching does not talk to people about the Bible. Instead, it talks to the people about themselves—their questions, hurts, fears, and struggles—from the Bible. When we approach the sermon with that philosophy, flint strikes steel. The flint of someone's problem strikes the steel of the Word of God, and a spark emerges that can set that person on fire for God."¹⁹

■ The Worlds of the Preacher

This volume engages with Haddon Robinson's widely recognized lecture "The Worlds of the Preacher." Contributors represent the institutions at which Robinson served: Dallas Theological Seminary, Denver Seminary, and

17. Haddon W. Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application," in *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 85–86.

18. Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application," 88.

19. Robinson, "Blending Bible Content and Life Application," 94.

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Writing from their areas of expertise, the authors explore aspects of the worlds that Robinson presents.

Chapter 1 is Robinson's lecture, "The Worlds of the Preacher." The lecture was presented orally and has been transcribed and edited for publication. Here, Robinson lays out the four worlds of the preacher: the ancient world of the Bible, the modern world, the world of the preacher's listeners, and the preacher's personal world.

Chapter 2 begins the book's engagement with Robinson's four worlds by considering the world of the Old Testament. Steven D. Mathewson, a former student of Robinson's and author of *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, examines four aspects of the Old Testament world that preachers must understand when they enter it to preach to their listeners.

Chapter 3 is authored by Robinson's former Dallas Theological Seminary colleague Duane Litfin. Writing as a New Testament scholar and homiletician, Litfin focuses on a conceptual model that clarifies what preachers do: the journey from *then* to *now*.

In chapter 4, I examine the inner world of the preacher, where the preacher's character is cultivated. I provide suggestions for the preacher to foster growth and maturity in his or her life that will strengthen preaching.

Chapter 5 discusses the world of ethnic and cultural issues. Matthew D. Kim of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary examines three areas where a preacher may develop a robust ethnic and cultural integration in preaching.

The worlds of the listener is the focus of chapter 6. Jeffrey Arthurs of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary builds on Robinson's lecture by helping preachers analyze and adapt to their listeners. Specifically, Arthurs engages with stage four of Robinson's homiletic, analyzing the exegetical idea with the three developmental questions.

In chapter 7, Patricia M. Batten of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary opens readers' eyes to the importance of understanding the immediate context in which preachers preach. She considers elements that preachers need to know in order to be effective in their preaching within the particular churches they serve.

Victor Anderson of Dallas Theological Seminary casts a vision in chapter 8 for preaching by examining the mission of God and what that mission looks like in our present world. He challenges readers to embrace preaching that "seeks to see the image of God filling the earth."

Chapter 9 underscores the important role that history plays in our preaching. Scott Wenig of Denver Seminary encourages readers to see the value of historical insight and how an appreciation and understanding of the worlds of history will help in the exposition of Scripture.

In chapter 10, Donald R. Sunukjian, who taught with Robinson at Dallas Theological Seminary, helps preachers consider the challenge of preaching in an age saturated with images. Sunukjian skillfully demonstrates how sermons can faithfully depict the truth of the biblical text.

An afterword completes the book. More than a book that honors Haddon Robinson, the chapters in this volume are meant to advance the field of preaching by building on Robinson's homiletics.

■ Conclusion

Haddon Robinson confessed, "I have come closer to being bored out of the Christian faith than being reasoned out of it. . . . I think we underestimate the deadly gas of boredom. It is not only the death of communication, but the death of life and hope."²⁰ His influence on and commitment to biblical preaching and to listeners has helped preachers to remain fresh and encouraged in their preaching. God made a difference in Haddon Robinson's life, and God has used Haddon Robinson to make a difference in the lives of others.

In the foreword to *Making a Difference in Preaching*, the late Keith Willhite wrote:

Haddon Robinson himself is a preacher of difference. Anyone who has had the joy of listening to him preach has listened to interpretive insights, masterful images, and similes and illustrations that sharpen the point or the big idea with amazing precision.

Years ago, a seminary classmate remarked, "I think God made Haddon Robinson and then he made the rest of us—two runs of production." I responded, "I think he made Haddon Robinson, then a bunch of other preachers, and then the rest of us. We were two runs removed." My classmate agreed.²¹

This book is dedicated to Haddon Robinson, who died on July 22, 2017, during the production of this project. Haddon Robinson understood well the worlds in which a preacher lives.

20. Quoted in David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 19.

21. Keith Willhite, foreword to *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 9.

1

The Worlds of the Preacher

HADDON W. ROBINSON

■ Introduction

One of the surprising discoveries that archaeologists have made is that the temple in Jerusalem and the temples of pagan religions in the Near East were not radically different. Most temples that have been excavated had an outer court and an inner court that led to the holy place. The architecture of the holy place in pagan temples, like Solomon's temple, led to the holiest place of all. Everything pointed to that sacred chamber—the slant of the floors, the increasing darkness, the awe and mystery. Into that sacred chamber the pagan priest would go, sometimes once a month at the turning of the moon, or once a quarter, or even less often, only once each year. That central place was filled with mystery and awe.

In pagan religions, in the holy of holies sat a little gold idol. That god or goddess represented the sun or the moon or fertility that the people worshiped. If you look at the tabernacle and later the temple of Israel in the Bible, it too had an outer court and an inner court, it too had a holy of holies. In that holiest place of all, however, instead of a golden god, the god of war, or the goddess of fertility, was a golden box. Within that golden box were, among other things, the tablets of the law delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai.

You might think that the temple architecture was unique to the people of Israel. But what it may tell us is that what separates us from the pagans is not

the shape of our buildings or even the forms of our worship. What separates men and women who take God seriously is that the center of the religion of the Bible is the revealed moral will of God. God revealed himself through history, and that revelation is contained in the Scriptures. We believe that this book is the Word of God without error, and for that reason all Christian thought must emerge from this book and all Christian preaching and teaching must be based on it.

That stands as the cardinal reason for expository preaching. If our thought must follow God's thought, then those who lead God's people must teach the Scriptures and relate the Scriptures to people's lives.

We recognize that if we are going to be teachers, we're going to be communicators. We not only have to have this supreme message, but we also want to have an understanding of the people to whom we speak. That's why some people talk about preaching being not in the shape of a circle but in the shape of an ellipse. An ellipse has two centers. We are not singly centered in the Bible, as important and crucial as that is to us; we are also centered in the men and women in the world. James Cleland calls this "bi-focal preaching."¹ It has two centers—a center in the Scriptures and a center in people today.

The central image in John Stott's book *Between Two Worlds* is that of a bridge.² He says that the preacher stands like a bridge between two worlds—the world of the Bible and today's world. A bridge brings two landmasses together. Two bodies of land that are separated by a river or a canyon are bridged, and the bridge brings them together. Stott argues that the expository preacher who takes the Bible and the listener seriously is like a bridge between two worlds.

Being a great communicator of God's truth, however, involves us in not just two worlds but in four worlds. One world with which we are concerned is the world of the Bible—the ancient world. It's the world we enter through exegesis, through the study of the Scriptures. It dominates us. It is crucial to our message. As preachers, we want to understand the history of the ancient world. One really cannot understand the Bible unless one understands its history.

■ The First World: The Ancient World or the World of the Bible

History

If you were to travel along the North Shore of the Boston area, you'd see a lot of little shops that sell antiques. We have one in Gloucester that

1. James Cleland, *Preaching to Be Understood* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965).

2. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

has on one side of the sign “We buy junk” and on the other side “We sell antiques.” But let’s suppose you go into one of those stores, and as you wander around you see an old trunk. Your hand springs a small lever, and there is a compartment that has obviously been hidden for a long time. You reach into that compartment and come out with a bundle of letters. They are old and faded and tied with a ribbon that once was yellow but has been touched by the years. You gingerly open them. Though the ink is dim, it is still able to be deciphered. As you read, you recognize that these are letters written by a young man to a young woman. You discover that he has apparently gone off to war. You don’t have to know much else as you read those letters to get some feel for what they are about. You can understand his loneliness when he writes about it. You’ve felt loneliness too. You can understand his fear when he talks about comrades of his who have fallen in battle. You can understand his frustration. When he went off to fight, the motto was “Keep the eggs warm—we’ll be home for breakfast.” But they’ve grown cold. Then there are other things in those letters that you won’t understand. You might have references to Bull Run, to Chattanooga. There’ll be other mentions of generals and “the cause.” The letters are about the Civil War. Obviously, to understand the letters, you have to understand the history.

When God chose to give us his revelation, he chose to give it to particular people at a particular place and a particular time. God spoke once to a people long ago and through those people he speaks to us. To understand the Bible, you have to know its history. If you take the Minor Prophets, for instance, and you do not understand anything about Edom, you cannot understand the book of Obadiah. If you don’t understand anything about Israel and Judah, you cannot understand Hosea, and it would be more difficult to understand Amos. That is, to understand the meaning of any passage of Scripture, you must understand the history.

Language

To understand the Bible, it’s also helpful to understand the languages of the Bible—Greek and Hebrew. Let me at least file this disclaimer (not very popular on a campus of a theological seminary): you do not really have to know Hebrew or Greek to be able to understand the Scriptures. It’s amazing how much of the Bible you can learn just by reading it in English. What I think the languages do is like the difference between a color photo and a black-and-white photo. Both the black and white and the color give you the picture, but one gives you a bit more depth, a bit more “color.”

Philipp Melanchthon said, “The wisdom of the Bible is in the grammar.” One of the reasons for knowing the languages is that when you are using commentaries, you discover that commentators are just like you. They’re people who read the Bible and try to make sense out of it. The fact that they put their information in a book doesn’t make them any more authoritative than you sitting in your study. When you get three or four commentaries, you discover that they differ. Usually commentators differ not because one bunch fell off a turnip truck and the other went to seminary. They differ because in order to translate the Bible, in order to comment on it, you have to try to understand its flow of thought. So as a preacher, you have to make interpretive decisions. For example, you have a subjective genitive, “The love of Christ constrains us.” You ask, is that an objective genitive? Is that my love for Christ, or is it his love for me? You have to make a decision. In making that decision, it turns around and makes the rest of your passage and sermon. Read three or four translations and see where they are the same and where they differ. To be sure, it helps to know something of the language, to know why some translators didn’t translate this passage in exactly the same way. So even if you only have a minimum knowledge of the language, you discover that it’s a help. You can understand the translations, and you sometimes have a better understanding of the commentator.

But there is another reason that an exposure to the languages of the Bible can help you. Language not only is a way of expressing thought; language is a way of helping us think. We can’t think apart from language. Benjamin Lee Whorf was a noted linguist who worked with the Hopi Indians in the American Southwest. As he worked with them, he discovered that they understood Einstein’s theory of relativity. When it was explained to them, it made sense because in the Hopi language there is no sense of time. Hopis do not talk about the past, the present, the future. For them, everything is either happening here where they are or away from them; it has nothing to do with time.

For us, we cannot think apart from time if all we know is English. Bound up into English, and Greek for that matter, there is past, there is present, there is future, there is past beyond past; you just can’t talk apart from time. Einstein said that he could not have thought of the theory of relativity if he did not understand mathematics and German. What Benjamin Lee Whorf came to realize was that language not only expresses thought; it also forms thought.

For instance, the Eskimos do not have merely a single word for snow—they have seventeen. They have words for snow falling, snow that has just hit the ground, snow that’s beginning to freeze, snow that’s been there for several days, snow that’s beginning to melt. When Eskimos think of snow, they can really

think of snow!³ Likewise, we do not have a single word for a bread product made from wheat. When we think of bread, we tend to think of a loaf of bread. We don't think of Twinkies or donuts or bear claws. In other parts of the world, that isn't so. Where people do not use wheat, one word may cover it all. So one advantage of knowing the language of the Bible, in particular, is that it enables you to understand how people thought in the ancient world.

That's what grammar is. It's the way people put their thought together. If you studied German, you'd know that the verb is in either the second position or the last position. Imagine how it is when you've got one of these long, complicated sentences and you have to wait until that final verb to discover what the action is. Grammar is that way. Those who study other languages often discover that you learn English by studying Greek. You grew up knowing English—you didn't know indirect objects or objects or prepositional phrases. These are ways of thinking. They're ways in which people put thought together.

So, to know the world of the Bible, it helps to know the history and the language that exposes us to the way the people in the ancient world thought.

Culture

To know the Bible is to know its culture. It was only a few years ago that it dawned on me that the biblical writers and the readers were bound up in their culture. I used to think that the cultural problem of the Bible was that Paul said to greet one another with a holy kiss and we make it a hearty handshake. We don't want to go around kissing people in our churches. That makes sense. The more I work with it, as the revelation comes to us in Greek and Hebrew, it still comes to us out of a culture. That culture is all-pervasive. One of the enormous problems that you have as you work with the Bible is to understand how much of it is bound up in the culture and how much of it transcends culture. The answer is, all of it is bound up in the culture. It is out of that culture that you are to find the truth that transcends culture.

When I was broadcasting on *Discover the Word*, we were studying the book of Proverbs. If there's any book in the Old Testament that looks like a slam dunk, it's the book of Proverbs. Wisdom literature tends to move over from one culture to another with ease. But as you read that book and work with it, you find that in the last chapters the wisdom that is given is for young men who are preparing to serve in the king's court. There's a great deal about kings and royalty that you take for granted as you read the book. You ask

3. John B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956), 98, 216.

questions like, When the biblical writer talks about kings, is he saying that a monarchy is a preferred form of government?

Or consider the warnings in the book of Proverbs about cosigning a note. If you cosign, you cannot get out of it. You might beg, plead, nag—anything to get out of the obligation. The reason, of course, was that if you cosigned a note, you became responsible for the note. If the person who took the note out couldn't pay the note, the lender would come back to you, the cosigner. He could take you and everything you possess—your wife, your children—and sell them into slavery to pay off that note. If you cosigned a note, you were in big trouble in the ancient world. That's not true today. Today you can file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The fuss in Proverbs about cosigning a note, while probably still a good thing to keep in mind, doesn't cause the same alarm today as it did in the ancient world. The question is, What do you bring over to the twenty-first century? With what force do you bring it over to today?

When you're dealing with the ancient world of the Bible, you have to know its language, you have to know its history, you have to know its culture.

The danger at this point is that there are preachers who never get out of the ancient world. All of their preaching is at least two thousand years old or more. What they deal with in their sermons is the language, the history, the culture of the ancient world from which the Bible comes. Those are the kinds of sermons from which you leave saying, "David shouldn't have done that with Bathsheba" or "Abraham made a mistake when he went down to Egypt," but it doesn't touch today. A person who takes the Bible seriously understands the ancient world.

■ The Second World: The Modern World

History

The world of the preacher, the modern world, is the world that I have to work with—the world of homiletics, the world of the twenty-first century. This world, too, has a history. Evangelicals, it seems to me, have a tendency to ignore history. Unfortunately, history will not ignore us. We might want to ignore history, but history does not ignore us.

I remember the first time I ever talked with someone, a couple, considering an abortion. It was in the middle sixties and I was working with a group of physicians in Dallas in a Bible study. The young man and his wife came to my office. He was in his third year of medical school. They discovered that his wife was pregnant, which, to them, got in the way of their plans. She had been working to put him through school, and it looked like that would

change. He was going to go on to advanced residency, and that was going to take several years, and children were not in their plans. They came to tell me that they were seriously thinking, in light of their situation, of having an abortion. That was 1965. I can still remember the feelings that I had. If they had told me that they had a two-year-old and that they were going to kill the two-year-old because he was just getting on their nerves, I might have understood that! But I couldn't have been more repulsed by the thought of abortion. I did not know how to handle it.

In 1968 there was the first of a number of judicial decisions related to abortion. Up until that time in our country, every state in the union had laws against abortion. Two—Colorado and Hawaii—allowed abortion if a woman's health was affected. Then in 1973 when *Roe v. Wade* was upheld by the Supreme Court, abortion became the law of the land. Today a million or more pre-borns are aborted. Numerous women in our society have had an abortion. If you don't keep that in mind as you get up to thunder like a prophet against the evils of abortion and recognize that in front of you in that congregation are a group of women who have had an abortion, you cut their hearts out and bring back a whole flood of guilt. You can't be just a prophet today; you have to be a pastor. You have to understand that history has caught up with you. We ignore history, but it doesn't ignore us.

I would like to believe that the reason folks today, more or less, think it's good to have churches that are racially integrated is because a group of theologians from Gordon-Conwell and Trinity and Dallas and Fuller and Westminster got together in the 1940s and studied the book of Ephesians. One of them might have said, "You know, the middle wall was broken down between the Jews and the gentiles. It strikes me that that must have some influence, some effect on blacks and whites. We ought to break down the wall in our churches." It didn't happen that way. Rosa Parks got tired of sitting in the back of the bus and didn't move. And then there were the marchers of the 1950s and 1960s. The last group to figure it all out were the churches, and some haven't figured it out yet. Integration didn't come because we were so biblically correct and so formed by the Scriptures that we said, "This has got to go! It's damnable; it's against the law of Christ!" No, it happened out there on the streets. We ignore history, but it doesn't ignore us.

We have the issues of pollution, poverty, and the defiling of our environment, among many others. Have we talked about them at all? Do we think about them? I remember talking to a Catholic priest who told me that part of his responsibility was to hear confessions from nuns. I asked him what that was like. He said it was like being stoned to death with popcorn. I grew up in a church that knew the will of God for the length of a person's hair and

whether you should wear a beard and how long or short a woman's dress length should be, but the church never ever talked about segregation, integration, or the issues that were tearing at our society. You can ignore history, but it won't ignore you. It keeps knocking on the door and saying, "Look! Here's the agenda!" It's not wrong if society sets the agenda, but it demands that we answer it. You can ignore it, but it won't ignore you.

Language

We also have a language of the twenty-first century. It's the language of the communicator, the language of the preacher. It is the language of the marketplace. It's the language of the Volkswagen ad. It's the vernacular, it's the common language, the *koine* in Greek. Somehow, when we get into church, we lose that accent. The preacher stands up on a Sunday morning, "Oh, God, Thou who sittest on the rim of the universe, we come to you with all of our humility and ask you . . ." You can imagine what happens if that man, after the service is over, goes to the local McDonald's and says (in a preaching tone of voice), "I'd like three hamburgers, two Cokes, and an order of French fries. And be thou quick about it." People would think he had lost his mind. When we do that in church, to the ear of the person who hasn't been there for fifteen years this kind of language sounds like it came from another planet—or certainly from another era.

The language of the communicator is the language of the people on the street. It's that language at its best. To fail to recognize that is to bathe the message of the gospel in the Bible in an antiquity that makes it sound, by the way we speak it, that it is irrelevant to people today.

Culture

When I think of culture, I think of colored paper over people's eyes. Those of us in the United States may have blue paper. The folks in Latin America may have yellow paper. People from Europe, from England, may have orange paper. When we look through that paper, we all see the same thing but differently. In fact, that paper is so prevalent, it never goes away, so that you cannot imagine that anyone else can see anything differently than the way you see it. That's the culture coloring what we see. We're so caught in the culture, it's hard to step outside and evaluate it.

Look at what it is like to grow up in this culture. How do you preach the lordship of Christ in a democracy? Once every four years, the candidates for the office of the president of the United States come to us and beg for our vote. Every two years members of Congress come back to us and want us

to give them our vote. Every six years the senators are around, wanting the vote. We vote them in, we vote them out. How do you preach the lordship of Christ in a democracy? If I understand the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, God isn't asking for our vote. Some people's view of an election is that if God votes yes and Satan votes no, we cast the deciding vote. We see it in our vocabulary. We say, "Make Jesus Christ Lord of your life." But that's not good theology. You don't make him Lord. He's not running for office. The New Testament says that he *is* Lord, like the fact that gravity is a law. And if you do not respond to that, you'll go to hell.

Likewise, in our culture how do you preach grace? One of the themes of modern advertising is that whatever you get, you deserve. You can see it in car ads. It's dark, and there's one light on up in the fifth story of the office building. The voice-over says, "You've worked hard to get to the top. You've given it your best effort. Now you've achieved, now you have the prize of victory." The light goes out. This man walks out with his briefcase and gets into a brand-new Cadillac or BMW or Buick. You know why you have a car like that? Not to get from point A to point B. You have a BMW or a Buick because this is a way of putting your neighbor in your exhaust fumes. You deserved it. This is the symbol of your victory. That's true with hamburgers. You go to a McDonald's why? Because, as their ad states, "You deserve a break today." If everything you get, from automobiles to hamburgers, is something you deserve, how in the world do you ever preach grace?

No wonder pastors have people say to them, "I'm angry with God." "Oh?" you ask. "I'm not just angry with him. I'm upset with God," the person says. You want to say, but you don't, "Do you know that every drop of water that you get this side of hell is sheer grace? He doesn't owe you anything. He owns you; he doesn't owe you." The tricky thing is, you can't say that in this culture. You can say it, but people don't hear it. Or if they hear it, they walk away angry at God—and you. You preach in this culture. How do you do it?

How do you preach in a culture that's dominated by images? The average person watches television twenty-six hours a week, not to mention the time that's spent on the computer or on the smartphone. Before beginning school, a child spends six thousand hours in front of a television set. From the time they go to school until the time they graduate, they spend another seventeen thousand or more hours in front of the television set or some other media device. By the time somebody gets to be twenty years of age, they will have watched seven hundred thousand commercials—all of them designed to sell, all of them fast, all of them moving, all of them image, all of them touching emotion. You may come to the pulpit with a sermon that sounds like a classroom lecture. They end up not listening. You think, "They should listen!"

But they don't. If you're going to communicate with this world, you've got to take these things into account. You may despise it, you may preach against it, you may not like it, but it's the way it is. These are the people who come to you in that culture, out of that culture; you're part of that culture, and you can't avoid it. Analyze it all you want, and when you're all through, if you're going to touch this generation for God, you touch them within their culture.

■ The Third World: The World of the Preacher's Listeners

History

This world is a particular world. This is the church with the zip code. This is the church at Fifth and Main. This is where *you* minister. This is the Bible class *you* have, the Sunday school class *you* teach. It is part of this modern world, but in a sense, it is more particular than that. It, too, has a history. That history has shaped those people.

When I was teaching at Dallas Seminary in our Department of Pastoral Ministry in the early 1970s, we had a project that students were assigned to do. One of the students wanted to do a history of his church. He had just become the pastor of a Baptist church in a little East Texas town, and he thought it would be nice to do the history. He'd wanted to go back at least seventy-five years and see how this church had developed. He discovered that in the 1950s there was a young black man in town who was accused of raping a white woman. A vigilante group got hold of him, set up a cross on the lawn of that church, and burned him to death. In the 1960s, for other reasons, apparently, the church split. I mean *split*. When a church in a small town splits, everything splits—families split, businesses in town are affected, the whole community is affected. In big cities, you can go from one church to another. In a small town when you split, you've got problems. He discovered several similar issues. When he went door-to-door inviting people to come to First Baptist Church, he discovered that the community remembered a burning cross on the lawn, and they could feel the effect a split had had in their family. This newly minted preacher was simply trying to do something for God. He found out that there was a lot of history to that church. Your people have a history.

Language

You preach to people out of a history. You preach to people in their particular language. There's a language used in the Northeast, a language that

is used in the South, a language used in Harlem, where I grew up. It's not a language that you put on; you know it.

When I was serving in Denver, we had a man from Great Britain who came as a student. He was trying to relate to an American audience. He talked about a baseball game and was serious when he said, "The man ended the game by getting a four-base hit." We knew what he meant, but we also knew that he didn't know baseball. You have a single, a double—but a four-base hit? No, it's a home run! As listeners we didn't sit and turn down the volume and remark to each other, "That's the last we'll listen to him!" We knew he wasn't from here. But that's possibly why some people can preach in one situation and can't make it in another. Know the language.

Culture

I went on a preaching engagement in Aurora, Nebraska. It's not the end of the earth, but if you got on a tall building you could see the end of the earth from Aurora. I remember going to the town and going to their little motel and wondering how I got there. Why did I say yes to this? Then I opened my folder and they had on the stationery, "The Greater Nebraska Crusade for Christ." I thought sarcastically, we're going to get all of Nebraska together—all ten of them—and we're going to have an evangelistic crusade. Nevertheless, I came prepared to preach the gospel.

I discovered that there were three churches in town that sponsored the event, which was really a Bible conference in the local high school. I asked the man who invited me about the stationery. He said that back in the 1950s they had had Marv Rosell, the father of professor Garth Rosell of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, for an evangelistic crusade. At that time they had invested in the stationery and didn't want to waste it! I was invited and so I went.

It was a different world. When you turn on the television in Aurora, Nebraska, early on is a weather report. The weather report comes between the news and sports. They also had a report from the Chicago livestock, produce, and grain markets. When I was in Denver, I used to get up about 5:15 a.m., and about 5:25 a.m. came the farm report. I was there twelve years and heard it every morning, and I still don't understand the farm report. In Aurora, Nebraska, the weather report is more important than the ball scores. Anybody who ministers in Aurora understands those market reports, understands the weather.

One of the graduates from Denver Seminary went to Wyoming to serve as a pastor. He has a church with 275 to 300 people in a town that has about

200 people. You talk about mega-church, that's mega-church up in Wyoming. He said,

There are certain times of the year that my worst nightmare would be that you would show up for church, and I would have to preach. When it comes to harvest time, I get out with the folks of the church and help to bring in the harvest. I work the tractor, and sometimes I get an hour and a half to prepare for preaching, if I have that. Some of those sermons I preach are simply terrible. But I know that at that time of year, it's more important for me to be out there than to be preparing in my study.

I spent some time with him. In the morning from about seven to nine o'clock he'd sit in the only restaurant in town, and the whole town would come in. He knew all about his people and understood them: "How's that new calf doing? How's the wife doing? You going to get that crop in?" He understood how to work a town in Wyoming.

You minister in a particular place. You speak the language, you know the culture, you're aware of the history. There are some of God's great saints who can minister in Aurora, Nebraska, when someone like myself couldn't touch the place. You have a culture and background, and so does the place you're in.

■ The Fourth World: The World of the Preacher

There's one other world, and it's the one that's easiest to overlook: your world. Sure, it's easy to look at the world of the Bible and the modern world and the world in which I live. But there's a way in which I'm in the middle of all these worlds. That is, when I study the ancient texts, *I* study the ancient texts. One of the insights from scholars in literature studies is that there is a distance between myself and that text. There is some meaning that comes between myself and the text, and I can't avoid that. While I believe with all my heart in authorial intent, I also recognize that when I study the text, *I* study it. You'll see something in the text that I won't see. Because you're the one interpreting it, you will interpret it differently than I will. You come out of this modern world with your own background, your own experiences of growing up. You've got a way of talking, a way of thinking, a way of handling life. You're you, for better or worse; for richer or poorer, you're you.

A lot of people, for example, go into ministry because they grew up in dysfunctional families and are trying to fix either themselves or others. That's the wrong reason to go into ministry. They may even come from perfectionistic families. If you grew up in a perfectionistic family, you could never please

your parents, even dad. You'd get three As and a B and dad would say, "How come you didn't get four As?" Then you'd work hard and get four As and your folks would respond, "Must be something wrong with the school system if you can get four As that easily!"

One of the marks of those kinds of preachers is that they get into churches as angry people. You can see it in the way they preach. One of their major moods in preaching is guilt. There are people who take any passage in the Bible and turn it into a guilt trip. The reason is that they feel guilty. All their lives they've not been able to measure up. They have a difficult time praising their congregation. They have a hard time praising their kids. It would be all they could do to sit down with their daughter or son and say, "You know, you're great. The greatest thing that ever happened to me was to have you. I want you to know that you're a first-class winner. You're great! You're really something!" Some people can't do it. This makes it difficult for you to encourage your kids. If that's true of you, you're going to find it hard to praise a congregation. We then turn every sermon into guilt.

Take a passage like 1 Peter 1:3–5: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power." That's brimming with hope! That's optimism! You can't beat that. Except when an angry preacher gets ahold of it and says, "You don't have that hope, do you? You don't live in that hope." Therefore, every week people come to church, and you set the bar, and they jump. The next week they come back, and they think they've jumped high enough, but no, the bar is higher still. They can't please the pastor, and then they figure they can't ever please God.

There are two doctrines that hold me. I grew up in New York City in a tough, hard area—in the section of Harlem called Mousetown. *Reader's Digest* said it was the toughest place in the United States—an area known for its viciousness, its vice, its violence.⁴ Two doctrines hold me. One is that I believe in depravity. I think it is the best-proved doctrine of the Christian faith. I think all of us suffer from a curvature of the soul. All of us have polluted bloodstreams. Whenever I get into a discussion with somebody who tells me that everybody is inherently good, I can hardly continue the discussion. Have you ever been in a discussion with somebody who honestly believes the earth is flat? You say, "What about the astronauts? They went around . . ."

4. Bradford Chambers, "Boy Gangs of Mousetown," *Reader's Digest* 53 (August 1948): 144–58.

“Oh, no, no.” This person’s got every answer. Like the folks who believe in UFOs—they simply believe in them. Nothing you say works. The people who believe that men and women are inherently good, I don’t know how to handle them. We all suffer from a curvature of the soul. I believe that. I believe in the doctrine of depravity.

I also believe in the grace of God. I believe that to the core of my being. I believe in grace; I believe in depravity. Those are not the only two doctrines from the Christian faith. I need other Christians who are aware of sovereignty and of righteousness. I need them. I need to be reminded that God is more than that. But for me, grace and depravity anchor my soul.

What we are we bring to our study, we bring to our preaching. People in the congregation who are with you several years begin to become like you. For better or worse, richer or poorer, that’s what happens. So you’ve got to ask yourself, “Who am I when I preach? Am I a prophet? Am I a drill sergeant? Am I a teacher? Am I a counselor? Am I a shepherd?” You better define what you mean by “shepherd.” That’s an image that gets lost in the twenty-first century. “Who am I?” The answer to that question is often shaped by who you are when you move into ministry, understanding your history, language, and culture.

■ Conclusion

These are the four worlds of the preacher: the Bible, the preacher in the modern world, the preacher’s world of ministry, and the preacher’s personal world. To live in these worlds, you need to know the history, the language, and the culture of each world. You come away from reading this overview and you may say, “Who is sufficient to preach in this complex and layered world?” The answer is: none of us. With all the flaws that we have, somehow God uses us in this big, wide world through these four worlds—to his glory.