

Haddon Robinson and Cathedral Thinking

The spires of the Sagrada Familia reach over 500 ft in the air. The edifice is one of the most distinguishable landmarks in Barcelona, Spain, and while technically not a cathedral, the church is of cathedral size. Construction began in 1882 and was soon after assumed by the brilliant architect Antoni Gaudi. Gaudi took a medium that was traditionally approached with gothic architecture and crafted it in the modernisme genre. It is magnificent.

A work of this size demands great planning, a great mind, huge financial resources, and the most valuable commodity: time. While the Empire State Building took less than 14 months for completion, ancient cathedrals took generations to build. A generation would live and die, only satisfied that the foundation was laid and a few feet of stone rose from the ground. Another generation would be satisfied that the edifice rose a little higher, and perhaps another generation would see it near completion. For a great structure to be built, generations had to adopt the mindset that every generation would play a part with the last one being able to see it to completion. Only the patient were able to set the cross on the spire.

For a generation of preachers to be raised up, preachers whose reach will span high and influential, the church will have to adopt cathedral thinking: each generation playing its part to encourage the called to keep building on the original foundation. Perhaps this is the best way to understand the legacy of Haddon Robinson.

This is not to suggest that Robinson is the foundation; Christ is. Rather, Robinson's life demonstrates a commitment to longevity like few others. He is not the head waters of the stream, but his teaching so caused the tide to rise that all of us called to be preacher-teachers have been raised. Robinson's life demonstrates cathedral thinking.

A Friend Once Removed

In 2004, I left the pastorate to teach preaching full time. I became a colleague of Calvin Pearson, who was a D.Min. student of Robinson. At the time, I would take a limited amount of notes in the pulpit. Through conversations with Calvin, I grew convinced of the value of no notes of any kind in the pulpit. I believe that Robinson had influenced Pearson to this position. I still remember the Sunday I looked at my notes for the last time and then slipped them in the back of my Bible, where they stayed for the rest of the sermon. It is a practice I still use each Sunday and one that I lead my students to as well.

Similarly, when I first stepped into a classroom to teach preaching, I did not realize how I would be helped by Robinson's classic text, *Biblical Preaching*. In the first few semesters of teaching, I reflected on my own experience and convictions in the classroom but soon found the many places where my thinking was thin. Then I turned to the pages of this simple monograph to find that, in words etched out with simplicity, Robinson had already expressed what my students needed.

Perhaps what helped my own thinking the most were the models of sermon structure (deductive, inductive, inductive/deductive). This idea deepened my conviction to allow the structure of the text to become the structure of the sermon. It is one thing to espouse the conviction of an inerrant, infallible text. It is another thing to provide a student the means to allow that Word to breathe through them with absolute fidelity to its own expression. It's not surprising then, that in an attempt to communicate these things, the teacher became the student. So, while I never formally sat under his teaching, I felt as if I were sitting at his feet, since dispensing his material made me more convictional about the principles in my own preaching; like a friend with decades of experience who could express things with greater clarity than I could. For that I am most grateful.

The Shadow

Interestingly, the Sagrada Familia Church still stands incomplete. While Gaudi worked on it until his death it remains under construction more than 120 years later, with the projected date of completion in 2026. He started something he was not able to finish. And that's just fine. After all, if you are building for generations, then time is your friend. Another generation gets to rise up and build, haunted by the shadow of those who have already built so much.

Thank you Haddon Robinson for a life well lived. And thank you most of all for your foreboding shadow, which motivates us to keep building for generations to come.