

On the Ministry of Robert S. Rayburn

from
*Remembrances, Reminiscences
& Reflections
on the Ministry of
Robert S. Rayburn*

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Trying to sum up anyone's life, particularly by those closest and in such a small space as this is impossible. This not to mention the subject's reticence to talk about his own story in any public setting (or most any private setting!). To many he has remained something of a mystery. However, as a close friend said, "time paints a fuller portrait." Any historical description picks and chooses what is most important, most interesting, and gives a shape to the story in order to leave particular impressions with the readers. We do not apologize for this, but we do wish to be upfront with how we approached this work. We wish to offer a tribute, a brief overview of the life of Robert S. Rayburn in a way that demonstrates the good that God has done through his life and ministry. It is not to declare that it was a life or ministry without fault or failings, but, above all, to give an overview of his life through the lens of service to the church out of love for Christ.

Robert S. was born into a family of Presbyterian preachers. His grandfather, James Chalmers Rayburn, was an itinerant Presbyterian evangelist whose work took him all over the country on preaching campaigns where he often took his son, Robert G. Rayburn. The young Bob Rayburn would play piano, sing, and early learned the particular rhetoric of traveling evangelists. He would go on to win a national oratorical prize and eventually take up the mantle of his father as an ordained Presbyterian pastor (United Presbyterian Church), accepting a call to a church in Gainesville, TX. In 1944 he married LaVerne Swanson whom he had met in the Pacific Northwest on a preaching tour with his brother, Jim, who would himself go on to be the founder of Young Life. Bob served as a chaplain in Europe in WWII and returned to his church only to find that he was being brought up on charges by the UPC for a letter in his files that convinced some that he was considering leaving the denomination—taken rather unfairly to be a violation of ordination vows. Refusing to budge on some of his conservative views, and refusing to condemn those who had left the denomination on such grounds, he was eventually deposed.

But, as often happens, rather than ending his influence the decision moved Bob into another circle where he would flourish. He was befriended by Francis Schaeffer who convinced him to bring his gifts into the young Bible Presbyterian Church. He planted a new church under the BPC in Gainesville, largely made up of his previous congregation. And while he, with Schaeffer, had reservations over the divisiveness of parts of the conservative (sometimes fundamentalist) movement, they felt compelled to align themselves with it and especially the attempts to be faithful to the Scriptures as directly (and literally) the Word of God.

Bob would soon leave Gainesville after establishing the church to take a call at College Church in Wheaton, IL. And it was while pastoring here that Robert S. (Rob) was born, the third of four children, on August 8, 1950. Two months later Bob left to serve as a chaplain again, now in the war in Korea. Like many others at the time (and since), Rob spent his first two years without his father in the home. When he did return from Korea the family moved from Wheaton to Pasadena, CA, to help found Highland College, a liberal arts college of the BPC, where he served as its first president. But soon the divisiveness of the BPC began to interrupt the new calling. The denomination would split and Bob would be let go at Highland. With several others he founded Covenant College out of most of the faculty and students of Highland. The founding of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) gave him a home. One of the early congregations of the EPC was made up of a small group from Tacoma, WA. And, an event that would prove more important than its isolated appearance, Bob served as one of the commissioning pastors for that church.

Covenant College continued to grow and moved to a campus outside St. Louis, MO, and added a seminary to its ministry. Bob now served as president of both institutions while continuing to teach homiletics. Eventually the College moved to a beautiful new campus atop Lookout Mtn., GA, and for ten years Bob served both institutions as president, traveling regularly by train between them for at least the first two years. This is not to mention the many trips he continued to take around the country and world, preaching and teaching. In short, Rob grew up with a father whose ministry took on much of the itinerant character of his grandfather's, with the sacrifices and toll on the family taken as a part of what it means to serve God. (It is impossible not to see here a contrast, deliberate or not, with Rob's own ministry that refused to budge from a small corner of the world for 40 years!) After these ten years of constant to-and-fro, Bob stepped down as President of the College and remained at the Seminary in St. Louis, whose campus would be the family's home until Bob's retirement.

We would be remiss to ignore the role of “the cabin” in all of this. Every summer the family would pack up and leave St. Louis, sometimes picking the kids up from school on the way out of town, and head to a cabin—a renovated old schoolhouse—purchased by Bob and LaVerne in 1955, just five years after Rob was born. It is nestled into a valley in the mountains, away from towns and bustle. The family would spend their whole summers here, climbing, fishing, and exploring. Bob would give what time he could to the cabin, but always had duties calling him back: the seminary work, guest preaching, denominational duties, and continued work in the Army Reserves. This cabin became for the family a sanctuary, a place of rest and fun, “unplugged” (in contemporary lingo) from the cares of the outside world.

Like all of us, Rob was formed by the dynamics of his home, and no more than the conviction that everything takes a back seat to the service of God. As Rob would later put it, “I grew up in a home dominated by the interests of the kingdom of God.” We can fully agree with this, even if, from the outside, it seems hard not to notice the cost it required of those closest. In many ways Robert S. picked up where his father left off, pursuing a life dominated by interest in the kingdom of God. He used to say that his own education was much better than his father’s had been since he was able to benefit from the institutions his father had founded. He graduated from Parkway High School in 1968, from Covenant College in 1972 and from Covenant Seminary in 1975—the loyalty to his family obvious in the latter decisions. Oldest sons often aspire to be like their father, their own imaginations shaped by his work and life. And so it seems the case here, a third generation Presbyterian pastor in the making. He grew up hearing and seeing hundreds of pastors, missionaries, and professors. The “heroes” woven into his life were centered on the same thing: tireless work for the kingdom of God. When he was still a young man he read Andrew Bonar’s *Memoir of Robert Murray M’Cheyne*, a classic in Reformed hagiography whose great impulse is the author’s extolling his friend’s tireless service to preach anywhere and everywhere, dying at a young age after a fruitful (if short) ministry. The book seems a perfect distillation of the ideal already being formed in him. It made a deep impression and was one of the early reasons for his desire to enter ministry.

Rob’s two older sisters, Linnea and Bronwyn, both married ministers and his younger brother, Bentley, studied at the Air Force Academy. Rob played soccer at Covenant College and served as the student body president his senior year. It was as a student at Covenant Seminary that he began to pursue the more academic aspects of theology that would frame his own view of ministry so deeply, in particular the unity of the Scriptures. And, most importantly, it was at the seminary that he met Florence Roskamp. While not his first girlfriend, she would prove to be

his last. She came to the seminary after studying music at Drake University in Iowa, largely because her first choice seminary (Westminster) had delayed her acceptance out of a desire to respond to her application personally. Aspects of the early romance can be seen in the stories that have survived: Rob completing his own death certificate sent to Florence from the morgue where he worked, with the cause of death listed as “heart palpitations because of Florence Roskamp”; or the letters written to her during their engagement from his travels to India with his parents, to which she fumed, “He could have written that to his mother!” He was, it seems, rather more comfortable interacting with the biblical and theological than the emotional.

The two were married on August 23, 1975, and moved straightaway to Aberdeen, Scotland, where Rob began his doctoral studies under I. Howard Marshall. They became a part of the community of Gilcomston South Church of Scotland pastored by William Still, whose own ministry made a deep impact on the young Rob and Florence. William Still was a strictly expository preacher, with weekly prayer meetings, and—particularly important given what is said above—an absolute devotion to his local congregation. Pastor Still pastored the same church from 1945-97, and the fruits of that pastoral devotion were such that could not have been gained through an itinerant ministry. When Rob gave a series of talks at Covenant Seminary many years later on pastoral ministry he included the benefits of a long stay in one place over against the short stays popular for many pastors. It was a view of ministry embodied by William Still.

By the time they left Aberdeen, Rob had not only grown in his theological development, but he had seen a form of ministry in a community that grabbed his own imagination; he had made lifelong friends, Ian Hamilton and Oliver Claassen, and had left with the name of the Rayburn family’s first dog, Murray, famous above all for loving to remain on the rug over against the constant protests of his owners. As their time in Aberdeen came to a close a connection with a small church in Tacoma was revived. The church had undergone a painful split in 1977 when they held a meeting to see whether they would remain in their denomination or leave. The meeting was moderated by one of the pastors who had commissioned them within the denomination, Robert G. Rayburn. The motion to leave failed by a small number and the pastor and much of the congregation left. On April 29, 1978, the remaining members called Robert S. Rayburn to serve as their pastor. It was not, by most any reckoning, a glamorous position to land, even in the small world of conservative Presbyterians. One of the elders on the pulpit committee even apologized to the candidate that they were offering so little pay. But the call was received and in May of 1978 Rob and Florence moved to College Lakes apartments (now The Lakes Apartment) in Tacoma, WA, where they lived for just under a year. These apartments had a rule against children and by the end of their

tenure Florence was well into her pregnancy with their first baby. They found a white stucco house on M Street in the Hilltop neighborhood and began their family as they began their new ministry.

The ongoing tensions of the divisive conservative movement soon came to the fore again, this time in the proposal of a merger of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (which had grown out of the EPC) of which the College, Seminary, and church in Tacoma were a part, with a large group of churches that had come out of the Presbyterian Church USA—South, called the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Rob was wary of the merger and anticipated (rightly) a lot of conflict arising from two traditions that embraced different views of numerous issues. But his father, weary of seeing so many divisions, was a key supporter. And in 1982 the merger occurred and the RPCES was received into the PCA. Devoted, like his father, to the corporate life of the denomination, Rob would continue to be a mainstay at General Assembly (even if often seen with a book in hand during the seemingly endless disputes of procedure), and would serve on several committees, including a study on paedocommunion in 1986 and a study of divorce and remarriage in 1992.

The work at Faith Presbyterian in Tacoma became all-consuming: morning and evening services, a newly-introduced weekly prayer meeting, and slow but ultimately thorough changes to the liturgy and approach to worship. Over the course of three decades flags were removed from the front of the sanctuary, kneelers were added, hands were raised—though in true Presbyterian form, in an orderly and controlled fashion. Wine was introduced to the Lord's Supper, the type of bread was changed, and the congregation began moving forward to participate instead of sitting passively in the pews. This last change came together in his mind, after much study, when he saw marathon runners stopping at a table, running in place, to take a drink and continue their race. "That is what the Supper is for a Christian," he said—a moment to be refreshed for the continuing race. Alongside all of these developments the music in the church deepened and expanded in large part through Florence's capable hands.

They would have five children in the first decade of their life at Faith: Bryonie (1979), Evangeline (1981), Courtney (1983), Robert (1984), and James (1986). And the home life, while absent of the itinerant nature of the two previous generations, nonetheless maintained the dynamic of the life of the church as the first calling on their father. Rob slowly and steadily built for himself a library, having no adequate theological library in town to sate his ongoing theological curiosity. And the ministry centered on, and in many ways was happy to be circumscribed, by the single congregation at Faith. Parents had children whom he baptized; those children grew and he married them only to baptize their children.

Rob gave himself as well to the sorrows that inevitably come. People left for numerous reasons, wounds were given and received, and all the realities of a group of broken Christians trying to be faithful were felt. In and through all of it he continued to preach, to counsel, to lead, and to study.

One of the greatest sorrows for Rob and also one of his most formative moments was the death of his sister Bronwyn in September 1996, after a prolonged, suffering-filled fight with cancer. Before she died he called her almost every day to read to her from the sermons of Alexander Whyte, poems of Christina Rossetti and Anna Cousins, the river crossings from *Pilgrim's Progress* parts I and II, accounts of the dying and death in the church triumphant. He read from Thomas Boston's *Memoirs* and Andrew Bonar's biography of Robert Murray McCheyne. He read Dante and the sermons of Adolphe Monod, Richard Baxter, Samuel Rutherford and John Newton. It demonstrates how he saw himself and his work: as a living and ongoing part of the pastoral work of so many from the generations before him.

Bronwyn's death struck deep. They had been close all through their lives, and it was both fitting and an indication of Rob's devotion to ministry that he preached at her funeral, and in many ways preached entirely in character—hardly a mention of himself, but filled with theology as an instrument by which God comforts his people. From the beginning he has used his reading and study to pastor. Indeed his library serves as something of a parable for his ministry. It betrays a man whose intellectual world was voracious and eager to be found deep in dialogue with the church universal—filled with texts from across the centuries and theological spectrum, with Latin, Dutch, German and French works—and yet found deliberately within this local church. He served the church as a scholar who gave himself entirely to pastoral work, studying and pursuing the world of ideas so that he might pastor his local congregation well.

But that is not to say Rob's impact never ventured outside Tacoma. Today, aside from preaching in many PCA churches in the US and Canada, he has preached or taught in Uganda, India, Russia, Australia, Japan and the UK. His sermons via the church's website and other media have been heard and read in countries all over the world. He has personally received thanks from China, Nicaragua, the Caribbean, the UK, Portugal, Poland and Australia among many others. His theological imagination has, from his father's and grandfather's lives to his own experiences and study, been deliberately a part of the larger catholic (universal) church.

Faith has served as a hub for many international missionaries and the Rayburns have shared their Sunday table with Edith Schaeffer (Switzerland), Ron Bergey and Nicolas Farelly (France), Jay Stoms (Malawi), Khen Thombing (India), David and Eleanor Fiol (India), Koji Esaki (Japan), O. Palmer Robertson (Uganda), John Rug (Chile), Chris

Granberry (Yakima Nation), Blake Purcell (Russia), Tom Johnson (Czech Republic) and many others. Rob has deliberately sought out men from around the world and the country to fill the pulpit, reminding Faith of its place within this global and historic Church.

Through Rob's work at Faith many others from the congregation over the years have had their own imaginations formed to pursue lives in public ministry: army and civilian chaplains, college and seminary professors, missionaries and Reformed University Fellowship and pulpit ministers. Rob was influential in the founding of the Pacific Northwest Church Planting Network, ensuring Faith's active support in the many churches planted out of that network all over the Northwest. He played a key role in Faith's supporting Tacoma's first Crisis Pregnancy Center, and in establishing Covenant High School. The church has given support to hundreds of missionaries all over the world during his tenure, as well as other mission works like Orphans of War, Sacred Road, CareNet in Tacoma, Youth for Christ, and many others.

We have mentioned his life in the denomination. He is also a leader in the Pacific Northwest Presbytery, its longest-serving pastoral member, and has served as its stated clerk for twenty-two years (though he has himself said that's largely because Mike Simpson, the church's administrator of many years, did all the work!). One long-time member of the presbytery remarked that

[his] greatest influence was his natural ability to see all that we did with greater clarity and depth than anyone else in the room. He wasn't always right in knowing how things would turn out, but he has a gift for seeing what I would call the history of the moment—he knows the meaning of a decision or course of action better than anyone.

Rob has served as a trustee on the board of Covenant College and been deeply invested in its life and work on behalf of the denomination.

But this denominational engagement has not always been peaceful. More recently, in 2010 he was asked by the Pacific Northwest Presbytery to defend one of its ministers whom one other pastor had accused of heresy. His defense and the man's subsequent unanimous acquittal illustrated Rob's commitment to the historic tenets of the Reformed tradition and his passion for the peace and purity of the church. He diagnosed a tension between submission to the community and its tradition on the one hand and a willingness to re-examine and critique that tradition on the other. Much of his own academic life has been governed by that tension, and resulted in a reformed ecumenicism that allows him to defend some with whom he might disagree. The weariness of his own father with the divisiveness of American conservative Christianity is yet another trait that took root in Rob's life.

But not to be lost in all of this, the most significant work is the “hidden” work—at least, hidden from those not at Faith in Tacoma. It is the ways in which mothers and fathers have been better able to be faithful mothers and fathers; the ways in which pilgrims from any and all walks of life and callings, from a variety of demographics, politics, social locations, have met Christ and found themselves able to love Christ through the life of worship and service at Faith. Rob’s ministry is circumscribed by Faith not through its influence, but by conviction. Offers have come to pastor other, more glamorous and bigger churches; to teach or serve in other ways at the college or seminary level. And over and over again he and Florence have decided to give themselves to Faith. The outflow of influence, such as it is, has been accidental. And that is itself tribute to the love and devotion Rob has given to this church.

He and Florence early decided to make their home a center of their ministry, hosting people every Sunday to the same meal—roast beef, rice and gravy, mushrooms, and a vegetable platter. And while the many missionaries above have been at the table, so too have long-haul truckers, business executives, teachers, writers, soldiers, stay-at-home parents, engineers, kids in the thousands, and countless other professions. The legacy he has pursued from the beginning is narrow in focus so that it can be deep. He has walked, and tried to walk faithfully as he could, alongside thousands of ordinary pilgrims (like us) who have found in him a good pastor, helping us to love Jesus.

Rob and Florence will have been married by publication of this essay for some 44 years. And they have lived in the house on M Street in Hilltop, serving the same church in the same location. They have raised five children, each now married, and currently have 15 grandchildren, 13 of whom are now living. And he loves, and is loved, by them all. The pulpit at Faith will be the ministry of his life and, whatever else the Lord calls him to, the primary means of his service to the kingdom. Rob has lived in a world of ideas, of that we are sure. But they were ideas that he constantly attempted to bend for the use of all those whom God might bring into this congregation to which he had been called. As one of Rob’s friends and a fellow minister remarked,

Rob’s focused, forceful mind is in service of a redemptive ecclesiology that weaves his great loves into a tapestry of family and sacrament and so the Church, where his fellow ministers strive to foster the family of faith for generations to come. Here we see nexus of his affections. Like all good ministers and fathers, his convictions are rooted in a heart for people, not ideas.

Like his father, and his father’s father, Rob worked tirelessly for the kingdom of God, trying to be faithful as a servant. He has given the whole of his efforts to that work, expressing his love for Christ and the body of Christ through devotion to a small part of that body: the congregation of Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, WA.