

# The Rewards and Challenges of Teaching Robinson's Big Idea Method

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## Abstract

The Big Idea method of biblical preaching yields many hermeneutical and homiletical benefits. They include the overarching attempt to proclaim authorial intention; unified communication which increases attention, comprehension, and retention in the listeners; and help for the preacher in remembering the flow of thought of the sermon. However, professors who teach the method encounter challenges. First, there is the challenge of teaching students where to start searching for the subject. This requires proficiency in exegesis, something that cannot be assumed of each student. Second, students' ability to grasp the method depends on the ability to think abstractly. Not all people are skilled at that. Third, is the perennial question of how the little ideas of the passage relate to the BI and how to handle those little ideas in the sermon. Finally, there is the challenge of teaching students how the BI contributes to the development of the sermon. This paper will highlight and expand upon the benefits and challenges of teaching the BI method and also suggest ways to meet those challenges.

## Introduction

The Big Idea philosophy and method of biblical preaching yields many hermeneutical and homiletical benefits, as well as some challenges. This paper describes some of those benefits and challenges from the experience of two preachers and professors who use the method themselves and teach it to others. That is true of many members of the EHS, so we look forward to your dialogue as all of us seek to improve our preaching and pedagogy.

Before diving into the rewards of the method, clarification is needed on that word—"method." We realize that Robinson's approach is more of a philosophy of exposition than method,<sup>1</sup> but we use the word "method" throughout this paper because our concerns are mostly procedural and pedagogical. In other words, we are interested in the methodical aspects of the philosophy. That was Robinson's purpose in writing *Biblical Preaching* as well. To coach neophyte preachers, he divided his philosophy of expository preaching into ten "stages," thus accentuating the fact that his approach is a method as well as a vision.

## Some Rewards of Teaching the Big Idea Method

### *Pre-exegesis: A Way to Utilize the First Hour of Study*

A few years ago, EHS member, Lee Eclov, and Randal were talking about the different ways preachers utilize their first couple of hours in their studies. You might call this "pre-exegesis." Consider the benefits of starting sermon preparation with a search for the BI. Robinson helpfully reminds students to "remember that you're looking for the author's ideas. Begin by stating in rough fashion what you think the writer is talking

about—that is, his *subject*. Then try to determine what major assertion(s) the biblical writer is making *about* the subject, that is, the *complement(s)*.”<sup>2</sup>

This is not the time for background, word, syntactical, or theological studies. We’re not trying to dissect the text, but rather to comprehend the primary thought of the thought unit. Searching for the BI helps preachers understand the relationships between the various ideas. Preachers begin to see dominant and subordinate ideas and how the Scripture might be functioning for the Church. Some approaches to sermon preparation build a brick wall between “meaning” and “significance,” and although he is not explicit about this in *Biblical Preaching*, Robinson substitutes a screen door for the brick wall. In other words, by beginning our study with a quest for a provisional BI, the method starts the preacher on the road to application at the very beginning of the process.

Think about the difference between spending one’s first hour in the study searching for the BI versus studying each key word, phrase, or dialogue (depending on the genre of the preaching portion). Preachers often lament that at the end of a week’s worth of studying, they have lots of notes, but no sermon. That means they know all kinds of information about a preaching portion, but are not sure how it functions for the Church. Searching for the BI in the first hour of the study helps to reverse this experience. Preachers get a sense of the whole, not the parts. We have found it helpful for ourselves and our students to start the BI method with the “pre-exegesis” of an idea versus the exegesis of fragments. Preliminary identification of the BI helps preachers understand the entire preaching portion as opposed to understanding, what is at this point, disconnected data.

One caution should be sounded here: once a preacher steps onto a road, it is hard to get off. That is, once a preacher articulates a BI in the first hour of study, his or her mind desires to stay on that track, even if the ensuing exegesis shows the idea to be mistaken. The first articulation of the BI must be provisional. It’s only Monday morning, for goodness sakes! Preachers must be willing to make course corrections, or even take a new road.

#### *Discovery of the Interrelationship Between Ideas*

It goes without saying that a BI implies the presence of little ideas. Except for the tiniest preaching portions, every passage selected for a Sunday sermon has more than one idea. Searching for the BI helps preachers think about the various ideas floating around in a preaching portion. Then, the method helps us begin to prioritize or size-up the ideas. Which ones are dominant? Which ones are subordinate? Not all ideas in a preaching portion are created equal.

And just as every text contains multiple ideas, so does every sermon. Haddon Robinson says that the number one complaint by our listeners is that our sermons contain too many ideas.<sup>3</sup> That means preachers can do a better job keeping their ideas unified. When Andy Stanley says that sermons with three points are three different sermons, he’s assuming that the three points are disconnected (either actually disconnected from each other due to being different concepts or experientially disconnected in the mind of the listener because of communicative breakdown).

Not all ideas require or warrant equal sermon time. Due to their preaching context, preachers might decide to major on a minor concept, but having identified the BI, they do so knowing full well the author's major concepts and minor. Later, we'll talk about how to preach little ideas in their context, but for now we simply assert that the process of finding the BI helps show how each of the various sized ideas interrelate to create meaning in a preaching portion.

#### *Helps Preserve Authorial Intention*

When preachers utilize the BI method they are helping to maintain expositional integrity. The method gives preachers the confidence that they are going to say in God's name what God has said to the Church. That confidence stems from the fact that the preacher allows Scripture to dictate the sermon's message. The preacher is not necessarily preaching what strikes him or her in the text. Instead, Scripture signals meaning and intention by its context, vocabulary, structure, and point of view. Without these signals communication would not be possible. The BI method prompts the preacher to let the passage to determine the sermon. Otherwise, preachers can do all kinds of things to the Bible to create a sermon. Like playdough being extruded through various molds, preachers shape the Bible to match their own agendas. Often someone will justify this by arguing for the presence of multiple meanings in a given passage, but they have failed to see how the various sized ideas interrelate to make the meaning signaled by the structure.

#### *Helps Suggest the Sermon's Structure*

There are many approaches to creating sermon outlines. As a preacher analyzes the subject of the BI with the six or seven narrowed subject questions, the structure of the sermon begins to take shape. The questions show what angles of the subject are being covered in the preaching portion. While this may not determine the outline of a passage, the questions covered most give preachers an initial look at the structure and flow of thought.

For example, the BI of Romans 6:1-11 could be worded as follows:

Broad Subject: Christians not continuing in sin (v. 1)

Narrowed Subject Questions: *Why* should Christians not continue in sin (answered numerous times in vv. 2-10) and also, *How* Christians can avoid continuing in sin (answered in v. 11 "...consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God...").

The preaching portion doesn't address the questions what, where, who, and when. Notice that the why question is the angle of the subject covered the most (it takes up all but two verses). This displays how the author is developing his thoughts. Expository preachers often want to follow that same pathway to meaning. Preachers who plan on taking their listeners on this journey will benefit from this analysis. The prominent questions can become major sermon points or the foundation for them. In this case the expository preacher will spend significant sermon time on two major concepts: why Christians should not continue in sin and how to accomplish that by the act of "considering

yourselves dead to sin.” The process of formulating the narrowed subjects shows the basic structure of the passage.

### *The Big Idea Contributes Other Sermon Elements*

The BI produces big results for sermon preparation. First and foremost, if the preacher’s exegesis is accurate, the sermon’s theme is in hand. No more wondering what the sermon is about. Sermons should have one theme and early in our preparation we know what it is. The subject of Scripture becomes the subject of the sermon.

Second, because we know the subject of the sermon we also know what the introduction will point toward. While a preacher may choose to wait until later in the week to craft the sermon introduction, at least there is no question about what is going to be introduced.

Third, having the subject of the sermon in hand means having an initial understanding of how the sermon will conclude. If a preacher plans to conclude with a brief summary of the sermon, that summary may well focus on the subject of the sermon or the entire BI. If a preacher plans to conclude with application, the application will stem from the BI. There is an organic connection between the subject of the sermon and the purpose of the sermon (what the sermon is intended to do to the congregation, often related to sermon application). Again, early in the work week the preacher gains an initial understanding of how the purpose of the sermon will be brought to a climax in the conclusion. In the case of Romans 6:1-11, the preacher is preparing to summarize and apply the subject of Christians not continuing to live in sin.

### *Enhances Listeners’ Attention, Comprehension, and Retention*

This benefit is assumed almost universally among homileticians and teachers of public speaking—unity is the soul of clarity. A handful of quotations is representative:

(Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*): “One nail driven home is better than twenty tacks loosely fixed to be pulled out in an hour.”

(Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*): “How many things is a sermon about? One! . . . The major idea, or theme, glues the message together and makes its features stick in the listener’s mind.”

(Keller, “A Model for Preaching”) “A sermon must be like an arrow, streamlined and clearly driving at a single point, a single message, the theme of the passage.”

Note: this widespread agreement seems to be based primarily on authority and experience. That is, theorists since Plato have asserted the necessity of unity (the voice of authority), and preachers themselves have seen how having a BI enhances attention, comprehension, and retention (the voice of experience). Homileticians would benefit from more rigorous study of this issue—benefits to listeners—with social scientific

research. We encourage such research from members of EHS who have expertise in designing experiments and gathering data.

### *Benefits for the Preacher*

When a preacher follows Robinson's method, starting with good exegesis and then progressing through audience analysis, he or she is inevitably left with more to say than can be said in 20 or 45 minutes. The BI helps fence the wide prairie. The biblical author did not say everything that can be said about his topic, and neither should we. Instead, the biblical author dealt with aspects of the topic, as revealed in stage four of the BI method: *submit the exegetical idea to three developmental questions—what does this mean, is it true, what difference does it make?* Thus, Robinson's method helps the preacher choose supporting ideas and illustrations that truly support the central theme. Only guests who are on the list are allowed into the party.

Unity brings another benefit to the preacher—memory. Assuming that we are delivering the sermon without notes or from limited notes rather than reading from a manuscript, preachers need help in remembering what comes next and how parts relate to one other. When preaching without notes, a mandate Robinson is passionately committed to, preachers will inevitably forget things, but the BI keeps the lead actor on center stage in their minds and the listener's minds. Thus, leaving out a supporting thought or illustration does not cripple the sermon.

## **Challenges to Teaching the Big Idea Method**

### *How Do I Identify The Subject?*

Anyone who has tried to teach the BI method of interpreting Scripture for sermons knows that it's not easy to identify the BI. This is especially true in the genres of poetry and historical narrative. While epistles might easily yield their subject and complement, Old Testament narratives can be stubborn. Give a class a lengthy OT narrative and ask everyone to identify the subject. Be prepared for answers to be all over the place. Robinson himself seemed to teach this stage of his method based more on intuition and general skill in reading comprehension, than on a communicable and reproducible technique. And little has been written since the publication of *Biblical Preaching* that helps students identify the subject of a passage.<sup>4</sup>

One challenge of teaching the method is giving students a starting point to discover the subject of a preaching portion. This is critical since formulating the BI begins with the foundation of locating the subject. Identify the wrong subject and it will be difficult to hope for success in locating the BI. Randal's extension of Robinson's approach focuses on an additional step called the *Broad Subject*. This precedes Robinson's discovery of the subject-in-question-form.

The location of the broad subject is determined by genre analysis—how the genre of the preaching portion displays dominant meaning. Working from genre clues, preachers can identify a broad subject phrase that begins the quest for finding the BI. In the case of Romans 6:1-11, the broad subject phrase might be worded: *Christians not continuing in*

*sin*. From this starting point, preachers can move to the analysis of the *narrowed subject*, equal to Robinson's subject: Why should Christians not continue in sin?

#### *Not All Brains Are Wired For This Method*

Over the years we've noticed that not all students are wired for this kind of analysis. That doesn't mean the method can't be taught; it simply means that the method won't come easily to all students. This is not a matter of IQ; it's a matter of whether a student has highly developed skills in reading comprehension and is able to abstract from details the overarching point the author intends to communicate.

This will require patience on the part of professors. Teaching the BI method, especially the early stages of formulating and analyzing the exegetical idea, cannot be rushed. The old saying, "Practice makes perfect," has some truth to it. We've found it helpful to encourage students that the method gets a little easier over time. It's also a reminder that the method, as helpful as it is, is not the savior of preaching. Throughout the centuries God has blessed all kinds of preaching and the hermeneutics that led to all those sermons. It's helpful to remind students to keep this all in perspective.

#### *Be Prepared To Reteach Exegesis*

Teaching the BI method inevitably means we will have to spend time re-teaching exegesis. As we noted earlier, this is partly due to the fact that the method requires the exegesis of ideas, not fragments. In simplistic terms, the method does not primarily involve a search for the meaning of individual words, but how words and phrases interrelate to create whole meanings for a selected preaching portion. When we hear subpar preaching, it's often the result of what we call "micro-exegesis"—painstaking examination of the trees while never lifting one's head to see the forest. Unfortunately, we have observed that seminary-level instruction on biblical interpretation privileges "micro-exegesis."

As correctives to this tendency, we offer three suggestions. The first is simply that teachers of homiletics devote a significant portion of their course syllabus to exegesis as they demonstrate and give students experience in naming the forest, not just the trees. A helpful question in that endeavor is Kuruvilla's oft repeated, "What is the author *doing* with what he's saying?"<sup>5</sup>

The second suggestion relates to cutting the text—determining where to begin and end the portion of Scripture to be handled in a given sermon. Cutting the text will determine whether a preaching portion has no BI or more than one. Think about what happens to one's search for the BI in Luke 15 if one's preaching portion begins at verse 3 where the parable begins: "So he told them this parable: 'What man of you having a hundred sheep. . .'"

Verse one and two clearly set the three parables within the context of conflict with the Pharisees. The "tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near" to Jesus, and he was eating with them, so "the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled." The preamble is crucial to understanding Luke's intention—an explanation and defense of Jesus' "policy" of welcoming sinners. Without the lead-in statement, preachers often turn the parable(s) into

an opportunity to call all the prodigals in attendance home instead of calling all the self-righteous to follow Jesus' example of seeking the lost.

The third suggestion asserts the value of reviewing the basics of genre studies. Finding the BI of a preaching portion is largely determined by the ability to allow genre to signal meaning and intention. Different genres communicate meaning differently. For instance, in the Luke 15 example above, Luke creates a chapter by beginning with a brief narrative and then ends with a lengthy three-part parable. Paying attention to the plot is critical to understanding the broad and subject of the chapter. Understanding how parables communicate will be important, but only after the preacher realizes that the subject is found in the narrative, not the parable.

Teaching the BI method involves making sure students have the ability to apply their hermeneutics to homiletics. The process of finding the BI of a selected preaching portion is an exercise in hermeneutics. The results of the process become an integral part of all things homiletic. Benjamin Walton's new book, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives*, extends Robinson and Sunukjian by giving special instruction on how to cut the text.<sup>6</sup>

#### *How to Preach the Little Ideas*

Another challenge to teaching the BI method is teaching students how to handle the little ideas in preaching portions that are so preachable. We could argue, though, that this is as much a benefit as a challenge because passages and sermons *do* contain little ideas, so if students can be taught how to unify everything around one idea, they and the listeners will profit. Whichever way you see it, be prepared to show how little ideas within a passage can be preached within the context of the BI.

Sometimes this means announcing to a congregation how the preaching portion functions for the Church. While preaching Luke 15 a preacher might say, "This passage is designed to help all of us evaluate our relationship, or lack of relationship, with non-Christians." The preacher has taught parishioners what Luke 15 is designed to do to the Church. Then, the preacher can direct listeners to the concept that is being singled out for the sermon: "However, this morning we are going to focus on the spiritual turnaround of the prodigal and how that explains what God means by repentance." The preacher has declared that he or she knows what the passage means (relating to non-Christians) and how the pieces fit together to make meaning (the concept of repentance). The preacher has announced the parameters of meaning for the fragment they want to focus on. This averts the danger of taking verses or concepts out of context.

#### *Be Prepared For Repetition*

If you have attempted to preach through a book of the Bible or through large segments of a book, you will have encountered several preaching portions that share similar BIs. Think about sections like the Joseph narrative in Genesis 37-50. This lengthy section is truly *one* section with the dominating idea being x, yet individual scenes such as z, contribute to the same subject. The same can be true of lengthy Pauline paragraphs. Many students will feel the urge to find new ideas within each scene.

To prepare students to preach long sections, we suggest using the analogy of a television mini-series. Individual scenes and episodes contribute to the theme by supplying multiple complements. For instance keys scenes might yield the following:

God is sovereign over man's evil intentions.

God is sovereign over nature.

God's sovereignty enables us to walk in hope and to forgive.

Another form of repetition is found in places like Psalms and Proverbs. These books repeat themselves often. Big ideas are repeated or restated often. It is important to prepare the preacher for this so they can create a preaching strategy that takes into account the repetition found in God's Word. For a defense of the necessity of repeating theological themes, and for methodology on how to do so without boring listeners, see Jeffrey Arthurs' forthcoming, *Preaching and Remembering*.

Rewards and challenges—both are present when we use the BI method. The authors of this paper look forward to dialoguing with the members of EHS on their own experiences and suggestions on how to teach the method in ways that serve students and ultimately bless the Church.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Three sources which build on the BI method are: Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson, eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); and Randal E. Pelton, *Preaching with Accuracy: Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text: A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2103).

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin H. Walton, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2016), 45-81.

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