

# **Robert Creech: Serving the church and equipping others to do the same**

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Robert Creech has been a professor of pastoral leadership at Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#) since 2009 and is a member of [DaySpring Baptist Church](#) in Waco. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on Christian higher education. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

## **Background**

### **Where else have you served, and what were your positions there?**

- Senior pastor, University Baptist Church in Clear Lake City, near the Johnson Space Center south of Houston, 1987 to 2009.
- Taught biblical courses and Greek, Houston Baptist University, 1979 to 1987.
- Pastor, North Main Baptist Church in Houston, 1979 to 1982.

### **Where did you grow up?**

Houston.

### **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

My mother took my sister and me to church—prenatally—at Glenn Rose Baptist Church in Houston. We had one pastor while I was growing up--Lee

Roy Pearson. I came to Christ there through the youth ministry at age 15. A youth retreat was particularly important in causing me to want to follow Christ.

## **Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?**

I graduated from Houston Baptist University in 1974 with majors in Christianity and sociology. In 1976, I received a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I earned a Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Baylor University in 1984.

## **About education**

### **Why do you feel called into education?**

I always have had one foot in the classroom and one in the local church, shifting the weight from one foot to the other along the way. While serving as pastor at North Main Baptist Church, I also taught adjunctively at Houston Baptist University. While on the faculty at Houston Baptist, I served as interim pastor or supply preacher in a variety of congregations.

When I was at University Baptist Church, I taught adjunctively at Houston Baptist University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and the Houston Graduate School of Theology.

In the dozen years I have been at Truett, I have served as interim pastor and supply preacher for churches in Texas and Arkansas. This is the form my calling has taken--serving the church and, in the classroom, helping to equip others to do so.

My original sense of calling to the classroom was to teach the Bible to freshmen students in required classes, hoping to introduce them to the

beauty and value of Scripture. This was a big part of my work at Houston Baptist University. When I returned to the classroom full-time in 2009, it was to a seminary setting, where I felt called to invest in the next generation of congregational leaders.

## **How does being a Christian influence your work in education?**

I hope my life with Christ shapes the way I relate to students and to my subject matter. I attempt to bring Christian practices—such as prayer and hospitality—into the classroom.

I like very much this prayer by J.B. Lightfoot, a 19th-century New Testament professor and Bishop of Durham, I kept taped to my desk:

“Since it hath pleased Thee, O Lord, that I should be called to take my part in the teaching of this College, grant that I may not assume the same lightly, or without a due sense of the importance of my trust; but, considering it a stewardship, whereof I shall have to render an account hereafter, may faithfully fulfil the same to Thy honour and glory. Grant, O Lord, that neither by word nor deed I may do aught that may weaken the faith, or slacken the practice of those committed to my charge; but rather grant to me such measure of Thy Holy Spirit, that my duties may be discharged to Thy honour and glory, and to the welfare of both the teacher and the taught. Grant this, O Lord, through Thy son, Jesus Christ, who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. Amen.”

## **What is your favorite aspect of education? Why?**

Without question, my favorite aspect is the interaction and relationships with my students, followed by the interaction and relationships with colleagues committed to the same work.

I love the academic rhythm of working hard during the semester, getting a break at Thanksgiving or Spring Break, finishing strong, and then having time to revise the course and start over again the next semester.

I love the research and writing that is part of the calling, as well.

## **What one aspect of education gives you the greatest joy?**

Seeing a student “get it” in the classroom or in a conversation outside of class.

## **What is your favorite class to teach? Why?**

“The Life and Work of the Pastor” has been a favorite of mine since it touches on so many aspects of where I have spent my life and offers the opportunity to engage the next generation of pastors.

## **What one aspect of education would you like to change?**

Were it up to me, I would eliminate grades, especially at the master’s level. I have eliminated exams from my courses.

## **How has your place in education or your perspective on education changed?**

When I first began at Houston Baptist University, I did not see myself ever teaching in a seminary setting and supposed a career in a university and a more academic trajectory for my research and writing.

Leaving the pastorate after 22 years and moving into a seminary setting, where I taught practical theology rather than biblical studies, changed that. My research and writing has taken on a more practical approach solidly grounded in the academic training I have received.

## **How do you expect education to change in the next 10 to 20 years?**

With COVID-19, many of us were launched into a new world of online teaching, whether we wanted to be or not. I expect multiple delivery systems will be a permanent part of the landscape of higher education.

I also anticipate we will find more creative scheduling to supplement the traditional 15-week semester—such as weekend courses, shorter courses and more connection between the classroom and the field.

We have offered a course for Truett students twice called “Nature as Spiritual Practice” on our prairie in South Texas. The course was taught by our pastor, Eric Howell, and my wife Melinda and I hosted it. More of this type of experiential learning surely is a part of education in the future.

## **Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing education.**

One is cost. How long will people be willing to spend \$80,000 to \$100,000 for an undergraduate degree? Our seminary students often graduate with significant student debt acquired during their undergraduate and graduate education. They are not entering a workplace where they are likely to earn enough to pay off that debt easily.

We need greater partnerships between churches and the seminary to help with this, such as churches who might, as part of their salary structure, help pay off their staff members’ student loans if they stay with them for five years.

A second challenge is the issue that brick-and-mortar institutions face in competition with online institutions. Will employers care that a candidate’s degree is from a more traditional institution? How will the older model continue to compete?

Third, I would raise the issue of the diminished value of a liberal arts education in our world. Students—and their parents who are paying the bill—want to know what kind of job will await the graduate. Universities increasingly become trade schools.

The liberal arts education traditionally intended to prepare one to be a thinking, informed, contributing member of society. But majors in literature, history, religion and art play a backseat to the STEM programs and to programs in business and other professions.

### **What do you wish more people knew about education?**

That being a university professor is a full-time job. I also wish people really could know how much most of us in this work respect and care for the students who sit in our classrooms.

### **What is the impact of education on your family?**

We have invested heavily in education in our family. My wife Melinda holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Houston Baptist University, a Master of Arts degree from University of Houston in Clear Lake and another from Baylor University, and a Ph.D. from Baylor University.

Our oldest son holds two degrees in architecture from the University of Houston. Our daughter holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in radio, television and film from the University of Texas. Our second son is in the military and has received his training as a part of his career in the U.S. Army Special Forces.

My wife and I were first-generation college graduates in our families. Our education has broadened our view of our world, provided us with incredible experiences we would not have had otherwise, and has introduced us to some of the most amazing people you can imagine. Our lives have been enriched incredibly by the investment in education.

## **What do you do outside of teaching and pastoral ministry?**

My wife and I have 88 acres of family farmland about 30 miles southeast of San Antonio. We are working with a grant from Texas Parks and Wildlife to convert 80 acres to a restored prairie, providing habitat for quail, dove, turkey and deer. In 2018, we planted a mix of 40 native grasses and forbs. In this, the third year, the prairie is flourishing.

Anticipating retirement next spring, we have built a “barndominium” on the prairie with three motel-type rooms so we can host friends, family, seminary and college students for classes; pastors and professors for spiritual or writing retreats; and even total strangers who want to spend some time in creation. The building is dubbed “The Bee and the Clover” from Emily Dickenson’s poem “To Make a Prairie.”

## **If you could get one “do over” in education, what would it be, and why?**

I spent far too little time in the library and at the feet of my teachers in college. I was so eager to graduate and get on with things, I did what I had to make my grades, but learned far less than I should have. I graduated a year early and headed for seminary.

I became a much better student at seminary, but still took too many hours to graduate a semester early. With a do-over, I would slow down and soak up more of what was so readily and graciously available to me.

## **About Baptists**

### **Why are you Baptist?**

I have to admit, part of the answer to that question is I was born and reared in that tradition. As an adult, however, I have the freedom to choose

otherwise.

I have been tempted over the past three decades to find some other tradition with which to identify. But I share with Baptists a belief in the Bible as God's word, a love for the local church, a commitment to a church that stands free and separate from the state, a devotion to Christ's mission to this world, and a conviction that the call to discipleship is responded to personally. So, despite our foibles and squabbles, I am determined to hold to that heritage.

### **What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?**

Currently the intense political polarization of our culture has infected Baptist congregations, as it has others. This is the biggest issue for Baptists in America, in my opinion, because it touches so many others.

It determines whether, during a pandemic, the church seeks—in love—to care for its members or—in defiance to science and common sense—ignores guidance and endangers its constituents.

It affects whether the church is obedient to the biblical mandate to care for God's creation or rejects the notion humans have any responsibility there at all. It affects the church's attitude and behavior toward deep human needs surrounding issues of immigration and racism.

I'm sure it extends to other areas as well. But as long as Baptists reject our heritage of a free church in a free state and align with partisan political agendas rather than agendas driven by the kingdom of God, issues such as these will continue to divide us.

### **What would you change about the Baptist**



## **denomination—state, nation or local?**

I long for those denominational entities to maintain a missional focus rather than a doctrinal one, leaving those questions to the local church.

## **About Robert**

### **Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?**

Pastorally, my childhood pastor Lee Roy Pearson at Glenn Rose Baptist Church in Houston defined for me what a pastor is, and recognized and called out my gifts. I always will be indebted to him.

Jay B. Perkins was the pastor at Hibbard Memorial Baptist Church, where I served as youth minister during my college days. He modeled loving Jesus and loving the congregation so well.

Academically, my mentors exhibited the combination of a warm heart toward God, a deep devotion to excellence in scholarship, a sacrificial love for the church, and a personal commitment to their students.

Glen T. Cain, A.O. Collins, Arthur Travis, William Hendricks, Jack MacGorman, Boo Heflin, Ray Summers, Dan McGee and Wally Christian are among those whose teaching and lives have shaped mine.

Unfortunately, it was the nature of the times that no women's names appear in this list. I could go back to my high school days and mention several however: Judy Kahla, Neva Weeks, Muriel Flake and Mildred Fisher.

### **What did you learn on the job you wish you learned**

## **elsewhere?**

I could have used some training on how to operate a mimeograph machine.

I learned about the nature of family systems and congregational life on the job and in the field. I would have appreciated some training about the nature of anxiety and its effects in the lives of people.

## **Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.**

Wendell Berry is at the top of the list. He is an 87-year-old farmer, essayist, novelist, short-story writer and poet. I began reading his work somewhat metaphorically as a pastor, equating his love for the land and his service to it to pastoral ministry, at the suggestion of Eugene Peterson.

We inherited family property 14 years ago, and suddenly Berry's thinking was valuable to me, literally. Berry represents a perspective called "new agrarianism," which combines concern of ecology and sustainable agriculture. His thinking touches every dimension of human flourishing and always is challenging. *The Art of the Commonplace* (essays), *A Place on Earth* (novel), *The New Collected Poems* and *That Distant Land* (short stories) are favorite works.

Eugene Peterson has shaped my thinking about pastoral ministry more than any other single writer. I found his four core books—*The Contemplative Pastor*, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* and *Working the Angles*—in about 1992. After reading them once, I re-read one a year to keep my ministry recalibrated.

Dallas Willard became part of my favorite writers list in about 1990 when I first encountered his *Spirit of the Disciplines*. I already had been reading Richard Foster when I accidentally discovered the connection between the two of them. His later works—*The Divine Conspiracy* and *Renovation of the*

*Heart*—have been especially helpful in an intentional pursuit of life with God.

### **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

I repeatedly am drawn to Colossian 3:1-17 as a portrait of the Christlike life pursued communally by God's people. If I could preach only from one biblical text, however, I think it would be the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. It contains about all the biblical theology that could be distilled into five verses.

### **Who is your favorite person in the Bible, other than Jesus? Why?**

The apostle Paul, I suppose. I have spent lots of time with him over the years. He also is someone of whom we know a good bit about his life, as well as his thinking. Both dimensions have spoken to Christians over the centuries. I have a copy of Rembrandt's *Paul in Prison* hanging on the wall of my study.

### **Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.**

I once flew in the back seat of a Russian MIG trainer (L-39) with an American astronaut flying in the front seat.