

# **Robert Sloan: Christian education shapes hearts and minds**

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Since 2006, Robert Sloan has served as president of [Houston Baptist University](#). From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on leading that BGCT school. 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 worked, and what were your positions?**

Sue and I spent 23 years at Baylor, where I served as a faculty member in the religion department, the founding dean of Truett Seminary, president (1995-2005) and chancellor (2005-2006).

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

I grew up in Abilene, Texas, and was baptized at Pioneer Drive Baptist Church. Brother Jack Riddlehoover was my hometown pastor and is still a mentor and dear friend. At Pioneer Drive, I publicly committed my life to ministry and was both licensed and ordained to the gospel ministry there.

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

I was baptized into Christ in response to the gospel teaching of my parents, my Sunday School teachers, and the preaching of our minister, Ed Laux.

That commitment was reinforced over the years through many others, especially the preaching of Jack Ridlehoover and the witness of Christian friends.

I was also greatly influenced while in high school by a trip Pioneer Drive sponsored to Glorieta, where numerous conversations with our youth director encouraged me toward an important recommitment to Christ.

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

I was educated from first- through 12<sup>th</sup>-grades in Abilene, Texas, and graduated from Cooper High School in 1967. My bachelor's degree is in religion and psychology from Baylor University (1970). I have a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary (1973) and a doctorate in theology from the University of Basel, Switzerland (1978).

## **Ministry/Profession**

### **Why do you feel called to your particular vocation?**

The calling I have in the field of Christian higher education is probably due to my Christian parents, for whom education was a significant priority. I think the greatest influences in life are families, churches, education and the gospel.

The gospel is the power of God working in us by the Spirit through the message of the crucified and risen Jesus. It transforms us in the direction of Christlikeness, which means humanity as divinely intended, a restoration of the image of God that enables us to do God's work in the world.

I am energized every day by the opportunity to work in the world of Christian education because it presents the opportunity to multiply the

impact of the gospel. Like the family and the church—which should not be separated—Christian education works to shape the heart and mind toward Christ. It is thus an extension of the true work of the family and the church.

**Please tell us about your BGCT institution—the breadth and nature of its work, including its mission, measures of scope, etc.**

HBU is a comprehensive university. We offer undergraduate and graduate degrees, including both masters and doctoral degrees.

We have 61 undergraduate degrees, 38 masters degrees and two doctoral programs, with more on the way. Our online offerings have increased greatly in recent years, with some 17 programs offered exclusively online, plus many programs offered both residentially and online.

We are recognized for genuine excellence in a number of areas, including theology, nursing, the humanities, psychology and education. In the fall of 2018, we will begin classes with special programs in cyber engineering, electrical engineering and computer engineering.

We are well-known for our pre-med programs and for having the first MBA in the city of Houston starting more than 40 years ago.

Our studio artists are recognized around the world for their productivity and exhibitions. Our students in the arts continue to lead the state in The Rising Eyes of Texas competition. We are known throughout the city for our choral programs, our Honors College and our internationally recognized apologetics program.

One exciting new development is our new College of Engineering.

## **What do you like best about leading your institution? Why?**

I love the opportunity to work at HBU because the culture is so open to change. The city has a very entrepreneurial spirit, and the university itself is known for its ability to grow and adapt to new conditions in the marketplace. We are a unique combination of deep, traditional Christian commitments coupled with a willingness to change as conditions warrant.

## **What aspect(s) of your institution and/or its mission do you wish more people understood?**

The diversity of Houston is shared by HBU. We are probably the most diverse private university in America. The opportunity we have to influence the various cultures of the world and to influence America through its character as a melting pot is significant.

This is the most dynamic and exciting city I've ever lived in, and it is an amazing experience every day to work in Christian higher education in an institution like HBU and in a city like Houston.

## **How has your institution and its mission changed since you began your career?**

The mission of HBU has not changed in my years at the university, but our vision statement, our goals and aspirations, and the way we deliver education have continued to change at a rapid pace in a very dynamic environment.

Higher education has changed enormously throughout the world in recent years, and HBU is no exception. Government influence, the cost of a university education, K-12 preparedness of students, the content and delivery of material to be mastered in an ever-changing digital age, accreditation, cultural norms with respect to families and lifestyle—all of

these have changed, but our mission of providing an outstanding, cutting-edge university education that is unapologetically committed to the scripturally understood Lordship of Jesus Christ has not changed.

## **What one aspect of your job gives you the greatest joy or fulfillment?**

Reflecting on the implications of the Lordship of Jesus Christ for the world of higher education and trying to translate those implications into a vision and set of strategies that will be effective in the current environment, especially for the purpose of having a transformative impact in the lives of students for extending the kingdom of God.

## **About Baptists**

### **What are the key issues facing Baptists?**

The issues facing Baptists are similar to the kinds of issues facing institutions the world over, that is, maintaining historic identity and mission while being able to adapt rapidly.

The growing non-denominationalism of Christian culture is a primary example of the challenges Baptists face. Even our name has become controversial, yet it reflects things that are deep within our tradition and identity.

How can we maintain the deep scriptural commitments we as Baptists have historically had about preaching, discipleship, congregational life, cultural engagement, freedom of conscience, and a heart for missions without losing our identity in a world of rapid change, especially a world where the foundational cultural units of marriage and family are so radically challenged and in many cases redefined in ways that actually nullify all biblical definitions of marriage and family?

Baptists have to figure out new cultural channels and strategies for expressing and living out our deeply scriptural beliefs and heritage.

I think our Baptist institutions and our churches face almost unprecedented challenges with respect to the nature of the family. The kinds of ministries and missions we must all think about and direct our strategies toward relate to the family.

We used to be able to focus on strengthening the family, but now, in addition to strengthening families, we must help repair the brokenness of families and even contend for the definitions of family, marriage and gender. In spite of these definitional challenges we are facing, nuclear families (as grounded in marriage between a man and woman) and biological identities (as male and female) are not going away.

Therefore, how can we engage in restorative and redemptive activities (including service, research and teaching) that are prepared to bring healing and clarity in places where our culture has caused such destruction? Mental and spiritual health/salvation for individuals and families must continue to occupy our ministries of healing, teaching, discipling and preaching.

## **About Robert**

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

Jack Ridlehoover, Harold Cunningham, Richard Scott, David Brooks and many others. They all combined deep Christian commitments with the ability to dream, plan and operationalize a vision.

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

In terms of theological resources, I am always helped by the books of N. T. Wright, Richard Hays, C. S. Lewis, and the commentaries of Gordon Fee, George Beasley-Murray and F. F. Bruce. I read extensively in the world of fiction and especially enjoy young adult fantasy and detective fiction. I also enjoy reading 19th and 20th century American history.

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

Romans 8. I love this great text because of its theological depth and scope and its emotional power. It covers Christology, the atonement, the nature of the Law, the work of the Spirit, Christian behavior, suffering, hope, the resurrection of the body and the new creation, assurance, and the love of God in Christ, a love which conquers sin, death and all the powers of darkness.

## **Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?**

My favorite Bible character other than Jesus is the apostle Paul. More than any other New Testament writer or leader, he shaped by his prayers, pastoral leadership, scriptural exegesis, and letter writing the parameters of Christian thinking for all generations. He was the one under whose Spirit-inspired thinking and influence biblical theology has much of its shape and power.

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

Sue and I originally thought as (naïve) newlyweds that we would not have children. As of today, we have seven children, all married, and 21 grandchildren!