

HELPING STUDENTS REFLECT ON HOW GOD HAS USED PREACHING IN THEIR OWN LIVES

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The School-Wide Context

Talbot School of Theology has made an extensive commitment to spiritual formation. Each student is required to take two courses in their first two semesters that specifically focus on "intentional character development."

The first course, *Personal Foundations for Ministry*, meets 2 hours a week, with enrollment limited to 20. Taught by specialized faculty, it deals with such things as:

- Identifying the people, events, and circumstances that God has used to build the student to the person they presently are.
- Recognizing how their family of origin has affected their theological perspective, personal growth, and individual relationships.
- Understanding the experiences that have had a negative impact on their lives, and how "losses" (e.g. death, divorce of parents, personal failures) have contributed to their identity.
- Comparing theologies of sanctification, and finding one's place in the sanctification process.
- Dealing with forgiveness.
- Taking assessments, such as MMPI, 16PF.
- Going on an all-day spiritual retreat.
- Beginning a Mentoring Couple relationship through their local church.
- Developing a Growth Covenant to guide their development for the rest of their seminary experience.

The second course, *Spiritual Mentoring Group*, meets 1 1/2 hours each week, with enrollment limited to 12. Different faculty members serve as mentors, in addition to those who taught the first course. The weekly meetings are given over to students sharing their Growth Covenant with the group, and then the group supporting and holding each other accountable for continued development in specific areas. A second retreat takes place, this time overnight.

After the student has completed 30 units, a faculty committee reviews the Growth Covenant with the student. This review provides the opportunity for celebration of progress, discussion of struggles, and, if necessary, appropriate corrections, focused needs, or dismissal. The completion of this review-which covers theological, spiritual, academic, emotional, and practical concerns-is prerequisite to registration for further classes.

In addition to this school wide commitment to spiritual formation, each individual course is supposed to have some component which lifts the student away from the "academic," and into a recognition of how the subject material affects their personal spiritual lives.

The rest of this paper deals with how we have attempted to do that with the two required homiletical courses.

The First Homiletical Course

The first homiletical course is the basic "preparation and delivery" course. It meets for 3 hours a week, with enrollment limited to 18.

The first two-thirds of the course are given to lectures on how to prepare a biblical message, and the final third is devoted to student sermons.

Each student preaches twice. The first message, on a single verse from the Epistles, is limited to 12 minutes. The second message, up to 15 minutes, can be on any passage of the student's choice.

At various times during the course, the students are asked to submit a onepage "Reflection Paper." The general instructions for the 4 papers are:

As part of your "quiet-time" with God, on in addition to it, please "remember, reflect on, and give thanks to God" for how He is working in your life in the following areas. Let it be a time of gratitude and worship for His special love and care in your life.

Also, jot several quick paragraphs, no more than one page for each area, to let me know the summary of your thoughts on each of these. The questions or suggestions are simply to spur your thinking; they do not all need to be addressed in the paragraphs to me.

The first Reflection is due the third week of the semester, and focuses on "**The influence of preaching in your life.**" The suggestions for the one-page paper are:

Can you recall a particular message which had a critical impact on your life, one which radically changed the direction, thinking, or actions of your life? What was going on in your life at the time? How did you happen to be at the preaching event? What did the speaker say or do that has such an impact on you?

Or, are there some speakers whose consistent preaching has been a significant part of your spiritual growth? What major themes came through their preaching, and influenced you spiritually? What good skills in preaching did you observe in them; what made them effective speakers?

There are several benefit to this first Reflection:

- As the student is beginning a course on preaching, they recall how God has powerfully used preaching in their own life.
- Hopefully, the student will be encouraged to expect that they too, once they start preaching, will be used with similar impact on many individuals, most of whom will be

unknown to them.

- The professor is blessed out of his socks on reading these brief bios! If you ever wonder whether your preaching accomplishes anything, reading 18 papers of testimony about the power of preaching will make you bounce in your seat!
- If the student focuses on the second suggestion-a *speaker* who has impacted them, as opposed to a *message* which changed their life the professor gets an idea of whose preaching the student admires, and whether this might pose a difficulty in the teaching process (e.g., that speaker has a different homiletical approach than what will be developed in class).

The second Reflection occurs toward the end of the lecture weeks, after the concepts of "contemporary relevance" have been extensively dealt with in class, and focuses on "**The ministry of a recent sermon.**" The directions for the second Reflection page are:

In the last few weeks, have you heard a message which seemed specifically relevant to your life-i.e., as you were listening to the speaker, you found yourself thinking of some specific situation or person, and felt that God was giving you insight into how He wanted you to think or act regarding the matter? Do you remember the theme of the sermon? What specifically within the message caused you to think concretely about your own circumstances and situation?

The responses on this second Reflection paper tend to go in to directions:

- Most students recall a particular message, either as church or in the seminary chapel, that spoke to them directly. In addition to the spiritual benefit they gained, they are hopefully again reminded that God uses preaching in people's lives which it is biblically and relevantly presented.
- About a third of the students ruefully confess that they cannot recall anything relevant in the preaching at their local church over the past month or so. Hopefully this observation results in a vow that their own preaching will be different.

The third and fourth Reflections occur within a week after the student has preached each of their two messages in the last third of the course. The papers focus on "**The blessing from your own message,**" and the guidelines are:

During your preparation of the message, what particular truth or concept excited you, warmed your heart, or made you realize something in a deeper and more personal way? What thoughts did it stir in you? How did God use it in your own life?

The purpose of these final Reflections is to highlight how we as the preachers often get more from our messages than those who hear us. God uses our preaching in our own lives!

The Second Homiletical Course

The second homiletical course is about one-third lecture (e.g., filing system, creative forms, topical preaching, reading Scripture, word-choice, writing for the ear, physical setting), and two-thirds preaching. The course meets for 3 hours a week, with enrollment limited to 15.

Each student preaches 3 times. The first message is a topical sermon, limited to 15 minutes. The second message must be on a narrative text, and is also 15 minutes. The student has freedom to pick any biblical passage for the third message, which can go 20 minutes.

The following paragraph appears in the Syllabus handed out on the first day of class:

Within a week of giving each sermon, please turn in a one-page reflection on that sermon:
What factors led you to select that topic or passage? What particular truth or concept excited you, warmed your heart, or made you realize something in a deeper and more personal way?
What thoughts did it stir in you? How did God use it in your own life?

Hopefully this furthers their awareness that preaching frequently arises out of the stirrings of our own spiritual lives, and then fans those embers into a blazing fire.

These reflection papers are part of preparing a student to preach-reminding him of the power preaching has had, and continues to have, in his own life, and encouraging him to believe that it can have an equal power in his hearers.