

## **Pedagogical Insights on Teaching African American Preaching**

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This paper reflects on my unique journey through the pastorate to become a teacher of preaching, and on the pedagogy I developed along the way. I have come to believe that African American preaching can help generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity in the twenty-first century, and that conviction has shaped my pedagogy.

### **1989–1999: The Beginnings of a Practical Pedagogy**

I began teaching preaching as an adjunct seminary professor in 1989. I was working on my second Doctor of Ministry degree, this time in African American preaching with Henry H. Mitchell and Edward L. Wheeler. Mitchell is known as the academic father of black preaching because of his groundbreaking 1970 book, *Black Preaching*.

Mitchell sought to educate a cohort of students to teach black preaching. In the 1950s and '60s, following national exposure to the oratory of many civil rights preachers, especially Martin Luther King Jr., many seminaries invited black preachers to teach preaching. Though he thought those invited were fabulous preachers, Mitchell worried they had little training in homiletical theory. He and Wheeler therefore recruited a cohort of black preachers and trained them in homiletical theory. He insisted that we learn more than how to teach black preaching—we were to know the whole field and be competent to teach all students.

Reflecting back, I see that while I learned homiletical theory and was prepared to teach the whole field, I did not receive a formalized pedagogy. Pedagogy was always implied, but we had no explicit readings, discussions, or training in pedagogy. As a result, I entered the classroom in 1989 with little pedagogical guidance other than the good and bad of what I had experienced as a student.

I populated my syllabus with reading assignments. After weeks of lectures, I finished the class by having each student preach a sermon, to which their classmates and I offered critiques. When the class concluded, I devoured the student reviews. The consensus was that students felt they had learned to preach more effectively. I was invited back the next year and incorporated what I had learned in teaching my first master's-level class. By the time I began my third year of teaching, I had finished the program with Mitchell and Wheeler, and I used my new insights to strengthen the syllabus and develop class handouts.

Feedback from my preaching class students helped me turn my doctoral thesis into my first contribution to the field of preaching, a homiletical methods book titled *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*.

Classes overflowed, and my courses became a yearly staple in the MDiv curriculum. My basic pedagogical model was that of a strong professor who lectures while students take notes and respond through discussion. Toward the end of the course, based on the readings, lectures, and discussions, students would practice the basics of a celebrative sermon. I continued using this

teaching model until I became uncomfortable with it in the late 1990s. With the advent of computers and the internet, students and their learning styles were changing. I sensed the need to adjust my teaching methodologies—to rely less on lectures and more on interaction and student ownership of the learning process. By this time, I was teaching preaching in MDiv and DMin programs at several seminaries.

Seeking to develop a less lecture-intensive pedagogical model, I conceived the idea of recording my in-class lectures for two years and then editing the best of this material into a set of digital lectures. I designed a makeshift workbook to accompany the lectures. Students would be responsible for listening to the lectures and responding to the workbook questions outside of class. Students would prepare and deliver two sermons—one at the start of the course and one at the end. I discovered I could more carefully target the lectures and instruction to students' specific needs after hearing them preach.

I learned something valuable when I rolled out this new pedagogy in 2000. The sooner I got students up to preach, the more they learned. As I tested this model—having students listen to lectures ahead of class, using the critique of sermons as the central means of teaching pedagogy, and assigning supplemental readings to expose students to different methods and perspectives of homiletics—it showed itself to be effective. Lectures and readings could fit within the practice of preaching rather than dominating the course and leaving only a small window for practice.

In my first ten years of teaching preaching, I developed a consistent set of values that have formed the basis of my pedagogy.

## Seven Fundamental Pedagogical Values

1. **Preaching is very much alive.** Following in the African American preaching tradition, I believe preaching is neither dead nor on life support in light of cultural and religious shifts. Quite to the contrary, I have based my pedagogy on the belief that the present moment is ripe with potent opportunity for great and impactful preaching. Preaching can now, like never before, make a huge difference in our culture and world.
2. **The class is a community of practice.** The preaching class is a community of practice, a safe space where learners experiment with preaching methods and the teacher and classmates provide a supportive and affirmative community. I insist that students support, encourage, listen to, and learn from one another. Such an environment, encompassing group exercises and small group learning, is necessary for improving one's preaching.
3. **Class feedback and critique serve as affirmative pedagogy.** Critiquing sermons is an art form modeled by the teacher, with the goal of providing honest, yet affirmative feedback. Sermon feedback should build up rather than tear down, especially in light of many students' already fractured confidence. The teacher and students all work together to affirm, critique, and support one another.
4. **The aim is to develop the unique gifts of all.** Even though I was born and bred in the African American preaching tradition, I would never attempt to make anyone into a "black preacher." The goal is to use the genius of the black preaching tradition to

highlight and encourage each student's uniqueness and gifts. African American preaching has profound insights for preaching, but students have to consider their own tradition and context.

5. **Preaching is a vulnerable act, and risk is sacred.** Risk, tears, and vulnerable emotions are part of the class instruction and the preaching process. Sometimes insights from lectures, discussions, and sermon critiques provide moments of self-awareness that are deeply personal and emotional. Such moments are gifts of the Holy Spirit. We ensure the time and space to process the Spirit's movement.
6. **Technology is a friend to pedagogy.** In various expressions—from video to digital lectures to hybrid and online classes—technology is an asset and is not to be disregarded or feared. Technology is a pedagogical tool that opens doors to creative learning in the contemporary moment.
7. **Only the God revealed in the biblical text has the power to save.** The heart of the preaching process is theological reflection and practice based in the biblical text and the God who is revealed through the text. While rhetorical tools and practices are necessary to help reach hearers, theological substance is always the lead partner. Rhetoric, social science, visual images, screens, stories, illustrations, and so on are complementary partners, but the power of salvation is rooted in the biblical text.

## **2000–2012: A Season of Practical Pedagogy**

With these seven fundamental preaching values in place, I moved into the second era of my growth in pedagogy. As an adjunct professor at various seminaries, I began to organize class handouts into the rudiments of a new workbook. Internet video was exploding, and I sampled the waters by introducing a series of brief homiletical instruction videos on YouTube called “The Five Most Common Preaching Mistakes.”<sup>1</sup>

The response was overwhelming, and I realized that short videos could become an important part of the pedagogical process. In class and in preaching workshops around the country, videos continued to earn favorable responses.

## **2013–Present: The Advent of a Pedagogical Theory**

In July 2013, I accepted an offer from Christian Theological Seminary (CTS) in Indianapolis, Indiana, to teach preaching full time. In 2014, I developed my first formal workbook, *Preaching As Celebration: Digital Lecture Series and Workbook*. The workbook brought together digital class lectures, reading materials, videos, classroom handouts and exercises, and a selected bibliography all in one place. Students loved the on-demand nature of the lectures and videos.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank A. Thomas, “The Five Most Common Preaching Mistakes,” Academy of Preaching and Celebration at Christian Theological Seminary, <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/preaching/resources/five-most-common-mistakes>.

Consistent positive feedback convinced me to develop a broader set of three- to five-minute videos to enhance student learning.”

At my own expense, I flew to Johannesburg, South Africa, and, with a production team, shot ninety-six short videos based on *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* and my new homiletical textbook, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*. On-demand video instruction became a key part of my pedagogy. In 2018, I updated the preaching workbook with clearer illustrations, a revised bibliography, improved writing exercises, and so on.

CTS and I soon began developing a PhD program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric, the first of its kind. The program’s mission is to teach, archive, and develop the depth, beauty, power, and imagination of black preaching in order to generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity in the twenty-first century. We devised it as a cohort-based program to experiment with the power of peer learning—both to enhance academic learning and to help with student retention.

Stimulating a preaching renaissance could not happen if we trained students to teach only in the academy. In the African American community, the majority of preachers do not go to seminary. Our program trains students to teach anyone who wants to improve their preaching at any level—novice, less experienced, or experienced, including those pursuing continuing education. As a graduation requirement, students have to teach two preaching courses in their home community—classes that target non-seminary trained students. We want to be pedagogically effective not only at the seminary level, but for every preacher who wants to improve. Because I had not received formalized pedagogical instruction as part of my PhD education, I made a class in pedagogy one of the required courses of the new PhD program. In spring 2019, Debra J. Mumford, professor of homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and an affiliate faculty member of our PhD program, taught our first course in contemporary pedagogy.

To meet the goal of generating a preaching renaissance, we knew we needed to reach out to the community with a pedagogical opportunity. We therefore developed the idea of a Mixed Methods Preaching Conference to expose learners to three homiletical methods: womanist, narrative, and expository preaching. The ultimate goal was to help participants improve their preaching by clarifying their preaching method. We headlined the conference with three master practitioners of the featured preaching styles and invited PhD students who had completed three years of classes, including the pedagogy class, to teach preaching labs. Lab participants received method instruction from PhD students, preached a seven-minute sermon, and had their sermon critiqued by lab leaders and classmates.

In addition, I developed the African American Preaching Legacy Series, in which I interview more than fifteen prominent African American preachers on camera about their preaching. These videos serve as one of the prime pedagogical instruments of the PhD program for the community. Videos in the series have collectively received more than 350,000 views on YouTube as of this writing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This video interview, “A Conversation with Dr. Howard-John Wesley hosted by Dr. Frank A. Thomas,” published on YouTube in February 2019, has received more than 42,000 views at the time of this writing: <https://youtu.be/1a-6CqrnkhE>.

## Future of Preaching Pedagogy

In this final section, I respond to the initial questions posed to me in the request to write this paper.

### 1. What are the fears that keep homileticians from using new ways of teaching?

First and foremost, many of us were trained within a traditional, lecture-based pedagogical model, with graded paper production as the standard assessment tool. Yet most preaching classes use preaching, not paper production, as the assessment tool. I sensed that participants might need a bridge to help them shift from the paper production model to the practice of preaching model—and that a required pedagogy class as part of a PhD program in homiletics would be a natural fit. But pedagogical instruction in PhD programs is uneven. Many graduates construct pedagogy based upon what they have experienced—good and bad—and how they have been taught. Many schools focus on the theory and content of the homiletical field; the student’s pedagogy is not a high priority. Far too many graduates in their first teaching positions overload their syllabi with content, and it takes them several years to develop an approach that balances content and practical teaching. I believe that a pedagogy class would help tremendously.

Based upon these assertions, I informally polled several seminary faculty colleagues to learn whether pedagogy was taught or required in their doctoral education. Here are two representative samples:

*I did not have a class, unfortunately. I mostly learned from my experiences as a student and from the guidance of more senior colleagues who were generous enough with their time to help. —Calvin Theological Seminary colleague*

*I remember one course that targeted the work of teaching while I was a student at Vanderbilt. The course was titled “Teaching the Bible: Biblical Interpretation as Congregational Practice,” and I worked as the teaching fellow for the course. I benefited from access to the Center for Teaching while I was a doctoral student at Vanderbilt.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the center offering a formal certificate in teaching, as a graduate teaching fellow in the Graduate Department of Religion, I was required to participate in workshops around pedagogy sponsored by the center. The other resource that helped me fine-tune my pedagogy (and my thinking about teaching) was the Wabash Center.<sup>4</sup> I was part of a learning group at Wabash during my time at Vanderbilt. —CTS colleague*

As these sample comments illustrate, pedagogy is unevenly administered and applied in PhD programs—at least in the programs of the teachers of preaching that I contacted. I believe pedagogy must be taught to doctoral students. I even suggest that pedagogy instruction can help us teach a far broader audience than seminary students, reaching any preacher who wants to improve. I would like teachers of preaching to be capable of teaching seminary- and non-seminary trained persons alike.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu>

On another note, professors often fear teaching online and distance learning courses, which require new pedagogical methods and practices. Some within our seminary have found it hard to let go of familiar classroom relationships and develop new, online class intimacy. We have also struggled with how to take a fourteen-week class and distill the information into a one-week or three-weekend intensive course. The pedagogy has to change, and we have faced some resistance. A tremendous amount of research has been published on pedagogies and strategies for online and distance learning and the general levels of anxiety in seminaries and faculties about these matters. I feel no need to contribute to what has already been said.

Aside from the anxiety surrounding online and distance learning, I observe a general anxiety in many seminaries as a result of shrinking enrollments and budgets, fewer faculty appointments, campus relocations, reduced staffs, and higher demands being placed on remaining faculty. Many seminaries are reducing the number of hours required for graduation, which means intense debates are taking place about what should and should not be included in the curriculum. These factors significantly affect pedagogy, and more study and writing would help all involved to more effectively deal with the tremendous shifts in twenty-first century theological education.

The culture is shifting to on-demand services, such as Uber, Amazon, and DoorDash. My thinking is that the “big box” seminary model might not work going forward. New models of theological education are being born but we don't yet know what the best model will look like. Our PhD program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric is one new model. Several seminaries have online master of divinity programs. New seeds are being planted all around us.

## **2. What has already changed and what must yet change when it comes to how we teach preaching?**

I believe change is afoot in how students view what makes an effective professor. Adult learners do not want to be lectured to for a semester and then preach one sermon—the old preaching class paradigm. They want much more say in their education and class experience. The number of full-time residential seminary students is shrinking dramatically. Though there is still a critical role for the semester-long class, the reality is that more students are working to help pay for school and avoid potentially life-altering debt. Working students have tremendously busy lives, and they seem to want as much on-demand education and as many shorter, intensive classes as possible.

These changes in students' lives affect how much reading and class work they can get done. I have heard several professors say that today's students are reading less before coming to class. They also have less interest in collegial seminary life, taking an approach that says, “I get what I need from my classes and go home or go to work.” Scholarly leisure—time to read and satisfy intellectual and spiritual curiosities—is giving way to practical realities and “what I need to know to accomplish specific tasks.”

All of this is forcing pedagogy to change. Yet many professors were trained in the leisurely, scholarly method of intellectual and spiritual curiosity, which doesn't fit as well in this twenty-first century world. Instruction and learning are more diffused than under the “professor as authority” model. When professors recognize this, students consider them more effective.

Students seem to want scholarship that is more intricately connected to practice, along with scholarship that acknowledges their existing expertise and knowledge. This might be why the peer-to-peer learning model is so effective. The Lilly Endowment Inc. has extensive experience in peer-to-peer learning, so I will not say more. I believe people want theory that is connected to and rooted in practice.

On the other hand, while we seek to bring more practice into the classroom, I am also trying to bring more theology and theory into our practice. In particular, I am often dismayed by the lack of theological content in sermons. For all of the gifts and genius of the African American sermon, I often lament the popular effort among preachers to have people standing up, shouting, and viscerally emotional at the end of the sermon. This is an intense pressure seen in African American preaching like nowhere else. It can leave audiences manipulated and, in some instances, abused. We have far too many preachers more interested in the close of the sermon than in the sermon as a whole—preachers who watch the endings of sermons online so they can copy and paste celebrations into their own sermons in an attempt to leave people in an emotional frenzy.

As a consequence, I have heard several former students preach in congregations—students to whom I have taught the substantive theological content of the celebrative method—and wondered if my teaching was in vain. Far too many succumb to the pressure of the vaunted, ritualistic, and overhyped emotional close in the black church, to the sacrifice of theological content and sermon structure. Students today need more practice of theology and preaching theory, and homileticians need more theory and theology in their practice. This is the modern pedagogical dilemma.

An important question connected to our discussion is this: Do students today still buy the idea that Scripture is authoritative? In the African American community, the answer is yes. In my book *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, I define the characteristics of black preaching. The first characteristic is the centrality of the Bible, about which I wrote this:

This is not to be mistaken for a rigid biblical literalism. The Bible is seen as the inspired and dynamic source for understanding the world and the wise guide for life's decisions. Cleophus J. LaRue suggests: "More than a mere source for texts, in black preaching, the Bible is the single most important source of language, imagery, and story for the sermon."<sup>5</sup>

By and large, the African American community still sees Scripture as authoritative, though pockets of variance exist. I teach with a high view of the authority of Scripture.

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<sup>5</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 87.

### **3. How does the church shape the way we teach preaching?**

I believe that the academy must ask itself what its goal is in teaching preaching. Whom do we want to teach and what do we want to see happen in the world as a result of our teaching? The answers to these questions will shape pedagogy. I want to teach anyone, anywhere who wants to improve their preaching—seminary or non-seminary student, experienced or beginner, African American or non-African American. The genius of African American preaching can help generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity in the twenty-first century. This goal informs my pedagogy, so I seek to produce PhD students who can teach at any level to anyone who wants to improve their preaching.

Not only must homiletics professors teach anyone who wants to improve their preaching, but they must write and develop homiletical theory and training materials for students at every level, including materials to assist clergy peer group leaders and participants in peer-to-peer learning programs. What if homiletics professors wrote and developed curriculum for these groups or trained group leaders to lead more effectively?

In short, we must launch a more focused effort to help those who have studied preaching at the highest levels make their teaching more accessible to those who want to improve their preaching—that is, if we want to generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity.