

Delighting to Preach: Teaching Towards Affective Formation

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Abstract: *Learning to preach is an activity of holistic formation involving a student's intellect, behavior, and emotions. Yet it is this last component – affective formation – that often proves most difficult to address in a required preaching course. How does one form student affections for preaching so that they come to delight in the practice when they only take the course as a requirement? What does it mean to teach in ways that aim at affective formation? What activities can students do to demonstrate formation of the affections? This paper draws on Jonathan Edwards's account of the religious affections to develop strategies for affective formation within the context of a preaching course. It reflects on one pedagogical strategy used by the author for teaching toward affective formation in preaching courses. Overall, this article seeks to foster a conversation on the importance of affective formation for preaching and pedagogical strategies for bringing it about.*

Introduction

"I only took this course because I had to, but now I can't imagine my ministry *without* preaching." If you have heard a student make such a claim about your preaching course, you know how energizing and encouraging it can be. A student reluctantly enters your class because it was either required or was the only course that fit a busy schedule. But by semester's end, they have experienced a change of heart. They become passionate about preaching and see it as a central aspect of their burgeoning ministerial call and identity. I saw this happen frequently as a teaching assistant, and as a professor have even been blessed to experience it in my own classroom.

But I must admit, somewhat embarrassingly, that my reaction in those instances had always been surprise: "*How did that happen?*" The change the student describes is not what I was aiming for. Rather, my focus was on the skills and strategies of sermon design and development. I sought to help students "carry out the fundamental components of sermon exegesis, construction, and performance" and "exercise strategies for planning and carrying out a contextually sensitive and theologically rich preaching ministry."¹ But what this student described was not a skills-related acquisition of abilities but a *conversion*. Their disposition toward preaching had changed. They were now *excited* by it, they *wanted* to do it more, and they *desired* for this practice to become a major component of their ministry. I was teaching for intellectual formation or knowledge acquisition, and what happened was the formation of the student's desires and affections so that they now delighted in the practice of preaching.

If learning to preach is not merely about proper techniques for sermon construction but an activity of holistic formation, then it is important to understand how that student's conversion happened.² Or stated more technically, if learning to preach is about entering a particular way of life – *the preaching life* – then those of us who care deeply about the formation of preachers and ministers (whether a professor of preaching, a field placement supervisor, or a ministry mentor)

¹ These were stated learning outcomes in my course syllabus.

² See, Michael Pasquarello III, *We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken: A Grammar of the Preaching Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) and David Ward, *Practicing the Preaching Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

must incorporate a holistic vision of formation for such a life in our pedagogy.³ Such formation includes *affective formation*, the cultivation of a student's disposition and affections so that they come to delight in the preaching life.

In this article, I take an initial step in exploring the place of affective formation within the context of a preaching course. I deploy a transversal approach to engage Jonathan Edwards's work in the religious affections.⁴ This examination focuses on what the affections are and their role in the practice of preaching and the cultivation of a preaching life.⁵ With this understanding of the affections in hand, I explore what affective formation would entail and share one pedagogical strategy I have begun to incorporate in my own preaching courses. Above all, I hope this paper fosters a conversation about the important role of affective formation within our homiletical pedagogy.

Edwards, Affections, and the Preaching Life

To gain conceptual clarity, I turn to one of the most well-known theological articulations of the affections: Jonathan Edwards's *Treatise on Religious Affections*. Edwards's account of the affections and their role in the Christian life – what Edwards calls “true religion” – provides us with a point from which to consider the place of the affections in the preaching life and how we might cultivate them in our students.⁶ Edwards wrote *A Treatise on Religious Affections* in 1746, and it represents his most mature reflection on true and false religion, and the place of human affections within the Christian faith.⁷ This was an important question in Edwards's time, as the effects of the First Great Awakening swept through New England and many wrestled with the aftermath of its revivals.⁸ As someone deeply involved in those revivals, Edwards sought both to

³ While my work with preachers and students occurs primarily within the context of the preaching classroom, I also recognize that many others contribute to the holistic formation of ministers and preachers. And while the context of our interactions may differ – the preaching classroom, the field supervisor meeting, or the coaching session with a mentee – they all share a responsibility for helping to foster the affective formation of the preacher and minister. Thus, while I write from the perspective of one who operates within the context of a formal preaching classroom (though not only there), I also believe affective formation – what it is and how one pursues it – is vital for anyone who works with those either training for or already serving in a preaching role.

⁴ My use of a transversal model allows me to focus on the question of affective formation. I engage Edwards's thinking on that issue as a means of addressing this question about affective formation and how we might develop intentionality around its formation in the preaching classroom. A transversal model of engagement allows me to engage Edwards as a resource on this specific question without committing me to a comprehensive defense of, or agreement with, his total theological project. The area of agreement is around a particular question or issue rather than adherence to a set of prolegomena assumptions. On this method, see Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

⁵ My exploration focuses on Edwards's most popular work on this topic, *A Treatise on Religious Affections*. This is not the only place in which Edwards explores the concept of the affections and their role in the human life but it is the most focused and it serves as a helpful starting point for my purposes. For a more comprehensive account of Edwards's conception of the affections, see Ryan Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards: “The High Exercise of Divine Love”* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019).

⁶ The reader can understand this article as establishing a link between Edwards's vision of the place of affections in the Christian life and my understanding of the role of affections in the preaching life. Thus, I draw an analogy between the Christian life and the preaching life, seeing the preaching life as one specific and unique form of life within the broader category of the Christian life.

⁷ Kyle Stroble, “Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Eds. Michael Allen and Scott Swain; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 295.

⁸ Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 161.

defend the genuineness of the Christian faith produced within them against critics and to curtail some of the excesses that the movement produced.⁹ Polemical in nature, Edwards's *Treatise* argues for the vital role of religious affections in "true religion." Doing so, he also considers how to discern good from bad affections and thereby cultivate the affections of true religion. For our purposes, it is important to see how he defines the affections, understands their function, and perceives the path of their development.

Edwards on the Religious Affections

Edwards's account of the affections occurs within his larger theological anthropology. According to Edwards, human beings are both soul and body, with powers corresponding to each.¹⁰ The soul has a rational power by which it perceives, discerns, views, and judges. The soul also has a power which enables it to be "inclined with respect to the things it views or considers; either is inclined to them, or is disinclined, and averse from them."¹¹ This second power is what Edwards identifies as the affections. Thus, for Edwards the affections are an act of the will; the "more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul" (WJE 2:97). It is by the affections – by our inclination to pursue or avoid – that we act toward what reason perceives. While Edwards does not equate the affections with emotions, there is an emotive element to them. Through reason we perceive something, and by our affections our will is shaped to act toward the thing perceived in some way. We perceive the good, for example, by our reason. And through our affections, we desire that good and move our will in ways that influence our actions toward that good. Thus, it is by the affections that we demonstrate our values and our attitude toward the world we perceive.¹²

This connection to the intellect and will is what leads Edwards to distinguish the affections from the passions. Passions, according to Edwards, are those responses that correspond to our more basic and animal-like qualities. These passions are fleeting in nature and duration, lasting only momentarily (WJE: 2: 98). Passions are more "sudden" and "violent," so that the rational intellect is overpowered by them and can lead one in ways contrary to reason and the intellect.¹³ In contrast, Edwards maintains a direct relation between the religious affections and the human intellect so that "the affections themselves must be understood in partly cognitive terms."¹⁴ The affections move in concert with the intellect, leading one to act in accordance with reason.¹⁵ This relationship

⁹ *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* is far from Edwards's only attempt to address these questions. Rather, the work is the final in a ten-year process of reflection on the results of the Great Awakening.

¹⁰ Kyle Stroble, "Jonathan Edwards's Affective Anthropology," *JSFSC* 16.1 (2023): 34-35. In many ways Edwards's theological anthropology mirrors that of the medieval resources on which he draws. For Edwards and his theological forbears, there is a clear hierarchy between the soul and body. The soul is the location of the "higher powers" of reason, intellect, and affections. The body is the site of the "lower" powers of the appetites. Thus, a chief aim of formation is bringing one's body and its appetites into alignment and under the control of the soul and its powers. For a more comprehensive discussion of the body and soul, and their relationship within Edwards's theological anthropology, see Martin, *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 88.

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:96. From this point forward, citations from Edwards's writing will appear in the paragraph with the abbreviation WJE, followed by volume and paragraph number.

¹² Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, "The Moral Significance of Religious Affections: A Reformed Perspective on Emotions and Moral Formation," *SCE* 28.2 (2015): 153.

¹³ Ryan Martin, *Understanding Affections on the Theology of Jonathan Edwards: "The High Exercises of Divine Love"* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 231.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁵ Edwards contrasts the passions and their "beastly" quality with the affections which are an aspect of the rational functioning of our personhood as those made in the divine image. The affections belong to the soul which, when operative, guide the body toward its proper end. Whereas the passions belong to the body and oppress the soul.

to the intellect is what enables both the duration of the affections as they move us toward or away from a thing perceived. Because the affections are tied to the intellect, they are concerned with our first principles and ultimate goods. As such, the affections play in the background of our emotional lives, enduring through various stages and circumstances, and thereby shaping our decisions and actions in the world.¹⁶

Edwards makes a comparison between the place of the affections within the moral and religious life and our romantic relationships. In romantic relationships, there is an initial disposition in which we are drawn to another. And indeed, this initial passion is an important aspect of a relationship's development; without it the romantic relationship will never occur or endure. Yet one clearly does not feel that same passion all the time in the relationship with their partner. At some point, the love that exists in a romantic relationship shifts from the passion of the early stage to a more habitual disposition from which acts of kindness and love flow. It is this more habitual disposition, this more sustained orientation, to act toward a thing perceived – a partner, a moral good, God – that Edwards names as an “affection.”

The Function of the Affections

Edwards argues that our affections are an irreplaceable component of the Christian faith and what it means to live the Christian life (WJE 2:95).¹⁷ This is because the Christian faith, properly understood, is self-involving. It is not enough to assent on an intellectual level or to have a general knowledge of the content of Christian faith and doctrine. True belief, true religion, means that the one who believes has experienced the reality of God and God's work so deeply that they perceive God's activity as occurring *for them*. They become participants in the faith they believe rather than mere “knowers” of that faith's content. This experiential quality, for Edwards, leads to his claim that to truly belong to the Christian faith is to have one's entire being engaged by it. This involves our affections. One comes to perceive the realities of the Christian faith in such a way that they are not only moved intellectually, but affectively and emotionally. Edward notes that the “true religion” which God requires of us “does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wouldings, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God, in his Word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, fervent in spirit, and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion” (WJE 2:99). This is the case, Edwards claims, because the affections are the wellspring from which come our behaviors and actions. Human beings are not simply “brains on a stick” who make decisions through coldly rational logic.¹⁸ Rather, our affections play a prominent role in the ways we make decisions, in what we assume about the world, and in the actions we undertake. We do not first “reason” and then act; our affections are at work all along the way, shaping our reason and moving our wills to act.

Additionally, true religion requires a person's affective involvement because the call of discipleship is rarely straightforward or easy. Our previous example of an enduring marriage

Strobel, “Jonathan Edwards's Affective Anthropology,” 37.

¹⁶ It would be an interesting study to compare Edwards's notion of “affection” with the Thomistic account of “habit.” On some of the similarities, see Oliver Crisp, “Moral Character, Reformed Theology, and Jonathan Edwards,” *SSCE* 30.3 (2017): 262-277.

¹⁷ It is important to note that Edwards makes a distinction between those affections we have as human beings made in the image of God and those affections to which we awaken through the Spirit's activity. That distinction, while important to a larger vision of Edwards's conception of the affections, is not important for my general account in this section. For more on that distinction, see Martin, *Understanding Affections on the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.

¹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Habit of Power* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 1-26.

relationship makes this clear. At some point, if the relationship is to survive and thrive, it will require a shift from the purely romantic attraction in which it originated (though it may always be present) to a more enduring form of love with the affections at its base. Romantic, passionate attraction will not remain constant. And in those moments, what enables the relationship to endure are formed affections that enable one to continue loving another, even when they may not “feel like it,” choosing the sometimes difficult or arduous tasks which enduring love requires. In the same way, living out the Christian faith is not merely a matter of knowing at an intellectual level what we ought to believe or what we ought to do or being driven by an overwhelming passion. For it is often the case that we have a general idea of what the call of discipleship entails in any given moment, yet we struggle to fulfill that obligation because the action would be unpleasant in some way.¹⁹ Edwards notes this was the case for early Christian communities. As these communities grew in their faith, they faced immediate threats of persecution and ostracism by those outside the community. This is where one’s affective disposition becomes vital. It is through one’s affections that one can strongly will a good and act to bring it about, even though the actions might be difficult or sorrowful in some way.²⁰ And this allows one to experience genuine Christian love and joy even as one endures hardships that result from living out one’s faith in hostile circumstances. Thus, the affections are known by their “lively” and “vigorous” quality as they are expressed in our lives (WJE 2:98). By being sustained and powerful movements of the soul toward a thing perceived, we can live out the callings of the Christian life in the face of trial and hardship.²¹

The Formation of Affections

The connection of the affections to the intellect leads Edwards to suggest that they are not set in stone but are open to development over a lifetime. Our affections are influenced by any number of factors, including “the distemper of melancholy, doctrinal ignorance, prejudices of education, wrong instruction, false principles, peculiar temptations, etc.” and he is clear that all of these can hinder reason and the affections (WJE 2:180). Additionally, sin can exercise a disordering effect, such that one’s affections are deformed.²² Thus, Edwards’s account of the affections includes the assumption that while we are born with affective potential, our affections are something we will develop over a lifetime, with the help of the Holy Spirit and a host of other aides. Furthermore, that development will be, in some sense, intentional.

So how does one make the journey of affective development? As Strobel notes, a key aspect of Edward’s account is that someone’s affections cannot be moved to a more holy or developed state unless there is something better with which to replace the immature or deformed affection.²³

¹⁹ John Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 106-159.

²⁰ This dynamic leads Edwards to note that possessing well-formed affections does not mean that one will not experience negative feelings. Such negative feelings, according to Edwards, have their place and can lead one toward the good. Strobel, “Jonathan Edwards’s Affective Anthropology,” 47.

²¹ Edwards begins the treatise by reflecting on a passage from 1 Peter and the ways that love and joy for Christ – two primary affections – seemed to only increase for the Christian community in the face of trial and persecution. This leads Edwards to see that whatever challenge the community faced, the power of their affections – their love and joy – must be greater still (WJE: 2:94).

²² While Edwards did not have this language in his time, we might also reflect on the role of addictions in deforming the affections.

²³ Edwards uses the metaphor of “weaning” to speak of this development. We do not wean children from nursing without, at the same time, introducing other foods as a replacement. In the same way, one’s affections are not moved to the better without the immature or deformed affection having something ready to replace it. Strobel, “Jonathan Edwards’s Affective Anthropology,” 47.

This leads Edwards to take a developmental approach to the affection through which one embraces “what is better so that one’s body and soul are reformed away from what is ‘lower’ to what is higher.”²⁴ According to Edwards, affectional development is a process that occurs in three moves. First, one comes to a knowledge of what is true. This knowledge provides one with the *telos* toward which right affection is aimed, thereby avoiding deformation. Second, this grasping of the truth gives one sight of the good’s beauty. By glimpsing the beauty of the good, we find something toward which we rightly direct our affection. Finally, by grasping the truth and glimpsing the beauty of the good, one recognizes that their current state is not the good. It is this recognition that one’s current state is not the good that their affections can then move to the good and beautiful they have glimpsed through the true (WJE 2: 264).

The Affections and the Preaching Life

This sketch of Edwards’s view of the affections is brief. Yet if we take his account of the affections – what they are, what they do, and how they develop – we have a framework for better understanding the role of affections within the practice of preaching. While Edwards speaks about the affections and their importance in the life of the Christian, we can place this vision alongside a conception of preaching as *a way of life* that also calls for the development of the affections. And when we do, we see that Edwards’s understanding of the affections holds explanatory power for the experience with which I began this article.

A student enters the preaching course, perhaps reluctant to begin. Yet over the span of a semester, is introduced to various aspects of the preaching life: information on preaching’s history and its role in the Church’s life, techniques for developing sermons, strategies for engaging the biblical witness, virtues that sustain the practice, and a host of others. We might say that (hopefully) the student encounters something true about the practice of preaching and its place within the Christian faith. Additionally, the student is exposed to preaching exemplars through whom, by example, they experience the good and beautiful within the practice of preaching. As a result of their encounter with the field of homiletics and their experience of beautiful preaching, they come to recognize that their current state within the practice is not what they have experienced or witnessed. They now see a world of possibility that they experience as good and beautiful. And perhaps a new affection for the good of preaching has grown. They become someone who delights in the practice. What happens within the journey of the Christian life occurs also in their journey into the *preaching life*.

As with the Christian life, this new “conversion” into the preaching life is only a start. There is a long way for this student to go on their journey. There will be more knowledge to acquire, more beauty to encounter, more dispositions and virtues to form, and a host of other aspects of what it means to move into preaching as a way of life. What has occurred within the confines of the preaching course is merely a beginning into a life-long journey. However, Edwards’s account of the affections gives us language and a framework for understanding what has occurred in our classes when a student comes to love the practice of preaching. It is not merely that the student has rational knowledge of the practice. It is not merely that they have a toolkit of sermonic mechanics at their disposal. It is that the student’s affections have been influenced such that the soul’s powers have been moved toward this beautiful good. They have begun their movement into the preaching life and all the affective qualities such a way of life entails. They have moved from an intellectual knowledge of the practice to a delight in its work, goods, and ends. And while only a beginning, it is no less vital to a sustained and flourishing preaching

²⁴ Ibid.

ministry by being only a beginning. For it is through this beginning that the student will form the long-enduring affections necessary to sustain their preaching practice in the face of difficulties and challenge. It is this habitual disposition toward the good and the beautiful within the preaching life that will drive their continued growth and underpin their efforts on the road ahead. While only a start, it is vital for any future practice.

Teaching for Affective Formation

If such affective formation is vital for entering and sustaining the preaching life, how might we teach toward it? How might our pedagogy aim beyond the “basics” of homiletical instruction and incorporate aspects that intentionally seek the affective development of our students? How might we, in the context of our preaching courses, help students enter and begin their journey in the preaching life? In this final section I recount one pedagogical strategy I have incorporated in my introduction to preaching course.

BIBM 493 Preaching

BIBM 493 Preaching is an undergraduate-level preaching course for the Bible and Ministry majors at Abilene Christian University. It primarily consists of college juniors and seniors who are enrolled in the University’s undergraduate Department of Bible, Missions, and Ministry. I teach the spring course offering. As a university that historically serves students from Free Church traditions, students come to the course with varying levels of experience with preaching. Some students already have a considerable amount of preaching experience, having done it for years growing up in their congregations. Others are already preaching regularly at smaller congregations around town. However, some have only limited experience in preaching as part of their summer internships. Others will preach their first sermons in the course.

The variety of preaching experience is matched by the variety of discernment around their ministry callings. Students imagine themselves engaging in youth ministry, missions work, children’s ministry, non-profit and social justice ministries, family ministry, worship ministry, and a host of other options. However, it is rare that any see themselves as preachers or see preaching as something that will be a major component of their future work.²⁵ Yet this course is required for most of the ministry and Bible degree plans at the University. This contrast between the place of preaching in the students’ vocational imagination and the required nature of the course can easily create an adversarial dynamic. Students are often nervous about preaching (and receiving feedback) in front of their peers. This nervousness, combined with their resistance to being in the course to begin with, can predispose them to dislike the course before we have even begun. The course is also unique in that it does not run by the traditional undergraduate course framework (three or two meetings per week for 50 or 90 minutes). Instead, this course reflects a graduate course structure of one weekly, three-hour meeting. This format can be difficult for undergraduate students, given their work and other commitments within the university’s life.

As an introductory course, we spend most of the semester simply scratching the surface of the practice of preaching. I want them to be serviceable in the “mechanics” of preaching since many of them will be moving from that course into internships where they are expected to preach multiple times over a summer. I am aware and trying to teach to the congregational expectation of the student’s task competency around preaching. But I also want them to be aware of the wider

²⁵ I have often wondered if this is, at least in part, a function of the age of these students. As college juniors and seniors they are typically 20-22 years old. This often means that congregations are less likely to entrust a preaching ministry to them. As a result, they do not see preaching as a form of ministry that is open to them.

world of preaching that exists beyond their own experiences and traditions. We spend time exploring the wide variety of preaching diversity that exists and draw upon those diverse voices as influential for their own preaching practice. I also want them to have a foundation from which they can grow. So I devote time in that course to identifying various directions of growth they might pursue beyond our semester together. These are three ambitious aims, and the difficulty of accomplishing them is compounded by the reality of how much one can realistically cover in a single semester with college students who may or may not be interested in the course. For me, this raised the question of how I might aim at their affective formation. Indeed, is such formation even possible to accomplish intentionally, or is it simply a matter of the Spirit's activity (and divine humor) and being surprised by, and thankful for, the student who has expressed an "affective conversion" at the end of the semester? Is this something at which I can intentionally aim to bring about, or must I only accept it as a gift?

The Journey of Affective Formation in BIBM 493

My development of an assignment aimed at affective formation began with reflection on Jonathan Edwards's process for how such affective formation occurs within other arenas of life. According to Edwards, affective development occurs when we 1) perceive the truth, 2) glimpse the beauty of the true, and 3) recognize the gap between the beauty glimpsed and our present state. Glimpsing the beauty awakens our affections, and recognizing our distance from that beauty stirs us to pursue the true and beautiful. Thus, affective formation would involve some dialogue between these three aspects of Edwards's process. An assignment that sought to aid the student's affective formation would involve perception of the true, glimpsing or experiencing that truth's beauty, and recognizing the distance of their own practice from that truth, good, and beauty. What might this look like in a course that seeks to initiate students into the *preaching life*?

It occurred to me that my own journey into the preaching life began when I encountered excellent preachers; those in whose example I saw aspects of the kind of preacher and minister I one day hoped to be. It was through experiencing the beauty of their homiletical example that I gained aspirations for myself and the kind of sermons I hoped to proclaim. Those examples were often vastly different from the kinds of (rigid, fundamentalist) preaching with which I was familiar and defined my vision of preaching at that point. As I have grown in the preaching life, it has been through a continuing encounter with various exemplars that have propelled my movement. These exemplars have shifted and changed, depending on my own life and ministry, yet in each case there is something attractive in their homiletical example. I encounter the beauty of their preaching and that beauty stirs within me a movement of the affections that moves me deeper into the preaching life.²⁶ Thus, I began to wonder if such an experience reflected the kind of process of affective formation which Edwards describes.²⁷ I encountered the beauty of preaching that occurs when one is well-formed in the preaching life, and by encountering that beauty and the homiletical truth it

²⁶ This process is similar to the process of moral formation named by Agnes Callard. Callard notes that moral formation first begins by seeing examples we want to imitate, and it is through aspiring to be like that example that we begin to organize our lives around the values which lead us toward that example. See, Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁷ In some ways, this dynamic is something we have known for a long time. I can remember being told repeatedly as a student that one way to become a good preacher was "to listen to good preaching." Yet, sound as it may be, what that advice left unarticulated was why listening to good preaching has that effect. Reflecting on that advice through Edwards's account of the affections reveals that one of the reasons that advice "works" is because it creates opportunities for affective formation, which is vital if one is to grow into the practice of preaching.

contained, my affections were stirred in ways that led me toward it. Through encountering that beauty, I was moved to explore why it was beautiful. By exploring why it was beautiful, I discovered things that are true homiletically. And through that discovery, my journey into the preaching life moved forward. If this is how it worked for me, could I facilitate such encounters for students in my own preaching course? This led to the development of an assignment whose purpose was to open the door for homiletical encounters that would foster affective formation in my students.

BIBM 493: Affective Reflections Assignment

To foster opportunities for affective formation, I created a series of reflective assignments that aimed at helping students encounter examples of homiletical beauty, reflect on their experience of that encounter, and then project forward how they might incorporate that beauty into their own preaching life. The process is straightforward. I have an evolving set of sermons – some that are videos and others that are only audio – that I have students listen to and watch.²⁸ Students listen to between six and seven sermons, then write reflections on their experience. This reflection is governed by a three-part movement that reflects Edwards’s process of affective formation.

This reflection begins by asking the student to name their emotional experience with the sermon. At this point I do not want the student to assess the sermon through the lens of sermon “mechanics” we have learned in the course. Instead, I ask them to reflect on their emotional responses to the sermon. I ask them to name the emotion they felt most strongly through the sermon and their immediate reaction once the sermon was finished. I then have them name features of the sermon they found most beautiful. Admittedly, students sometimes struggle with this reflection because they want to begin analyzing the sermon. I must be explicit about “turning off” that part of their thinking and lean into their experiential encounter with the sermon.

Having had them name and reflect on their emotional experience of the sermon, I then have them move to questions of assessing. What do they think it was about the sermon which led them to experience the emotions they did? What within the sermon fostered the experience with it that they had? In this section students begin to make a turn to what I name “homiletical truths” by reflecting on the sermon in light of what we have explored in the course. Through reflecting first on their experience and then to the sermon and how it did what it did, they are able to name some aspects of preaching that are “homiletically true”: those things that lead to better rather than worse preaching. They may name the power and clarity of a theological claim, the pathos of the speaker, a moving insight or reframing of a biblical text, or any number of other dynamics. Whatever the students name, they can make a connection with some component of the course to uncover a kind of “best homiletical practice” which that particular sermon embodied.

The final movement of the assignment is to reflect on their own homiletical growth. I ask the student to put their own preaching in conversation with the sermon example they have just experienced. I then ask them to name ways in which their own preaching is like this example, and ways that it is not like the example. My intention in asking them to make this comparison is not to make the student feel inadequate (I am very intentional in communicating that). Rather, I want to help the student see something akin to Edwards’s notion of “distance” that is required for any affective or moral journey to begin. For students to feel any need to grow in the preaching life,

²⁸ I say an “evolving list” because the sermon “taste” of my students can differ wildly for many reasons. My selection of the sermon options grows out of prior work in the semester where we surface our preaching assumptions and dispositions. This helps me do some (admittedly small) adjusting to the sermons that are available to the students for this assignment.

they must be aware of how far the road ahead of them stretches. By asking them to compare their own preaching to this example in light of their experience of its beauty, they begin to realize ways in which their own preaching can grow and expand. And, indeed, they may now *desire* for their preaching to grow and expand in these ways after having encountered these exemplars.

I recognize that this assignment is far from perfect. Indeed, there may be other avenues that better capture the affective dimension of the preaching life. For example, might there be ways of incorporating the practice of spiritual disciplines into my pedagogy that could better speak to the affective realm of preaching? Yet by asking the student to experience beautiful examples of preaching, reflect on the emotions and impact of that beauty on them, and then compare that sermon example to their own preaching, I hope to facilitate an experience of the affections that will lead the student to desire to preach in particular ways. And by seeing both what is possible and how their own preaching might move toward these exemplars, they may come to delight in the practice as their own journey into the preaching life deepens.

Conclusion

To learn to preach is to enter a way of life, the preaching life. As a way of life, it contains a holistic vision that encompasses not only the preacher's intellect and their knowledge of skills and sermon mechanics, but their affections. And through their affections, their behaviors and actions. Yet how to accomplish such affective formation within the context of a preaching course is a difficult question. It is made difficult by dynamics common to "required" preaching courses, since such affective and habitual formation requires an initial willingness to enter a process of formation. It is made even more challenging by the nature of affective formation itself. Such formation is rarely a "straight line" from activity to formation, but involves many stops and starts, and entrusting oneself to a process one can only rightly perceive at the end. By leaning into affective formation, we are asking students to step into an open and ambiguous space, trusting us as they grope their way forward. This ambiguity around the affections and how they develop poses a challenge to pedagogical attempts to harness it.

Yet the difficulty of capturing it pedagogically does not negate the importance of such formation in our students and it does not invalidate our experiences of when it does happen when students encounter the practice of preaching in ways that they come to delight in it. This paper has used Jonathan Edwards's conception of the affections and their role in the Christian life as a starting point for reflecting on how we might shape our homiletical pedagogy to better capture the important role of the affections within the practice of preaching. With this *Edwardsian* lens I then gave one, admittedly imperfect, way that I have sought to incorporate affective formation within the context of an undergraduate preaching course. My hope is that we might increase our thinking and pedagogy around the formation of homiletical affections within our courses, so that the students we teach may enter the preaching life, delight in its practice, and flourish in the good Word that God has given them to speak.