

THE IMPACT OF ONE PROFESSOR

Alex Montoya, Th.M.
Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministries
The Master's Seminary

Dr. Robert Thomas has been my professor, mentor, friend, and colleague since I became a student at Talbot Theological Seminary in 1968. In those formative years of my ministerial preparation, he helped to frame my convictions about God's Word, i.e. the unwavering belief that the Bible is unquestionably the inspired, infallible Word of God. This foundation has been the basis for all other ministry and life.

Two outstanding qualities come to my mind when I remember the life and impact of Dr. Thomas upon my life and the lives of other students, past and present. First is his reputation for intellectual discipline and careful attention to his own work and to the work performed for him by us, the students. There is a work ethic he displays which makes cowards of most of us, but which eventually instills in us a desire to do the best we can in the handling of the Biblical text and thus in the ultimate communication of the Word of God. In the furnace of affliction, his classroom, we were molded into the serious and conscientious expositor. There, he instilled his passion for the original languages and for the truth of the text. Even today, his shadow is cast over my study and the Greek text is not far from my reach.

The second outstanding quality which Dr. Thomas possesses can be summed up in a description offered by one of my classmates during a time of great testing. He described Dr. Thomas as "the sweetest little old man that ever slit a throat and scuttled a ship." By this he meant that Dr. Thomas was a truly loving and caring person. All who know him are aware of that other side; he is compassionate and loving to all. He is always there for his students and they know it. He was there for me when I needed his human touch in the midst of personal trials. He was there for my wife and children. He always took a personal interest in us.

Although there are many instances in which Dr. Thomas impacted my life, there are three that stand out as special landmarks of his affirmation of my life and ministry. Students and young ministers are in desperate need of affirmation, i.e. to be reassured that they are spending their life in a worthwhile cause, that they are doing the right thing at the right time, and that they are

replicating in their lives what has been taught them in the classroom. He did all that for me in the early stages of ministry.

The first instance of his affirmation came early in my pastorate at First Fundamental Bible Church of Los Angeles. I took that church upon graduation from seminary in 1972 and it was indeed a humble beginning. It was a small church in a run-down building in the heart of the East Los Angeles barrio. Needless to say, it was far removed from the suburbs of Orange County. To this humble church I dared to invite the esteemed Dr. Thomas to deliver a series of sermons on spiritual gifts because our church needed to offset the charismatic influence in the community. It was a long shot, but I asked him to come. You cannot imagine my joy and admiration when he agreed. I felt so proud to introduce him to our congregation and to have him stand in my humble pulpit. What an encouragement to this young preacher. Then, he totally humbled me when he returned the honorarium in the mail, giving me an example to offer my ministry to the church-at-large without charge. I was reminded of the great Apostle Paul who ministered so effectively at his task. I see in Dr. Thomas a modern day Paul.

The second instance of his affirmation of my life was when he invited me to help teach a class in beginning Greek at Talbot Theological Seminary. Although not feeling quite qualified, I considered it a great honor to be asked to help such a great scholar (actually I felt like the batboy to a professional ball player). Yet his affirmation of my scholastic abilities provoked me to greater zeal in enhancing my teaching abilities and sent me down the road to the preparation of men for ministry. His confidence in me helped to sustain the courage to start and develop a Spanish-speaking seminary in Los Angeles and, in due time, also led to my desire to teach at The Master's Seminary. I wanted to do for others what he had done for me. Now in the halls of The Master's Seminary, I'm humbled to walk side-by-side with such a giant and also honored to know that he has confidence in me and my ministry.

The third example of Dr. Thomas' affirmation of my life and ministry was when he recommended me to Zondervan Publishing Company for the publication of the book *Hispanic Ministry in North America*. It was under his inspiration that the book took its form as a lecture at an ETS meeting and then went on to be published. He was the key to its publication and its subsequent influence in the Hispanic world in North America. Our Hispanic community is indebted to him.

Every preacher and pastor needs someone to stand in his corner, i.e. to affirm him, to believe in him, to encourage him, and to be there in case of an emergency. Dr. Robert Thomas has been there for my family and me. Now, he is more like a dear friend and father to me. I want him to know that it is my heart's desire to make him proud of me, to duplicate his life, and to influence others as he influenced me.