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Preaching and Place: A Mosaic of a German Perspective

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Abstract: *The question of preaching and place is currently the subject of intense debate in Germany. Due to a significant decrease in church membership, the question arises as to what place preaching has in today's society and how it can continue to be carried out in the future, both in word and deed. Related to this is the question of the aspirations of preaching and homiletics, and how they envision their place in society. This paper deals with the question of whose place preaching is and which voices are heard in this place. It argues that German homiletics must critically examine itself in terms of racism and make room for other voices. The paper concludes with a call for preaching and homiletics in the German context from a more humble place.*

Introduction

The following thoughts and remarks on preaching and place are specific to the German Protestant context. Like a mosaic, this paper highlights different perspectives on the topic from various angles. The intention of the paper is to open up a discussion, not to provide an exhaustive treatment of the outlined perspectives.

First, under "Preaching – My Place (in Society)," I situate myself as the author of this paper. In "Preaching and Its Changing Place in Society," the question of preaching's place in society will be emphasized due to a significant decrease in church membership. "Preaching—Which Place Do We Seek in Society?" addresses the question of which place preaching seeks in society and the hesitancy toward political preaching in the German context. In "Preaching—Whose Place?," I explore which voices are heard in German homiletics and preaching and which are left out. The final section, "Preaching from a Humbler Place," argues that German homiletics must engage in critical self-examination, address the issue of racism, and allow itself to be questioned.

Preaching – My Place (in Society)

In order to reveal the perspective from which I approach the topic, it is appropriate to provide some social context about myself as an author: I am a White German woman who was born and raised in Germany. I am a heterosexual, cisgender person belonging to the middle class. Apart from my gender, these elements contribute to my status as a privileged member of German society.

During my studies in Germany, all my professors were White and most were male. The majority of the content of my studies consisted of engaging with texts by White European or Euro-American theologians whose work significantly impacted my theological thinking. However, the lack of engagement with non-White theologies and voices also shaped my theological understanding and worldview, contributing to a narrowing of my perspective. During my studies, I had the opportunity to spend a year at Duke Divinity School in the United States. Although Duke University is an elite, predominantly White educational institution, my time there greatly broadened my perspective by exposing me to different voices and theologies.

It was only during my time in the U.S. that I became truly aware of my identity as a White person, showing that I belong to the dominant social group in the contexts in which I mostly move and that this influences my identity.

Preaching and Its Changing Place in Society

The two biggest churches in Germany are the Roman Catholic Church and the EKD, which translates to "German Protestant Church." The EKD is organized into 20 regional churches, some of which are Lutheran and others Reformed or United, but all are organized under the EKD.¹ These two churches have long played an important role in German society because, unlike many other countries, Germany does not have a strict separation of church and state. While Germany is a secular state, it is not a laicist state like France. Instead, there is a cooperation model. For instance, the state collects church tax and allows religious education in state schools. In return, churches take on state tasks, such as running kindergartens, hospitals, and retirement homes.²

Nonetheless, the German church landscape and the role of the church in society are undergoing rapid changes. While 22% of people were unaffiliated in the 1990s, the number of unaffiliated people surpassed the combined number of Catholic and Protestant church members for the first time by the end of 2024.³ It is predicted that the number of Protestant church members will be half of what it was in 2017 by 2060.⁴ This rapid decline in church membership poses major challenges for German churches. Since churches have largely been financed by church taxes collected from church members, the decline in membership means significantly fewer financial resources. Human resources are also becoming scarce as fewer people are studying theology or entering the ministry while baby boomers retire.

In light of these developments, the question arises as to what role the church, and thus also preaching, still plays in society. These changes are challenging churches and prompting them to address fundamental theological and organizational questions. These questions concern the core understanding of ecclesiology and the fundamental tasks of the church. They also include decisions about which forms of proclamation to prioritize and how to continue proclamation, in word and deed, successfully in the future. Should churches withdraw from areas such as hospitals and prisons, or should they focus on widespread proclamation on Sunday mornings? Which tasks must be performed by ministers, and which can be performed by laypeople?

¹ EKD, Übersichtskarte der evangelischen Landeskirchen, <https://www.ekd.de/evangelische-kirche-in-deutschland-14272.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

² Bundesministerium des Inneren, Religionsverfassungsrecht, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/heimat-integration/gesellschaftlicher-zusammenhalt/staat-und-religion/religionsverfassungsrecht/religionsverfassungsrecht-node.html> (02/14/2026); EKD, Kirche und Staat: "Getrennt und doch partnerschaftlich verbunden," <https://www.ekd.de/dutzmann-vortrag-verhaeltnis-kirche-staat-45442.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026); Bundestag: Deutsches und europäisches Staatskirchenrecht, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/415154/1d79e78517cba693aa287b580281738d/WD-3-491-06-pdf.pdf> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

³ Süddeutsche: Erstmals mehr Konfessionslose als Kirchenmitglieder in Deutschland, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/konfession-deutschland-kirchen-li.3230534> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

⁴ EKD, Entwicklung der Kirchenmitgliederzahlen, <https://www.ekd.de/projektion2060-mitgliederzahlen-45532.htm> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

Another question arises: What should be done with places, such as churches, that have been used for proclamation but will no longer be used for worship services?⁵ The relationship between preaching and its place in society is currently a widely debated topic in Germany, oftentimes accompanied by difficult decisions and feelings of grief and loss.

Preaching – Which Place Do We Seek in Society?

The question arises not only of what place preaching is accorded in society, but also of what place it would like to occupy, according to its self-image.

In the German context, the relationship between the church and the public sphere, and, consequently, between the church and politics, is a recurring topic of discussion.⁶ Closely linked to this topic is the role of preaching and its relationship to social issues.⁷ Does preaching as a form of communication see itself as exerting influence beyond the walls of the church and taking social and political stances?⁸ Or does preaching try to stay out of political—and thus also social—debates?

Germany has historically experienced the perils associated with political preaching, leading to a prevailing reluctance toward such practices. For instance, during the First World War, there was a pervasive enthusiasm for warfare. Many preachers expressed similar sentiments and promoted the war in their sermons.⁹ The indelible mark left on homiletics and the understanding of sermons by the fact that sermons were used to promote the Nazi agenda during the worst chapter in German history, the Nazi era, is profound. Nevertheless, other experiences with political sermons occurred after World War II. They played a significant role in the peace movement and the struggle for German reunification, for example.¹⁰ However, political preaching in Germany has become rather silent in recent decades.¹¹ For a long time now, German homiletics has placed greater focus on the aesthetic dimension of preaching and on "the listener," i.e., the individual, rather than on the social dimension of preaching.¹²

⁵ See the work on the deconsecration of churches. Annemarie Kaschub, *Liturgie der Kirchenschließung*, Eine kirchentheoretische und empirische Studie zu Entwidmungen (Leipzig 2022).

⁶ Kristin Merle, "Politisch predigen? Lust und Last einer gegenwärtigen Suchbewegung," in *Politikum Predigt. Predigen im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Relevanz und politischer Brisanz*, ed. Johann Roth and Ursula Pock (Don Bosco, 2021), 66-71.

⁷ The discussion cannot be pursued further at this point, but the lines can be traced in the following works, for example: Johann Pock, and Ursula Roth, *Politikum Predigt. Predigen im Kontext gesellschaftlicher Relevanz und politischer Brisanz* (München 2021); Sonja Keller, *Parteiische Predigt. Politik, Gesellschaft und Öffentlichkeit als Horizonte der Predigt* (Leipzig 2017); Helmut Schwier, *Ethische und Politische Predigt. Beiträge zu einer homiletischen Herausforderung* (Leipzig 2015); Albrecht Grözinger, *Toleranz und Leidenschaft. Über das Predigen in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft* (Gütersloh 2004; Andrea Bieler and Hans-Martin Gutmann *Rechtfertigung der Überflüssigen. Die Aufgabe der Predigt heute* (Gütersloh 2008).

⁸ As explained in the previous section, proclamation naturally goes beyond public religious communication in a worship setting. However, the following will focus on this.

⁹ Albrecht Grözinger Vgl., *Homiletik* (Gütersloh 2008), 64f.

¹⁰ Oxen, Kathrin: „Nur noch kurz die Welt retten?“ Die politische Predigt von heute als Herausforderung für die homiletische Aus- und Fortbildung, in: Schwier, Helmut (Hg.): *Ethische und politische Predigt. Beiträge zu einer homiletischen Herausforderung*, Leipzig 2015, 184–195, here 184 f.

¹¹ Merle argues that political preaching has received greater attention again since the so-called refugee crisis. Merle, "Politisch predigen," 65. Nevertheless, discussions about political preaching continue to play a minor role in German homiletics.

¹² Up until now, these two dimensions have been at odds with each other in German-language homiletics. However, a look at African-American preaching traditions shows that the political and aesthetic dimensions of preaching can easily be combined and enrich each other.

I argue that the reluctance to engage in political preaching is related not only to Germany's past and the experienced dangers of political sermons, but also to the privileged position of the church, as well as that of many homileticians and preachers in Germany. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the majority of preachers and homileticians do not face direct challenges related to social marginalization and discrimination. Instead, they predominantly belong to the dominant social group, which ensures that their interests are addressed within the political landscape.¹³

The implications of the church's shifting position in society, precipitated by a substantial decline in membership, on its relationship to political statements in sermons and its potential shift toward a heightened emphasis on the prophetic dimensions of preaching remain to be examined.

The political situation in Germany also challenges Christian preaching: the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution considers right-wing extremist, is currently the strongest or second-strongest force, depending on the poll.¹⁴ The success of a political party that advocates inhumane positions and is contrary to Christian ethics in many respects calls into question the reluctance of German preachers to bring theological and socio-political issues into conversation.

Preaching – Whose Place and Voice?

Let us turn now to a fourth aspect in need of further understanding: Whose voices are heard in German homiletics and preaching—and whose are missing?

In 2022, Sabrina Müller evaluated homiletic seminar curricula at major German-speaking universities. The results are sobering: Zero percent of the texts read in the seminars were written by people of color, and texts by women were rarely included in homiletic training.¹⁵ Homiletic courses are usually based on texts by White male authors considered "classics" in German-language homiletic discourse.¹⁶ While this study is not representative, its findings highlight an issue that plagues many German-speaking theological faculties.¹⁷ Theological and homiletic training continues to focus largely on ideas proposed by White male scholars. Even today, students in Germany can study theology without engaging with voices from outside the German

¹³ This statement refers solely to the German context. Some traditions do not address political issues for other reasons, such as fear of reprisals. As argued here, a refusal to express political views is not necessarily related to a privileged position or great privileges. I would like to thank J. Sergius Halvorsen for this valuable insight. See Sergius J. Halvorsen, "Preaching the Impossible in the Face of the Unthinkable: Nonviolence, Love, and Thanksgiving in a Coptic Easter Sermon," *Religions* 15, no. 4 (2024), <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/15/4/455>.

¹⁴ Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland: Umfragewerte im Bund: Wie die Bürgerinnen und Bürger wählen würden, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/umfragen-zu-parteien-aktuelle-trends-fuer-spd-union-afd-gruene-und-co-14-02-2026-462SFUR3SNBCLN3ACXRFNANNSE.html> (Accessed 02/14/2026)

¹⁵ Sabrina Müller, "After the Sermon and Beyond the Pulpit. Transformative, Power-Sensitive Homiletics of Polyphony and Hope," *Homiletic* 49, no. 1 (2024): 40 f., <https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5623>.

¹⁶ Müller, "After the Sermon," 41. According to Müller's empirical analysis, the most frequently read texts are those by white German men: Engemann, Grözingen, Lange, and Nicol/Deeg. As previously mentioned, this is not a representative study; however, it does indicate a trend.

¹⁷ An informal evaluation conducted by Helmut Schwier and me with students in a seminar reached a similar conclusion. The students evaluated their current seminar plans for the semester based on the diversity of the authors of the texts they were reading. It became apparent here, too, that apart from religious studies, texts by BIPOC are rarely read and that the texts are predominantly written by *white* male authors.

context—voices that offer different perspectives, experiences, and critical questions about the dominant White context's entanglement in racism and colonial heritage.

White perspectives are not named as such but are rather assumed to be theologically normative. Rendering White perspectives invisible presents them as neutral and manifests the hegemony of White theologies and homiletics.¹⁸ In Germany, theologies that address the connection between power and knowledge production, or that are not practiced by White people, continue to be treated in most settings as “special cases” and denied validity beyond their original context. Thus, the group in power decides what constitutes academia and the “correct” form of homiletics.¹⁹ In the German context, this group is White academics, who are often male.²⁰

While the works of White American homileticians, especially those belonging to the so-called “New Homiletic,” are well-received, this is not the case for the work of homileticians of color.²¹ Since language and access to texts are not reasons for the lack of engagement, bias and racism may be assumed as the reasons for this current lack of receptivity. Excluding other voices and establishing White (German) theology as the only valid theology by treating texts differently in seminars and lectures maintains privileges that have applied only to certain groups of people in a theological context across generations.

In Germany, most people who regularly preach in church services are pastors who are at the center of society, not on the margins. As Christians, they have privileges. Due to their education and status, they usually belong to the middle class. In many cases, they are cisgender and White. Because of their social location, most are likely accustomed to reading the Bible from a privileged perspective. When preachers in Germany rely primarily on sermon aids and websites for sermon preparation or engage with exegetical commentaries from the German-speaking context, these materials are most often written by people with a similar social location to that of the pastors. In other words, hegemonic traditions of interpretation are most often perpetuated.

In many German cities, church communities barely reflect the ethnic and linguistic diversity of society. Churches create spaces that are not representative of society as a whole, since Germany has long welcomed immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds and nations of origin.

Theological studies, the church, and pulpits in Germany continue to be predominantly White spaces that are part of a White-dominant culture.²²

¹⁸ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2021): 28 f., <https://homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5140>.

¹⁹ Judith Gruber, “Wider die Entinnerung. Zur postkolonialen Kritik hegemonialer Wissenspolitiken in der Theologie,” In *Postkoloniale Theologien II. Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, ed. Andreas Nehring, and Simon Wiesgickl (Stuttgart 2018), 24.

²⁰ Mumford rightly points out that white racism cannot be separated from other forms of oppression, such as sexism, classism, and ableism. Therefore, whiteness must be understood in an intersectional way. Debra J. Mumford, “Unmasking the Homiletical Whiteness of Jerry Falwell Sr. and the Moral Majority,” In *Unmasking White Preaching. Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities*, ed. Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer (Lexington, 2022), 29; Kim-Cragg, “Invisibility of Whiteness,” 34.

²¹ Martin Nicol, *Einander ins Bild setzen. Dramaturgische Homiletik* (Göttingen 2005); Daniel J Schmidt, *Der homiletische Entwurf von Gerhard Aho (1923–1987): Studie zur Rekonstruktion eines nordamerikanischen lutherischen Predigtkonzepts* (Leipzig 2014); Inga Kreusch, *Absichtsvoll Predigen. Rhetorik und New Homiletic* (Stuttgart 2024).

²² Nathalie Eleyth, “Rassismus im Semesterplan. Warum Schwarze Theologie an hiesigen Fakultäten wichtiger werden sollte,” *zeitzeichen*. <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/11385> (Accessed 02/14/2026). See also Veccera's

Preaching from a Humbler Place

The self-referential nature of German homiletic discourse, coupled with the widespread exclusion of other voices, suggests an arrogant attitude on the part of German homiletics. However, it is more than arrogance. The lack of diversity in literature studied in homiletic seminars and the disregard for the voices of homiletics of color suggest an underlying racism problem.²³

In Germany, we have not yet developed a sufficient understanding of racism. In the German context, the tendency of White people who consider themselves "good" to deny their own racism is often linked to a reductionist understanding of racism as physical violence belonging to the past of National Socialism and associated only with right-wing extremism.²⁴ The idea that racism does not require malicious intent but rather is an institutionalized system that preserves White supremacy is often overlooked.²⁵ In Germany, racism and its history are often viewed as an American problem rather than something closely linked to European intellectual history and thus as part of Europe's heritage.²⁶ This issue must be addressed in theology and homiletics, as well as in teaching and research. All theological disciplines must consider the interplay of Christianity, colonization, and racism. This also applies to homiletics, especially since preaching played a central role in colonization and has not yet been adequately addressed in German-speaking contexts. While German theology rightly and necessarily reflects on anti-Semitic Christian thinking, it largely ignores the symbiotic relationship between Christianity, colonialism, and imperialism, the racism that accompanies it, and Christianity's complicity in legitimizing colonial worldviews and racist classifications.²⁷

Not only does the selection of primarily White (cisgender male) voices point to an underlying problem with racism, but it also leads to a lack of sensitivity to racism among future pastors within their own religious tradition and in society as a whole. However, the results of the 2020 Afro Census, the "largest survey ever conducted among Black, African, and Afro-Diasporic people in Germany," reveal the urgent need to address racism, particularly within the church.²⁸ Of all the institutions, the church was the second-least trusted by the people surveyed. Even the police and security authorities seemed more trustworthy than the church.²⁹

book, in which she examines the whiteness of the church in Germany and the racism that goes with it: Sarah Vecera, *Wie ist Jesus weiß geworden? Mein Traum von einer Kirche ohne Rassismus* (Ostfildern 2022).

²³ As well as one with sexism.

²⁴ Susan Arndt, "Rassismus," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk* ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster 2011), 37; Astrid Messerschmidt, "Distanzierungsmuster. Vier Praktiken im Umgang mit Rassismus," In *Rassismus bildet. Bildungswissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Normalisierung und Subjektivierung in der Migrationsgesellschaft*, ed. Anne Broden, and Paul Mecheril, 41–55.

²⁵ Noah Sow, "Rassismus," In *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht. (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache. Ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk* ed. Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (Münster 2011, 37); Arndt, "Rassismus," 37.

²⁶ Birgit Rommelspacher, "Rassismen," 48–50.

²⁷ Andrea Bieler, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Addressing Whiteness in the Church. Challenging the Power Differential and Moving Towards Intercultural Congregations", In *Interkulturelle Kirche. Strategien zur Verwirklichung der Wohngemeinschaft Gottes. Zweite Studientagung der EKD zur migrationssensiblen Kirchenentwicklung* (Frankfurt 2020), 29.

²⁸ Afrozensus 2020, Der Report, <https://afrozensus.de/reports/2020/> (Accessed 02/14/2026).

²⁹ Afrozensus 2020, <https://afrozensus.de/reports/2020/Afrozensus-2020-Einzelseiten.pdf>, 254. I owe this reference to Nathalie Eleyth's article. "Rassismus im Semesterplan."

Furthermore, German homiletics, with its Eurocentric/White orientation, deprives itself of the potential to learn from other preaching traditions. Of course, care must be taken to ensure that elements are not simply adopted in a manner that constitutes cultural appropriation. At the same time, questioning the hegemonic claim of White homiletics means rejecting the idea that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color can learn from White traditions but White people cannot learn from preaching traditions of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

German homiletics must abandon its self-centeredness and critically examine its own racism (as well as other forms of discrimination such as gender discrimination, classism, etc.) and work to decolonize the field. It is time to listen to and learn from other traditions. It is time for us to take a step back and make space for the voices we have silenced until now. It is time for German theology and homiletics to preach from a humbler place.

Conclusion

It has been argued above that the question of preaching and place is a central one in the German context due to the decrease in church membership. The question arises as to what role the church, and thus also preaching, still plays in society, and what role preaching wants to seek in the future. It was argued that there are good historical reasons for a reluctance toward political preaching in the German context. At the same time, the question was raised as to the extent to which this reluctance in the German context is related to the privilege enjoyed by most preachers and homileticians. The aforementioned privilege was also considered in terms of which voices are given a space in German homiletics and which remain unheard. In “Preaching from a Humbler Place,” it was argued that German homiletics needs to engage in self-critical reflection on racism and work on a decolonization of homiletics to develop in a way that respects and learns from other homiletical and preaching traditions.

For Further Reading

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Pedagogy, Preaching, and Place: Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Homiletical Formation

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Abstract: *Building on a panel discussion in the Pedagogy workgroup at the 2025 Academy of Homiletics gathering, this collaborative essay explores the intersection of pedagogy, preaching, and place across three contexts: online, hybrid, and in-person. Place is understood as more than just a designation of a thing, but a reality that shapes and is shaped by our knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making. The essay features three homileticians—Lisa Lamb, Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, and Jared E. Alcántara—who offer reflections on their experiences of teaching preaching in a specific context. The essay concludes with questions and ongoing challenges related to homiletic pedagogy and place.*

Introduction

Preaching is homiletical theology embodied in specific contexts.¹ It is both a theological and a social act.² Likewise, the theological formation of preachers is always rooted in a particular place and shaped by the intersections of places where it emerges. In 2025, the Academy of Homiletics focused its annual conference on the theme of “Preaching and Place.” Our president for the year, Richard Voelz, drew attention to how, throughout the biblical witness and history, “place has been a way that identity, conflict, community, and interactions with the Holy have been mediated.”³ The conference featured illuminating offerings, including a plenary session on “Proclamation and the Public Square,” panel discussions on “Borders, Migration, and Preaching Place,” presentations on specific issues related to preaching in Germany and Fiji, and a host of

¹ For an exploration of homiletical theology in various contexts, see David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed., *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology* (Cascade, 2017). See also Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's classic work *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Fortress, 1996).

² Arthur Van Seters, ed., *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Abingdon, 1988), 21.

³ “Annual Meeting,” <https://www.homiletics.org/annual-meeting/2025/>, accessed 15 November 2025.

papers on topics ranging from ecological homiletics to the “execution sermon as homiletical place.”⁴ Alongside the conference contributions, recent scholarship has explored the intersection of place and preaching from different vantage points.⁵ Moreover, while works on homiletical pedagogy in the past and present have attended to place implicitly in various ways,⁶ in the last few years, scholarship has emerged that explicitly focuses on place-based pedagogy and preaching.⁷ Still, there is a need for additional reflection on the vital topic of pedagogy, preaching, and place.

Thus, this collaborative essay takes a step toward further addressing this subject. It offers three different perspectives on the relationship between place and preaching pedagogy, which were first presented as a panel at the Academy of Homiletics annual meeting in the Pedagogy workgroup.⁸ As Tim Cresswell notes, “place” is not just a way to designate “a thing in the world”; it is an epistemological term employed to name “a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places, we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience.”⁹ The article asks: What are the unique challenges and opportunities of

⁴ See, for example, Caroline Smith, “Preaching at the Gallows: Samson Occum and the Execution Sermon as Homiletical Place,” Paper Presented at the Academy of Homiletics, Richmond, VA, USA, December 4–6, 2025.

⁵ See, for example, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Earth-Bound Preaching: Engaging Scripture, Context, and Indigenous Wisdom,” *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 357, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030357>; Wing Yi Wong, “Unearthing the Disturbing Ghosts of Postcolonial Lands That Linger After the Sermon,” *Homiletic* 49, no. 1 (2024): 30–38, <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v49i1.5624>; Jerusha Matsen Neal, *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place* (Baylor University Press, 2024); Timothy Levi Adkins-Jones, “Hoodies and Holy Disruption: Black Protest Preaching and Multicultural Congregations,” *Religions* 16, no. 11 (2025): 1366, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16111366>; David M. Stark, *Preaching that Confronts Confederate Monuments: Religion, Anti-Racism, and United States Politics* (T&T Clark, 2025); Casey T. Sigmon, *Engaging the Gadfly: Reflective Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Preaching in a Digital Age* (Cascade, 2025); Richard W. Voelz, *From Pulpit to Public Square: Faithful Speech beyond Church Walls* (Westminster John Knox, 2025); and the articles in Jerusha Matsen Neal, ed., “Preaching Climate Justice,” *International Journal of Homiletics* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1–123.

⁶ See, for example, Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Learning Preaching: Understanding and Participating in the Process* (The Academy of Homiletics, 1989); Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Westminster John Knox, 2008); Geoffrey Stevenson, “Learning to Preach: Social Learning Theory and the Development of Christian Preachers” (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2009); Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Training Preachers: A Guide to Teaching Homiletics* (Lexham, 2018); Lisa Lamb, “Enabling Diverse Learners to Thrive in the Online Homiletics Classroom” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22, no. 2 (2019): 92–101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12476>; David Schnasa Jacobsen, ed., “Exploring Intercultural Instructional Communication for Homiletical Pedagogy” *Homiletic* 46, no. 2 (2021): 4–47; John S. McClure and Allie Utley, eds., *Learning Together to Preach: How to Become an Effective Coach* (Cascade, 2023); Courtney Buggs, “Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching Preaching: Black Women Preachers as Sources for Pedagogical Reflection” *Sermon Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025): 58–66; and the articles in Leah D. Schade and Richard W. Voelz, eds., “Assessing Pedagogical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Academy of Homiletics” *Homiletic* 50, no. 2 (2025): 4–80.

⁷ Miri Yemini, Laura Engel, and Adi Ben Simon define place-based education as “an umbrella term for pedagogical practices that prioritize experiential, community-based, and contextual/ecological learning to cultivate greater connectivity to local contexts, cultures, and environments.” See “Place-based education – a systematic review of literature” *Educational Review* 77, no. 2 (2024): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2177260>. For examples of work that explicitly explore preaching and place-based pedagogy, see David M. Stark, “Confronting Confederate Monuments: Place-Based Pedagogy for Anti-Racist Preaching,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 224, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020224>; and E. Trey Clark, “Forming Preachers: An Examination of Four Homiletical Pedagogy Paradigms,” *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 364, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030364>.

⁸ Richard Voelz and Trey Clark co-convene the Pedagogy workgroup of the Academy of Homiletics.

⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Wiley and Sons, 2015), 35–36.

teaching preaching in online, hybrid, and in-person contexts, recognizing that place is more than a designation of a thing but a reality that shapes and is shaped by our knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making?

The essay is organized into three sections in which a homiletician reflects on their experience teaching in a particular context.¹⁰ The reflections are meant to be exploratory, not exhaustive. Rev. Dr. Lisa Lamb examines teaching preaching in online environments. Lamb taught Fuller Theological Seminary's first fully online homiletics course ten years ago, and has since taught hybrid, in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous courses for Duke Divinity School and Fuller, as well as for several seminaries in Nepal, the Philippines, India, and Malaysia. Rev. Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough offers insights and reflections on hybrid preaching education, defined here as simultaneously addressing students online and in person.¹¹ Yarborough is Associate Director of Leadership Programming at the Association of Theological Schools and previously served as Assistant Professor of African American Preaching, Sacred Rhetoric, and Black Practical Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary. Teaching preaching in residential contexts is explored by Rev. Dr. Jared E. Alcántara. He serves as the Professor of Preaching, Holder of the Paul W. Powell Endowed Chair in Preaching, and Director of the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Following contributions from Lamb, Yarborough, and Alcántara, the essay concludes with reflections on ongoing issues and challenges in homiletic pedagogy and place.

The Place of Place in Online Homiletical Education (Lisa Lamb)

When we look through the lens of place at the opportunities and challenges of a fully online preaching course, we hold in tension the values of access to education and physical proximity, of real-time collaboration and delayed reflection, and more. Embracing the online modality involves grieving real or perceived losses related to the potentially transformative power of the physical classroom. But each loss comes with a gain for skilled instructors and willing students. We will consider here four losses, or at least differences, offering with each various strategies that can mitigate the losses and optimize the opportunities that the online modality presents.

Home Court (Dis?) Advantage

Students who learn remotely do not leave home, and so they are less likely to experience the potentially transformative opportunity that comes with uprooting themselves. The obvious barrier to entry of a physical, campus-based seminary education is (for many) the need to pack up and leave home. This is costly for almost every student, and downright prohibitive for some. Students who can access seminary education online do not need to be displaced from their local communities. The experience is usually less disruptive for families, friendships, and community involvement. This pragmatic advantage of online learning is so compelling that it silences many valid concerns.

But as the journey motif in literature throughout the centuries attests, much transformation happens when a character leaves home. From as far back as the departure from Eden and Abram and Sarai's exit from Haran, leaving has been part of our story. Leaving makes

¹⁰ To be clear, each homiletician has experience teaching in a wide variety of contexts beyond the one they reflect on in this essay.

¹¹ Future research should consider the role of place in hybrid intensive courses where some instruction occurs fully in-person and some occurs fully online.

space for learning as we sever ties with what is familiar and open ourselves to what is new. Sometimes, home is not only familiar but downright toxic; it is the desert for which seminary is the oasis. This is especially true for students who dwell in spaces where their preaching voices are not affirmed. This can cut both ways, of course, as for some, home is the oasis and seminary the desert.

One way I seek to mitigate the loss of a shared place is to highlight the goodness of the diverse places in which we are situated. I always ask my students in their introductory videos to share where they live, with whom they live (if anyone), one thing they love about where they live, and one thing they do not love about the place they call home. This is a way of establishing place and context as factors in our preaching and evoking Wendell Berry's concept of the importance of nurturing affection for our place and its people.¹² It often connects them to each other and me to them.

For online students, in general, their listening audience is their familiar place. They do not shed the calcified embeddedness that can mark home, as they preach to their spouses, mothers, and the occasional cat wandering through the room—the “Nazareth” that Jesus found so tough a crowd. On the other hand, some seminarians experience home as a nurturing and grace-filled environment, one that mirrors and affirms their preaching style, in contrast to the sterility of the classroom, where peers and professors can be a tough crowd in different ways.

When students study preaching online, the first feedback they receive is often from their mother-in-law or old friends, who are usually kind and sometimes bring real insight. But this is very uneven. In my most recent course, one of the ten students had a listening group that offered substantive and helpful feedback. The rest affirmed excessively, picked at inconsequential minutiae, and made trivial suggestions. This can provide an unhelpful cushion against feedback that they really need to hear.

Physical Settings

Another place-related challenge of online preaching is that access to ideal settings in which to preach is extremely uneven. In a classroom, everyone gets a level playing field—maybe a lovely chapel, maybe a sterile classroom, but they all at least get space to move, a stand for their notes so they can gesture, the built-in need to project their voices and hold a larger room, and the ability to make eye contact with a group of peers who are hopefully becoming their friends. In classrooms, there is a sermon length and other standards we can all commit to.

An online preaching course promises that students can preach to their home congregations or to listening groups of loved ones, but that promise too often translates into huge frustration for those whose preaching traditions call for 40-minute sermons when the course requirement is much shorter. Female students in churches that do not allow them to preach struggle to find settings. Students in dying, dwindling churches must preach into lifeless settings with folks nodding off, as I have watched happening online. Three of my ten students this past quarter had what we think of as ideal: engaged congregations or listening groups to whom they could preach. One of those three had to preach for 40 minutes to bring that about. The rest of the class preached in far from ideal settings, including straight into their laptops when their listening group bailed. This limits gestures, eye contact, vocal projection, the chance to practice working well with notes, and obviously, a genuine, embodied connection with humans.

¹² See Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Counterpoint, 2012).

One other setting-related challenge is the need to master new technology. Last year, I worked with very smart students at a top-notch seminary, and yet I fielded over a dozen emails from students who could not figure out how and where to save their sermons in the new Learning Management System. Students often struggle with camera angles and uploading, when I would rather be coaching them on how to preach. I am also unable to offer substantive feedback on delivery for many of the videos I get.

Collaboration, Place, and Time

One of the skills I worked hard to cultivate as a classroom professor was the capacity to facilitate a feedback session following student sermons that brought a potent blend of truth and love. I sought to model this and occasionally had to give feedback to students as to how to deliver their comments in more hearable ways. These sessions were lively, marked by both laughter and occasional tears. I always found this second hour to be both exhilarating and exhausting, every bit as effortful for me as giving a good sermon. Research on organizational collaboration bears out the idea that physical presence increases the sheer quantity of feedback. As corporate consultant Jordan Mattson writes:

Research on proximity and collaboration is unambiguous. A University of Michigan study found that researchers on the same floor are 57 percent more likely to collaborate than those in different buildings. For every 100 feet of shared walking path, collaborations increased by 20 percent. MIT research on the ‘Allen Curve’—named after MIT professor Thomas Allen—shows that even basic conversations become much less likely when workers are more than 10 meters apart.¹³

But there are students who neither thrive nor shine in such settings. They are slow, deep thinkers. They may come from cultural backgrounds that value indirect, face-saving communication. The pressure to craft insightful peer feedback in the compressed time frame of the classroom hinders their contributions. In the charged moment of the classroom feedback setting, they go silent. But given time to ponder a sermon, attending carefully to how aspects of it land within their minds and hearts, they will post responses that are marked by deep insight, often with concrete suggestions that are of real help to their peers. On the receiving end, some students do not thrive when feedback is given immediately after such a stressful endeavor. The delay brings the needed objectivity and distance. Not everyone can process feedback when it comes raw and unfiltered, and with a tightly limited amount of time to absorb and clarify what is heard. For these students, the online discussion thread becomes a life-giving space.

Negotiating Spaces of Shared Learning

Some of my favorite memories of my teaching career involve moments of triumph, such as when a shy student who persevered through a sermon sits down to cheers from their peers. Or when 60 Indian students worked on a storytelling exercise together and were stunned by the beauty of what they created. A classroom gives us a shared place, and when we meet twice a

¹³ Jordan Mattson, “AI Augmented Development: Hype vs. Reality,” <https://e27.co/ai-augmented-development-hype-vs-reality-20251217/>, accessed 29 December, 2025; For more information on the study, see “Sharing Space: Proximity Breeds Collaboration,” <https://news.umich.edu/sharing-space-proximity-breeds-collaboration/>, accessed 20 January, 2026.

week in that space and do something as vulnerable as preaching for each other, that space can come to feel sacred indeed. I can work hard to replicate these moments in an online setting, but let's be honest, it is not the same.

I have sought to cultivate, if not shared physical space, at least a sense of shared learning in three ways: First, I offer, and sometimes can require, what I call Coaching Calls, half-hour Zoom sessions where we reflect together on the first sermon. I like to do this early in the term to build persistence and a sense of belonging. Second, I strive for highly active participation in discussion threads. I try to respond at least briefly to every post, and I give ample feedback on their sermons in a public thread. Thirdly, I set up discussion posts to maximize peer engagement. Every post reflecting on the course content must close with a question, and the highest possible grade on a post without a reply to a peer is 80%. I am lenient about maximum word counts because some students who are learning remotely highly value the chance to process course content, and I want to give them a wide space in which to do that. While concision is an important skill for students to cultivate, faculty harping about maximum word counts seems to communicate that teaching them is a hassle; I want to communicate that it is a privilege.

There is an undeniable loss of joy when we are not physically gathered. But perhaps that loss of joy means that a student preacher's five-year-old has the joy of a birthday party with their best friends in the town where she was born. That is hard to quantify, but it seems worth protecting. I can find joy elsewhere.

Holding Hybridity in the Classroom (Chelsea Brooke Yarborough)

Teaching, Particularity, and Place

Teaching is a practice of collaborative world-bending—hopefully bending toward something that looks like justice, wholeness, and possibility. Preaching is also such a practice in its best and most aligned forms. So, teaching preaching is the unique gift of watching change agents find, own, and use their voice—ideally equipping them with the hope and belief that they can do that world-bending beyond the confines of the classroom.

In the spirit of place, I see the theological classroom as a space of risk, where two or more are often gathered from many perspectives, yet work together in a space they may not have found without something like the classroom. It is a place of play—where failure is inevitable—and allowing it to be normal and necessary makes room for folks to be held in ways their failure may not always be. It is a place where contextualities collide with one another, and students encounter the crucial reality that their epistemological frameworks are grounded in hermeneutical particularity that may, and sometimes must, rub up against others. And when done well, these encounters with information, self, and practice bend the world, and when done justly, that bend is toward justice.

I ground my practice in the teaching prowess of Black women and Blackqueer folks whose pedagogical theory and instinct have often asked us to consider what freedom looks like in the classroom, what binaries inhibit our work, and how we see the classroom as not just a receptacle of knowledge but a commission to practice beyond it. I enter that classroom as a Blackqueer woman amongst other things—existing in the many/and versus either/or in my person—which I experience often as an in-between space and multiple hybridity unto itself.

I start here so you can understand my particularity of place in any classroom as I move into how I think about the particularities of the hybrid classroom. For clarity, I am talking about hybrid classrooms where students are physically in the classroom, and others join synchronously via Zoom.

Strategies for the Hybrid Classroom

When I was asked to write about the hybrid classroom, I almost said no because I knew I would have to be honest about something. The first time I had a hybrid teaching course, it was, in colloquial terms, a hot mess. I feel like that is important to say so that I remember teaching is a practice, and that we are grateful for the opportunity to grow. Even more so, teaching is hard, and there is something particularly hard about holding multiple modalities together. At best, I have found that hybrid classrooms create a third space—the space in between virtual and physical space—where students are not just spectators of others’ locations but are asked to consider crossing places and the in-between places of overlap as part of the pedagogy. These classrooms require a commitment to both/and, even as students may be situated in the either/or. While many strategies emerge for me in navigating multiple places within pedagogy, I will highlight three that have felt most critical.

First, it is crucial to prepare the space for all students, which means being clear about which students’ learning is centered at any given time. Blackqueer womanist pedagogy asks us to think beyond hospitality into welcome when we are talking about space. Hospitality often ends with someone preparing a place for another; however, the place is standardized, and the invitation is to come into what I have created. Welcome takes it a step further, saying, “I have created this space with you and your particularities in mind.” It is not saying “you can be here,” as is often expressed in online student data on satisfaction with hybrid classrooms. Instead, it signals that this place has been prepared for your thriving, and I am willing to reimagine the space if you tell me you are not thriving. Before the class, I conduct a pre-survey to get a sense of the modalities students have taken before, what has helped them feel heard, seen, and connected, and what has made that more difficult. I also ask about the places they come from to get to class or take classes from, and what is important to know about those places. In one of our opening activities, students introduce themselves in a long-form, fill-in-the-blank spoken-word format, and one question is: “What is important about where you are and/or where you came from?” followed by “What helps you feel connected?” I have found that this warms up the space for a place to be held collectively, which supports what I name next.

Second, I invite communal accountability to holding our place together alongside the places where we are disparate. When I first began teaching, I was trying to navigate the different modalities on my own and, in some way, protect students from the awkwardness of the both/and. However, I quickly realized they were in an awkward position, whether I wanted them to be or not. Therefore, if we were going to exist in anything that felt like community, we would have to do it together. Hybridity asks for multiplicity to be held together, and I was trying too hard to hold it alone, which was not working. I began to ask myself, “How does the entire community participate in the collective holding and place-making in the classroom?”

Several practices have shaped this work toward collective accountability. In addition to the introductions mentioned earlier, in the opening, I also note that not all classroom activities will be geared toward the location where you are taking this course. There are some things that will feel more awkward to do online, like some of our improv activities. Other times, when we are having a live discussion board in class, it may feel superfluous when you are sitting next to someone you could speak to. However, this allows our online students to overcome some of the delay and difficulty of jumping into live conversations with people sitting next to each other. I make it clear that we will move back and forth in ways that we might all experience ease and stretching at different times.

As part of communal accountability, I am also committed to presence and preparedness. For example, everyone in person brings a device they can use to join Zoom, and those online are expected to have their screens on. We also discuss what conflict looks like across modalities and have frequent check-ins to ensure that what we are working through is effective. In this vein, feedback loops are more frequent for me in a hybrid classroom. Every unit (about every three weeks), I ask what is working well, what is not connecting, and where you were lost. With these notes, we adjust along the way. One student remarked in an evaluation, “Being in our hybrid classroom made me realize I have been making the online community at my church mostly just watch the in-person community . . . I want to think about how they can come together.” I was grateful to hear that the work we did together kept on bending the world beyond our classroom.

Third, I commit to practicing teaching agility as a way of inviting preaching agility. Preaching agility asks us to consider our prowess in changing directions without injury. I believe in changing times, the most effective proclaimers are agile proclaimers that attend to place but are not limited to one.¹⁴ They move between places, contexts, and changing terrains—grounded in who they are, clarified in their voice, and committed to world-bending with words. They move between spaces as call often necessitates, when we are attuned to the many ways call might come. Practicing teaching agility in the classroom has helped me recognize the type of muscles that might be helpful for preaching agility.

Hybrid teaching asks me to cultivate agility across all aspects of the classroom and to think about key takeaways that will help all students grow in their agility. Some of these ways include how students work with each other, how they change to welcome the perceived other, and how they begin to realize how much work the person in the other place must do to connect well with them. Hybrid teaching also asks me to grow the necessary muscles to change directions in the inevitability of shifting terrains and to learn new things, so that we can move together with the least amount of harm.

A Final Thought

Hybrid teaching pushed me to be honest about whether I was willing to learn and to create a space where students would feel togetherness. It is hard work, but it is worthy work. It has pushed me to center students, which means all of them. The greatest gift of hybrid classrooms is that they ask students to consider that, in the mess of trying, we might find something that looks like the hope of community: that it is worth the hard work of welcome, agility, and collective accountability together.

Preaching and Place in the In-Person Homiletical Classroom (Jared E. Alcántara)

The in-person homiletics classroom is not a *perfect* place, far from it, but it is a *fertile* place for redemption and transformation. The in-person classroom is a place for redemption to occur in the sense that, within its walls, one has opportunities to observe, facilitate, or experience the unbinding of bodies, voices, postures, temperaments, and callings; those who begin their journey bound can see deliverance and freedom within the walls and beyond the walls.

¹⁴ For a historical examination of the preaching agility of Black women preachers, see Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, *Proclamation beyond the Pulpit: The Expansive Homiletical Practice of Black Women* (Baylor University Press, 2025). For a popular article on the concept of preaching agility, see Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, “Preaching across Platforms: An Invitation to Preaching Agility,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/culture/preaching-across-platforms-an-invitation-to-preaching-agility>.

The in-person classroom is also a place infused with possibilities for transformation. Consider the image of metamorphosis, which comes from the Greek verb for transformation and is used to describe a disruptive change from one thing to another. A caterpillar becomes a butterfly. A tadpole becomes a frog. What might this look like in the classroom? Consider some of the inherent possibilities: a brain-on-a-stick changes into an embodied theologian; an arrogant jerk is deconstructed into a hesitant and vulnerable novice; a dispassionate analyzer is turned into a practitioner of prophetic imagination; an academically oriented student decides for the first time that she is called. A seminarian transforms into a preacher.

The classroom catalyzes both redemption *and* transformation, and not just one or the other. When it is working as it should, the classroom can be a force for exponential and lasting change. bell hooks claims this reality in *Teaching to Transgress* when she reminds us that, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”¹⁵

Whether we teach in an in-person, online, or hybrid classroom, many of us have a natural proclivity to imagine that the only ones in need of redemption and transformation are our students. We are quick to identify the ways *they* are bound and in need of loosening; we see them as caterpillars, and ourselves as the butterflies they would like to become someday, after they have preached enough sermons. What if we, as educators, are also bound and need to be loosed? What if we are bound to stale practices and pedagogies, stale exegetical approaches and methodologies, sage-on-the-stage mindsets? Also, what if we are not as close as we think we are to being the dynamic teachers that we think we have become? As professional talkers, perhaps we have lost the ability to listen. As professional evaluators, perhaps we have lost the ability to self-diagnose. To become better teachers, we must also become better learners.

When I reflect on teaching in an in-person classroom, I use the language of “homiletical ecology” to describe my journey and commitments. Usually, in ecology, we think of organisms and their relationships to their environments. I use the word in a similar vein, in this instance, to refer to the cultivation of a pedagogical ecosystem in which certain values are prioritized over others and in which teaching and learning are maximized, not minimized.

Many values guide the in-person classroom ecology I strive to create. For the sake of this article, I will mention just four: openness, attunement, respect, and responsibility. The first value is *openness*. I try to create environments that foster openness to the Spirit’s movement and promptings, as well as to change. Regarding the latter, in *Teaching Community*, hooks contends that democratic education requires “radical openness,” namely, “the will to explore different perspectives and change one’s mind as new information is presented.”¹⁶

The second value is *attunement*. This is a musical term used in improvisational performance. Nathan Crawford argues that improvisational musicians strive for “triple attunement,” by which he means 1) the attunement of the musician to the tradition, 2) the musician to other musicians, and 3) the musician to the audience.¹⁷ In the case of preaching, triple attunement involves the preacher’s attunement to a chosen Christian tradition, to peers and professors, and to laypeople as prospective listeners. Attunement also means guiding students to become more in tune with the physical spaces where they preach and the technological spaces where they record, watch, and prepare their sermons.

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994), 12.

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (Routledge, 2003), 48.

¹⁷ Nathan Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation: Using the Metaphor of Attunement to Think Theologically” (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2011), 101–14.

The third value is *respect*, namely, respect for differences that make a difference in the physical classroom. Here is where my research on intercultural competence becomes more relevant and useful to me in the classroom.¹⁸ Teachers of preaching need eyes to see and ears to hear intercultural differences in ways that bring honor and dignity to diversity.¹⁹ Respect also means seeing and hearing the wisdom our students bring with them as co-constructors of knowledge. I am in the Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky school of education theory in that I see students as co-architects of their learning.²⁰ They bring unique experiences infused with wisdom.

The fourth and final value of my homiletical ecology is *responsibility*. The expectation here is that students and teachers will choose to have binding commitments to one another in the in-person classroom. As teachers, we are bound to serve as coaches, doctors, and mentors, three vocations in which it is still possible to tell the truth and not be fired for it. When truth-telling is at its best, it chooses kindness over niceness or harshness. “Niceness” teachers avoid telling students the truth about their sermons. “Harshness” teachers revel in the hurt it causes them. However, “kindness” teachers seek the welfare and growth of those who receive their coaching and criticism. Students also have a responsibility, in their case, to engage in meaningful critical reflection for the purposes of transformation: to listen and respond well to their colleagues, to their instincts, and to God.

These four values, of course, can be cultivated in online and hybrid settings and not just in-person. Even so, the in-person classroom remains especially fertile soil for these values to flourish. Students enter a three-dimensional, incarnational, and embodied space. The setting grants them opportunities to practice openness, attunement, respect, and responsibility before, during, and after class in a manner that is more difficult to replicate in online or hybrid settings. The space creates better conditions for a multi-sensory encounter: if teachers and students are open and alive to the Spirit, and God sees fit to facilitate divine appointments, then those who gather may hear the ground shake, see the air thicken, and feel the wind blowing wherever it wills.

Conclusion

These three perspectives on online, hybrid, and in-person homiletical pedagogy help us recognize some significant roles that place plays for teachers of preaching. Too often, pedagogical evaluations of place as it relates to modality devolve into simplistic binaries, false assumptions, and/or biases based on social location and privilege. Discussions of modality are not merely pragmatic, data-driven decisions made by schools or other institutions that teach preaching. Rather, because modalities are manifestations of place, and place is an

¹⁸ Jared E. Alcántara, *Crossover Preaching: Intercultural-Improvisational Homiletics in Conversation with Gardner C. Taylor* (IVP Academic, 2015).

¹⁹ For an exploration of how this kind of sensibility can help reduce stereotype threat in the physical classroom, see Jared E. Alcántara, “Pedagogy that Purifies the Air: Recognizing and Reducing ‘Stereotype Threat’ in the Preaching Classroom,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 2 (2021): 20–30.

²⁰ For more on co-constructivist learning, see Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence* (Routledge, 2001); Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (Routledge, 2002); Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978); Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (MIT Press, 1986). See also Dave S. Knowlton, “A Constructivist Pedagogue’s Personal Narrative of Integrating Faith with Learning: Epistemological and Pedagogical Challenges,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 11, no. 1 (2002): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656210209484931>; R. Keith Sawyer, “Improvised Lessons: Collaborative Discussion in the Constructivist Classroom,” *Teaching Education* 15, no. 2 (2004): 189–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/104762104200021360>.

epistemological expression, modality discussions have significant implications for meaning-making, justice, belonging, and formation. Lamb, Yarborough, and Alcántara do not allow us to hold onto simplistic narratives about pedagogy's relationship to place. Whether we are considering students' relationships to their homes, how they co-construct the classroom as a meaningful place amidst hybridity, how we as instructors consider our relationship to place, or how we design the classroom as a generative place for learning and homiletical formation, these authors help us recognize the range of decisions that teachers of preaching can and must make at each step along the way.

No matter the modalities we might take up in our teaching, these authors help us interrogate our assumptions, reconsider our relationship to place, and encourage us to make pedagogical decisions that respect the complexity and responsibility of teaching preaching, helping stretch our students and ourselves. And yet, these reflections are not definitive nor authoritative. As conversation partners, we might recognize our own resistance to or rejection of elements of what has been articulated above. Neither are these reflections comprehensive and conclusive. We might wonder what a decolonial lens offers to understanding homiletical pedagogy's relationship to place as well as the work of place-making amidst colonial realities and multicultural learning (or place-holding, to use Yarborough's term). A related question can be raised if we center the climate crisis as a central pedagogical theme and not merely as the content of homiletical pedagogy. While Lamb opens up the conversation around the student cost of homiletical pedagogy as it relates to place, what might more attention to class raise to the surface of our pedagogical assumptions and practices as it relates to place? And of course, none of these reflections indicate the particular content or focus of the courses under consideration. For homileticians who believe the "what" and the "how" are related, this is an important consideration, especially if the "how" also includes the "where." This is all to say that even as we note the significance of these reflections and offer gratitude, there is additional room to consider other dimensions (to invoke other spatial themes) of how place relates to homiletical pedagogy.

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AI as a Homiletic Assistant: a Case Study for the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul

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Abstract: *As part of an initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Catholic Theological Union has partnered with the Attention, Perception and Experience [APEX] neuroscience lab of the University of Chicago to discover if there is an empirically verifiable basis for “compelling preaching.” As this project has evolved, AI has become an important partner. This paper will explore one aspect of the interface between AI and effective preaching: the creation of a virtual homily builder grounded in a database of approximately 600 homilies authored by the program director. This experimental information bank is being used for both analyzing preaching patterns and generating future homily outlines. This article provides a general view of the digital preaching landscape and then narrates a specific experiment with this “imitator” for preaching the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul on 29 June 2025.*

Introduction

While not all futurists agree with him, computer scientist and inventor Raymond Kurzweil’s work on the law of accelerating returns has prompted him to predict that in the 21st century the world will experience the equivalent of 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress.¹ Kurzweil notes that among those developments we will see pilotless aircraft, human-level AI, synthetic telepathy, and successful nuclear fusion.² While he does ponder a future emergence of a “technological transcendence” in which advanced AI could facilitate new forms of meaning or even worship,³ he makes no specific predictions about AI assuming the roles of pastor or preacher. Maybe because this has already come to pass.

The intersection of religion and AI has produced some startling results over the past three decades. These include spiritual robotics such as the Daruma doll grounded in the Zen-Buddhist tradition, the Catholic saint-like SanTO with rudimentary praying and talking abilities, the robot monk Xianer that, among other things, can lead visitors to the Longquan Monastery in Beijing in their meditation.⁴ While developing more slowly, there is not only a growing number of apps,

¹ Ray Kurzweil, “Understanding the Accelerating Rate of Change,” *Perspectives on Business Innovation*, 2 May 2003, reprinted on KurzweilAI.net, accessed [3.vii.2025], <https://www.thekurzweillibrary.com/understanding-the-accelerating-rate-of-change>.

² Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005).

³ Kurzweil, *The Singularity*, 387-390.

⁴ See the overview of religious robots in Jonas Simmerlein and Max Tretter, “Robots in Religious Practices: A Review,” *Theology and Science* 22, no. 2 (2024): 255–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2024.2351639>; also Simon Balle, “Theological Dimensions of Humanlike Robots: A Roadmap for Theological Inquiry,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 1 (2022): 132–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2155916>; Simon Balle and Charles Ess, “Robots, Ethics and Digital Religion: Initial Considerations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*, eds. Heidi Campbell and Pauline Hope Cheong (2022), 562–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197549803.013.27>; William Gaver et al., “The Prayer Companion,” paper presented at the 28th Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2010, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1753326.1753640>; Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial*

websites, and AI tools designed to assist in sermon preparation,⁵ but there are already virtual preachers appearing across various religions. In 2023, a Lutheran congregation in Bavaria held a service in which the sermon was generated by ChatGPT and delivered by an avatar of a bearded Black man on a huge screen in the sanctuary.⁶ Since early 2019, the Android preacher known as Minda has been regularly giving 25-minute sermons at the Zen Buddhist Kōdai-ji Temple.⁷

The debate over whether to use some form of AI when preparing a sermon or homily has been lively.⁸ Yet there seems to be an emerging consensus that employing AI as a tool rather than

Intelligence, and Virtual Reality (Oxford University Press, 2010); Löffler, Jörn Hurtienne, and Ilona Nord, "Blessing Robot BlessU2: A Discursive Design Study to Understand the Implications of Social Robots in Religious Contexts," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 13 (2021): 569–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-019-00558-3>; Scott Midson, "Posthuman Priests: Exploring the 'New Visibility of Religion' in Robotic Representations of Religious Rituals," *Religions* 13, no. 10 (2022): 941, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100941>; Ilona Nord and Charles Ess, "Robotics in Christian Religious Practice: Reflections on Initial Experiments in This Field," available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370600338_Robotics_In_Christian_Religious_Practice_Reflections_On_Initial_Experiments_In_This_Field; Anna Puzio, "A NAO Robot Performing Religious Practices," *ET-Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024): 129–40, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anna-Puzio/publication/381003073_A_NAO_Robot_Performing_Religious_Practices/links/6658e86f0b0d284574759539/A-NAO-Robot-Performing-Religious-Practices.pdf; Joseph Roso: Joseph Roso, "The Uses of Technology in Twenty-First Century Congregational Worship: A Report from the National Congregations Study," *Liturgy* 38, no. 4 (2023): 3–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2023.2260706>; Jonas Simmerlein (2024): Jonas Simmerlein, "Sacred Meets Synthetic: A Multi-Method Study on the First AI Church Service," *Review of Religious Research* 0, no. 0 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241282962>; Simona Stano, "Dis- and Re-Embodiment in Religious Practices: Semiotic, Ethical, and Normative Implications of Robotic Officiants," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law – Revue Internationale De Sémiotique Juridique* 37, no. 4 (December 20, 2023): 1209–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-023-10078-z>; William Young, "Reverend Robot: Automation and Clergy," *Zygon* 54, no. 2 (2019): 479–500, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12515>.

⁵ E.g., AI for work at <https://www.aiforwork.co/prompt-articles/chatgpt-prompt-rabbi-religious-services-prepare-a-sermon-b7337>; Logos at <https://www.logos.com>; Pastors.AI at <https://pastors.ai>; Pulpit AI Sermon Ai at <https://sermonai.com>; Sermon Illustrator at <https://www.newstartdiscipleship.com/post/a-free-sermon-illustration-tool>; Sermonary at <https://sermonary.com>; SermonPrep.ai at <https://chatgpt.com/g/g-zuGmaIq04-sermonprep-ai>; SermonsSend at <https://www.sermonsSend.com>; Sermonspark at <https://ai-for-churches.com/sermonspark/>; Verble at <https://www.verble.app/sermon/>.

⁶ "Can a Chatbot Preach a Good Sermon? Hundreds Attend Church Service Generated by ChatGPT to Find Out," *El País*, 10 June 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-06-10/can-a-chatbot-preach-a-good-sermon-hundreds-attend-church-service-generated-by-chatgpt-to-find-out.html>.

⁷ Erica Baffelli, "The Android and the Fax: Robots, AI and Buddhism in Japan," in *The Digital Turn in the Humanities* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2021), 123–45.

⁸ Besides the innumerable blogs and videos debating the intersection of AI and preaching, articles include: En Rui Chua, "ChatGPT's Gospel Preaching Process: A Grounded Theory Study," *Authorea Preprints* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.23257727.v2>; Bin Hwang, "인공지능 시대의 도래에 따른 설교 윤리와 활용에 대한 개혁주의생명신학적 검토" [A Reformed Life Theological Examination of Preaching Ethics and Utilization in the Age of Artificial Intelligence], *복음과 실천신학* 68 (2023): 76–105; Ian Hussey, "Preaching and Generative AI: A Perspective from Early 2024," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 28, no. 2 (November 2024): 307–323; Rachael A. Keefe, "Where Is the Spirit? Reflections on Engaging AI in Sermon Preparation," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 79, no. 2 (April 2025): 136–144; Byung-Seok Kim, "급변하는 사회, 4차 산업혁명 인공지능(AI) 시대의 예배와 설교의 위치" [The Rapidly Changing Society, the Place of Worship and Preaching in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Period], *신학과 실천* 59 (2018): 153–182; Ian Nell, "Homiletical Competencies for the Fourth Industrial Revolution: South African Perspectives on Speaking Truth to Power," *International Journal of Homiletics* 6, no. 1 (2023): 105–120; Rob O'Lynn, "Wise Preaching: Furthering the

a substitute in sermon preparation is inevitable and can be both appropriate and ethical as long as certain parameters are in place.⁹

The Compelling Preaching Grant

In 2022, the Lilly Endowment launched its Compelling Preaching initiative, intended to foster more engaging and effective preaching by “cultivating practices among aspiring and active preachers that can help them to proclaim the gospel to a variety of audiences in more engaging and effective ways.”¹⁰ To date, the Endowment has provided sizeable grants to 140 schools, churches, and other organizations.¹¹

In 2023, Catholic Theological Union proposed a grant that would put preaching in dialogue with cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Key to that proposal is the Attention, Perception, and EXperience (APEX) lab at the University of Chicago under the leadership of Prof. Howard Nusbaum who became the principal investigator for the project.¹² This author is the program director. The program was designed to enable individual preachers to become more effective and to help those who teach homiletics boost the effectiveness of their students.¹³ The project is being conducted in both Spanish and English.

The project is unfolding in three phases. The first phase studied whether people could actually recognize homilies that the program director discerned to be compelling. The results, acquired through video reviews, online interviews, and a variety of cognitive and linguistic tools¹⁴ across both English- and Spanish-speaking participants was a clear “yes”: both experts and lay participants confirmed the classification of homilies as more or less effective, originally curated by the program director. With this first phase largely completed, enough empirical data emerged for the scientists to establish a working standard of what a strong or compelling homily sounds like.

Phase two is designed to determine the impact a more effective homily might have. This impact inquiry is particularly focused on five key moral virtues that the preaching consultants

Wisdom Homiletics Conversation in Both Model and Method,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 240,

[https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020240\[2\]\[4\]](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020240[2][4]); Hyun-Shin Park, 챗GPT(ChatGPT)에 대한 실천신학적 조망: 챗GPT 설교에 대한 설교학적 비평을 중심으로, 복음과 실천신학, 2023; Woo Seung Pil, “Tools for 인공지능(A.I.: Artificial Intelligence) 시대의 선교전략: 선교지향적인 경험적 설교,” *복음과 선교*, 2024.

Jin-Ho Suh, “폴 틸리히의 신학의 관점에서 본 AI 설교의 가능성과 한계” [The Possibility and the Limitation of AI Preaching in Light of the Theology of Paul Tillich], *신학논단* 113 (September 2023): 165-192; Seung Pil Woo, “인공지능 (A.I.: Artificial Intelligence) 시대의 선교전략: 선교지향적인 경험적 설교” [Mission Strategy in the Age of A.I. (Artificial Intelligence): Mission-Oriented Experiential Preaching], *복음과 선교* 65 (2024): 195-223.

⁹ Dave Betts, “Can AI and Preaching Coexist? Three Ethical Ways to Use It Well,” *Church and AI*, 19 March, 2025, <https://www.churchandai.com/p/can-ai-and-preaching-coexist-three>.

¹⁰ <https://compellingpreaching.org/>

¹¹ <https://compellingpreaching.org/grantees>

¹² <https://apexlab.uchicago.edu/>

¹³ See the executive summary and other information about the project at <https://preachingandneuroscience.com/>

¹⁴ E.g., pupillary dilation studies, examinations of lexical-semantic predictors of compelling preaching, narrative transportation theory, and event segmentation studies.

confirmed were essential to effective preaching and that the scientists affirmed could be tested: can effective homilizing increase trust [in the community, the preacher, and God], increase hope, compassion, openness, or epistemic humility, and create memorability? This phase is moving forward by employing the same videos and the various linguistic and biophysical tools used in phase one, with additional studies utilizing EEGs and fMRIs.

Phase three will attempt to determine whether the project's findings can be translated so that homiletics teachers can employ them to nurture more effective preaching among their students. One major outcome will be the production of a series of online, open-access professional videos that both chronicle the work of the grant and present our findings in language understandable to those with no background in the sciences.

The Turn to AI

Late in phase one, the APEX team began to wonder whether it would be possible to create a virtual preacher that could be programmed with what we have learned from this project. Could our empirical findings, for example, be programmed into an AI system that would also be programmed with the Roman Catholic Lectionary, documents on Roman Catholic Preaching, the content and design of the Roman Catholic church year calendar, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and other relevant databases? Could we produce an AI preacher who could construct a homily for a specific feast or Sunday that is notably empathetic, engenders hope and trust in the listeners, prompts the listeners into a stance of epistemic humility, and is memorable?

When these musings first emerged, the APEX lab did not have the necessary hardware for creating such a digital preacher.¹⁵ Furthermore, with very little data on hand from the initial experiments underway, it was too early in the project to expend energy in this direction. However, one member of the team, David Falk, began a preliminary experiment with a "homily creator" based on texts from this author's homilies. For this experiment in January of 2025, I provided David with a compendium of about 600 of my stored homilies as Microsoft Word files.¹⁶ The goal was to create a large language model capable of generating a homily in my style. One of the presuppositions here is that my preaching is perceived as notably effective, something at least partially confirmed in phase I of the project and by other external sources.¹⁷

David first spent about 6 weeks formatting and labeling my homilies so they could be searched and imitated in creating a new homily. He then programmed in the liturgical calendar for all Sundays, solemnities, and holy days of obligation. This needed to be done for each year and in the context of the three cycles of the Roman Catholic Lection (A-B-C) as most Sunday celebrations (e.g., the 1st Sunday of Advent) fall on different dates each calendar year. The next step was to answer David's request to explain my style or method of homily composition, so that there was a broad homiletic framework the program could employ to generate a homily that imitated my homiletic approach. While I do not strictly follow any one pattern or model in my preaching, I am an admirer of Eugene Lowry. His insistence on introducing ambiguity very early

¹⁵ Subsequently, they have acquired a ThinkSystem SR630 V2 with 2x Intel 6346 processors, 64 total cores, 3.10 GHz, 1TB 3200MHz RAM, 960GB local SSD, and 4x L40S 48GB PCIe GPUs; more specifications at <https://www.itcreations.com/lenovo/lenovo-thinksystem-sr630-v2-server>.

¹⁶ 100+ of these are available on my website, edwardfoleycapuchin.org.

¹⁷ E.g., recipient of the 2022 Great Preacher's award from Aquinas Institute in St. Louis.

in the homily – his so-called "oops" move – is both appealing and, in my experience, very effective.¹⁸ I try to construct my homilies so as not to telegraph the summative points too early. Keeping the assembly a bit off balance through the unfolding of the homily is a useful strategy for maintaining their engagement throughout the homiletic event. Thus, I gave David an outline of Lowry's method as a final piece of programming. In early April 2025, I was given access to what David labeled the "Father Foley imitator."

The app is designed with four separate interfaces: 1) the liturgical calendar, which allows for browsing the current year's Roman Catholic calendar; 2) a discover scripture option, which allows for searching the bible by theme or question, 3) a homily explorer, which allows searching through the content of my stored homilies, and 4) an homily assistant, designed for writing, editing, and reviewing homilies in my voice.

The Feasts of St. Peter and Paul: a case study

For the past 18 years, I have been a guest preacher and presider at Old St. Patrick's Church in downtown Chicago. On 29 June 2025 I was scheduled to preach at the 9:00 a.m. Eucharist, a Mass that is regularly livestreamed.¹⁹ While the Roman Catholic calendar places that Sunday in the cycle of "Ordinary Time," Sundays in this post-Easter segment of the calendar are sometimes displaced by major feasts. Thus, in 2025, 29 June, which fell on a Sunday, intersected with the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul. According to Roman Catholic liturgical directives, this solemnity has priority and displaces what should have been the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. As preparing a homily is a time-consuming process, my preparation for the 29th began on 3 June. While I have explored the "imitator" before, I decided to engage it more systematically as a serious homiletic assistant in preparing my homily.

One note about the requirements of a Roman Catholic homily: contrary to a commonly held view, it is not a canonical requirement to preach the lectionary readings of the day. While in no way diminishing the biblical texts that comprise the Roman Catholic lectionary, the highest magisterial instruction on homilizing appears in the 1963 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In paragraph 52 of that document, the Council instructs, "by means of the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year."²⁰ While at first glance "sacred text" could appear to be a synonym for Scripture, the Vatican's first instruction in 1964, "on the orderly carrying out of the Constitution on the Liturgy" (*Inter Oecumenici*), teaches otherwise. It notes that "A homily on the sacred text means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners, of some point in either the readings from sacred Scripture or in another text from the Order of Prayer of the day's Mass."²¹ The current Roman Catholic code of canon law is similar, noting that "in the homily the

¹⁸ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded Edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Available at <https://livestream.oldstpats.org/sunday-9am-mass>.

²⁰ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

²¹ "Inter Oecumenici," 1964, in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 830.

mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian living are to be expounded from the sacred text through the course of the liturgical year.”²² Given this flexibility regarding the focus and content of the homily, I chose to preach “the mystery” of Peter and Paul, i.e., their shared feast day and notably different personalities and ministries reflected in the proper orations and preface, as well as the lection passages appointed for that day.²³

Preliminary work

Before engaging the “imitator,” I began my usual study of the lectionary readings and other proper texts for the feast. A key part of that study is attempting to discover some point of ambiguity à la Lowry that could be employed to “trouble” the feast and the mystery being celebrated. He analogizes this as the equivalent of providing an “itch” that the assembly needs to “scratch.” He further contends that to engage the assembly, this needs to happen within the first two or three minutes.²⁴

Two possible “oops” emerged from this preliminary study. The first is that Peter and Paul, although they share this single feast day, were very different people: a sort of sanctoral “odd couple.” The differences in their backgrounds, their missions, and their disagreement at the so-called Council of Jerusalem are reflected in the proper preface of the day, especially in the summary line “So each in a different way gathered together the one family of Christ.”²⁵ This seemed to be a fruitful launching point for acknowledging the multiple paths to service and holiness. A second problematizing of the feast arose from the Gospel verse “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” This text is usually interpreted by Roman Catholics as the biblical foundation for papal primacy, even infallibility. So how does this passage and its traditional interpretations invite all the baptized into mission and holiness and not simply reinforce fealty to the pope? Is there a way to imagine the rock of Peter embedded in the granite of all believers and so connect his ministry with that of all the baptized? After settling on these two points of ambiguity, I engaged the imitator through 6 different prompts.

Prompt 1:

Create a 1400-word homily on the solemnity of St. Peter and Paul that emphasizes their very different lives and personalities, but that what unified them was a shared faith. The homily should reimagine the Scripture reading for the day in Matthew 16: the rock is not a single person ... Peter was an outcropping at the beginning of a church ... and the rock today is not simply the pope but also the community.

This prompt did not produce a preachable homily but did produce some useful language, phrases, and suggestions. Especially appealing were nascent descriptions of these two apostles, like that of Peter: “Peter, the rugged fisherman from Galilee: a man who carried his faith with impulsive hands, shifting between boldness and doubt, a man whose faith sometimes felt like a

²² Canon 767 § 1, *Code of Canon Law*, Book III: “The Teaching Function of the Church,” canons 756–780, Vatican website, accessed 3 July 2025, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib3-cann756-780_en.html.

²³ 1st Reading: Acts 12:1-11; Responsorial Psalm: Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9 (R. 5) - “The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him”; 2nd Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; Alleluia: Matthew 16:18; Gospel: Matthew 16:13-19.

²⁴ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 29.

²⁵ *The Roman Missal*, English translation according to the Third Typical Edition (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2011), 887.

wave he could ride and at other times the sea ready to pull him under." Also helpful was language that tried to place Peter the Rock into a larger community context: "what if the rock was not simply Peter alone? What if it is more like a rugged coastline made of many stones, all pressed together by the winds and waves of time? Peter might be one prominent outcropping, but never the entire shore."

Prompt 2:

Nuance this homily with an awareness of so much division in the world today and even in the church. But that difference did not make Peter and Paul enemies ... so why does it so often make us enemies?

This prompt did not produce a markedly better homily, though, as before, there were some useful images and language. Building on the first description of the apostles, this prompt enhanced that description: "The two of them together—church's founding figures, sure—but it does not take long to notice a kind of oppositional electricity between them. The brawn and the brain, the impulsive and the reflective, the man of the people and the man of letters, the conventionally Jewish disciple and the radical missionary to the Gentiles." Overall, however, this prompt did not generate a text worthy of proclaiming. The opening seemed especially bland and did not introduce sufficient ambiguity for launching the rest of the text.

Prompt 3:

Now, expanding to 1500 words, nuance this homily with an ending that emphasizes how, despite our different political, social, or religious views like Peter and Paul, what can unify us - as they did in their own time – is not simply talking the talk but walking the walk.

Since the texts for my homilies ordinarily run about 1600 words, which turns out to be about 10 or 11 minutes when preached, this prompt was meant to expand the text closer to this ordinary length. This result properly expanded to 1500 words and improved upon the description of Peter and Paul, e.g.: "Peter, the rough and ready fisherman from Galilee, whose faith had the texture of the sea—sometimes calm, sometimes stormy—who shouted his confessions like a burst of wind yet faltered when the night grew dark. Paul, the fiery thinker, a man whose heart was caught up in zeal and whose mind raced with questions and struggles no less stormy, but whose path led him far beyond the waters of Galilee—across the Mediterranean, across cultures and communities." Overall, however, this version did not show great improvement. At this stage I realized that my original idea of Peter and Paul as a kind of "sanctoral odd couple" had not yet been included in any prompt, so on to the next one.

Prompt 4:

Now change the opening so it does not start by talking about Peter and Paul, but about other "duos" who were very effective even though they were very different, like maybe Oscar and Felix in The Odd Couple, or Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, or a more contemporary example. Maybe George Burns and Gracy Allen, Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Cheech and Chong, Simon and Garfunkel, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. The goal here is to catch people's attention early on.

This step brought the draft homily closer to what I was looking for, yet it took the prompt more literally than I had hoped. Upon consideration, I was concerned that the references to The Odd Couple or the references to Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were too dated for younger members of the assembly. Helpful for assembly engagement was the newly posed question:

“Maybe you think of someone more recent—two people from distinct worlds, odd complements who surprise you by the strength they find in each other’s differences.” The ending here also seemed a touch anticlimactic, so we needed to shore it up.

Prompt 5:

*The final invitation to the assembly is to become a trustworthy rock
like Christ was for Peter.*

This prompt generated a more refined ending, well underscoring the mission of the baptized: “When I think about that idea of becoming a trustworthy rock like Christ was for Peter, it calls to mind how messy that actually looks in real life. What does it mean to be a rock? Not a cold, immovable statue, but something you can lean on when the storms come, but also something alive and maybe even a little worn down by the waves.” The overall results, however, seemed subpar for actual use. It was becoming clear to me that “the imitator” was not capable of generating what I would consider a strong homily. Prompt 6 would be my last in this experiment.

Prompt 6:

*It is my style to end the homily so that it leads into the piece of music that will be performed
afterward. You can subtly weave allusions to the song into the homily text without being too
obvious. Here is the lyric:*

*When others see with earthly eyes
Just what they want to see
You will see the things that never die
You will know and recognize
By simple child-like faith
The priceless truth that
Others will deny.
When others say I'm just a man
Who likes to dream His dreams
When others call a miracle a myth
You'll listen for eternity
In moments as they pass
And see with spirit eyes
What others miss.
Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom
And on this rock forever and ever it shall stand
And all the powers of Hell itself
Shall never more prevail against it
For Satan's thrones are built on sinking sand
Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom
And on this rock forever and ever it shall stand
Upon this rock of revelation
I'll build a strong and mighty nation
And it shall stand the storms of time
Upon this rock.
If in a simple carpenter*

*You see the Son of God
If you would choose to lose
When you could win
If you would give your life away
For nothing in return
Then you are where
My kingdom will begin.²⁶*

This prompt was not terribly successful for enriching the rhetoric or effectively resolving the “oops” embedded in the contrasts of Peter and Paul. It did include a few references to the song “Upon this Rock,” but nothing outstanding. It became clear, at this point, that the “imitator” could not create a preachable homily on its own. It was time for me to draw ideas and phrases, rhetoric and metaphors from the generated text and write my own homily. The full text (1604 words) follows, in which materials either explicitly generated by or inspired by the “imitator” are underlined:

A number of years ago I had a great colleague
who became my most effective writing partner.
After authoring a few articles together
we produced a book that, 26 years later, is still going strong
both in English and Korean.²⁷

Part of the surprise of this success is that Herbert and I
are such very different people.

He is a married Lutheran Pastor
and I am a celibate Roman Catholic priest;

he has children and grandchildren
and I have an 18-month-old yellow lab;

his specialty is pastoral care
and mine is worship.

I am obsessively neat, and compulsively orderly
and let’s just say that Herbert is the opposite:
we were in so many ways an academic odd couple.

Yet as we have admitted in print, these differences
were part of the formula for the book’s success

²⁶ Gloria Gaither and Dony McGuire, "Upon This Rock," (Capitol CMG Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group, 1983).

²⁷ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); 예배와 목회상담 : 힘 있는 이야기, 위험한 의례, trans. Seok-mo Ahn (Seoul: Hakjisa, 2012).

and for our own friendship now stretching over 4 decades.

The so called “odd couple formula” was popularized
by Neil Simon’s 1965 play of that name, and its many adaptations.

But well before 1965 was the TV series "The Honeymooners"
with Ralph Kramden always wanting to send Alice to the moon.
Then there was what some considered
the greatest comedy duo of all time: Abbot and Costello.

Variations of the formula are repeated in innumerable shows
pairing unlikely characters
like Hot Lips and Frank Burns on Mash
or Frasier and Lilith in "Cheers"
and then there's the entire cast of "Big Bang Theory,"
except for maybe Raj and his dog.

You probably recognize variations of the odd couple in your life:
the extroverted relative with the introverted partner
a generous friend dating a selfish narcissist
or the religiously pious in love with a happy agnostic.

Not to be outdone, the church today invites us to what might be dubbed
“Odd Couple” Sunday:
an unusual interruption of the Sunday cycle of ordinary time
with these two extraordinary
and extraordinarily different disciples.

First there was Peter, the rough-edged fisherman from Galilee,
whose faith was not unlike the sea where he labored:
sometimes calm and generous, sometimes stormy and unforgiving.

who shouted his confession like wind gust
then faltered in the night when confronted with his discipleship
subsequently battered by wave after wave of guilt
and ultimately transformed into a bold yet humbled fisher of men.

The British Journalist William Norman Ewer once wrote.
“How odd of God to choose the Jews.”

Similarly, we might say of Jesus,
“How rare to dare, with Peter as Leader.”

Revered as the “first pope,”
the so-called prince of the apostles is the only person in the New Testament
that Jesus actually calls “Satan.”

Then there was Saul transmuted into Paul,
not a fisherman but a seafaring visionary
whose restless mind was as tumultuous as the waters he crossed;
fierce in zeal and sharp in judgment,
a voice first vehemently raised against the church
then zealously raised in its defense;

an ardent son of Israel riding high on certainty, until he was
then knocked off his high horse by the crucified;
the hunter was turned into hunted
whose letters burned with fire and mercy alike
fashioned out of hardship, shipwreck, and prison;

both scholar and tentmaker
he embodied the paradox of strength and vulnerability;

his relentless journeys carried the Jesus movement
beyond its local beginnings
into worlds both welcoming and hostile,

and his boldness in words and travels
letters and living
ultimately cost him his life.

So, we have these two alpha males
each critical for shaping the origins of Christianity
sitting somewhat uncomfortably side by side
on the same feast day ... in the same liturgy.

Peter is apparently the more important of the two:
after all, his name comes first,
he was the sidekick of the historical Jesus,
the divinely designated rock,
the progenitor of the Roman Catholic Papacy.

On the other hand, multiple scholars contend
that it was Paul ... not Peter ... not even Jesus
who founded Christianity²⁸ and Christian Theology.²⁹
Remember, Paul was writing his letters
decades before Mark invented the genre we call gospel
or before any other New Testament author
got into the act.

²⁸ A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (W. W. Norton, 1997); Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul the Founder of Christianity* (Prometheus Books, 2002), etc.

²⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Baylor University Press, 1951), 187.

To push the comparison a little further
their competing roles, personalities, and influences
actually clashed in real time – although there is no evidence
that they came to blows.

20 years or so after the death of Jesus
with the growing number of Gentile converts,
largely because of the efforts of Paul,
the question arose whether these non-Jewish believers
should be required to be circumcised
and follow other key directives of Mosaic Law.

This issue came to a head at the so-called Council of Jerusalem.
Initially, Peter agreed with James and other traditionalists
that Gentiles should follow the Torah
but Paul vehemently disagreed.
And even though Peter was the rock
his position crumbled and Paul's argument prevailed.

So we might wonder who is the real rock?

When my family needs a happy diversion
because of some new trauma on the horizon,
and there are many,
we often turn to trusted and true movies
that inevitably make us laugh and remind us that life goes on
even if in strange and unexpected ways.

One of these perennial favorites is "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

One memorable line from that movie
occurs when Tula wants to go to school, but her father is against it
but then her mother reminds her
that the man is the head, but the woman is the neck
and she can turn the head
any way she wants.³⁰

So is Peter the head and Paul the neck?
Peter the Rock and Paul the hydraulic hammer?
Peter the winner and Paul the contentious runner-up?

Or maybe we need to reimagine
any apostolic competition here,

³⁰ Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJbC5AfxqPc>.

any founder's tournament

and reassess this apostolic brotherhood
not only for the sake of history,
but also for the sake of the church today:
in a world in which competition can devolve
into a dangerous virus
where losers are shunned and degraded,
and martyrs are mocked as failures.

Over the years, I have often had the chance to fly
over amazing mountain ranges:
The Alps, the Andes, and the Canadian Rocky Mountains.
Inevitably, each is populated with impressive rock formations
huge boulders and massive stones.
Interestingly enough,
none of these geological outcroppings is alone:
some may soar skyward, dwarfing their surroundings,
but each such giant is embedded in communities of stone.

Largely because of today's gospel reading
we tend to see Peter as a singular rock
as an isolated cornerstone,
like the only leg on a three-legged stool ...
and you know how that is going to turn out.

However, rather than imagining a lone apostle
as a solitary cornerstone
what happens if we reconsider that rock
not as a lonely placard holding up one name
but as an admittedly notable peak in a rugged mountain range
a crest created by many stones pushed together
the result of tectonic plates colliding
like Jesus, Peter, and Paul
a religious Everest that reshapes the world
with its love ethic and call to radical inclusivity.

The church was never meant to rest on the shoulders of one person.
From the very start, it emerged from a community:
a brace of like-minded friends
a mountain range of believers
composed of a myriad of diverse outcroppings
pressed together in the tectonic upheaval we call faith,
and that here we call Old St. Pat's.

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege

of presiding at a baptism
of the first male son
born to either side of the family for two generations
... of course, he was destined to become a little prince.

Right before the baptism, the proud maternal grandmother
who had lost her husband some years before
said to her daughter, "He is so beautiful,
I think he looks like your father."
The daughter, who never knew her birth father, gently said,
"Mom ... that can't be ... remember I am adopted."
The Mother, at first a little taken aback, shook her head and said,
"I'm sorry, I always forget."

Sometimes we forget, in this age of singularity
that we were adopted into a community grounded in granite
and that this church of Peter and Paul
still needs rocks and jackhammers
still needs committed odd couples
still needs bold, impulsive, even problematic disciples
to move the tectonic plates of justice in a world
that resists the gifts of Christianity's preternatural odd couple
Peter and Paul.

On this their feast, we accept again their commission
that as bombs are turning cities into rubble
to be an unshakeable foundation for peace;
that as human dignity in all of its diversity is under assault
to be a mountain range of justice;
and as our society and the world
is prone to placing boulders of exclusion
to block the progress of those the elite deem unworthy
to become jackhammers of liberation
removing every obstacle that hinders the way of the Lord.

If we do so, then, like Peter, the Lord can say to us
upon you, this fresh outcropping of faith
this 21st-century rock, I will build my church
and the powers of hell will not prevail against it
through Christ our Lord.

Discussion

Homily preparation is a time-consuming venture. If a preacher has been ministering in the same congregation for any extended period of time, that preparation can be even more challenging unless the homilist ends up endlessly repeating themselves. Preparing a Sunday homily for Old St. Pat's church is ordinarily a 10- to 14-hour commitment for me. Not all of that is at the computer

writing. It includes reading and praying the appointed "sacred texts," musing on them while driving or on the treadmill, and reading multiple commentaries and searching various websites (e.g., textweek.com and zeteosearch.org) for information and inspiration. I also record the final draft on my iPhone so I have a good approximation of the homily's timing and can edit for oral delivery rather than simply reading it. Employing the "imitator" did not shorten the preparatory time. It actually increased it. Some of that may be the result of my not having previously explored the tool so assiduously and was inept in my preparation for this venture.

That has been one key learning resulting from this exercise. Since any large language model is, as David Falk once noted, a sophisticated "autofill" device, diligent preparation is necessary before engaging this or any chatbot. I had done some preparation and imagined two key "oops" points (i.e., the "sanctoral odd couple" and the Gospel singularity of Peter as Rock) that could propel the homily along. However, those key points needed to be elaborated more fully. Also, both of them should have been introduced from the beginning of the AI dialogue, whereas I only introduced the first of these in prompt three.

While I do not always follow it, especially when inspired to go in a different direction in the writing process, I ordinarily sketch a rough outline that sequences the key points, positions the "oops" (unlike Lowry some homilies will contain two or three of these), properly balances the liturgical-scriptural-doctrinal elements with narrative or poetry, and builds to an appropriate and succinct conclusion. Prompt one might yield a more useful text from the beginning if I provide it with a general outline of the homily as well as key points.

A downside of the "imitator" is its difficulty, or even its inability, to personalize. Despite the fact that the underlying database of my homilies is filled with personal anecdotes and stories, the "imitator" never accessed them. While aware that the homily should not be focused on the homilist, personalized experiences and stories are often more effective as they more easily communicate the emotion of the preacher, which contributes to their reception by an assembly.³¹

It is a privilege to have such a homily-preparation tool, largely driven by my preaching texts spanning the last 18 years. Even with such a personalized tool, however, the attempt to craft a quality homily for the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul for the community of Old St. Pat's was not wildly successful. That suggests that employing non-personalized, non-contextualized LLMs would produce even less satisfying results. Thus, while digital platforms such as ChatGPT, Chatbot, and Claude might supply useful information, their capacities for generating anything close to wise preaching are limited. If this experiment took 6 prompts to push the limit on what could be expected for a homily, other, more generic platforms might require at least twice as many prompts, if not more, to provide a text that a preacher could draw from in crafting a homily in their voice.

At the same time, my dialogue with the "imitator" was invigorating and even enjoyable. At times, it felt like I did have an assistant providing alternative language, new metaphors, even bits of poetry. It is doubtful that on my own I could have mimicked the couplet "How odd of God to choose the Jews" with "how rare to dare, choosing Peter as Leader." Consequently, I will continue to engage

³¹ This is one of the finds of APEX team member Ima Alberro, as reported in his M.A. thesis for the Social Sciences degree at the University of Chicago. By using narrative transportation theory, he concluded from the data derived from studying our Spanish language consulting experts that "while narrative transportation can contribute to pro-sociality, its effects are largely mediated through empathic engagement. The findings imply that it is the emotional, empathic engagement — not merely exposure to high narrativity or persuasion — that predicts real-world moral attitudes and pro-social tendencies. See Imanol Alberro, "Effects of Narrative Transportation on Personal Attitudes" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 2025), 20.

with the “imitator” but now with a more refined expectation. One overarching future goal in engaging the “imitator” will not be to produce a full text for a homily that is appropriate to preach. Neither the “imitator” nor any other LLM presently has that capacity. However, this digital assistant has shown the capacity, when appropriately interrogated, to stimulate my imagination, provide fresh rhetoric and metaphors, and even to craft phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that I can incorporate into a final homily.

As such, digital tools are programmed and trained to evolve into more effective homiletic assistants; it is also apparent that any preacher intending to engage them will need a notable degree of training if they are to reap the benefits of such tools while ensuring the integrity of their own voice.³²

³² Johannes Schneider, “Humans Learn too: Better Human-AI Interaction using Optimized Human Inputs,” *arXiv*, 19 September 2020, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2009.09266>.

From Minerals to Minister: Exploring the Materiality, Embodiment, and Place of AI-Generated Sermons

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Abstract: *AI cannot preach, claims one blogger, since preaching involves “real people, in a real place, through a real preacher.”¹ AI’s presumed lack of physicality has been one argument made against its use in preaching.*

However, are sermons generated by AI truly so disembodied, immaterial, and placeless? This paper traces, step-by-step, the actual development of one AI sermon – from the extraction of rare earth minerals, all the way to a completed manuscript upon the preacher’s desk. In so doing, this paper reveals that AI preaching is, in fact, multi-bodied, multi-material, and pluri-local. It raises the question: if these are the actual bodies, materials, and places used for AI preaching, what does this mean for a preacher’s use of it?

The term *artificial intelligence* hardly evokes images of trees and lakes, or soil and rocks, or villages and cities teeming with people. Instead, it implies the opposite: *artificial* meaning without pre-history, something human-made; and *intelligence* as something immaterial, an ability rather than a thing. Big Tech reinforces these ideas by describing AI as made of algorithms, machine learning, networks, and the cloud. Each of these terms both reflects and fortifies the prevailing perception that AI is an immaterial, disembodied, and placeless force.

It is this image of AI that is routinely used in arguments against deploying AI in the practice of preaching. AI cannot interpret scripture for preaching, claims New Testament professor John Boyles, since “the bot is disembodied,” and therefore, “its interpretations are necessarily disembodied.”² Christian ministry professor Ed Stetzer instructs preachers to balance “efficiency with quality” – weighing the choice between using a “disembodied automaton” and their own personal interaction with the church.³ Even ChatGPT joins in – when Pastor Randal Pelton asked the chatbot “What can I do as a preacher that you cannot do?” it replied, humans are “embodied and pastoral,” while AI is “disembodied and generic.”⁴

Are AI-generated sermons, or AI more broadly, truly as immaterial, disembodied, and placeless as these critics suggest? This paper will challenge that assumption. Step by step, it traces the making of an AI sermon: from the minerals that enable computation all the way to the sermon manuscript laid on the minister’s desk, just waiting to be preached. While a comprehensive survey of every stage of the development of an AI sermon is beyond the scope of this work, this paper will focus on five key stages along the way: 1) extraction, 2) data collection, 3) data cleaning, 4) prompting, and 5) inference (the processing of prompts).

¹ Brett Landry, “Should Pastors Use AI in Sermon Preparation?,” *The Gospel Coalition Canada*, May 26, 2025, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/should-pastors-use-ai-in-sermon-preparation/>.

² John Boyles, “Misreading Scripture with Artificial Eyes,” *Christianity Today*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/07/ai-chatgpt-exegetical-tool-bible-scripture-sermon-mount/>.

³ Carter Wiley and Ed Stetzer, “The Ethics of AI in Sermon Writing,” *Sermon Shots*, January 30, 2025, <https://sermonshots.com/blog/the-ethics-of-ai-in-sermon-writing/>.

⁴ Randal Pelton, “What Can I Do That AI Can’t? Reflections for Preachers in a Digital Age,” *Pelton on Preaching*, April 13, 2025, <https://peltononpreaching.com/2025/04/13/3544/>.

At each juncture, this paper will reveal that AI is profoundly dependent upon place, body, and materials, complicating the claim that AI should be rejected in preaching on the grounds of its supposed disembodiment. However, this new perspective will not clear the way for an uncritical embrace of AI. Instead, it will bring into focus new challenges for the utilization of artificial intelligence in preaching – rooted, not in what AI supposedly lacks, but in the material realities of what AI truly is.

I. Extraction

When and where does an AI sermon begin? Contrary to appearances, an AI sermon is not born when an overextended pastor opens her laptop and tells ChatGPT to “Write me a sermon on” Instead, it begins in deep time – millions and millions of years ago – when, through magmatic processes, hydrothermal activity, and shifting tectonic plates, mineral deposits formed on or beneath the surface of the earth.⁵

All AI systems run on physical components housed in human-made structures, and each component is a composite of human-made materials and many minerals and elements. For example, the chips used in modern computing require silicon and small amounts of boron, phosphorus, copper, cobalt, and gold. Magnets in hard drives are made of rare-earth elements (REEs) such as neodymium and dysprosium. Cooling mechanisms, built to prevent overheating, require aluminum, copper, REEs, and steel. Even the iPhone used to access ChatGPT contains around 75 elements, two-thirds of the periodic table.⁶

One significant element present in all AI systems is lithium. Lithium is a critical component in the rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that power multiple aspects of AI infrastructure – from data-center backup systems to the laptops, servers, and mobile devices on which AI runs.⁷ One way lithium is extracted is through brine evaporation, a process in which underground reservoirs are pumped into ponds where sunlight evaporates the water, concentrating the lithium.⁸

Lithium extraction via brine evaporation can take a severe toll on water-scarce regions, as extracting one ton of lithium may require evaporating up to 2 million liters of water.⁹ The strain of this extraction can be seen in Chile’s Salar de Atacama, which holds one of the largest lithium reserves in the world. As a result of mining in the region, flamingo populations are now under threat, foxes are creeping into villages, vicuñas are foraging further from home, carob trees are dying, natural springs have turned to sinkholes, and fields that were formerly meadows thick with grass have become open vistas of dry, cracked earth.¹⁰

Another essential group of elements for AI is rare earth elements (REEs) – the 15 elements on the periodic table used in almost every component of data centers that train and run

⁵ Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, “Anatomy of an AI System,” accessed August 5, 2025, <http://www.anatomyof.ai>.

⁶ “Critical Minerals in Artificial Intelligence,” SFA (Oxford), accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.sfa-oxford.com/knowledge-and-insights/critical-minerals-in-low-carbon-and-future-technologies/critical-minerals-in-artificial-intelligence/>; Konstantin Kakaes, “The All-American iPhone,” *MIT Technology Review*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2016/06/09/159456/the-all-american-iphone/>.

⁷ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 30.

⁸ “How Is Lithium Mined?” February 12, 2024, <https://climate.mit.edu/ask-mit/how-lithium-mined>.

⁹ “World Water Day: The Water Impacts of Lithium Extraction,” *Wetlands International Europe*, March 22, 2023, <https://europe.wetlands.org/blog/world-water-day-the-water-impacts-of-lithium-extraction/>.

¹⁰ Ione Wells, “The Rise of Green Tech Is Feeding Another Environmental Crisis,” *BBC*, July 19, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c30741j351go>.

AI systems. REEs are used in chip manufacturing, cooling fans, fiber-optic networks, high-performance magnets and batteries, and speakers, microphones, and displays.¹¹

When REEs are extracted, the ratio of usable minerals to waste is extreme. As AI researcher Kate Crawford explains, “Only 0.2 percent of the mined clay contains the valuable rare earth elements. This means that 99.8 percent of the earth removed in rare earth mining is discarded as waste dumped back into the hills and streams.”¹² Additionally, it is estimated that the process of refining one ton of REEs produces 75,000 liters of acidic water and one ton of radioactive residue.¹³

The environmental cost of extracting REEs is seen at Bayan-Obo, the largest REE mine in the world, located in Baotou, China. By the mine is a massive lake filled with 180 million tons of waste powder from ore processing.¹⁴ This “lake” reeks of sulfur, and, when standing at the shore of it, its surface stretches to the horizon. BBC Reporter Tim Maughan, visiting the lake in 2015, called it “nightmarish.” “Dozens of pipes line the shore,” he wrote, “churning out a torrent of thick, black chemical waste...it feels like hell on earth.”¹⁵

AI systems and AI sermons, when viewed from the perspective of extraction, are both material and situated in a place. However, this insight exposes a new issue that arises precisely because of AI preaching’s materiality: can preachers really employ AI if its fabrication has such a negative impact on the earth? Preachers are not just any users of AI. They are a group who, by the nature of their vocation, should be acutely aware of their responsibilities toward the environment. As Elizabeth Achtemeier argues, a preacher’s understanding of the scriptures “should act as a powerful check on all of our proud attempts to claim that we can do with the natural world as we will.”¹⁶

The solution may seem straightforward: abstain from AI and thereby reduce one’s environmental impact. However, the same minerals that form AI’s infrastructure also undergird other technologies preachers already use – the laptops, phones, and tablets preachers depend upon for their daily work. Will preachers, then, renounce these as well?

II. Data collection

After mining, the minerals required to build the hardware for an AI system are smelted, refined, and manufactured into components. These components are then distributed and assembled into domestic infrastructure (the computers and routers one uses at home), internet infrastructure, and data center infrastructure, where AI systems are created.¹⁷

The next step in the process of generating an AI sermon is to use this hardware to create a Large Language Model (an LLM). A large language model is a type of AI designed for language processing tasks, like the system that powers ChatGPT. LLMs learn to generate human-sounding language by reading a data set of text and learning to recognize patterns within it.¹⁸

The creation of an LLM requires an extraordinary amount of data. Data from an LLM is broken into *tokens*, which is the term used by AI developers for individual words or portions of

¹¹ “Critical Minerals in Artificial Intelligence.”

¹² Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 36.

¹³ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 37.

¹⁴ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 36.

¹⁵ Tim Maughan, “The Dystopian Lake Filled by the World’s Tech Lust,” *BBC*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150402-the-worst-place-on-earth>.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nature, God and Pulpit*, (Eerdmans, 1992), 67.

¹⁷ Crawford and Joler, “Anatomy of an AI System.”

¹⁸ Ethan Mollick, *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI* (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2024), 9-11.

words. GPT-4 is estimated to have been trained on a total of 13 trillion tokens.¹⁹ The training data for next-generation AI models, such as OpenAI's GPT-5, has been estimated at 70 trillion tokens.²⁰ If these figures are even roughly accurate, it would be analogous to every living person, all 8.1 billion, contributing one long academic paper to GPT-5 each.

Due to the massive amount of data required to create AI systems, data has become a valuable commodity in the 21st century. Data is so valuable that it has begun to be spoken of as an unrefined resource, with terms emerging like “data mining” and “data is the new oil.” Promoting the idea of data as a commodity has, however, “shifted the notion of data away from something personal, intimate ... toward something more inert and nonhuman.”²¹ Crawford questions the commodification of AI training data in her investigation into the Multiple Encounter Data Set (MEDS). MEDS is a dataset of mugshots of people arrested multiple times throughout their lives. The photographs in MEDS are used to train AI facial recognition software – to teach it how to recognize the same person as they age, or how to retrieve a face from a surveillance video, or even simply to detect the basic mathematical components of a face.²²

Looking closely at the photographs that constitute MEDS brings into sharp relief a crucial truth: that behind each datapoint is a human being. These photographs are not merely “mathematical components of faces.” They are images of real people: some young, others old. Not only are they human, but they are humans photographed at a vulnerable moment – some visibly sad, confused, or shocked; some bearing visible signs of violence – bruises, cuts, or blood. There are stories behind these photographs – stories that involve heartbreak, sorrow, regret, remorse, injustice, police brutality, and racism. Yet as soon as these images become datapoints, all of this humanity is erased.

OpenAI's LLMs, such as GPT-4 and GPT-5, are very likely to contain sermons in their training data. They are known to contain, at least, data scraped from the web, as well as the text of books that are old enough to be in the public domain.²³ Considering sermon manuscripts are found in both, it is safe to assume that sermons, representing many human voices, form at least some of the training data of the LLMs that power ChatGPT.

Keeping MEDS in mind, one comes to realize that there are also human elements of sermons that are discarded when these sermons are used as AI training data. Imagine: when cataloged sermon #95,512 was preached, was the pastor doubting that Sunday, or full of faith? When sermon #9001 was delivered, was the pastor preaching her very first sermon, or preaching her very last? What was happening when Sunday sermon #15,667 was preached – was the congregation celebrating their pastor's 50th anniversary, or grieving the loss of a beloved member of their church?

¹⁹ Patrick McGuinness, “GPT-4 Details Revealed,” Substack newsletter, *AI Changes Everything*, July 12, 2023, <https://patmcguinness.substack.com/p/gpt-4-details-revealed>.

²⁰ Alan D. Thompson, “What’s in GPT-5? (2024),” *LifeArchitect.Ai*, July 28, 2024, <https://lifearchitect.ai/whats-in-gpt-5/>. Note: these figures are sourced from leaks and have not been officially confirmed; OpenAI has not publicly disclosed the size of its training datasets, citing “the competitive landscape and the safety implications of large-scale models like GPT-4” as justification for their opacity. OpenAI et al., “GPT-4 Technical Report,” arXiv, March 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2303.08774>.

²¹ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 113.

²² Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 92.

²³ Stefan Baack, “A Critical Analysis of the Largest Source for Generative AI Training Data: Common Crawl,” *The 2024 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, ACM, June 3, 2024, 2199–208; Simon Rowberry, “The Value of Books in the Age of Generative AI Training Data,” *Convergence*, SAGE Publications Ltd, July 2, 2025.

What is so concerning about AI training data is not that it is non-human, but that it *is* human, but only *part* of a human. John McClure defines embodiment in preaching as “all the ways in which preaching is enhanced by virtue of its presentation through the human body.”²⁴ This data, like the text of a sermon, did find its origins in lived, enfleshed experiences. It too came through human bodies. Yet in the process of being fed to an LLM, this data became only a partial representation of human experience, neglecting significant dimensions of the human reality from which it emerged. AI training data, therefore, could function as a partially erased representation of human experience, which in essence devalues and dehumanizes that experience.

The field of homiletics is not immune to doing the same thing – homiletics archives do a similar thing when they collect data from minoritized preaching traditions. Historically, when a sermon event from the African American tradition is written down, it is the linguistic data from the preacher that is preserved in the transcription – the words that the preacher said. However, transcriptions of African American sermons almost always omit any paralinguistic data from the preacher, as well as any linguistic or paralinguistic data that might be collected from the congregation.²⁵ This data includes, but is not limited to, any call-and-response, any variation in the preacher's vocal volume, pitch, pace, and tone, any long pauses or sounds independent of speech, such as laughter, whooping, sighs, humming, and singing. William Turner highlights the importance of these elements of African American preaching when he argues that, in African American preaching, there is a “fusion of sonic and conceptual things” and the decoupling of them “unravels and erodes the very nexus from which the power of African American preaching emerges.”²⁶ Yet these elements *are* uncoupled when African American preaching is written down.

To collect certain elements while discarding others is never a neutral act: it is to assign value to one thing while treating another as negligible. When MEDS is used to determine “parts of a face,” but not “police brutality,” it is valuing the mathematical proportions of a face but devaluing an experience. When only the words of sermons are used as training data for LLMs, the contexts of those sermons are devalued. Moreover, homileticsians do the same: when transcriptions of African American preaching preserve only the preacher's words, they devalue the tradition's distinctives. Perhaps now, in this AI age, homiletics needs more than ever those “scholars and scribes” Frank Thomas called for in 2015, who would “transfer the living presence of the sermon to the written page.”²⁷

III. Data evaluation

After this system is trained on human data, an LLM will finally emerge, but the AI model still requires some fine-tuning. This, then, is where humans step in – “to provide data, annotate it, and verify algorithm inputs.”²⁸ This work requires the employment of human *data evaluators*.

²⁴ John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Westminster John Knox, 2007), 26.

²⁵ A notable exception: Jon M. Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1988).

²⁶ William Turner, “The Musicality of Black Preaching,” in ed. Jana Childers. *Performance in Preaching* (Baker Academic, 2008), 207.

²⁷ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*. Updated ed. (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2013), xiii.

²⁸ Julian Posada, “Platform Authority and Data Quality: Who Decides What Counts in Data Production for Artificial Intelligence?” in *Decoding Digital Authoritarianism*, ed. Ziyaad Bhorat and Martin Rauchbauer (Berggreun Institute, 2023), 82.

One example of humans employed to refine an LLM is the Kenyan data evaluators hired by OpenAI to reduce ChatGPT's toxicity. Data evaluators are low-wage workers responsible for evaluating an LLM's output to refine it before it is released to the public. OpenAI had already made an LLM called GPT-3 in 2020. GPT-3's language creation abilities were already impressive, yet it had a major issue – it “was also prone to blurting out violent, sexist and racist remarks.” OpenAI needed to create an additional safety mechanism to ensure its LLM would not continue to generate this kind of content. To achieve that goal, they planned to create a data set of “labeled examples of violence, hate speech, and sexual abuse,” so that GPT-3 “could learn to detect those forms of toxicity in the wild.”²⁹

In November 2021, OpenAI sent thousands of pieces of text to Sama, a firm in Nairobi, Kenya. These texts contained all the horrors of the internet: “describing situations in graphic detail like child sexual abuse, bestiality, murder, suicides, torture, self-harm and incest.” The employees at Sama were responsible for evaluating which type of graphic content each text contained. When TIME reporters interviewed four of the workers from Sama, all of them “described being mentally scarred.”³⁰ They were paid between \$1.32 and \$2 an hour to perform this work.

Sama's relationship with OpenAI dissolved in February 2022, eight months before their contract ended, when OpenAI sent Sama the request to collect and label “sexual and violent images – some of them illegal under U.S. law.” The workers at Sama evaluated 1400 images for OpenAI – images that contained child sexual abuse, bestiality, rape, sexual slavery, graphic death, violence, or serious physical injury. Sama ended the contract, not wanting “to expose their employees to such [dangerous] content again.”³¹

Data evaluators, like those in Kenya, are not the only low-wage workers employed in AI production. There are also *data annotators* – individuals hired to label data before they are fed into machine learning systems. For instance, workers may be contracted to tag images of bodies, pedestrians, buildings, and vehicles to train driverless cars to recognize what is on the road.³² There are also *data generators*, laborers who produce input by submitting text, capturing photographs or videos, or recording audio of their surroundings.³³ Incredulously, there are even *data impersonators*, hired to mimic the behavior of chatbots or AI personal assistants.³⁴

The necessary employment of data evaluators, annotators, generators, and even impersonators reveals that AI requires the labor of many human bodies, many of whom are marginalized and underpaid.³⁵ This whole system is not so different from the reliance on underpaid and exploited workers in the textile industry. There, laborers farm cotton, weave fabric, and sew clothing, removed from each other, from their product, and from the consumers of their product. The alienation that workers in both industries experience supports their

²⁹ Billy Perrigo, *OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than \$2 Per Hour*, TIME (January 2023), <https://time.com/6247678/openai-chatgpt-kenya-workers/>.

³⁰ Perrigo, *OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers*.

³¹ Perrigo, *OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers*.

³² Posada, “Platform Authority and Data Quality: Who Decides What Counts in Data Production for Artificial Intelligence?” 83.

³³ Paola Tubaro et al., “The Trainer, the Verifier, the Imitator: Three Ways in Which Human Platform Workers Support Artificial Intelligence,” *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020). (Both data annotation and data generation are addressed here.)

³⁴ Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil: What Artificial Intelligence Can Do, What It Can't, and How to Tell the Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 230.

³⁵ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 63-64.

mistreatment and their disempowerment, all while consumers are clueless to – or can willfully ignore – the impact of their purchases or their use of AI products on human beings.

Though these workers' involvement in AI text generation may not capture the full sense of the term "embodiment" as it is used in homiletics, this does not mean the system is disembodied. To make such a claim would be to ignore the presence of the flesh-and-blood human beings that keep AI systems afloat. Perhaps a better term to capture the distributed, collective human labor underwriting these systems would be *multi-bodied* rather than disembodied.

Preaching has been multi-bodied long before AI, most recently in the movement toward collaborative preaching. Collaborative preaching, as defined by John McClure in his *The Roundtable Pulpit*, is

a form of preaching in which the preacher and hearer work together to establish and interpret the topics for preaching. They also decide together what the practical results of those interpretations might be for the congregation. The preacher then goes to the pulpit and represents this collaborative process during sermon delivery.³⁶

In a way, the multi-bodied AI sermon is the ultimate realization of McClure's vision. Not a few, but millions of voices, across cultures and time, are woven together in the data processed by an LLM in order to write a single sermon. Moreover, with respect to data cleaning, hundreds of human beings are involved in the "editing" of the sermon, determining what is appropriate and what is not. Only in the pulpit does the preacher "represent this collaborative process in the event of sermon delivery."

However, the AI sermon also constitutes a distortion of collaborative preaching, in that it undermines two of its central aims: empowerment and recognition. As McClure observes, "When your preaching empowers a congregation it must express power with others."³⁷ In contrast, AI preaching disempowers and dehumanizes through the hidden labor and data upon which it depends. Furthermore, McClure insists that collaborative preaching requires sustained attention to the other, listening to discern who the other truly is. In AI preaching, however, the other is rendered invisible – concealed within the opaque infrastructures of Big Tech.

This tension raises a pressing question: why does AI preaching appear so close to collaborative preaching yet remain fundamentally different? Is the problem a problem of scale? Could it be that when collaboration is dispersed across millions of unseen contributors, the structure collapses under the weight of its own expansiveness?

More significantly, however, the bodies employed by AI organizations reflexively challenge practitioners of collaborative preaching to interrogate their own methods. Might collaborative preaching, like AI sermons, also depend upon hidden laborers whose contributions remain unacknowledged? Whose voices are not found around the round table?

IV. Prompting

At last, ChatGPT is ready for use – a preacher may now open a browser window and enter their prompt: "Write me a sermon on ..."

³⁶ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 48.

³⁷ McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*.

It is hard to see how this moment might be dismissed as disembodied, given that it presents itself through the body of a human preacher. Unless, of course, one supposes that composing a prompt is purely mechanical – something like pressing an icon on a touchscreen to order a takeaway meal.

Recent research, however, demonstrates that prompt formulation is not mechanical at all but is shaped by the choices and personalities of an LLM's user. For one, LLMs have been shown to be affected by a user's point of view. They experience "anchoring bias," being especially persuaded to a certain point of view, alluded to in the first piece of information the LLM encounters in a prompt.³⁸ Second, studies have also shown "impolite prompts often result in poor performance, but overly polite language does not guarantee better outcomes," and that "the best politeness level is different according to language."³⁹ Third, a study by Sawalha et al. revealed that female students who used ChatGPT to answer exam questions tended to compose single-question prompts, whereas male students tended to use multiple-question prompts, and, as a result, male students performed better on the exam.⁴⁰ Finally, more generally, in an effort to tailor responses to individual users, an LLM will "sometimes provide answers based on assumed demographic traits inferred from identity markers" such as a user's name or dialectal markers – a practice that is called "implicit personalization."⁴¹ This personalization to a provided or assumed age, gender, race, and/or socio-economic status will lead LLMs to produce different outputs for the same prompt, or, as one paper explains, "while model internal knowledge remains stable, user identity can skew generation outcomes."⁴² In sum, the personal choices of an LLM user, as well as who the user is, as well as who the user is assumed to be by the LLM, all affect the output of an LLM's prompts.

The choices of and personality of a prompter affect both the human input and the AI output in AI sermon generation, too, as evidenced by the earliest reported ChatGPT-generated sermon, preached by Rabbi Joshua Franklin on January 1, 2023. Rabbi Franklin's sermon garnered much press interest, but little attention was paid to the prompt he offered to ChatGPT. Franklin did not simply ask for any sermon. He asked for a sermon on the weekly Torah portion, on the themes of vulnerability and intimacy, incorporating a quote from Brené Brown.⁴³

The uniqueness of Franklin's prompt reveals that the Rabbi made several choices the day ChatGPT supposedly wrote that sermon all on its own. Franklin chose to create a sermon using ChatGPT and said in the coming week that he would preach it to his synagogue. He decided that

³⁸ Jiaxu Lou, "Anchoring Bias in Large Language Models: An Experimental Study," arXiv, December 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2412.06593>.

³⁹ Ziqi Yin et al., "Should We Respect LLMs? A Cross-Lingual Study on the Influence of Prompt Politeness on LLM Performance," arXiv, October 14, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2402.14531>.

⁴⁰ Ghadeer Sawalha et al., "Analyzing Student Prompts and Their Effect on ChatGPT's Performance," *Cogent Education* 11, no. 1 (2024).

⁴¹ Vera Neplenbroek et al., "Reading Between the Prompts: How Stereotypes Shape LLM's Implicit Personalization," arXiv, September 16, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2505.16467>.

⁴² Ibid; Miao Zhang et al., "Identity-Robust Language Model Generation via Content Integrity Preservation," arXiv, January 14, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2601.09141>. For more information concerning the impact of a user's identity – real or assumed – on an LLM's output, see Anjali Kantharuban et al., "Stereotype or Personalization? User Identity Biases Chatbot Recommendations," in *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: ACL 2025*, ed. Wanxiang Che et al. (Association for Computational Linguistics, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.findings-acl.1254>.

⁴³ Johana Bhuiyan, "Are Chatbots Changing the Face of Religion? Three Faith Leaders on Grappling with AI," *Technology, The Guardian*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/apr/07/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-religion-faith-leaders>.

he would ask for a sermon based on the weekly portion of the Torah. He asked for the sermon to be on vulnerability and intimacy, specifically. He desired a quote by Brené Brown—all conscious, personal, creative choices – *human* choices.

The influence of the human preacher on an AI sermon through their prompt is corroborated by Frida Mannerfelt and Rikard Roitto's investigation into the way Swedish preachers use AI in their sermon preparation. Among the preachers they observed, they identified that each preacher's prompts were deeply connected to their identity and homiletical orientation. For example, one preacher, "Luke," emphasized that what characterized him as a preacher was the importance he placed on the context of his listeners, as well as the context of his Biblical text. Mannerfelt and Roitto found that Luke's homiletical interests corresponded to his prompting strategies.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Mannerfelt and Roitto found that "none of the preachers copy text from the LLM directly into the sermon." When asked "how they chose among all the different ideas that the LLM throws at them, most initially express ... they just intuitively pick ideas that 'speak to them.'" The process was "an unconscious process, no different from how preachers usually use their intuition to choose among options."⁴⁵

Two essential features of preaching – the personal approach and the discernment preachers employ – thus remain operative when preachers prompt and sift through AI-generated output. AI sermons are shaped – through their prompting – by the preacher's unique, embodied personality and discernment. The act of prompting is not a mechanical gesture but a deeply human activity: weaving together texts, themes, and voices, imprinting the sermon with the preacher's creative choices.

V. Inference

One step remains in this before the sermon manuscript is complete: the preacher's prompt must be processed by the system. In machine learning, this stage is called *inference* – the process by which a trained model receives a new input (a prompt such as "Write me a sermon on John 3:16") and generates an output (the sermon on John 3:16). Having begun with minerals in the ground, through inference, the preacher's sermon manuscript will be complete.

Although a preacher may spend nothing to retrieve a sermon manuscript from ChatGPT, processing a prompt is not free: it requires a significant amount of both energy and water. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, states that the "average query" to ChatGPT "uses about 0.34 watt-hours, about what an oven would use in a little over one second, or a high-efficiency lightbulb would use in a couple of minutes. It also uses about 0.000085 gallons of water; roughly one fifteenth of a teaspoon."⁴⁶ However, Altman never defines what an "average query" entails, so these figures may be imprecise. To arrive at more reliable estimates, Jegham et al combined publicly available usage data with "company-specific environmental multipliers and statistical inference of hardware configurations" (in layman's terms, information about how the computers that process these systems are built and operate) across 30 different models to determine the energy, water, and carbon footprint of LLM inference.⁴⁷ As a result, they were able to estimate

⁴⁴ Frida Mannerfelt and Rikard Roitto, "Preaching with AI: An Exploration of Preachers' Interaction with Large Language Models in Sermon Preparation," *Practical Theology* 18, no. 2 (2025): 127–38.

⁴⁵ Mannerfelt and Roitto, "Preaching with AI," 134.

⁴⁶ Sam Altman, "The Gentle Singularity," accessed March 20, 2026, <https://blog.samaltman.com/the-gentle-singularity>.

⁴⁷ Nidhal Jegham et al., "How Hungry Is AI? Benchmarking Energy, Water, and Carbon Footprint of LLM Inference," arXiv, May 15, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2505.09598>.

that a medium-length inquiry (1,000 tokens of input and 1,000 tokens of output) through GPT-4o uses around 1.21 Wh of energy (the equivalent of running an LED light for 7 minutes), 3.7mls of water, and emits around 0.38 gCO₂e (around half a human breath).⁴⁸

While the energy required to process a single prompt may seem inconsequential, it becomes astronomical when scaled to ChatGPT's annual usage. In December 2024, OpenAI revealed that 1 billion queries were made per day across all ChatGPT deployments. Adjusting for various lengths of inputs and outputs that might occur daily, Jegham et al found that GPT4o's annual global inference would "exceed the total electricity consumption of 35,000 U.S. residential households, 50 inpatient hospitals, and even 325 universities annually."⁴⁹

ChatGPT's annual global carbon footprint and water use figures are just as sobering. When ChatGPT's carbon footprint is aggregated globally, its CO₂ figures "are comparable to the annual emissions of 30,000 gasoline powered cars" and to offset GPT-4o's annual emissions "would require of 138,000 acres of average U.S. forest, an area roughly equivalent to the size of Chicago." With respect to ChatGPT's annual water consumption, Jegham et al. estimate it to be between 1,334,991 and 1,579,680 kiloliters. Of this figure, they explain, "this consumption refers to evaporated freshwater permanently removed from local ecosystems rather than recycled. This means GPT-4o alone is responsible for evaporating an amount of freshwater equivalent to the annual drinking needs of almost 1.2 million people."⁵⁰

To the very end, an AI sermon is material – and yet again its materiality raises a new issue for homiletics, and, in particular, eco-homiletics. Earlier eco-homiletical texts, like Elizabeth Achtemeier's *Nature, God and Pulpit* and John Holbert's *Preaching Creation*, were concerned with *what* to preach – equipping preachers with exegetical material that they may construct sermons that address the environment. More recently, Leah Schade's book *Creation-Crisis Preaching*, concerned with "ways to preach ... environmental sermons that are equally pastoral and prophetic," and HyeRan Kim-Cragg's "Earth-Bound Preaching," which proposes "three movements ... to help preachers and congregations address the climate crisis," have shifted the discipline's focus from *what* to *how* to preach in light of eco-concerns.⁵¹

The existence of AI sermons, however, presents a new challenge to homiletics: *by what means* will one preach? Until now, this has hardly been a concern, since countless preachers throughout history have composed sermons without computers, electricity, or even a pen and paper. Today, however, since queries to ChatGPT incur a measurable environmental cost, a preacher's means *is* a concern.

One way to approach this issue would be to conduct energy audits of different contemporary methods of sermon preparation. Such knowledge would enable preachers to make more informed choices about whether to integrate AI into their homiletical practice. In the process, homileticians may even discover that other aspects of preaching carry environmental burdens that have gone unexamined until now.

Conclusion

⁴⁸ Jegham et al., "How Hungry Is AI?"

⁴⁹ Jegham et al., "How Hungry Is AI?"

⁵⁰ Jegham et al., "How Hungry Is AI?"

⁵¹ Leah D. Schade, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (Chalice Press, 2015), 3; HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Earth-Bound Preaching: Engaging Scripture, Context, and Indigenous Wisdom," *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024).

The goal of this paper has been to lift the veil on AI systems and reveal, for homiletics, the true nature of an AI sermon. While this article does not claim that AI preaching possesses embodiment, or is situated in a place, or uses materials in the same ways as traditional sermons, it does reveal that AI sermons are materially, geographically, and socially embedded in ways that are often overlooked in critiques of AI preaching. AI sermons, when scrutinized, are found to be not local, material, or embodied, but *pluri-local* (emerging from lithium flats in Chile, or rare earth mines in China, or a preacher's study in Sweden), *multi-material* (composed of silicon, copper, lithium, water and more), and *multi-bodied* (created with the help of human data, and data cleaners, and the preacher themselves).

Although these forms of embodiment and materiality may differ from those typically present in conventional preaching, the presence of materials, places, and bodies nevertheless complicates the claim that AI-generated sermons are simply disembodied and therefore unfit for preaching. If AI-generated sermons are insufficient, the reasons for those insufficiencies may have to be sought elsewhere.

Yet what replaces this common critique is not ease, but gravity. As Duke ethicist Matthew Elmore explains, “when nodes of the network come to light, they reveal the interconnectedness of ethical dilemmas that transcend geographical and disciplinary boundaries.”⁵² Now that at least some of the “nodes” of AI have been revealed, homiletics faces new ethical concerns regarding AI preaching. Preachers must consider – will we continue to employ hidden, underpaid labor? How have we data-fied and dehumanized the marginalized? Should we take up technologies that wreak havoc on ecosystems? What is our role in preaching when we decide, “This week, I'll preach on vulnerability”

These are only preliminary questions – there are many more “nodes” of AI that intersect with homiletics that have not been explored above. Still, here is a starting point, a first glance, at the pluri-local, multi-material, multi-bodied system that is AI preaching.

For Further Reading

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⁵² Matthew Elmore, “The Hidden Costs of ChatGPT: A Call for Greater Transparency,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 23, no. 10 (2023): 48.

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Why Do Sociologists Neglect Studying Sermons?

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Abstract: *A 2024 study on how US Catholic homilists treated references to Jews and Judaism found that sociologists rarely study contemporary sermons to learn what they may reveal about the practices and attitudes of religious communities. Scholars who do study sermons tend to be theologians or pastoral educators who are interested in preachers' biblical hermeneutics, theological perspectives, or rhetorical practices. Some scholars in practical theology have deftly used the social sciences to learn what might constitute effective preaching. The barriers that discourage sociological studies of sermons may be (1) resistance from religious communities, (2) the logistics of gathering sermon data, (3) methodological questions, and (4) an academic reluctance to study religious discourse. All of these obstacles, however, are readily surmountable, especially with emerging technologies that allow ready access to sermon information that would be valuable to a variety of research projects of interest to sociologists.*

Introduction

Recent research into the question of how contemporary Roman Catholic preachers in the US treat Jews and Judaism in their homilies,¹ uncovered a deeper methodological question: Why do so few sociologists, especially those who are concerned with studying contemporary religious movements, neglect studying sermons?² In an attempt to respond to this query, this essay surveys the relative lack of sociological interest in sermons and provides one example of how the use of a sociological method can be helpful in understanding the social implications of collected sermons;

¹ Some scholars make a distinction between a sermon, which is an address that a preacher—often an ordained person—delivers on a religious topic to the faithful, and a homily, which is an address that a preacher delivers in a liturgical setting to interpret a selected scriptural passage. This article, however, uses the terms interchangeably. The focus here is on Christian sermons, but sermons, or talks on core beliefs and practices in the context of an assembly, occur in many religious traditions (e.g., *derashot*, *khutbahs*, or Dharma talks). The questions raised in this essay about studying Christian sermons, however, may apply to other religious communities. See, for example, Mazen Hashem, *The Muslim Friday Khutba: Veiled and Unveiled Themes* (Institute for Social Policy Understanding, 2009).

² George Jacobs Mazza, “The Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Selected Contemporary Homilies” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2024), ProQuest & Theses Global; George Jacobs Mazza, “Catholic Preaching on Jews and Judaism: The Challenge from Surveyed Good Friday Homilies,” *The International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* 4, no. 2 (2024): 141–63. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jec.2024.a939336>; George Jacobs Mazza and Kathryn Burrows, “The Neglected Study of Sermons in the Sociology of Religion: Catholic Homilies and References to Jews and Judaism” (paper presented at the 85th annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Montreal, QC, August 11, 2024).

the essay then suggests reasons that have led scholars to neglect studying sermons and proposes an agenda for studying contemporary sermons as important data for sociologists.

Studying Sermons

An Overview

One might classify scholarly interest in sermons in two broad categories.³ There are those who study the collected sermons of well-known preachers, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to understand the development of a religious leader's thought and social activism.⁴ There are others, however, who are interested in studying collected sermons from ordinary preachers from a particular time period in a given geographic region. The purpose of the second type of study is to use sermons as important data to infer the social context in which preachers deliver them.⁵ The latter approach to sermons is the one that should draw the attention of sociologists, particularly sociologists of religion. Arthur Van Seters observed that even though "preaching is first and foremost a theological act," one must acknowledge that "[a]ll preaching is a social act."⁶

As one would expect, some studies have attempted to address social questions through the analysis of sermons. One of the most important studies of sermons in the US was a survey conducted by Rodney Stark and his colleagues in the late 1960s on the antisemitic attitudes of Protestant clergy.⁷ A prior study of the laity, in which Stark also participated, found that there was a strong correlation in the US between Christianity and antisemitism.⁸ This earlier study found, for example, that many US Christians believed that contemporary Jews still bore responsibility for the death of Jesus.⁹ To learn whether Protestant clergy shared similar negative attitudes toward Jews, Stark and his associates surveyed 1,580 Protestant ministers in California.¹⁰ The survey included detailed questions about the ministers' own sermons.¹¹ Stark and his team acknowledged that the better approach would have been a textual study of the actual sermons, but costs prevented undertaking such a project.¹² The analysis of the clergy's responses to the questionnaire revealed that they shared the same anti-Jewish prejudices as their congregations. The qualitative study by Stark and his colleagues tartly concluded that "when both sheep and shepherds are wayward in the same direction and to the same degree, it seems unrealistic to blame only the sheep."¹³

The study of sermons has usually drawn the attention of theologians or pastors rather than social scientists, meaning that the focus of such studies has often been the sermons' theological

³ David Millard Haskell, "The Theological Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection: A Content Analysis of Mainline and Conservative Protestant Easter Sunday Sermons," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 25 (2012): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341247>.

⁴ Haskell, 215; Nick Sharman, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution: The Rhetorical Strategies of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Social Semiotics* 9, no. 1 (1999): 85-105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350339909360423>; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, *Desmond Tutu's Message: A Qualitative Analysis* (Brill, 2001).

⁵ Haskell, "Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection," 215.

⁶ Arthur Van Seters, ed., introduction to *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Abingdon, 1988), 17, 19.

⁷ Rodney Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds: Prejudice and the Protestant Clergy* (Harper & Row, 1971).

⁸ Charles Young Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (Harper & Row, 1966).

⁹ Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds*, 44.

¹⁰ Stark et al., 5, 13.

¹¹ Stark et al., 88.

¹² Stark et al., 88.

¹³ Stark et al., 48, 57.

or pastoral significance rather than what they reveal about a religious community from a sociological perspective. Studies of Christian sermons have also tended to focus on Protestant rather than Catholic or other Christian preaching, which is not surprising, given the historically more prominent role preaching has played in Protestant churches.¹⁴

Beginning in the 1970s, one of the centers for studying sermons in the German language was at Heidelberg University under the direction of Rudolf Bohren.¹⁵ Aside from linguistic inquiries, the Heidelberg analytical method focused on questions related to four homiletic elements in a sermon: the reference to God, the use of a cited biblical text, the composition and needs of the listening assembly, and the person of the preacher.¹⁶ Using the Heidelberg analytical method, Johan Cilliers, for example, studied how English- and Afrikaans-speaking clergy from the Dutch Reformed Church framed references to God in their sermons as “God-for-us” during the apartheid period in South Africa.¹⁷ Among other studies of Protestant sermons available in English have been Joseph Falkner’s analysis of the elements of preaching in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),¹⁸ Marsha Witten’s investigation into the encroachment of secularism in Presbyterian and Southern Baptist sermons,¹⁹ and Reid Thomas’s inquiry into how the gospel shapes the content and delivery in the sermons of five prominent preachers.²⁰ David Haskell and his colleagues examined how sermons in conservative and mainline churches in Canada referred to popular culture.²¹ Following this study, Haskell, using the same dataset of sermons, also tracked the differences between conservative and mainline Protestant preachers in their approaches to biblical hermeneutics.²² Hendrik J. C. Pieterse, perhaps the most prolific practitioner of analyzing sermons from the perspective of practical theology, has produced an extensive body of work on collected sermons in South Africa, examining, for example, how sermons should address the issue of poverty in a country where poverty is pervasive.²³ Marianne

¹⁴ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 4th ed. (Beacon, 1993), 75; Wilfried Engemann, *Homiletics: Principles and Patterns of Reasoning* (Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 307; Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Eburon Academic, 2010), 26. Following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) (1962–65), the Catholic Church has arguably placed a greater emphasis on the significance of preaching. See *Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Revelation—Dei Verbum* § 21 and the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests—Presbyterorum Ordinis* § 4, in *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II and the Instruction on the Liturgy with Commentaries by Council Fathers*, comp. J. L. Gonzales (Daughters of St. Paul, 1967); see also Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), § I.4.

¹⁵ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “A Short History of Empirical Homiletics in South Africa,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (2020): 345–64, <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n2.a15>; Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974).

¹⁶ Pieterse, “A Short History,” 350–51; Johan Cilliers, *God for Us? An Analysis and Assessment of Dutch Reformed Preaching During the Apartheid Years* (Sun Press, 2006), 11.

¹⁷ Cilliers, *God for Us?*, 5.

¹⁸ Joseph Edward Faulkner, “What Are They Saying? A Content Analysis of 206 Sermons Preached in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) during 1988,” in *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880–1989*, ed. D. Newell Williams (Eerdmans, 1991).

¹⁹ Marsha Grace Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Reid S. Thomas Jr., “Evidence of the Gospel Preaching to Postmoderns: A Study of the Sermons of Leading Preachers” (DMin diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2005), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

²¹ David Millard Haskell et al., “Defending the Faith: Easter Sermon Reaction to Pop Culture Discourses,” *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 2 (2008): 139–56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20447558>.

²² David Millard Haskell, “Meaning of Jesus’ Resurrection,” 205–35.

²³ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “An Emerging Grounded Theory for Preaching on Poverty in South Africa with Matthew 25:31–46 as Sermon Text,” *Acta Theologica* 33, no. 1 (2013): 175–95.

Gaarden and Marlene Lorensen interviewed pastors and congregants in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark to learn how people who hear sermons actually integrate them into their thought processes.²⁴ André Verweij studied the Lenten sermons of Protestant pastors in the Netherlands to learn how they referred to the suffering of Jesus.²⁵ Darin Freeburg and Daniel Roland studied sermons to show how they attempted to persuade listeners and how they disseminated information.²⁶ Miriam Perkins studied the rhetoric that Evangelical preachers used to describe the terrorist attack on the US on September 11, 2001.²⁷ Matthew Hastings examined the preaching of three of the fastest growing churches in the Southern Baptist Convention to identify the elements that comprise effective preaching to millennials, defined as people born between 1981 and 1998,²⁸ and using the Heidelberg analytical method, Jima Seo studied how prominent Protestant pastors in South Korea preached on suffering.²⁹

As to Catholic homilies, many of the sermon studies examined whether contemporary Catholic preaching adhered to the homiletic reforms promoted by Vatican II. Leo Sands' dissertation analyzed Catholic homilies in the US in 1973 to see whether they reflected Vatican II's renewed emphasis on preaching.³⁰ Fred Baumer studied post-conciliar Catholic homilies in terms of theories of communication.³¹ Bede Peay produced an historical account of Catholic preaching in the US, finding that the reform movement in preaching that Vatican II initially promised had stalled by the 1980s.³² Stephen DeLeers presented a scheme for evaluating student homilies, but he neither derived nor applied his assessment method to a dataset of actual liturgical homilies.³³ Thomas Gaughan advanced the theory that an appeal to the emotions is an essential component of effective homiletics, especially when preaching to college-age young

<https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v33i1.9>; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2001).

²⁴ Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives." *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013): 28-45, <https://doi.org/10.15695/hmltc.v38i1.3832>.

²⁵ André Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering: A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes* (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon, 2014).

²⁶ Darin Freeburg and Daniel Roland, "Goals and Information Behavior in Religious Sermons," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 11 (2015): 1-19, http://works.bepress.com/darin_freeburg/6/.

²⁷ Miriam Yvonne Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror: American Evangelical Sermons Delivered in Reaction to September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

²⁸ Matthew Joel Hastings, "Preaching to Millennials: A Content Analysis of Preachers' Communication as It Relates to Millennial Congregants" (EdD diss., Liberty University, 2021), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3848&context=doctoral>.

²⁹ Jima Seo, "A Homiletical Strategy for Preaching on Suffering: Redemptive-Historical Narrative Preaching" (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2021), https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/86918/Seo_Homiletical_2021.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

³⁰ Leo Richard Sands, "Contemporary Roman Catholic Preaching: Its Inventional Characteristics" (PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1975), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³¹ Fred A. Baumer, "Toward the Development of Homiletic as Rhetorical Genre: A Critical Study of Roman Catholic Preaching in the United States since Vatican Council II" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1985), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³² Bede Steven Peay, "Change in the Theology and Practice of Preaching in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, 1928-1983" (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1990), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³³ Stephen Vincent DeLeers, "A Process for the Assessment of Liturgical Preaching Reflecting Official Roman Catholic Understanding of the Homily" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 1996), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

people.³⁴ Stephen Bosso conducted a survey of the homiletics programs in six major US theologates, highlighting best practices,³⁵ and Peter Hill, a Redemptorist, surveyed a dozen members of his order, asking them to reflect on whether their homilies were in keeping with their order's charism of prophetic preaching.³⁶

The Pew Research Center (Pew) conducted two recent studies of Christian sermons downloaded from the Internet. The first study, which Pew described as a "computational analysis," focused on describing the parameters of its sermons database, noting the average sermon length across various Christian traditions, the distinctive words preachers used within particular faith communities, and the biblical texts homilists most frequently cited.³⁷ The second study, based on sermons collected from the Internet immediately prior to the 2020 US presidential election in 2020, examined how preachers referred to the upcoming election and some of the issues that were central to voters at the time.³⁸ Mathew Boedy also examined sermons during a US presidential election, but his focus was on how preachers framed the 2016 election results in both political and religious terms.³⁹

As noted here, the body of research on contemporary sermons is relatively small, and many studies are dated. Scholars have not only had a variety of goals in analyzing sermons, but they have also used a variety of methods to evaluate them, ranging from rhetoric to historiography. There have, however, been only a handful of studies that have analyzed sermons from a sociological perspective, defined as using the tools of sociology to make sense of the data. Moreover, even among sociological studies of sermons, it is rare for studies to rely on the actual texts of collected sermons as delivered in liturgical settings.⁴⁰

A survey of the relevant academic literature shows that sociological studies based on an analysis of sermons *in situ*, meaning the actual spoken words of a liturgical sermon as preached along with the response of the listening congregation, are, for the most part, nonexistent. There are a number of studies that have used sociological methods to analyze how congregants respond to sermons, but the focus has often been on the experience of listeners rather than on the sermonic texts.⁴¹

In the previously cited studies of sermons, it is worth noting the gap between the data that scholars analyzed and the optimal communications data for analyzing sermons, which would

³⁴ Thomas E. Gaughan, "Preaching to Catholic College Students: Issues and Strategies in Developing a Homiletic for Roman Catholic Preachers in the United States" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2009), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³⁵ Stephen C. Bosso, "Best Preaching Practices in Homiletic Programs in Roman Catholic Theologates in the United States" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; cf. George Jacobs Mazza, "Teaching on Jews and Judaism in Selected US Catholic Seminaries," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 19, no. 1 (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v19i1.17605>.

³⁶ Peter Davidson Hill, "Preaching the Gospel Anew: Forming Redemptorist Students for the Ministry of Prophetic Preaching" (DMin diss., Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2020), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³⁷ Dennis Quinn, *The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons*, The Pew Research Center, December 16, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/12/PF.12.16.19_sermons.analysis.report.pdf.

³⁸ Dennis Quinn and Aaron Smith, *Pastors Often Discussed Election, Pandemic and Racism in Fall of 2020*, Pew Research Center, July 8, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/07/PDL_07.08.21.Sermons.pdf.

³⁹ Matthew Boedy, "The Sunday After Tuesday: The 2016 Presidential Election in the Pulpit," *Sermon Studies: Essays on the Preaching of the Abrahamic Faiths* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–17, <https://mds.marshall.edu/sermonstudies/vol2/iss1/1>.

⁴⁰ Mazza, "Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching," 121–50.

⁴¹ See, for example, Pleizer, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*.

have ideally included a reliable, independent rendering of the preacher's spoken words along with an experiential assessment of the listeners' reception of them.⁴² As already noted, Stark and his team relied on clergy responses to questionnaires about their sermons.⁴³ Cilliers chose the sermons for his study from those that appeared in *Die Kerkbode*, the official paper of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.⁴⁴ Faulkner wrote to a representative sample of clergy, asking for the submission of consecutively preached sermons for review.⁴⁵ Witten based her study on the homilies she collected by writing to Presbyterian and Southern Baptist preachers, requesting sermons based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).⁴⁶ Gaarden and Lorensen relied on interviews of both preachers and congregants, using an initial questionnaire to obtain the listeners' immediate responses to sermons and then following up with the listeners through in-depth interviews.⁴⁷ Verweij's analysis of Protestant sermons included both transcriptions of recorded homilies and texts posted on the Internet.⁴⁸ For his study on preaching on poverty, Pieterse used his former doctoral students to collect homilies based on the biblical text Matt 25:31-46.⁴⁹ Freeberg and Roland worked from sermons' transcripts in a database, but since the database no longer exists, it is unclear how these sermons were initially obtained.⁵⁰ For his two studies based on the same pool of sermons, Haskell obtained the texts by either emailing denominational offices or calling individual churches in a set geographic area for clergy contact information. He then requested that the clergy submit their Easter Sunday sermons for review.⁵¹ Based on data from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Perkins selected for her study publicly available sermons from pastors at the three largest Evangelical congregations in nine regions of the US, using both audio and video recordings and sermon transcripts.⁵² Seo based his research on a selection of sermons from the "sermon books" of five senior pastors, each serving the largest congregation within a different Protestant denomination in South Korea.⁵³ Hastings's study relied on analyzing sermons from three leading Southern Baptist pastors, obtaining audio or video recordings of the sermons posted on the pastors' churches' websites.⁵⁴ Sands' study of post-conciliar Catholic homilies used a mix of manuscripts and recordings that he and his friends collected.⁵⁵ The studies by Pew and Boedy relied solely on sermons collected from the Internet,

⁴² See the discussion in Teemu Taira, "Making Space for Discursive Study in Religious Studies." *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2013.742744>.

⁴³ Stark et al., *Wayward Shepherds*, 5, 13.

⁴⁴ Cilliers, *God for Us?*, 6.

⁴⁵ Faulkner, "What Are They Saying?" 417-18.

⁴⁶ Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 13.

⁴⁷ Gaarden and Lorensen, *Listeners as Authors in Preaching*, 28, 28n3.

⁴⁸ Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering*, 55.

⁴⁹ Pieterse, "Preaching on Poverty in South Africa," 176; Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, "Grounded Theory Approach in Sermon Analysis of Sermons on Poverty and Directed at the Poor as Listeners," *Acta Theologica* 30, no. 2 (2010): 119, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v30i2.67265>.

⁵⁰ Freeburg and Roland, "Goals and Information," 14. Freeburg and Roland analyzed sermons from a database of Protestant sermons collected and maintained by the Center for the Study of Information and Religion at Kent State University (KSU) in Kent, OH. KSU no longer retains this database, so the relevant information about the process used for collecting the cited sermons is no longer accessible.

⁵¹ Haskell et al., "Defending the Faith," 146.

⁵² Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror," 3, 250.

⁵³ Seo, "Homiletic Strategy for Preaching on Suffering," 21.

⁵⁴ Hastings, "Preaching to Millennials," 74.

⁵⁵ Sands, "Contemporary Roman Catholic Preaching," 49.

which they acknowledged were not representative of US Christian communities.⁵⁶ Significantly, some of the scholarship on sermons did not even use textual transcriptions.⁵⁷

In reviewing how scholars have approached the analysis of collected sermons, it is important to note at the outset that many studies have had to rely on sermons that clergy submitted or posted online, risking the distortions of self-selected content and brushing past the significant differences between a speech event and a polished written essay in the form of a sermon that a preacher knew in advance would be the subject of academic analysis. For the sake of acknowledging the studies of sermons with the highest standards of reliability, one should give priority to work based on collected sermons from the field captured in independent audiovisual recordings, sound recordings, or accurate transcriptions of the recordings.

An Example of the Use of a Sociological Method in Studying Sermons

Although some of the scholars studying sermons have acknowledged the benefits of using the tools of the social sciences to analyze sermons, except for the few research projects with a descriptive or a partially political perspective, most sermon studies have dealt with theological, pastoral, or rhetorical issues. Many scholars who have emphasized the significance of the social sciences in the study of sermons have used inductive qualitative content analysis, particularly Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach, to analyze texts.⁵⁸

Charmaz's constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, which acknowledges the researcher's role in interpreting data and constructing meaning, provides a useful framework for analyzing the complex interplay between religious discourse and social context.⁵⁹ The application of Grounded Theory to sermon analysis typically involves three stages. Initial coding begins with a line-by-line analysis of sermon transcripts, identifying key concepts and patterns without imposing predetermined categories. This process helps researchers remain open to unexpected themes and avoid being constrained by existing theoretical assumptions about religious discourse. The second stage, focused coding, involves synthesizing and explaining larger segments of data, identifying the most significant or frequent codes that emerged during initial coding. Finally, theoretical coding examines possible relationships between categories developed during focused coding, leading to the development of theoretical propositions about how sermons function within religious communities.

The work of Pieterse in South Africa is especially worth noting as an example of how sociological research informed an analysis of collected sermons, with the stated practical goal of developing an approach to preaching that reaches a particular audience.⁶⁰ It is a quandary why his work is not better known among scholars outside the Christian Reformed tradition, especially in the US. Building on his work in post-apartheid South Africa, in which he identified preaching

⁵⁶ Quinn and Smith, "Pastors Often Discussed Election;" Quinn, "The Digital Pulpit;" Boedy, "The Sunday after Tuesday."

⁵⁷ Mazza, "Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching," 143-49.

⁵⁸ Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, "The Grounded Theory Methodology to Conduct Content Analysis of Sermons and Interviews: Critique and Response," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5851>; Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering*, 16; Haskell, "Meaning of Jesus' Resurrection," 219; see Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014); cf. Titus Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2014): 855-72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513477664>.

⁵⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

⁶⁰ Pieterse, "Grounded Theory Methodology," Pieterse, "A Short History."

on poverty as a formidable challenge for the Church in a country where poverty is extensive,⁶¹ Pieterse designed a study of sermons that clergy from the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church preached in South Africa on the text of Matt 25:31-46.⁶²

Following Grounded Theory methodology, Pieterse analyzed the sermons in three cycles. The first cycle involved open coding 12 sermons collected from all provinces in South Africa.⁶³ The second cycle involved selected coding, adding 14 new sermons to the original 12.⁶⁴ The third cycle of theoretical coding analyzed the same twenty-six sermons.⁶⁵ In the first cycle, Pieterse identified the main variable as an appeal to those who were listening to the sermon.⁶⁶ In the second cycle, Pieterse found that the key variable was “an invitation... to participate in the congregation’s projects concerning the poor.”⁶⁷ In the third cycle, the key theoretical variable was the call to become involved in the Church’s social-action projects to help those in need.⁶⁸

Based on the third cycle of sermon analysis, Pieterse identified emerging concepts from all the data.⁶⁹ He recognized that preparing and delivering a sermon relied on three broad concepts: scriptural exegesis, the rhetorical structure of the sermon, and a catalog of all church-sponsored projects that serve the poor.⁷⁰ Pieterse argued that all three concepts are at the heart of calling listeners to respond to sermons on Matt 25:31-46 by participating in congregational social-justice projects that benefit those in need.⁷¹ Pieterse saw all three concepts as interrelated: exegesis informed the rhetorical structure of the sermon, which called listeners to engage in congregational services provided to the poor.⁷²

Regardless of whether one finds merit in the use of Grounded Theory to analyze sermons or whether one regards Pieterse’s particular treatment of the sermons he collected as an accurate application of the methodology, his work provides an example of how sociology’s qualitative content analysis may inform the field of practical theology, which he defines as “the study of communicative acts in the service of the gospel within the context of modern society.”⁷³ Sociologists might use a similar approach or other sociological methods to analyze sermons collected from a particular time, geographic region, or religious tradition, in order to understand the religious communities in which they were delivered. The topics for sociological research based on sermon analysis are unlimited, reaching far beyond theological or pastoral interests.

⁶¹ Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty*.

⁶² Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa.” The text of Matt 25:31-46 is a teaching attributed to Jesus, who refers to a day of reckoning. Those who have recognized and cared for those in the greatest need (i.e., “the least of my brethren” who are hungry, thirsty, naked, displaced, sick, or in prison) will receive their eternal reward, while those who have failed to do so face condemnation.

⁶³ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa;” Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “An Open Coding Analytical Model of Sermons on Poverty with Mathew 25:31-46 as Sermon Text,” *Acta Theologica* 31, no. 1 (2011): 95-112, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v31i1.6>.

⁶⁴ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 176.

⁶⁵ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 177.

⁶⁶ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178.

⁶⁷ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178; see also Hendrik Johannes Christoffel Pieterse, “A Grounded Theory Approach to the Analysis of Sermons on Poverty: Congregational Projects as Social Capital,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33, no. 1 (2012): 95-112, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.689>.

⁶⁸ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 178-79.

⁶⁹ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 179.

⁷⁰ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 179, 184-85.

⁷¹ Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 191.

⁷² Pieterse, “Preaching on Poverty in South Africa,” 191.

⁷³ Pieterse, *Preaching in a Context of Poverty*, 8.

Why Sociologists Do Not Study Sermons

One can speculate that the relative understudying of sermons in sociology may stem from four interconnected challenges: (1) the resistance of religious communities, (2) the logistics of gathering data, (3) methodological questions, and (4) academic reluctance to study religious discourse.

The Resistance of Religious Communities

Faith-based communities may be wary of granting access to sociological research. For example, conservative Protestantism has been linked to a general distrust of science as a whole.⁷⁴ Religious communities may be hesitant to welcome outside observers, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as interfaith relationships, core theological beliefs, or controversial social and political issues. This barrier becomes especially problematic when one considers how crucial it is to understand how religious institutions shape perspectives not only about other faiths but also about broader societal debates and moral questions.

The reluctance to grant access often stems from concerns about potential misrepresentation or criticism. Religious leaders may worry that their words will be taken out of context, that nuanced theological positions will be oversimplified, or that their communities will be portrayed in an unfavorable light by researchers who may not fully understand or respect their traditions. This wariness can be particularly acute in smaller or more traditional communities that have historically faced discrimination or misunderstanding from mainstream society.

The access challenge extends beyond just the initial permission to observe or record services. Religious communities might also be concerned with how sermon recordings or transcripts will be stored, shared, and used in the future. Questions about intellectual property rights, privacy concerns for congregation members, and the potential for sermons to be reused in ways not initially intended can all contribute to hesitancy to participate in research studies.

There is also the matter of selection bias in terms of which religious communities might be willing to participate in sociological research. More progressive or mainstream congregations might be more open to academic study, while more conservative, marginal, or traditional communities might be more hesitant.

The Logistics of Gathering Sermon Data

Studying sermons presents significant logistical challenges that have historically deterred comprehensive sociological research. The few academic studies based on actual texts of sermons delivered in liturgical settings attest to the complexity of collecting sound data. These logistical challenges can be broken down into several key areas: recording and documentation, transcription accuracy, data volume management, and integration of contextual information.

Recording and documentation pose the first major hurdle. Researchers must consider both technical and ethical aspects of sermon capture. From a technical standpoint, achieving high-quality audio recordings in worship spaces requires careful equipment selection and placement to account for varying acoustics, speaker movement, and ambient noise. Video recording adds complexity, requiring multiple camera angles to capture both verbal and nonverbal communication and the congregation's reactions. Furthermore, recording equipment

⁷⁴ Jennifer Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention? Religion and Politics in Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2019): 9-27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry041>.

must be unobtrusive enough not to disturb the natural worship environment or make participants self-conscious.

The ethical dimensions of recording include obtaining appropriate permissions not only from religious leaders but also potentially from congregation members who might appear in recordings. Privacy concerns become particularly acute when services include personal testimonies, prayer requests, or other sensitive information. Religious communities may also have specific rules or traditions that deserve respect when recording in sacred spaces.

Transcription accuracy represents another significant challenge. Sermon delivery often includes contextual elements that are difficult to capture in written form—tonal variations, emphasis, pauses, gestures, and audience responses all contribute to the sermon’s full meaning.⁷⁵ While automated transcription services have improved, they still struggle with religious terminology, biblical references, and the informal speaking style common in many sermons.⁷⁶ Manual transcription, while more accurate, is time-intensive and expensive, particularly for large-scale studies requiring hundreds of sermons.

The sheer volume of data presents another logistical hurdle. The transcription of even a single sermon generates substantial text for analysis, with longer sermons producing significant volumes of data, not including contextual notes or congregational responses. For longitudinal studies or those comparing multiple congregations, the data volume quickly becomes substantial. Studying sermons requires robust systems for data storage, organization, and retrieval that can handle both text transcripts and associated audio/video files while maintaining appropriate security measures for sensitive religious content.

Integration of contextual information adds another layer of complexity. Sermons do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger worship service and community context. Researchers must develop systems to document and correlate the order of service and liturgical elements surrounding the sermon, scriptural readings and other texts referenced, musical selections and their relationship to sermon themes, physical setting and use of visual aids or technology, congregation size and demographic composition, special occasions or events that might influence sermon content, local or national events that provide broader context, and the historical and denominational background of the congregation.

Furthermore, researchers interested in sermon reception must devise methods to gather data about how congregants understand and respond to sermons.⁷⁷ This might involve post-sermon surveys or interviews, observation of informal discussions among congregants, analysis of social media responses when sermons are shared online, tracking of behavioral changes or community actions prompted by sermon content, and documentation of how sermon themes are referenced in other church activities.

The emergence of digital platforms has somewhat eased these logistical burdens, as many congregations now routinely record and archive their services. The COVID-19 Pandemic prompted most US churches to expand significantly their capacity to make sermons available

⁷⁵ Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 4.

⁷⁶ Mazza, “Jews and Judaism in Roman Catholic Preaching,” 368, 371-72.

⁷⁷ Engemann, *Homiletics*, 410-25; Gaarden and Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching,” Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*; John S. McClure et al., *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 81-104.

online.⁷⁸ Reviewing electronically gathered sermons, however, brings its own challenges. Researchers must ensure consistent quality across different recording setups, manage multiple digital formats and platforms, deal with incomplete or interrupted recordings, address copyright and usage rights for digitally shared content, account for how digital delivery might affect sermon content and style, and develop protocols for archiving and accessing digital materials.

Methodological Questions

The challenge of studying sermons from a sociological perspective extends beyond mere data collection to fundamental questions about methodological approaches. While various methodologies have been employed in sermon studies, from rhetorical analysis to historical investigation, sociological approaches offer unique opportunities for understanding how sermons function within and influence religious communities.⁷⁹

Even prior to selecting a method for evaluating sermons, there are a number of important questions that sociologists may want to consider prior to engaging in research. Whether implicitly or explicitly, scholars may need to acknowledge a working definition of religion or discourse.⁸⁰ Do they acknowledge that their analysis of sermons relies on an understanding of religion as being *sui generis*, or is it one of many other social constructs?⁸¹ Do researchers make a distinction between discourse as the construction of the research topic, defined as “a coherent set of statements . . . which produce a particular version of events” within a particular socio-cultural context, and discourse as a theme, which means the topic that is being discussed?⁸² Consequently, scholars may need to pay close attention to their foundational assumptions prior to designing any practical research projects involving sermons.⁸³

Any sociological method used to analyze sermons, however, will have to address at least four methodological concerns. First is the question of representativeness. Researchers must consider how to construct sermon samples that meaningfully represent the diversity of religious discourse within a particular tradition or geographic area. This challenge is complicated by variations in preaching styles, theological orientations, and social conditions across different congregations.

Second is the challenge of context. Sermons are embedded within specific liturgical, theological, and social environments that shape their meaning and impact. Methodological approaches must account for these surrounding circumstances while still allowing for meaningful comparison across different settings.

Third is the question of reception. Understanding how congregants interpret and respond to sermons requires methodological approaches that can capture both immediate reactions and

⁷⁸ Aaron Earls, “Online Services Expanded Reach of Churches During Pandemic,” Lifeway Research, October 14, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/14/online-services-expanded-reach-of-churches-during-pandemic/>.

⁷⁹ See the discussion below on *Deciding on Sociological Methods*.

⁸⁰ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25, no. 1 (2013): 5-25. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341253>; Taira, “Discursive Study in Religious Studies.”

⁸¹ von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion,” 17; Robert Neelly Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 250.

⁸² Taira, “Discursive Study in Religious Studies,” 28-29.

⁸³ Marcus Moberg, “First-, Second-, and Third-Level Discourse Analytic Approaches to the Study of Religion: Moving from Meta-Theoretical Reflection to Implementation Practice,” *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 4-25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2013.742742>.

longer-term impacts on beliefs and behavior. This might involve combining sermon analysis with surveys, interviews, or ethnographic observation of the congregation.⁸⁴

A fourth challenge concerns the relationship between spoken and written discourse. While sermon transcripts provide valuable data for analysis, they may not capture important aspects of oral delivery, such as tone, gesture, and audience response. Methodological approaches must account for these performative elements of preaching.

Academic Reluctance to Study Religious Discourse

The historical secularization of academic sociology may have led to an undervaluation of religious discourse as an object of study.⁸⁵ The influence of secularization theory within sociology, particularly during the mid-twentieth century, may have contributed to certain assumptions about religion's declining significance, which long predicted its inevitable decline in modern societies.⁸⁶ This theoretical orientation may have created an implicit bias against viewing religious discourse as worthy of serious academic attention. However, as Peter Berger points out, modernity is proving not to be defined by the declining importance of religion as early thinkers such as Émile Durkheim and Max Weber predicted.⁸⁷

As the history of American sociology demonstrates, the relationship between academic sociology and religious studies has been marked by increasing distance and disconnection.⁸⁸ While early American sociology had strong ties to Christian social reform, with many leading sociologists having backgrounds as Protestant ministers, the discipline quickly moved toward secularization as it professionalized in the early twentieth century. This historical trajectory helps explain the relative lack of interest among sociologists in studying sermons.⁸⁹

The roots of this potential reluctance can be traced to sociology's emergence as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century. Early sociological theorists such as Auguste Comte and Durkheim, while recognizing religion's historical importance, generally viewed it as a phenomenon that would diminish in significance as societies became more rational.⁹⁰ This foundational perspective may have created an enduring bias within the discipline against treating

⁸⁴ See, for example, Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*.

⁸⁵ Samuel L. Perry, "Religion Matters (And Doesn't Go Away When Sociologists Ignore It)," *Sociological Forum* 38, no. 4 (2023): 1456–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12960>; Matthew Blanton and Daniel Krasnicki, "'Value-Conditioned Interest': Secularity, Institutional Support, and the Sociology of Religion in Graduate Departments," *The Sociology Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2023): 401–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2293966>; James Arthur Beckford, "The Insulation and Isolation of the Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 4 (1985): 347–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711150>; Bellah, *Beyond Belief*, 250.

⁸⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

⁸⁷ Peter Ludwig Berger, "Secularization Falsified," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 180 (2008): 23–27, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/secularization-falsified>.

⁸⁸ John David Brewer, "Sociology and Theology Reconsidered: Religious Sociology and the Sociology of Religion in Britain," *History of the Human Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2007): 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695107076196>.

⁸⁹ William H. Swatos Jr., "Religious Sociology and the Sociology of Religion in America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Divergences from a Common Theme," *Sociology of Religion* 50, no. 4 (1989): 363–75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710767>.

⁹⁰ Anuli Blessing Okoli and Favour Chukwuemeka Uroko, "Critique of Auguste Comte's Ideology on the Death of Religion," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4810>; Giovanni Paoletti, "Two Turning Points or Religion in Durkheim's Oeuvre before *The Elementary Forms*," *L'Année sociologique* 62, no. 2 (2012): 289–311, <https://doi.org/10.3917/anso.122.0289>.

religious discourse as a primary object of study. By contrast, Christian Smith and his colleagues, who are also sociologists of religion, argue that sociologists need to take religious discourse more seriously as a distinct and meaningful area of study.⁹¹ They contend that religious discourse cannot simply be reduced to or subsumed under other categories, such as ideology, power, insecurity, or material interests.

Evidence for the academic reluctance to study religion can be found in several patterns within contemporary sociology. Religious studies departments, rather than sociology departments, tend to house scholars who study religious discourse.⁹² When sociologists do study religion, they often focus on institutional structures, demographic patterns, or social movements rather than analyzing religious discourse itself. This division of academic labor suggests an implicit assumption that the analysis of religious texts and speech belongs more properly to theology or religious studies than to sociology.

The potential hesitation to study sermons may also reflect broader tensions within academia regarding the relationship between scientific inquiry and religious belief. Despite sociology's theoretical commitment to value-neutral observation, scholars may worry that analyzing religious discourse too closely could be interpreted as either endorsing or criticizing religious beliefs. This concern may be particularly acute when studying contemporary rather than historical sermons.

Academic reluctance to study religious discourse represents a significant missed opportunity for sociological research. Sermons and other forms of religious speech serve as crucial interfaces between religious institutions and broader society, particularly in how they interpret and respond to social issues. Understanding how sermons communicate values about other religious traditions, social issues, and moral frameworks is essential for comprehending both religious influence and social change.

Why Sociologists Should Study Sermons

The barriers that sociologists have historically encountered in studying sermons can be readily overcome by (1) obtaining access to religious communities, (2) managing logistics, (3) deciding on sociological methods, and (4) recognizing the academic bias against analyzing religious discourse. The principal obstacle, however, may be acknowledging that sermons provide important data that inform sociological studies.

Obtaining Access to Religious Communities

The access challenges to religious communities, while significant, are surmountable. Building trust through long-term relationships with religious communities, ensuring transparent research protocols, and demonstrating genuine respect for religious traditions can help overcome initial reluctance. Additionally, as more religious institutions embrace digital platforms for sharing their messages, new opportunities for studying sermons may emerge that do not require the same level of direct access to physical worship spaces.

Managing Logistics

⁹¹ Christian Smith et al., "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology—A Mellon Working-Group Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2013): 903–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lft052>.

⁹² Smith et al., "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion," 912–13.

Contemporary technology has made the task of gathering sermon data considerably easier. With many religious services now livestreamed, recorded, or available as podcasts, there is unprecedented access to sermon content across denominations and geographic areas. This technological shift makes this an opportune moment for sociologists to examine how religious leaders communicate values, shape worldviews, and influence their congregations' understanding of both religious and secular issues.

An important example illustrating the significance of collecting and analyzing sermon data is the relationship between religious beliefs and political views in the 2024 US presidential election, where, according to the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University (ACU), Christians played a decisive role.⁹³ Among self-identified Christians, Donald Trump won 56 percent of their vote, and as Christians represented 72 percent of the voters who turned out to vote, their support played a key role in his victory.⁹⁴ Of the nearly seventy-five million votes for Trump, 78 percent came from people who self-identified as members of the Christian community.⁹⁵

According to the ACU report, Christian churches played a substantial role in mobilizing their congregations, with 54 percent preaching sermons about biblical positions on election issues and 53 percent actively encouraging their congregants to vote.⁹⁶ Further demonstrating their political engagement, 30 percent of churches invited or hosted candidates to speak at their services, while 23 percent took the additional step of explicitly endorsing or recommending particular candidates to their congregations.⁹⁷ This multi-faceted approach to electoral engagement by Christian churches appeared to have contributed significantly to voter mobilization and support patterns among religious voters.

The ACU report's findings about Christian voting patterns in the 2024 election highlight a compelling but as yet missed opportunity for sermon analysis. While the report indicates that the majority of surveyed preachers addressed election-related matters in their sermons, there is no systematic analysis of the content of these sermons. A comprehensive dataset of sermons from these communities would allow researchers to examine how religious leaders framed electoral participation, interpreted biblical teachings in relation to contemporary political issues, and potentially influenced voting behavior.

Pew's incipient analysis of sermons from the 2020 election cycle demonstrates both the feasibility and value of large-scale sermon studies that this paper advocates.⁹⁸ The finding that different Christian traditions employed distinctly different language and approaches when discussing the 2020 election, such as Evangelical preachers using more apocalyptic terminology, historically Black Protestant preachers emphasizing voting rights, and Mainline Protestant preachers focusing on social complexity, provides invaluable insight that sermon analysis can reveal about how religious communities frame political participation. The fact that Pew researchers were able to review over 12,000 sermons from more than 2,000 congregations in the 2020 election also challenges the assumption that gathering comprehensive sermon data is

⁹³ George Barna, "2024 Election Results —Report #2: Decisive Christian Vote Carries Trump to Historic Victory, Post Election Research Shows," Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, November 13, 2024, <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CRC-Release-Post-Election-Nov-13-2024-Christian-Vote-Hands-Trump-Victory.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 1.

⁹⁵ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 3.

⁹⁶ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 8.

⁹⁷ Barna, "2024 Election Results," 8-9.

⁹⁸ Quinn and Smith, *Pastors Often Discussed Election*.

prohibitively difficult. Unfortunately, for sociologists and other scholars who wish to study the political content of sermons, Pew did not repeat the same data-collection process for the 2024 election cycle.

The increasing political polarization between religious and non-religious groups demands greater scholarly attention to the collection and analysis of sermonic discourse, as it is a key mechanism through which religious beliefs shape political behavior.⁹⁹ Religious institutions play a crucial role in forming and reinforcing political worldviews, with sermons serving as a primary channel through which congregants receive guidance, not only on matters of faith but also on pressing social and political issues. The relationship between religious affiliation and political orientation has become increasingly apparent, with many Americans differing not only in their voting patterns but also in their fundamental views of society and governance. The controversy surrounding Episcopal Bishop Marianne Budde's appeal to Trump for mercy at the prayer service at Washington's National Cathedral after his 2025 inauguration highlights how religious and political views converge, with some sermons expressing the concerns of one sector of society while alienating others.¹⁰⁰ Understanding how religious leaders frame and interpret political issues through sermons is, therefore, essential for comprehending the deepening divides in contemporary American society. While Pew's analysis demonstrates the feasibility of large-scale sermon studies, much more systematic research is needed to understand how religious discourse contributes to and potentially reinforces political polarization.

The digital accessibility of sermons allows researchers to conduct comparative analyses across different denominations, regions, and timeframes. This broader perspective can help identify patterns in how different religious communities respond to similar social issues, how their messaging evolves over time, and how they adapt their communication strategies to address changing social conditions. Moreover, the ability to study sermons systematically through digital archives enables researchers to track the evolution of religious discourse on social issues over time. This longitudinal perspective can provide valuable insights into how religious institutions adapt their messaging in response to changing social norms and political landscapes, while also maintaining their core theological principles.

This rich data source can help sociologists better understand the complex relationship between religious institutions and social change, particularly in how religious communities both respond to and shape broader societal debates. The study of sermons can reveal how religious leaders navigate the challenge of addressing contemporary issues while maintaining theological consistency, and how they translate abstract religious principles into concrete social and political positions.

Deciding on Sociological Methods

The methodological complexity of sermon analysis remains challenging but ultimately worthwhile. Sermons operate on multiple levels simultaneously. They are theological, performative, educational, and social events that serve as critical venues for the transmission of both religious and cultural values. While this complexity makes analysis demanding, it is precisely this multi-layered nature that makes sermons crucial for understanding how values, beliefs, and social perspectives are communicated and transformed within religious communities.

⁹⁹ Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention?"

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Dias, "The Bishop Who Pleaded with Trump: 'Was Anyone Going to Say Anything?'" *New York Times*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/us/trump-bishop-plea.html>.

Grounded Theory, as developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss¹⁰¹ and later refined by scholars such as Charmaz,¹⁰² offers a particularly promising approach for sermon analysis. The method's emphasis on allowing theoretical insights to emerge from systematic analysis of data, rather than imposing preexisting theoretical frameworks, makes it well-suited for understanding how sermons operate within religious communities. Pieterse's work in South Africa, discussed earlier in this paper, demonstrates the potential of Grounded Theory for sermon analysis.¹⁰³ His three-cycle approach to coding sermons on poverty revealed not only their theological content but also their social function in mobilizing congregational responses to social issues. Pieterse's work exemplifies how Grounded Theory can illuminate both the content and social impact of religious discourse.

While Grounded Theory has shown promise, other methodological approaches also offer valuable perspectives for sermon analysis. Content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, can provide insights into patterns of language use, theological themes, and social messaging across large collections of sermons.¹⁰⁴ This approach is particularly useful for tracking changes in religious discourse over time or comparing sermonic treatment of specific issues across different religious traditions or geographical regions.

Some scholars claim that discourse analysis is a perspective rather than a methodology.¹⁰⁵ "Generally speaking, discourse analysis focuses on identifying patterns and recurring key elements in a given body of material or collection of material which appear to be central to how particular meanings are produced."¹⁰⁶ From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the goal of discourse analysis is to understand the processes that legitimate knowledge within a particular social context.¹⁰⁷ Arguably, one might use a range of methods from the perspective of discourse analysis to analyze the texts of sermons to understand how they disclose the internal dynamics and worldview of a particular religious community. Other scholars, referring to critical discourse analysis, which is explicitly concerned with the power dynamics and inequalities inherent in speech, use this approach to examine how power relations are established, maintained, or challenged through religious discourse.¹⁰⁸ The method can reveal how sermons contribute to the construction of religious identity, reinforce or challenge social hierarchies, and mediate between religious tradition and contemporary social issues.¹⁰⁹

Mixed methods approaches may be particularly valuable for sermon analysis. Combining qualitative analysis of sermon content with quantitative measures of congregational response, for example, can provide a more complete picture of how sermons influence religious communities. Similarly, integrating textual analysis with ethnographic observation can help researchers understand how sermonic discourse relates to broader patterns of religious practice and community life.

¹⁰¹ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰² Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

¹⁰³ Pieterse, "Preaching on Poverty in South Africa."

¹⁰⁴ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion," 14.

¹⁰⁶ Moberg, "Approaches to the Study of Religion," 11.

¹⁰⁷ von Stuckrad, "Discursive Study of Religion," 12.

¹⁰⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ See Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power."

Whatever sociological method one adopts for studying sermons, the research should take into account the performative aspect of sermons, which makes them particularly powerful tools for social influence. Unlike written texts, sermons combine verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional appeals, storytelling, and community participation. These elements work together to create experiences that can shape not only religious beliefs but also social attitudes, political perspectives, and cultural values.

Research methods should also recognize that the educational function of sermons extends far beyond religious doctrine. Religious leaders often use sermons to help their congregations interpret and respond to contemporary social issues, from economic inequality and racial justice to environmental stewardship and technological change.¹¹⁰ Sermons, moreover, serve as significant indicators of social change within religious communities themselves. How religious leaders address evolving social norms around gender roles, sexual orientation, family structures, and other cultural shifts reveals much about the dynamic relationship between religious traditions and social transformation. The social impact of sermons reaches beyond the immediate congregation to influence broader community dynamics and public policy. Religious leaders often use their pulpits to mobilize community action on social issues, encourage civic engagement, and shape public opinion on legislation and policy matters.

Recognizing the Academic Bias against Analyzing Religious Discourse

The most important step in addressing potential academic bias against studying religious discourse is acknowledging that such bias may exist while recognizing that it stems from historical and institutional factors rather than sound methodological reasons. Three countervailing factors that address outdated assumptions about both religious discourse and sociological methods may contribute to overcoming academic reluctance to study sermons.

First, contemporary sociological theory has largely moved beyond simple secularization narratives to recognize religion's continuing significance in modern societies. The persistent and often increasing influence of religious institutions in public life challenges any assumption that religious discourse is becoming less relevant to social analysis.¹¹¹

Second, recent developments in sociological methods, particularly in discourse analysis and mixed-methods approaches, provide sophisticated tools for analyzing religious speech without necessarily engaging with theological truth claims. These methodological advances make it possible to study how religious discourse functions socially while maintaining appropriate academic distance from questions of religious belief.

Third, the growing recognition of religion's role in social movements, political behavior, and cultural change makes the analysis of religious discourse increasingly relevant to core sociological concerns. Religious institutions continue to shape public debates on issues ranging from economic policy¹¹² to environmental protection,¹¹³ making religious discourse an important factor in understanding contemporary social dynamics.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Perkins, "Preaching and Rhetorical Responses to Terror."

¹¹¹ Glass, "Why Aren't We Paying Attention?"

¹¹² See, for example, Presbyterian Church (USA), *Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1996), <https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/hope-for-a-global-future1.pdf>.

¹¹³ See, for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (1993), <https://elcamediaresources.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/wp-content/uploads/EnvironmentSS.pdf>.

Sociology departments can also take practical steps to integrate the analysis of religious discourse into their research agendas by developing collaborations with religious studies departments, supporting dissertations that examine religious speech, and ensuring that graduate methods courses include training in discourse analysis that can be applied to religious texts. Building bridges between sociology and religious studies need not compromise sociological methods or perspectives; rather, it can enrich both fields by combining sociology's analytical frameworks with the deep understanding of religious traditions that scholars of religion possess. The success of studies like Pieterse's work on poverty in South African churches demonstrates how sociological methods can effectively analyze sermons while maintaining appropriate academic distance from theological truth claims.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, departments can actively recruit scholars working at the intersection of sociology and religious studies, thereby creating intellectual communities that support this kind of cross-disciplinary research. Professional organizations can play a role by establishing sections or special interest groups focused on the analysis of religious discourse, organizing conference sessions that highlight innovative methodological approaches to studying religious speech, and developing publication venues that welcome this scholarship. Journal editors can encourage submissions that examine religious discourse from a sociological perspective by organizing special issues that demonstrate the value of such analysis for understanding contemporary social phenomena. Funding agencies can also help overcome institutional resistance by supporting research projects that analyze religious discourse, particularly those that employ innovative methodological approaches or address pressing social issues. The goal should be to create an academic environment that recognizes religious discourse as a legitimate and valuable object of sociological inquiry while maintaining rigorous methodological standards and theoretical sophistication.

Conclusion

The time has come for sociologists to develop a systematic agenda for studying sermons and for preachers to welcome such studies. The historical barriers that may have discouraged such research, whether they were data access, methodological challenges, or academic reluctance, are increasingly surmountable. Digital technology has made sermon content more accessible than ever before, while developments in qualitative and quantitative methods have provided sophisticated analytical tools. Sociologists should seize this opportunity by developing research agendas that examine how sermons reflect and influence social attitudes, political behavior, and cultural change.

For Further Reading

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¹¹⁴ Pieterse, "Preaching on Poverty in South Africa."

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Artificial Preaching? Exploring the Ethical Limitations of and Opportunities for Using Large Language Models in Sermon Development

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Abstract: *Christians are wise to assess new technologies with conservatism and healthy skepticism. Rapidly developing tools in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI) are no exception—especially for the preaching ministry of the church. The power and allure of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT make AI worthy of critical assessment as a potential aid in sermon development. However, should preachers adopt AI as a tool in sermon development? If so, what limits ought to guide its use? This article addresses these urgent questions by weighing the benefits and risks of AI in homiletics. It lays out the relevant ethical considerations for discerning AI's use, arguing that LLMs can serve as a valuable aid to preachers within well-defined boundaries. To preserve the authenticity and integrity of both the preacher and the gospel message, AI's adoption requires clear limitations, ongoing ethical reflection, and—above all—the homiletical virtue of patience.*

Introduction

For centuries, preachers have drawn upon virtually every available tool in their calling to proclaim the word of God: from scroll and codex to search engine and LED screen. The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI)—especially large language models (LLMs) like OpenAI's ChatGPT—presents both novel challenges and familiar questions: “*Should* modern preachers adopt this latest technology? And, if so, *how* do they faithfully steward the use of this new machine in the proclamation of the gospel and the furtherance of God's kingdom in the world?”

The list of such inquiries regarding the adoption and ethical implementation of generative AI is long, and it is expanding nearly as fast as both the power and number of practical applications for LLMs grow. However, like the incandescent light bulb and the smartphone before it, AI and LLMs are here to stay. Some see AI as a threat,¹ while others are ready to embrace it wholeheartedly—lest they be left behind.² Those called to serve local congregations from the pulpit have the responsibility to wrestle seriously with such questions and to consider *whether* and *how* AI will be used by the people of God who find themselves living in the digital age.³ As Daniel Crouch writes concerning this modern technology, our task as Christians in

¹ Ned Desmond, “The Threat of Artificial Intelligence,” *First Things*, August/September 2021, 39–43.

² E.g., Gregg Kober argues that business leaders must “[cultivate] an AI-first mindset...viewing AI not as a tool but as an integral element for improving the productivity of personal practices [and] embracing its potential to augment human capabilities.” See Gregg Kober, “AI-First Leadership: Embracing the Future of Work,” Harvard Business Publishing, January 24, 2025, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/ai-first-leadership-embracing-the-future-of-work/>.

³ As Brad East rightly observes, *whether* ought to be “the first question for ministers regarding any new technology,” and his answer to that question when it comes to the use of LLMs in pulpit ministry is a resounding No. Surely, many preachers will come to the same conclusion and reject the use of AI in their ministries altogether. This article, however, argues for a tentative “Yes” to the primary ethical question regarding these technologies, and its goal is to answer the secondary question of *how* by determining ethical limitations for the use of AI in sermon development for preachers who decide to use them. For the case *against* the use of AI, see Brad East, “AI Has No Place in the Pulpit,” *Christianity Today*, September 27, 2023, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/09/ai-has-no-place-in-pulpit-chatgpt-llm-openai-preaching-past/>.

approaching any tool is “neither reactionary rejection nor naïve embrace. It is the harder thing: to discern how these tools reshape the conditions of learning and living, and to order our practices so that technology serves rather than supplants the formation of persons.”⁴

This article seeks to contribute to this important conversation about the use of AI in homiletics. First, it maps the current AI landscape regarding LLM capabilities for sermon development. Then, using a four-question framework suggested by Andy Crouch, this article examines the ethical use of LLMs across three notable aspects of the sermon development process—the cognitive, the creative, and the formative. As this article will show, the calling and craft of preaching demand the homiletical virtue of patience in all three aspects, which places ethical limitations on the scope and application of AI for pulpit ministry. In light of these constraints, this article’s exploration of these three aspects seeks to name specific ways preachers *may consider* or *must avoid* using LLMs as they carry out their calling to preach.

Mapping the AI Landscape

No preacher needs a complete understanding of a technology to use it well.⁵ Still, to discern a technology’s ethical use, we must have at least a general understanding of its form, function, and impact beyond its apparent utility. Because AI is an emerging and rapidly developing technology, laying this foundation is inherently difficult, especially within the scope of this article. Even so, defining a few key terms within the vast landscape of AI is a necessary first step in discerning whether to adopt AI tools into one’s preaching practice.

To begin, *artificial intelligence* (AI) is a broad term whose references “[extend] from speculative machines that match human intelligence to fairly simple algorithms.”⁶ When an AI program is able to synthesize and assess past successes and failures in achieving desired outcomes, it falls within the category of *machine learning*. Machine learning can either be supervised or reinforced by human beings who manually review an AI’s algorithmic output and “tag” correct solutions (or, more often, entire sets of training data) to aid in its future accuracy, or it can be unsupervised, meaning that the AI “discovers its own patterns” without human intervention.⁷ *Artificial neural networks* function independently without the aid of human beings and “were developed to mimic the way in which neurons work in a human or animal brain” and how they take in, process, and generalize information from their environment and experiences.⁸ In other words, artificial neural networks are “a series of programming algorithms that allow AI to process information so that it can ‘think’ and ‘learn.’”⁹ Working together, multiple neural networks conduct a more complex form of machine learning known as *deep learning*.¹⁰ Should

⁴ Daniel Crouch, “Artificial Assistance, Spiritual Impediment: AI Chatbots and the Risk to Human Flourishing,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 39.

⁵ Rachael A. Keefe, “Where Is the Spirit? Reflections on Engaging AI in Sermon Preparation,” *Interpretation* 79, no. 2 (2025): 137, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00209643241308587>.

⁶ Paul Scherz, “AI as Person, Paradigm, and Structure: Notes toward an Ethics of AI,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 124, n. 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00405639231223891>.

⁷ Matthew J. Gaudet, “An Introduction to the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, Special Issue no. 1 (2022): 4–5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.55476/001c.34121>.

⁸ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5.

⁹ Keefe, “Where Is the Spirit?” 137.

¹⁰ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5. For a scientific overview of deep learning, see Yann LeCun, Yoshua Bengio, and Geoffrey Hinton, “Deep Learning,” *Nature* 521, no. 7553 (2015): 436–44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature14539>.

the capabilities of these AI systems develop to the point where they equal or surpass human intelligence, the technology will be said to have achieved *artificial general intelligence* (AGI), a reality imagined in science fiction for nearly a century but yet to come to fruition.¹¹

Two more terms, which build on and implement the AI technologies defined thus far, are most relevant to the topic of this article. The first is *large language model* (LLM). An LLM is an AI tool that “uses machine learning to both generate and predict language” based on its training data.¹² The most familiar and widely used type of LLMs today is *generative pre-trained transformers*, or GPTs. They are trained on many terabytes of data, most of which are sourced from publicly available online sources. Based on that training, chat-oriented GPTs respond to a user’s prompts by inferring the most probable next word based on the previous words in a sequence.¹³ While LLMs can be employed for a wide range of language-related tasks, many GPT-based systems are further fine-tuned to generate longer, more conversational responses to prompts. In addition to OpenAI’s ChatGPT (mentioned above), other popular GPTs in use at the time of this writing—by both individuals and corporations all over the globe—are Anthropic’s Claude, Google’s Gemini, and xAI’s Grok. Much more could be said about how these AI technologies were developed and how they function today; however, this basic glossary provides an adequate foundation for the investigation in this essay: *Should* preachers use these AI tools as they prepare their sermons? And, if so, with what limits?

The Allure (and Asking Price) of AI

Upon first experiencing any new, well-functioning technology, most people express some level of amazement: “*It’s like magic*,” we might say.¹⁴ This is especially true for text-based generative AI, given its sheer power and speed, as well as its ability to simulate human language and conversation. For preachers, whose primary responsibility each week is to prepare and deliver a message of several thousand words,¹⁵ the allure of AI as a tool for sermon development comes as no surprise.¹⁶ If typing a prompt into an LLM can produce the thousands of words that preachers need for a sermon, and if a second prompt can then format those words into a pulpit-ready outline or manuscript, then why would they *not* consider taking advantage of this modern

¹¹ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5.

¹² Keefe, “Where is the Spirit?,” 137.

¹³ Keefe, “Where is the Spirit?,” 137.

¹⁴ In an interview with Jay Kim, Andy Crouch keenly observes that almost every company that has implemented and advertised AI in its programs uses iconography that includes either “a starburst” or “a wand,” “which represent...a little magical moment” promised by these digital tools. See Practicing the Way, “Andy Crouch & Jay Kim on the Future of the Church,” 1:04:28–1:05:29, August 12, 2025, accessed November 21, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2j8053yxbE>; Elsewhere, Crouch calls this “magical” experience the “superpower zone,” moments when any technology “[equips] human beings to vastly increase the sensation of power while vastly reducing the sensation of effort.” Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), 42.

¹⁵ A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center of nearly 50,000 sermons found that the average sermon in the U.S. is 37 minutes long. Assuming the general rule of 150 words per minute as the proper rate for public speaking in English, most sermons contain at least 3,000 words, and in certain streams of the faith, sermons often will amount to over 8,000 words. Pew Research Center, “The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons,” December 16, 2019, accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/16/the-digital-pulpit-a-nationwide-analysis-of-online-sermons/>.

¹⁶ As one preacher opines, “It’s like a mini research paper you have to prepare every week.” See Deena Prichep, “Clergy Grapple with the Ethics of Using AI to Write Sermons,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 17, 2025, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/17/nx-s1-5468637/clergy-grapple-with-the-ethics-of-using-ai-to-write-sermons>.

technology, freeing up time for the supposedly more relational tasks of ministry and saving them from the stress and anxiety of last-minute sermon preparation on a Saturday night?

Andy Crouch suggests two promises and two consequences that help to illuminate the competing desires that lie beneath the surface of this homiletical dilemma. In his assessment of the history of human technological development, Crouch concludes that “Every technical advance in human history has been borne on the wings of two promises.”¹⁷ The first promise of every new technology is that of enhanced capabilities (“*Now you’ll be able to...*”), which guarantees “[to expand] human experience and capacity in some way.”¹⁸ The second promise is the promise of alleviated burdens (“*You’ll no longer have to...*”), which offers “[relief from] toil, drudgery, stress, and, for that matter, skill.”¹⁹ Here, Crouch exposes a reality that those with a vested interest in any new technology would rather keep hidden: the cost of adopting it. In other words, there are *always* negative consequences in using a new technology—even when its promises to expand some capability or to alleviate some perceived burden of the human condition are, in one way or another, fulfilled. As Crouch names them, the drawbacks of every technical advance in human history are “*restricted capabilities*” (the consequence of “*You’ll no longer be able to...*”) and “*enforced burdens*” (the consequence of “*Now you’ll have to...*”).²⁰

Take the smartphone, for example. First, it promises to expand human communication capabilities. *Now, you will be able to hear and to read messages from others, instantly and regardless of where in the world they might be.* Second, as a device with many functions beyond communication, the smartphone promises to alleviate the physical burden of carrying multiple tools for various tasks: a camera for taking photos, a calendar for keeping up with your schedule, a GPS for driving to an appointment, a level for hanging a shelf in your office, and many more. *You will no longer have to carry the weight of all these tools with you wherever you go—you will not even need to own these other devices at all.*

However, with these promises comes an asking price; there are drawbacks to smartphone adoption. They restrict capabilities and skills that human beings possessed before: We may be able to punch any location into our phone’s GPS and arrive on time, but eventually we will lose the ability to distinguish north from south with only stars and landmarks to guide us. We may be able to communicate with family and friends across the country, but we now find it more difficult to engage in meaningful relationships with our neighbor across the street. Furthermore, smartphones impose new burdens upon us even as they alleviate others: We no longer need to carry dozens of separate devices for certain tasks, but we must ensure that this single device’s battery is adequately charged before we leave home for the day. We no longer need to keep a notebook with our contacts’ home addresses and phone numbers; now we rely entirely on our smartphone’s memory chip rather than our own brains because our capacity to remember information has decreased from lack of use.²¹

As the example of the smartphone shows, the promises (*enhanced capabilities, alleviated burdens*) and consequences (*restricted capabilities, enforced burdens*) that Crouch has identified together serve as a helpful lens for assessing any technology that becomes available, including

¹⁷ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 138.

¹⁸ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 139.

¹⁹ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 139.

²⁰ “The new technology will enforce new requirements, new behaviors, new patterns of life, whether you wanted it to or not.” Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 141. Emphasis original.

²¹ Crouch notes and briefly assesses several more technological examples, both ancient and modern: player pianos, robot vacuums, digital video streaming services, telescopes, roads, and even writing. See *The Life We’re Looking For*, 138–46.

AI.²² The next section of this article applies Crouch's framework for weighing the promises and consequences to LLMs like ChatGPT to determine the ethical limits of their adoption as a tool for sermon development.

Assessing LLMs as a Tool for Sermon Development

Melissa Florer-Bixler writes that LLMs aim to empower the preacher “to create sermons with greater impact in a fraction of the time.”²³ More specifically, they promise to enhance the preacher’s ability to research the biblical text and to write the various movements of the sermon. They promise to alleviate the burden of time that must be given to these duties for the preacher, as well as to other responsibilities that are delegated to fellow staff members or volunteers in the church, allowing them to spend their energy elsewhere, serving the congregation in other important ways without detracting from the quality or impact of the Sunday sermon. The homiletical possibilities of LLMs are appealing, and they target at least two primary aspects of the sermon-writing process: the cognitive and the creative.

The cognitive aspect of sermon development includes the task of exegeting Scripture, as well as interpreting one’s cultural and congregational contexts. It is the sum of the preacher’s skills in critical thinking, “a multifaceted cognitive process that involves the capacity to think clearly and rationally, understand logical connections between ideas, evaluate arguments, and identify inconsistencies in reasoning.”²⁴ From summarizing multiple commentators’ interpretations of a particular passage of Scripture to mapping out an entire year of sermons for one local congregation, LLMs promise to aid and increase the efficiency of almost any cognitive task required in preaching.

The creative aspect of sermon development is most prevalent in the step between study and delivery: writing the sermon. Whether preachers prefer to write their sermons on paper or type them on a screen, or whether they tend to speak from an outline or a full manuscript, their calling is to prepare the words they deliver to their congregations *before* stepping into the pulpit. Here lies the alleged “magic” of LLMs. Their power to generate thousands of words almost instantly promises to expand the preacher’s capacity to write sermons and to alleviate the hours-long burden that it would have taken to compose them without the assistance of AI.

As several of the scholars already cited have cautioned, however, it is vital that the preachers ask themselves at this point, “What is the asking price of the adoption of LLMs as a tool for writing my sermons?” One word that summarizes the chief drawback well is *atrophy*: the unrestricted use of LLMs in sermon development ultimately will inhibit the preacher’s cognitive and creative capabilities, enforcing in turn new and various burdens on them as these skills decrease, hampering their overall ministry to the church. This tradeoff results from a phenomenon psychologists call “offloading,” which is “particularly concerning in the context of

²² As Keith D. Stanglin puts it, the consideration of a technology’s negative consequences is precisely what “breaks the spell.” “AI in Congregational Ministry: Human Nature and the Significance of Process and Product,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 94–95.

²³ Melissa Florer-Bixler, “A Pulpit without a Context,” *The Christian Century* (July 2024): 29.

²⁴ Michael Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking,” *Societies* 15, no. 6 (2025): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010006>.

critical thinking, which requires active cognitive engagement to analyze and evaluate information effectively.”²⁵

In a study of nearly 700 people examining the impact of AI use on critical thinking skills, Gerlich and his team found that the more often individuals used AI tools at work, the more likely they were to offload cognitive tasks, resulting in lower critical thinking scores.²⁶ These researchers conclude that “while AI tools offer undeniable benefits in terms of efficiency and accessibility, they may inadvertently diminish users’ engagement in deep, reflective thinking processes.”²⁷ In other words, there is a significant inner cost paid by the user in exchange for the higher external efficiency of using AI. This reveals that a preacher’s use of LLMs to write messages is not a matter of the cognitive and the creative aspects of sermon development—it is, most importantly, a matter of the formative aspect as well.

Preachers proclaim the gospel Sunday after Sunday, not for the sake of efficiency, but for the sake of formation.²⁸ They are called to make disciples of Jesus, and their preaching aims to help transform not only the congregation into His image, but—first and foremost through the entirety of their preaching—to open themselves to the inner work of the Holy Spirit. This formation takes place for preachers in many ways, but certainly in the process of developing their sermons. As practical theologian Mason Lee has shown, sermon development is one of the most powerful opportunities for preachers to be transformed into more Christlike individuals through the cultivation of patience.²⁹ Lee names despair and pride as two contrary vices of the “homiletical virtue” of patience.³⁰ Both of these vices arise in the course of sermon writing, and the danger of LLMs lies in their potential to be used out of despair or pride rather than out of a desire to be formed by patiently waiting for God to inspire the words the preacher will deliver.

The preacher is prone to experience despair whenever resistance arises in the process of writing a sermon. Obstacles to putting the finishing touch on a final draft may include something as common and well-known as writer’s block (creative despair). They may also include the experience of struggling to grasp the most pressing real and felt needs of the congregation to whom preachers are called to speak (pastoral despair). Finally, preachers may come across their own internal resistance to the sheer otherness of the gospel itself—that, yes, even the one called to deliver the good news is in dire need of hearing it, too (formative despair). However, no matter the despairing barrier that preachers encounter on the way to completing their sermons each week, in the digital age, they may be tempted to eschew the patience required to wait for creative, pastoral, or formative inspiration to strike, turning instead to an LLM to rescue them from the struggle to write.

²⁵ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 2; See also Sandra Grinschgl, Frank Papenmeier, and Hauke S. Meyerhoff, “Consequences of Cognitive Offloading: Boosting Performance but Diminishing Memory,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 9 (2021): 1477–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218211008060>.

²⁶ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 13.

²⁷ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 23.

²⁸ As Scott Gibson writes, “Discipleship through our sermons is what we’re after. Discipleship, then, is developing mature, well-rounded Christians who not only are fed through preaching and the wider ministry of the church but also are able to feed others and themselves well.... *We preach to help disciples mature*” (emphasis added). Scott Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 14.

²⁹ Mason Lee, *Learning to Speak of God: Patience as a Homiletical Virtue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 146–64.

³⁰ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 138; 124–27.

Another vice, however, sits on the other side of the spectrum: that of pride in one's own homiletical abilities. "The vice of pride," Lee says, "suggests we can accomplish what we desire through our own power" rather than recognizing our creaturely finitude and relying upon the power of God to accomplish His good work in preachers and their preaching.³¹ For instance, young preachers using an LLM in their sermon development might succumb to pride by overestimating the depth of their knowledge of patristics: Seeking to use AI in researching a sermon on sanctification, they might prompt an LLM for quotations from writers of the early church, but fail to recognize that in its response, the AI had not quoted a particular church father verbatim but had merely conflated key elements of the figure's theology, falsely attributing a "hallucinated" quotation to him.³²

Pride may also surface within the heart of a longtime preacher who chooses to use an LLM. For example, if such a preacher wanted to save time on sermon preparation in order to conduct an additional hospital visit (or, perhaps the reasoning is less altruistic and is driven more by vocational burnout or simple laziness), they might prompt the AI to organize a smattering of disordered sermon ideas about that Sunday's text into a pulpit-ready manuscript, overly confident that years of preaching experience have engendered a level of rhetorical skill that will overcome whatever flaws or inconsistencies may be present in the manuscript the LLM produces.

Regardless of age or experience, the vices of both despair and pride may inhibit preachers from recognizing the biases that influence LLM output. One such bias is readily apparent but easily overlooked: Since the algorithms behind LLMs are trained to return human prompts with a sequence of words, each of which is simply the next most probable in the sentence of which they are a part, the use of these tools inherently involves an algorithmic bias toward language and ideas that will meet their users' expectations. But if, as Will Willimon writes, "Preaching arises from the conviction that Christ really is present, or could likely show up, in Word and sacrament, speaking for himself, walking freely among his people,"³³ then preachers who seek to use these AI tools with homiletical patience ought to pause and ask, "Does the message of the gospel always meet human expectations?" The resurrection was not statistically probable, based on the

³¹ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 129. See also Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 12:9.

³² The term "hallucination" refers to LLMs' propensity for "confabulation" in their responses to human prompts. As Ethan and Lilach Mollick explain, "[LLMs] are prone to producing incorrect, but plausible facts, a phenomenon known as confabulation or hallucination. These errors can be deeply woven into the AI's outputs and are hard to detect. While the AI can produce results that appear remarkably insightful and helpful, it can also make up 'facts' that sound entirely plausible and weave those into its output. While different LLMs have different rates of these sorts of errors...they are most common when asking for quotes, sources, citations, or other detailed information." Ethan R. Mollick and Lilach Mollick, "Assigning AI: Seven Approaches for Students, with Prompts," *Social Science Research Network Electronic Journal*, September 23, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4475995>; Surely, LLMs are bound to become more accurate in terms of their factual reliability as the technology develops over time (similar to that of the crowdsourced online encyclopedia Wikipedia); however, preachers will always need to verify any information provided by AI—and herein lies one of the greatest risks for preachers who use them.

³³ Will Willimon, *Accidental Preacher: A Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 142; Willimon here cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's definition of preaching. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 101.

historical data. Surely, the resurrected Christ continues to inspire new and surprising words that preachers at first would not expect.³⁴

A second bias that influences LLM output is cultural bias. As Casey T. Sigmon notes, “Generative AI’s learning has mostly been centered on Western views and the English language,” leading to the increased likelihood of an LLM excluding non-Western perspectives in its output.³⁵ Even more troubling is the fact that—because they are trained using data publicly available on the internet—LLMs are capable of giving responses that contain “racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, homophobic, antisemitic, xenophobic, deceitful, derogatory, culturally insensitive, hostile, and other forms of adverse content.”³⁶ Having made this observation, Glenn Kleiman points out that although the companies who create and maintain these AI tools have made efforts to improve their algorithms’ ability to identify and eliminate harmful content from LLM responses, “the issues of who will decide what is acceptable in what contexts, what criteria will be used to filter information, and how solutions can be implemented while respecting freedom of expression, are far from solved.”³⁷ Most preachers are unlikely to come across such adverse content when prompting LLMs for homiletical purposes. Nevertheless, if they are to maximize both “cultural engagement and sermon relevance” in messages aided by LLMs, they must not allow despair or pride to prevent them from doing the patient work required to ascertain the biases that lie beneath any response that AI gives.³⁸

Although the temptation to the vices of despair or pride is never directly caused by an LLM (or any other tool, for that matter), the imagined scenarios and relevant considerations given above may resonate with preachers who have encountered similar temptations in their sermon writing—instances in which the use of AI would have the potential to foster impatience or to perpetuate harmful biases. Ultimately, a consideration of these homiletical pitfalls highlights the ever-present need for preachers to cultivate the virtue of patience for their own sake, as well as that of their hearers, especially in the digital age. Lee summarizes it well: “In the pursuit of our good end, patience governs our passionate responses to sorrow by protecting us from despair that would lead us to give up early and pride that would lead us to conclude prematurely.”³⁹

Caution and calls for deep, ongoing ethical reflection are essential when considering adopting AI tools in one’s ministry. Even so, the outright dismissal of LLMs for sermon development by some is not a viable option. As Catholic ethicist and theologian Paul Scherz argues, “Even if all [Christians] were to forgo AI, we would still live in a world shaped by it.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Andy Crouch contrasts AI’s bias toward providing answers we expect with the teaching ministry of Jesus. Of the more than 150 questions posed to Jesus in the four Gospels, he answers fewer than ten. See *Practicing the Way*, “Future of the Church,” 36:15.

³⁵ Casey T. Sigmon, *Engaging the Gadfly: Reflective Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Preaching in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2025), 140.

³⁶ Glenn Kleiman, “Teaching Students to Write with AI: The SPACE Framework,” Medium, January 5, 2023, accessed March 18, 2026, <https://medium.com/the-generator/teaching-students-to-write-with-ai-the-space-framework-fl0003ec48bc>.

³⁷ Kleiman, “Teaching Students.”

³⁸ Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 9.

³⁹ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 129.

⁴⁰ Scherz, “AI as Person,” 144; In his essay, Scherz identifies the weaknesses of several common moral lenses for determining the ethical use of AI tools and recommends “a new, more sophisticated instrumentalist approach.” Scherz, “AI as Person,” 142.

And as this article has posited, there *are* ethical uses of AI for homileticians—so long as they first identify the proper limitations of AI use in the development of their sermons. Thus, within the ethical constraints outlined above, the final section of this article aims to suggest several ways that preachers *may* use an LLM as a tool to accomplish or to enhance the cognitive, creative, and formative aspects of preaching. These suggestions are determined to avoid the vices of despair and pride while, at the same time, allowing for the cultivation of patience in both preachers and their congregations.

Proposed Uses for LLMs as a Tool for Sermon Development

Using LLMs for Cognitive Tasks

Large language models offer great potential for cognitive tasks. Outside of sermon development, LLMs and other AI tools may be used for less significant, “economically valuable” cognitive responsibilities within congregational ministry.⁴¹ These might include formatting documents or other printed communication, synchronizing calendars for the reservation of church facilities, compiling quarterly reports on financial contributions, or ordering office supplies at optimal intervals throughout the year. When it comes to the cognitive aspect of sermon craft, LLMs’ ability to summarize enormous swaths of data on the Bible in general or on commentators’ interpretations of a specific passage throughout history is one of the first ways that many preachers might consider implementing these tools. In order to avoid the atrophy of one’s critical thinking skills, however, preachers should view LLMs not as *authoritative resources for*, but rather as *supplementary assistants* in their research.⁴²

For example, if the sermon text is Gal 2:19–21, to offload the cognitive aspect of sermon research by prompting an LLM to conduct a full textual analysis of the passage, or to complete an assessment of its historical and literary contexts, or to select its most relevant pastoral application for modern hearers, all likely constitute unethical uses of the tool.⁴³ The preacher must “take the lead” of AI when it comes to the cognitive aspect of sermon research. This includes tasks like reading and contemplating the passage, studying and learning its literary context, engaging with relevant commentaries, and carefully considering which truth from the biblical text the congregation most needs to hear that Sunday. Within the ethical limitations suggested above, however, it would be permissible for the preacher to prompt the LLM to summarize the main positions of the *pistis Christou* debate (relevant to one’s interpretation of verse 20), to name the most prominent interpreters for each viewpoint and to provide links to books or articles where the preacher can engage what others have written, or (once the preacher has carried out the initial study independently) perhaps even to engage in spiritual reflection through a simulated conversation with the LLM—so long as these uses are not motivated by pride or despair and allow for the cultivation of patience within the preacher.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Practicing the Way, “Future of the Church,” 52:10.

⁴² In the field of education, Mollick and Mollick advocate for this practice of assigning various roles to LLMs for the task of learning (e.g., AI as tutor, coach, teammate, and simulator). See “Assigning AI,” 2; For preachers, prompting an LLM to serve as a research assistant (or simply engaging the AI with this mindset) is a simple way to ensure that it serves as an “ally of labor rather than an independent entity” in the process of sermon development. Scherz, “AI as Person,” 142.

⁴³ As Keefe writes, such a wide-open use of AI promises only to “short-circuit the relationship between the human and Holy Spirit.” “Where Is the Spirit?,” 143.

⁴⁴ A recent case study of college students’ engagement with Psalm 1 highlights the capabilities of LLMs to this end: “By offering a broad overview of biblical scholarship and presenting a range of interpretations, [LLMs] can potentially allow users to engage with the text more deeply.” Kenan Casey, Matthew Sokoloski, Loren Warf, and

Using LLMs for Creative Tasks

For many preachers, the discovery of the sermon's main idea is the largest homiletical hurdle to overcome each week. Ever-present is the fear of *not* "having something to say" come Sunday morning. Since breakthroughs are often elusive, the creative aspect of sermon development presents the greatest temptation toward a despairing use of AI. Many preachers may go so far as to discern that prompting an LLM to generate words for their sermons is never on the table, as the risks that this implementation poses (of shrinking one's creative capacities or undermining one's credibility with the congregation, to name only two), are far too great.⁴⁵

There are, however, ways to use LLMs in the creative aspect of preaching and broader congregational ministry that avoid such risks. Within well-discerned ethical constraints, preachers may use LLMs to spark, to synthesize, and to smooth their own creativity, rather than short-circuit it. Examples include prompting the AI in such a way that it will function as a more robust thesaurus (*Help me find a synonym for "promise" that starts with the letter V, but carries less emotional weight than "vow"*) or as a brainstorming assistant (*Suggest titles for a sermon series on the topic of wisdom, rooted in the book of Proverbs, and that begin with the word "at"*). Such uses of LLMs within the creative aspect of preaching may lead to more memorable sermon content that will "stick with" the preacher's hearers and help them in their discipleship to Jesus for a longer period of time.

AI tools can also aid in the creative work of writing sermons by scouring the internet for news stories that will help illustrate biblical truth. For example, a preacher might read Jesus's final image in the Sermon on the Mount of a house with its foundation built on sand crashing to the ground and wonder if any human structures have fallen for similar reasons in more recent times. They could then prompt an LLM: *Give me a real-world example of a building or system that passed inspections but later proved to be unstable*. Or if the sermon text is John 15:1–2, the preacher might wonder how modern viticultural practices compare to those in Jesus's day and ask the AI to find examples of how pruning leads to greater fruitfulness in modern farming, weaving the results into their message.⁴⁶ Preachers should not rely solely on AI to unearth modern illustrations, as the biblical text will always intersect with the local community and the preacher's own life; however, using LLMs to search online for rhetorically powerful stories of people from around the world (of which the preacher would not otherwise have become aware) is one way that AI can assist in making the text more relevant to or resonate more fully with the congregation.

Finally (but most tentatively), preachers may consider using AI to smooth a sermon outline or manuscript they have written. For example, they can upload their work and ask an LLM to proofread the document, suggesting revisions to its most important rhetorical parts (i.e., the introduction, transitions, and conclusion). They can ask the AI to identify any redundancy

Wesley Baker, "Even the Bots Cry Out: A Case Study on the Use of ChatGPT for Spiritual Reflection," *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 23. The authors of this study are not alone in cautioning users to verify independently any information that AI provides (see n. 32 above).

⁴⁵ Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, 140.

⁴⁶ Both of these examples go beyond the cognitive task of simply finding illustrations (which could be accomplished with a basic query into an internet search engine) because, in the context of an LLM chat thread, they ask the AI to function as the preacher's creative assistant. LLMs possess a greater capacity to fine-tune searches through simulated conversation, such that the resulting illustrations are better suited to the exegetical, theological, and pastoral contexts, as first determined by the preacher and then prompted into an LLM.

that could be cut from the message, putting the sermon's main point into greater focus, or they might ask it to recommend how they might deliver important points more memorably. Having an LLM serve as an objective "reader" of sermons may help preachers receive valid criticism that they might not receive as readily from a parishioner or ministry colleague. This role for AI in creative tasks may also present preachers with critiques that such individuals in their orbit might be less willing to give out of a desire to protect the preacher's self-esteem. Nevertheless, preachers should weigh the benefits and consequences of this particular use of generative AI carefully, as it toes the line of the ethical constraints outlined in this essay.⁴⁷

Using LLMs for Formative Ends

As stated above, the formative aspect of preaching is also its primary aim. In other words, the *telos* of all aspects of homiletics (the cognitive, the creative, and others not discussed here) and their specific tasks is the transformation of Jesus's disciples into His image. Thus, all of the tasks for which a preacher might implement AI tools are not only cognitive or creative in function, but also formative in their end. The following suggested uses, while creative and cognitive in their function (respectively), are more explicit in the formation they seek to accomplish.

One case in which preachers might consider using LLMs to cultivate the spiritual formation of their congregation is to submit a sermon outline or manuscript and prompt the AI to generate several small-group discussion questions based on its content. Many churches today have a ministry in which smaller groups from within the congregation gather regularly for more intimate fellowship, and providing group leaders with questions based on a recent sermon would empower such groups to engage in intentional conversations about their discipleship to Jesus. Some preachers may reject this use of AI because it seems disingenuous, opting always to write their own small group discussion questions; however, because this creative use of LLMs is both rooted in authentic preaching and implemented for the facilitation of organic spiritual conversation among human beings, it falls within the ethical constraints laid out in this essay.

A final suggested use concerns the preacher's own formation in the process of developing their sermons. The preacher John Stott is said to have coined the adage that each minute of preaching requires an hour of preparation. However, in the modern Western church, where the professionalization of ministry has led many lay churchgoers to offload their service to those employed by their congregation, such ample time to research and write seems impossible.⁴⁸ Add to that pressure the many distractions of ministry in the digital age, and it is no wonder that many preachers experience significant despair in writing their sermons, unable to establish healthy study rhythms that would provide them with the time to craft sermons with homiletical patience. One way that LLMs can enhance the preacher's life of study and alleviate the burden of despair

⁴⁷ Additionally, at their current stage of development, LLMs do not match the level of creativity of human beings working together, and once individuals have interacted with GPTs for some time, it becomes possible to identify whether something was written by AI. As Ethan Mollick observes, "AI tends to act like a single creative person with predictable patterns. You'll see the same themes over and over... Thus, there is a paradox: while AI is more creative than most individuals, it lacks the diversity that comes from multiple perspectives." See Ethan Mollick, "'Against Brain Damage': AI Can Help, or Hurt, Our Thinking," *One Useful Thing*, July 7, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/against-brain-damage>.

⁴⁸ Although he rejects the use of AI tools for preaching, East acknowledges that sometimes these heavy expectations are placed on preachers by the elders in their churches, precipitating the stressful circumstances in which the despairing use of LLMs becomes an attractive way out. He writes, "Elders, give your pastors the time needed to study and serve the church in all their fallibility and finitude. Such limits cannot and should not be overcome." see East, "AI Has No Place."

is by helping create a weekly schedule that encourages healthy rhythms of Bible reading and prayer, research and reflection on the week's text, pastoral discernment, and writing their sermons. Preachers could prompt the AI with all their regular commitments and responsibilities, and, in a simulated "conversation" with an LLM, work through each day of the week to establish a plan for making time to encounter God and patiently to wait for the inspiring work of the Spirit on their hearts.

Conclusion

This article set out to help preachers determine the ethical limitations and potential opportunities for using LLMs in their sermon development, as well as to suggest specific ways that preachers might implement these AI tools in pulpit ministry. Here at the article's end, it is crucial that the reader recall the importance of homiletical patience, a conscious pursuit that helps to "break the spell" cast by AI. The process by which preachers develop every sermon—from the reading of and research on the biblical text, to the Spirit's inspiration of its main idea, to the composition of its words, to its delivery before the congregation—is not an exercise in enchanting the congregation with the "magic" of human technological development. Rather, the word of God is preached in order to proclaim the long-anticipated miracle of Jesus's birth, the patient ministry of his life, the long-suffering of his death—and the ongoing hope of those who await his return, rooted in the reality of his resurrection. May all preachers who choose to implement LLMs in the cognitive, creative, and formative aspects of their ministries do so with the kind of homiletical patience that honors and proclaims this message.

For Further Reading

Crouch, Andy. *The Life We're Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World*. New York: Convergent Books, 2022.

Crouch, Daniel. "Artificial Assistance, Spiritual Impediment: AI Chatbots and the Risk to Human Flourishing." *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 39–48.

East, Brad. "AI Has No Place in the Pulpit." *Christianity Today*, September 27, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/09/ai-has-no-place-in-pulpit-chatgpt-llm-openai-preaching-past/>.

Keefe, Rachael A. "Where is the Spirit? Reflections on Engaging AI in Sermon Preparation." *Interpretation* vol. 79, no. 2 (2025): 136–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00209643241308587>.

Lee, Mason. *Learning to Speak of God: Patience as a Homiletical Virtue*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023.

Sigmon, Casey T. *Engaging the Gadfly: Reflective Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Preaching in a Digital Age*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2025.

Stanglin, Keith D. "AI in Congregational Ministry: Human Nature and the Significance of Process and Product." *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 83–95.

Abraham Kuruvilla. *Psalms 1–44: A Theological Commentary for Preachers*. Cascade, 2024. 342 pages. \$34.

This work is one of three volumes Abraham Kuruvilla has written on the Psalms (the others are divided as *Psalms 45–100* and *Psalms 101–150*). This work adds to the lineup of his *Theological Commentaries for Preachers* series published with Cascade, which includes titles such as *Genesis*, *Judges*, and *Ephesians*. These commentaries demonstrate and apply the hermeneutical and homiletical methods Kuruvilla articulates in earlier works. Those unfamiliar with his homiletical oeuvre may consult *Privilege the Text!* (Moody, 2013), *A Manual for Preaching* (Baker, 2019), or his essay “Christiconic View” in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Baker, 2018).

In the introduction, he describes a Christiconic homiletic. Kuruvilla claims that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills not simply *Scripture*, but *every pericope* of Scripture. The theology of each pericope, therefore, projects “what it means to be more like Christ” (2). He writes that “the goal of preaching is to bring to bear divine guidelines for life from the biblical text upon the situations of the congregation, to align the community of God to the will of God for the glory of God” (1). Thus, “pericopal theology tells us *what* Christ looks like” and “application in sermons directs us to *how* we can look more like him” (3; emphasis original). This is the function of preaching, which shapes Kuruvilla’s reading of Scripture and is on display throughout this volume.

Kuruvilla treats each psalm (except Psalms 42–43) in its own chapter. Following a brief introductory comment, the author offers his own translation of the Masoretic Text. He then presents a table illustrating the psalm’s structure, followed by a statement of the psalm’s “Theological Focus” to help readers synthesize and grasp what the psalm says about God and the people of God. The bulk of each chapter is the “Commentary” section, where the author guides readers through the text. Such analysis is a strength of the book, and much space is devoted to discussing the meaning of words and syntax. Each chapter concludes with a sermon map, which offers a preachable outline based on the psalm.

The primary merits of the commentary include its study of the text and language. Also, the book is easy to read, and the divisions and tables make it accessible, something especially of value for introductory readers. The book can be set within an evangelical context and may be best appreciated by evangelical readers. Such a context is where Kuruvilla has done the majority of his teaching—he taught at Dallas Theological Seminary and now teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The perspectives of the work often assume evangelical understandings of the text. Readers outside this tradition will benefit from the work but may feel frustrated by questions unasked and angles unexplored.

In the preface, Kuruvilla shares that he wrote this book because he “recognized that my homiletics students needed help of a kind hard to find in standard commentaries on the Psalms” (ix). Such an impulse can be commended: to serve students and those who endeavor to proclaim the word. Yet I found it curious that he rarely interacts with texts in homiletics. The primary exceptions are his own works and a smattering of historical voices (e.g., Augustine, Jerome, Spurgeon). The work would have been greatly improved by engagement with homiletical scholarship on the Psalms, such as Dave Bland and David Fleer’s *Performing the Psalms* (2005), Ellen Davis’s *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament* (2005), James L. Mays’s *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (2006), or J. Clinton McCann and James Howell’s classic edited volume, *Preaching the Psalms* (2001). Many other resources could be added to this list,

including essays and, of course, commentaries. This is not to say that the work is poorly researched, only that for a commentary “for preachers,” the failure to engage (or even to mention) other homiletical works on the Psalms appears to be a glaring omission.

Many readers will appreciate this work, especially those in evangelical contexts and those who are favorably disposed toward Kuruvilla’s hermeneutical and homiletical methods. It contributes to the library of resources to which Christian preachers may turn for help in preaching the Psalms. Such scholarship is to be commended, since Christians and congregations need—now, as ever—the grammar of faith that the Psalms provide.

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Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby. *The Suffering of Job and an Enfleshed Homiletic: Bearing the Body's Witness*. Library of Homiletics. T&T Clark, 2025. 240 pages. \$108.00.

"Though wounded bodies surround preaching, preaching is seldom reconceived through the experiences and wounds of others" (3). The force of this book lies in its refusal to move too quickly away from this claim. Drawn from the author's own encounter with suffering bodies, this study exposes the limits of theological discourse that continues to explain suffering while remaining insufficiently answerable to its embodied reality. In that sense, *The Suffering of Job and an Enfleshed Homiletic* stands within a wider practical-theological concern that theodicy can concentrate on explaining suffering while leaving the suffering body unseen and unheard.¹ McLaughlin-Sheasby takes up that concern within homiletics by treating bodily pain as a theological reality and by developing an enfleshed homiletic attentive to the witness of wounded lives.

The first chapter reads Job not mainly as a theodicy text but as a crisis of theological discourse, arguing that a primary concern of the book is "God-talk in the presence of another's wounds" (13). This is a significant move for homiletics, since it shifts attention away from abstract explanations of suffering and toward the ethical problem of theological speech that refuses revision. McLaughlin-Sheasby's discussion of reception history is also important, showing how the anguished Job of the poetic dialogues has often been overshadowed by the more familiar image of a worshipful Job and the "patience of Job" (49–50). The chapter thus presents Job as a canonical challenge to theological speech that fails to reckon truthfully with suffering.

The second chapter turns from Job's speech to Job's body, treating the suffering body not as the background to theological debate but as what unsettles it. McLaughlin-Sheasby shows that Job uses the faculties of his body to test wisdom and God-talk (59). The chapter argues that bodies do not simply receive preaching after the fact. Bodies shape theology, exist in interdependence with others, and belong to the very conditions in which theological speech takes form.

The third chapter develops bearing witness as an ethical practice rather than a merely affective posture. McLaughlin-Sheasby clarifies the relation between witness and testimony by arguing that testimony bids others to join the original witness and to co-bear the truth of another's life. In that sense, preachers may become fellow witnesses, or false witnesses who reject or discredit another's truth (128).

The fourth chapter treats suffering, radical suffering, and trauma as related but not interchangeable terms, pressing for greater precision where wounds evade direct contact and explanation (138). Trauma, in this account, resists neat narration, which means that preaching in its presence cannot proceed by easy theological closure. Particularly compelling is the chapter's emphasis on the fragmentary nature of traumatic testimony and the responsibility of the witness to attend to suffering with patience, openness, and care (146).

The fifth chapter widens the argument by asking how preaching contexts and practices must be re-examined in light of suffering, testimony, and embodiment. Through the metaphor of the "theological landscape," McLaughlin-Sheasby turns to the life, terrain, and relations that shape a community's theological imagination (166–67). The chapter also presses toward self-examination, urging preachers to reckon with the ways they approach suffering and to release

¹ Eilidh Galbraith, "Doing Practical Theology 'from the Place Where It Hurts': The Significance of Trauma Theology in Renewing a Practical Theology of Suffering," *Practical Theology* 17, no. 1 (2024): 69–81.

theologies that cannot endure another's wounds. At the same time, it expands homiletical horizons beyond the pulpit and beyond the congregation, toward an enfleshed gospel pressed and shaped by the testimonies of those who surround the preaching event (197).

What is striking about the book is the way it binds biblical interpretation, theological epistemology, ethics, and preaching practice together without reducing any one of them to the others. As McLaughlin-Sheasby states from the outset, this is a book about the implications of bodies for preaching, especially bodies marked by the memories, scars, and open wounds of radical or traumatic suffering (3). An enfleshed homiletic finally asks preachers to dwell within the instability that suffering brings to theological discourse. It affirms the provisionality of theological speech, the interdependence of bodies in community, and the irreducible weight of human experience for theological imagination (4). McLaughlin-Sheasby leaves preachers with an invitation to remain with wounded lives in the reality of their pain, and there to allow theological discourse itself to be shaken and reshaped.

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Gregory Heille, Maurice J. Nutt, and Deborah L. Wilhelm, eds. *Preaching Racial Justice*. Orbis, 2023. 240 pages. \$30.

As a concise three-part edited volume, *Preaching Racial Justice* provides communication strategies for preachers to effectively engage with congregations on issues of race as an uneasy topic. Part I, entitled “The Preacher’s Journey,” integrates a wide range of practical theological themes including, expanding popular understandings of sin as more than personal transgressions, institutional racism, misogyny, and structural harms against targeted populations. Part II, entitled “Black Lives Matter,” introduces the concept of a “culture of racism” and its broader implications. Such implications have historically resulted in traumatic experiences like subjection to exclusion, over-policing, and subordination in everyday life based on ascribed characteristics. Throughout the latter years of his academic career, W.E.B. Du Bois expressed doubt in America as willing to address race on an honest level; however, the contributors of this book dare to prove him wrong. The common starting place for contributors entails recognizing the difficulty the preachers face in convincing deniers of the existence and severity of systemic racism. The contents of this book function as a call for preachers to become willing to take risks while in the pulpit by defying the confines of social pressure to evade topics that potentially make congregants uncomfortable. As a unique feature of the book, Part III (“Ancestors and Stories”) draws from sources of wisdom beyond the academy using varied genres. Chapter 13, entitled “Dismantling the Ecclesial Legacy of Colonial Attitudes” by A. Anita Vincent, deserves special attention. Such a chapter focuses on the effects of colonization on one’s thinking and the need to relearn scripture as prerequisite for preaching on themes of racial justice.

Most of the contributors come from the Roman Catholic Church with the remainder representing mainline Protestant traditions. Their writing reflects their background as theologically and ideologically progressive and socially tolerant. As such, the intended audience primarily includes like-minded clergy and seminarians. Conservative evangelical Protestants would less likely find the book appealing due to prolonged polarization in America making it improbable to find common ground in the applicability of the book’s content.

Part of the book’s strength lies in Stewart Clem’s explanation of how antiracist preaching has a strong connection to the Christian gospel. This connection extends beyond the utterance of words, requiring human solidarity while on a collective trajectory of life in Christ. (See Chapter 2: “Sin, Solidarity, and the Human Condition”.) Antiracist preaching draws from a combination of sources including scholars and the real experiences of people. The author of this chapter advises against cliché-filled speech and secular discourse, which tend to nullify the work of the preaching itself. Antiracist preaching equates racism as evil through language and convincing rhetoric. “At a more general level, the language of sin and solidarity can help people more clearly see the relationship between their lives and the problems confronting today’s world” (Clem, 30).

The book’s contributors meet the aim of providing an overview of the theological mandates and challenges that come with preaching the life, spiritual disciplines, and diligence of those who dare to proclaim racial justice beyond surface-level “race talk.” In addition to *Preaching Racial Justice*, preachers and lay speakers would benefit from building their “exegetical tool chest” by becoming diligent observers of the text using as many senses as possible, before engaging in the interpretation process. An additional suggestion includes becoming acquainted with the hegemonic hermeneutic that comes with the historical-critical method as discovered by African American biblical scholars within the last four decades. The

book's contributors discourage occasional preaching on the topic of race but embrace the idea of countering racism as part of one's regular homiletical objective.

Although *Preaching Racial Justice* reflects exemplary scholarship from academics and professionals with a keen understanding of "systemic racism" and expertise in public proclamation, the book does not negate the difficulty in challenging fixed assumptions in a preacher's "working gospel" that sees the world as just and racism as a relic from the past. When a preacher's "working gospel" denies the idea of a wounded world, then such persons become complicit with using ecclesial and pastoral authority to further support an unjust order that causes spiritual and existential harm to marginal groups (see Peter D. Hill in Chapter 5). "Ultimately, preaching to the wounded world is all about preaching hope. Racism steals hope from people" (Hill, 105). After carefully studying this book, the reader will either accept or reject its content. For those who do accept, the book can impact one's hermeneutical grid while stirring individuals from the broadness of over-spiritualizing racism by dealing with the specifics in concrete terms.

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John S. McClure and Allie Utley, eds. *Learning Together to Preach: How to Become an Effective Preaching Coach*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023. 222 pages. \$29.00.

Learning Together to Preach begins from a shared conviction that preachers seldom experience ongoing mentoring or coaching after seminary, even when conferences, lectionary study groups, and ad hoc sermon feedback remain available to them (1). In response, the volume presents collaborative homiletical peer-coaching as a form of collaborative mentoring in which preachers enter a shared process of discernment, learn from each other, and mentor one another into deeper forms of preaching (2). John McClure describes the book as written both for readers interested in homiletical pedagogy and for those who want to see how peer-coaching works in practice and whether it might serve their own contexts (4). Collaborative peer-coaching emerges here as a shared practice of formation, accountability, and mutual learning.

Part One develops collaborative peer-coaching through eight dimensions. McClure's chapter is especially important because it locates coaching within the longer work of formation by way of three models: Preacher Formation, Sermon Formation, and Individual Peer-coaching (23–24). In this sense, preaching is learned through sustained reflection on lived experience, practice, and learning goals rather than through occasional correction from outside (38). Geoffrey Schoonmaker's chapter on parallel-learning shows that participants do not remain in a single role. They learn as presenting preachers, as peer-coaches, and as lead coaches, so that the work of coaching itself becomes part of homiletical formation (76).

Part One also shows that collaborative peer-coaching cannot be reduced to any single dimension of preaching. In these chapters, communication, embodiment, and moral formation appear as integral dimensions of the practice. Marianne Gaarden presents communication as a disciplined practice within peer-coaching, one that some participants experience as less intimidating than directive teaching, while others find it restrictive and artificial (72). Lisa Thompson treats embodiment as part of coaching itself, understanding the body as more than a vessel and as a conduit of meaning-making in both preaching and its reception (106). Amy Steele locates moral formation within peer-coaching, showing that it must reckon with liberation, Whiteness, racism, sexism, nationalism, and anti-Judaism as forces that shape preaching and its communities (118–19).

Part One does not leave collaborative peer-coaching at the level of communication, embodiment, and moral formation. The remaining chapters suggest that the practice also requires spiritual discernment, the supervision of coaches, and analytic attentiveness to sermon language. Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm attends to the preacher's search for God's presence in preaching and in the life of the group (39); Ann Deibert to the structures of accountability that sustain the work of supervision (92–93); and John McClure to the scriptural, semantic, theosymbolic, and cultural dimensions through which sermons may be read more closely (132–33).

Part Two shows collaborative peer-coaching in practice across five settings—M.Div. education, denominational peer-learning, intensive or retreat contexts, seminary-based continuing education, and non-traditional preacher training—but the chapters do more than demonstrate contextual flexibility. These chapters show how the values and practices named earlier in the book are tested, adapted, and embodied in actual communities of preaching. Again and again, peer-coaching appears not as the delivery of expert answers but as a form of mutual learning marked by listening, questioning, reflection, and support. Allie Utley argues that, in the classroom, this can make preaching feedback more “generative and gentle” without removing its demands (151–52). Carolyn Coleman's denominational case study suggests that the process can

lessen competition and renew confidence in one's calling (170). Monica Hall's intensive setting clarifies the model's ethos in especially concise terms: "The peer group learns to ask questions—not provide answers" (172). Katie Shaw Thompson brings seminary-based continuing education into the discussion, placing collaborative peer-coaching within an institutional setting (183), and Kelley Hudlow shows how such groups can function as a "network of support" that helps "combat that isolation" in non-traditional settings (198–99). Part Two shows that collaborative peer-coaching is sustained not by a single program or technique, but by practices of mutual learning that can take shape across very different settings.

This book is worth recommending not because it offers a transferable formula, but because it opens a demanding and hopeful vision of how preachers might continue to be formed. Its invitation is to risk forms of shared attention through which preaching itself may become more answerable, reflective, and alive.

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Leah D. Schade. *Preaching and Social Issues: Tools and Tactics for Empowering Your Prophetic Voice*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2025. 260 pages. \$25.00

In her latest book, *Preaching and Social Issues: Tools and Tactics for Empowering Your Prophetic Voice*, Leah D. Schade offers thoughtful, pastoral guidance and helpful strategies for addressing social issues through prophetic proclamation. Throughout the book, Schade argues "...that preachers have a moral, ethical, and vocational..." responsibility to address social issues in a way that is grounded biblically, theologically, and ethically in our identity as the "people of God" and moves worshipping communities towards clearer discernment about how they might live into that identity when it comes to the social concerns of our time. *Preaching and Social Issues* is about prophetic proclamation that brings contemporary social issues into conversation with the biblical text in community (2–3). Throughout the book, Schade effectively argues that preaching is fundamentally formative and that formation happens best within the context of community dialogue.

Steeped in contemporary research and theory, *Preaching and Social Issues* is not just for students and preaching professors. It is for all of those who engage weekly in the task of preaching. The book is written for preachers who are looking for strategies to faithfully address "hot button" issues in their contexts. Schade's model builds on the preacher's understanding of themselves and their congregation. It then explores ways, with the congregation, to put those understandings in conversation with the Bible, theology, and social ethics, with the goal of embodying a more faithful Christian witness. Schade's model is interdisciplinary in its approach and weaves together insights from a myriad of fields and disciplines.

The book is organized into eleven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the text and outlines the book. Chapter 2 is a data-informed assessment of the challenges that come with prophetic proclamation about social issues. Chapters 3 and 4 offer valuable tools and paths to prophetic proclamation that allow the preacher to assess their context and then adapt their approach to an issue based on their assessment. Chapter 5 explores the basic moral and ethical foundations that ground the practice of prophetic preaching. Chapter 6 engages current scholarship in the field of homiletics in search of contemporary frameworks for preaching about social issues that reflect a prophetic witness. Chapter 7 traces the outlines for ethical frameworks for prophetically preaching about social issues and suggest homiletical "Conversation Partners" that the preacher might engage while crafting their sermon. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 apply Schade's model to different social issues. They offer sermon examples and case studies that demonstrate an application of Schade's methods and approaches. The book concludes with straightforward but nuanced guidance for preachers who want to engage social issues from the pulpit, with particular attention given to managing the conflict and pushback that may arise as a result of doing so.

Given the current political and social climates and the theological, political, cultural, and social diversity that exists in most congregations, this book has much to offer. *Preaching and Social Issues* suggests a model for proclamation that is unapologetically socially conscious and prophetic while at the same time lovingly pastoral. The model of proclamation Schade suggests centers the Christian values of love, radical grace, and community. It attends to the need in diverse congregations for the kind of deep listening and conversational/dialogical engagement that builds community and trust and, ultimately, strengthens Christian witness in the world.

Preaching and Social Issues is also very practical. Though grounded in relevant theory and contemporary research, the book quickly moves to application, suggesting ways in which Schade's model might be implemented and how to do it. It offers step-by-step instructions and

includes best practices gleaned from real-life examples in which the model has been used by real people serving in real congregations. Lastly, the book identifies many of the potential consequences that may attend prophetic proclamation in diverse congregations and offers wisdom on how the preacher might best mitigate and/or manage them in a way that maintains the values of love, respect, and community and honors the humanity and dignity of everyone involved when disagreement arises.

Already a strong text, the book would be even stronger if it included more case studies that centered a greater diversity of preachers prophetically preaching about controversial social concerns in their own contexts. For example, the book includes an insightful case study about a continental-African pastor who addressed a controversial issue in their home context in Cameroon. More case studies like this would thicken the already rich discourse in the book and should perhaps be a consideration for future researchers seeking to build on the work that Schade begins in *Preaching and Social Issues*.

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Sunggu A. Yang, ed. *Arts and Preaching: A Handbook for Practice*. Volume 1. Cascade Books, 2025. 120 pages. \$24.00.

Arts and Preaching: A Handbook for Practice, Volume 1 is an innovative work that explores the intersectionality of preaching and art in a sensory-rich and interactive age. Editor Sunggu A. Yang analyzes the crossroads of sermons in conjunction with painting, architecture, fashion, film, and theater. Through this work, the contributors seek to fulfill a two-fold need within local ministries: “[1] The dynamic spiritual formation of the preacher, and [2] a holistic-aesthetic and multisensory exposition and engagement with Holy Scripture by both the preacher and the congregation” (xi).

The book makes a revolutionary contribution to discourse related to preaching and art by pursuing a “reawakening of appreciation for mysterium,” engaging a spiritual and artistic collaboration with the divine (x). As noted in the Prologue, “Art can bring the abstract concept of the divine into the tangible realm, stimulating our senses and connecting with us on a primal level” (x). Chapter 1 builds on this premise, initiating a starting point for preaching to align with painting and cubism.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the importance of collaboration in architecture and preaching. Architecture occupies space through storytelling and aesthetics. Such collaboration suggests that the preacher function as a *type* of architect. Preachers will find new meaning in sermon development and spiritual formation when they embrace the beauty of architectural communication. It involves the preacher alongside “the basics of architecture,” including form, space, interaction with the environment, structure, and materiality. This idea of aesthetic wonder employs a variety of mediums that embody an architectural hermeneutic for preaching.

Chapter 3 expands on the importance of the sermon and the use of fashion. Eliana Ah-Rum Ku writes, “Preaching can be enhanced by scrutinizing how fashion generates and conveys messages, interacts with audiences, innovates through reflection on the spirit of the times, and influences social environment” (82). This chapter empowers preachers to pursue “fashionista preaching.” In fashion, the designers seek to express their work aesthetically. In like manner, fashionista preaching propels preachers to engage in creative and imaginative trustworthy communication.

Chapter 4 provokes the preacher to envision the sermon as a director would a film. This means of creativity provides an opportunity for the sermon to follow the moves and interactions of the Holy Spirit in film. This creativity expands and stretches the preacher to enhance their methods of storytelling and exegesis. Chris Murphy suggests, “As a pastor, I am not trying to compete with popular culture and film, but I am trying to stay current to how people are shaped spiritually” (59). Following Murphy’s train of thought, films awaken the listener and the preacher to the transcendent presence of the Spirit in preaching.

Lastly, Chapter 5 envisions theater as an avenue by which the Spirit draws humanity together. Rob O’Lynn suggest that “Preaching is where we enter the beautifully creative theater of salvation (78).” Here, the sermon becomes a narration—preaching laced with storytelling as scenes and dialogue. Scenes are eventually broken in “beats.” This challenges the preacher to develop “dramaturgical episodic plots.” Episodic plots both hook the listener’s attention and guide the sermon to a final resolution.

Chapter 5 expounds on the understanding of sermons as “scenes.” Scenes are reminiscent of the Black preaching tradition when reading O’Lynn’s writing. Black preaching is filled with

rich storytelling, narration, and dialogue. Black sermons are enriched with metanarratives that tell the story of biblical passages. Episodic plot takes it a step further. O'Lynn challenges the preacher to diverge from thinking narratively to processing episodically.

Overall, *Arts and Preaching* is a necessary resource for those interested in the intersectionality of homiletics and art. The writers offer innovative alternatives and perspectives on sermonic development, preaching, and spiritual formation through the Gospel and art. As noted on the back cover, the handbook “serves as a catalyst for enhancing public worship and fostering a deeper congregational life through the arts.” Each chapter outlines a different sermon-planning worksheet, sermon preparation example, and sample sermon. This work is essential for pastors, preachers, and scholars who seek to widen their preaching with artistic vibrancy and holistic multisensory engagement.

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David W. Peters. *Post-Traumatic Jesus: A Healing Gospel for the Wounded*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. 151 pages. \$19.00.

In *Post-Traumatic Jesus: A Healing Gospel for the Wounded*, David W. Peters—an Episcopal priest, former Army chaplain, and author of *Post-Traumatic God: How the Church Cares for People Who Have Been to Hell and Back*¹—offers a pastoral and theologically sensitive reading of the Gospels through a post-traumatic lens. The book is written for those whose lives bear wounds of violence, moral injury, or abandonment, as well as for the pastors, chaplains, and caregivers who companion them. This purpose is evident in the discussion guide, which advises that “individuals with PTSD, C-PTSD, or other extreme trauma experiences should study this book in a group with other traumatized people” (145), clarifying that trauma requires communities of shared understanding.

Across thirty concise chapters, Peters reframes familiar Gospel narratives by attending to fear, betrayal, hypervigilance, and embodied memory. Early in the book, he interprets the nativity not as a sentimental origin story but as a narrative unfolding under imperial pressure—Mary’s vulnerability, Joseph’s anxiety, and the Holy Family’s flight becoming markers of a world already shaped by violence. A later chapter reads the Beatitudes as “a trauma manifesto” (41), dignifying those whose lives have been unraveled by grief or oppression. These chapters establish the interpretive posture that governs the whole work: scripture becomes newly intelligible when approached from the underside of human experience. This reality resonates in communities where trauma is increasingly shared, whether through war, pandemic loss, or ordinary forms of human fracture.

Several chapters demonstrate Peters’s interdisciplinary method with particular clarity. In “Healing the Traumatized Daughter,” he weaves trauma theory, Roman political violence, and the Syrophoenician woman’s persistence to illuminate trauma-born agency. Jesus’s affirmation, “great is your faith” (Matt 15:28), becomes, for Peters, an invitation to recognize the fierce forms of trust that emerge in the aftermath of injury. In “Hypervigilance,” he distinguishes the vigilance Jesus commands (“keep awake”) from the debilitating hypervigilance associated with PTSD. Drawing on Elaine Hilberman’s clinical descriptions and his own pastoral encounters, Peters shows how numbing, avoidance, and exaggerated fear responses shape the disciples’ lives after the resurrection.

One of the book’s most theologically demanding chapters is “Post-Traumatic Judas.” Peters rejects reducing Judas’s betrayal to psychological dysfunction. “Judas is not ill,” he argues. “If he were, Jesus would have healed him” (108). The starkness of the claim underscores that not all trauma arises from misfortune; some wounds are inflicted through deliberate betrayal by those we trusted. However, Peters’s imagination remains pastoral: he envisions Christ descending into hell on Holy Saturday to seek his friend, illuminating the book’s central christological insight—that no depth of despair lies outside the reach of the crucified and risen Jesus.

The most arresting material appears in “Post-Traumatic Witness,” where Peters admits that he identifies not with the disciples but with the soldiers who crucified Jesus. By locating himself within the very structures of violence he once served rather than alongside the faithful followers of Christ, Peters models the moral clarity and vulnerability he hopes readers will cultivate. The soldiers’ confession at the cross becomes the paradigm of Christian witness: seeing

¹ David W. Peters, *Post-Traumatic God: How the Church Cares for People Who Have Been to Hell and Back* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016).

truthfully what has been done and whom it has harmed. This recognition becomes the ground for forgiveness, community, and renewed life.

The book concludes with “Post-Traumatic Resurrection,” a chapter of considerable theological elegance. Peters describes the risen Christ as one who inhabits transformed life with wounds still visible—“his calling card is his wounds, his trauma” (144). Resurrection does not erase trauma; it reframes it within a horizon of presence, recognition, and hope. The risen Jesus meets his disciples gradually, gently, and bodily, offering safety in proportion to their capacity to receive it.

The seventeen discussion questions at the end of the book are among its strengths. Several draw from DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition) categories, inviting readers to name triggers, patterns of avoidance, or moral injury; others ask them to locate themselves within Gospel narratives. These questions confirm that the book is designed not merely for reflection but for guided communal healing.

Taken together with *Post-Traumatic God*, this volume reads as the second movement in an emerging theological project attentive to trauma across the life of the Triune God. While Peters does not announce a trilogy, his sustained focus on consolation and communal healing gestures toward a pneumatological horizon that invites further exploration.

Peters ultimately succeeds in offering a healing gospel for wounded readers. Though contemporary clinical language sometimes overshadows historical nuance, the book’s pastoral sensitivity, interdisciplinary imagination, and deep honesty make it a valuable resource for preachers, chaplains, and scholars interpreting the Gospels in a world where trauma shapes both personal and collective life.

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David M. Stark. *Preaching That Confronts Confederate Monuments: Religion, Anti-Racism and United States Politics*. Library of Homiletics 2. London and New York: T&T Clark, 2025. 200 pages. \$120.00.

Discussions over the removal of Confederate war monuments are politically and socially complex in the present U.S. context. Not everyone experiences the monuments in the same manner, nor is there common agreement over what Confederate war monuments represent. David M. Stark speaks into this dissonance, convincingly arguing that Confederate monuments preach a distorted gospel and require counter-preaching. Stark's *Preaching That Confronts Confederate Monuments* provides the historical and homiletical direction for proclaiming a gospel that helps respond to the distorted memory and values of Confederate monuments. Stark sees "preaching that confronts Confederate monuments" as "an essential tool for anti-racist work in the United States" (10). Preachers ought to provide a counter-message to Confederate monuments, because otherwise the damaging messages of the monuments prevail.

In the introduction, Stark demonstrates how the messages of the monuments not only misconstrue the past but also shape the present and the future in destructive ways, particularly for those outside of places of power. He calls for more than simply removing the monuments, as removal without deeper interrogation of the systems which created the monuments is insufficient. Removal without critical accountability is akin to covering up the systemic and institutionalized violence and racism they represent. Yet, "When interrogated with a critical and anti-racist perspective, Confederate monuments can provide vital information about the particular anti-racist work that is needed within a local community" (11). Chapter two deepens the argument that Confederate monuments proclaim a gospel of whiteness and promote the values of whiteness. Historical details surrounding the Lost Cause show these monuments as value-laden, steeped in whiteness, and skewing eschatology. The chapter contains descriptions and reflections on two sermons preached in conversation with Confederate monuments, followed by concrete questions and take-aways.

The third chapter examines Confederate monument dedication speeches, especially how these speeches misrepresent the past in relation to the present. Dedication speeches help contemporary listeners understand many of the intents behind those who placed the monument. Many speeches clearly articulate a theology steeped in whiteness which do more than remember historical events. Chapters four and five are case studies of the Silent Sam and Robert E. Lee monuments. These chapters begin with discussions of the dedication speeches and move to counter-proclamation before finishing with insights for preachers. While readers will learn much about these two particular monuments and counter-movements around them, preachers can also learn how to preach on monuments closer to their context with critical engagement. Chapter six engages several naming commissions, including their processes and outcomes. The chapter provides a brief history on naming commissions and includes a discussion of several naming commissions from higher education institutions. Stark describes how various stakeholders experienced and responded to naming commissions. Chapter seven foregrounds decoloniality and students' experiences preaching after visiting The Legacy Museum. Identity and place are prevalent themes in the chapter and the exemplar sermon.

Throughout the book, Stark draws from wells of liberating sources like critical race theory, womanist theology, postcolonial theology, and queer theory to challenge whiteness. While these provide theoretical rigor and prompt theological reflection, I found these intersectional sources especially helpful for deepening the conversation on value laden

monuments. The work is an exemplar for practical theology and homiletics on engaging particular contexts and situational factors.

In addition to providing a convincing argument for why counter-preaching is necessary, Stark offers preachers important direction for how to engage in a process of coming to terms with the presence of Confederate monuments and dominating ideologies. By taking readers through a theological process of interpreting monuments and their function, Stark models how to engage parishioners in a like process sermonically. The discussion of naming commissions may be particularly helpful for preachers to think through how preaching on Confederate monuments might lead to conflict and disagreement among congregational members. Stark offers readers better understandings of the roots of Confederate monuments which should allow preachers to enter the conversation with greater nuance and to engage in good faith conversations. Stark's careful analysis of how place and the past preach, and impact present preaching, is especially needed and profound.

Stark's writing is bold and inspiring without belittling opposing viewpoints. It is accessible to those unfamiliar with his source materials and will deepen understandings of those who have personally or professionally been following national or local debates over Confederate monuments. This is a book for all preachers and for everyone who studies preaching. Even if a church is not located near a monument, Stark reveals that every pulpit in America has a stake in countering the anti-gospel message of Confederate monuments.

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Lisa Washington Lamb. *Resonate: How to Preach for Deep Connection*. Cascade Books, 2022. 162 pages, \$23.00.

“We need to hear timeless truth articulated in fresh, timely ways that resonate with the unique struggles and opportunities we face as individuals, churches, and members of our communities,” argues Lisa Washington Lamb, an ordained Presbyterian minister with faculty affiliation at Fuller Theological School in California and St. Paul’s Theological College in Malaysia (35). Lamb begins her book by acknowledging the changing faith landscape. She argues that those who preach—whether in pulpits or other leadership contexts—must learn to deliver sermons that resonate and connect more deeply with their congregations. Lamb has listened to thousands of sermons and contends that the best way to do this is through the use of verbs. Why verbs? According to Lamb:

Sermons do not just want to look pretty on a page or be doctrinally precise; they want to *do* something—to catalyze transformation. Verbs are literally where the action is, and how we use, neglect, or misuse them reveals our theology, heart, and capacity to be present with our listeners” (xviii).

Lamb rightly recognizes the need for a refresher on verbs, including how they function, and the formal terminology used to describe them. She presents eleven verbal forms, noting nuances in how other languages use verbs. Then she advances her argument through nine well-organized chapters, each beginning with a quote and story related to the topic, followed by a deeper explanation of the verbal form and illustrations. She closes each chapter with two reflective tasks: “Ask This,” a set of questions inviting preachers to examine their own lives and ministries, and “Try This,” a set of practices that help them experiment with action-oriented language.

Lamb does not insist that readers move through the chapters in a fixed order. Nevertheless, each chapter introduces more complex verb forms and preacher roles, shifting the emphasis from the preacher’s personal formation toward the congregation and wider community. Chapter one focuses on “Preacher as Witness and Host: The Power of First-Person Speech” followed by chapter two “Preacher as Shepherd: The Promise of Second-Person Speech.” Chapters three and four work together as Lamb explores third-person-singular (Proclaimer) and third-person-plural verbs (Sage).

Chapter four exemplifies Lamb’s inclusive framework and approach to preaching that equips people to navigate through life. She stresses that neither new, young, nor seasoned preachers should feel intimidated by the term “sage” since wisdom does not depend on age. Wisdom comes as a mysterious gift from God to those who seek it. Lamb encourages preachers to learn from ancient wisdom of developing life-giving virtues in community with others and letting go of death-dealing vices. She provides ten stepping-stones to help preachers move from abstract thoughts to “articulate what matters most about an idea” (47).

In the remaining chapters, Lamb offers preachers flexibility and freedom, with a call to ground preaching in scripture. Chapter five positions the preacher as Storyteller who narrates the past through lively and effective storytelling. Chapter six argues for the preacher as Priest who discerns current events and offers congregations a glimpse into what God is doing in the world. Chapter seven moves to the future, with the preacher as Visionary Prophet who can offer hope and nurture discipleship. In chapter eight, Lamb highlights the preacher as Leader who chooses and uses various modes of influence to direct people to action. She argues that “preaching is fundamentally an act of leadership. We are in this to influence” (101). Chapter nine concludes

by delving into the active and passive voice. The preacher as Catalyst can work through congregational resistance to change while reflecting on their own resistance and discouragement.

Lamb draws insight from scripture, theologians across the globe, and preachers from a range of traditions. For those wanting to redefine and reinvigorate their preaching, Lamb's book serves as a useful guide for approaching sermons each week. For homiletics professors hoping to expand resource options for their students, Lamb's work is useful for introductory and advanced preaching courses.

Lamb acknowledges that her book asks readers to grasp new or long-neglected concepts about verbs, which can make the work feel "daunting" (xvii–xxi). She eases this challenge by offering plenty of anecdotes and concrete descriptions. The book gives preachers a fresh opportunity to advance their preaching and connect with their congregations. Readers who experiment with the verbal forms in their sermons will be rewarded with a book that can be a tool and conversation partner for years to come.

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Joni S. Sancken, Luke Powery, John Rottman. *Getting to God: Preaching Good News in a Troubled World*. Cascade Books, 2023. 120 pages. \$21.00

Preaching the Good News of the Gospel is no simple task. Among many crucial concerns, one can be overwhelmed with the simple yet monumental question: what is the sermon's goal? In *Getting to God: Preaching Good News in a Troubled World*, Powery, Rottman, and Sancken give a poignant answer that helps to shape the inspiration, creation, and delivery of the sermon. Drawing on the work of their professor, Paul Scott Wilson, they assert that a sermon must place God's actions at the heart of the sermon. This happens by showing where God is active in the world today and creating conditions for the listeners to see God's work in their own lives (Powery, et al, 2).

With COVID-19 as a backdrop, along with the continuing political polarization in the United States, they explore the concept of "thin places." Drawn from Celtic spirituality, thin places are locations where the boundary between the earthly and the spiritual feels especially porous. These are spaces where the pretense of control is set aside so that we are vulnerable and open to God (6). Each author explores their context of "thin places" and their commitment and process of getting to God in their sermons.

Chapter 1 offers a summary and overview of the book. The authors elucidate that getting to God involves inviting or facilitating a homiletical encounter mediated by the Holy Spirit. Such an encounter fortifies and transforms the listener, launching them to faithfully live out the mission of God (2). Context matters "because at their best, preachers must work not just to understand a biblical text, but also to use that text as a potential means by which the Holy Spirit might address the lives of the listeners in diverse contexts, even those full of trouble" (4). The theme of thin places frames the sermon as a space that collapses the distance between God and our lives so that we may experience a transformational encounter with the divine (6). Each author presents their perspective during COVID-19 as a case study for homiletically traversing this thin place.

In chapter 2, Sancken delves into preaching in a disenchanted world. She first reflects on the ways that secularism and the privatization of faith have contested sources of ultimate authority and prioritized individual rather than communal beliefs. Within secularism the "buffered self" emerges internally insulated and with more autonomy, making it difficult to see God's activity in the world (27). Preachers can challenge the buffered self by focusing on human need and pulling back the veil of control so that listeners recognize their finitude (27). Sancken encourages preachers to re-engage with the transcendent nature of the divine, offering ways to connect with modern listeners by addressing their needs, proclaiming God's activity within the immanent world, and preaching the cross of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 3, Powery offers an intimate look at preaching on a university campus in the American South. He uses Duke University's history as a lens to examine its impacts and challenges of racism, especially during the pandemic's height. Offering personal testimony of what it has meant to preach as a Black man and Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, Powery paints a picture of the perennial sin of racism at the institution. As stated, "it is critical to acknowledge that all of human life, including the practice of preaching, is 'raced' already" (54). By highlighting the church's complicity in racism and the error of colorblindness, new possibilities for preaching emerge, including naming racism as sin, lamenting its effects, and celebrating God's goodness as a form of resistance.

In chapter 4, Rottman illuminates the thin place in the context of preaching in a prison during COVID-19. In a place that some may consider to be devoid of God's activity, the author gives detailed witness about the myriad ways God is active in prison ministry. Challenges such as injustice, loss of hope, and cross-cultural concerns abound. Yet, Christ's resurrection presence calls and transforms, providing reconciliation through fresh insights into interpreting scripture.

This book is a must-read and a source of comfort and inspiration for anyone seeking to faithfully craft and preach sermons. The authors offer three different contexts, along with sermon examples, to illustrate how the Holy Spirit is active in helping preachers get to God. The book gives hope for such visions and practical guidance for the preacher while assuring us that God is first getting to us.

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Chelsea Booke Yarborough. *Proclamation Beyond the Pulpit: The Expansive Homiletical Practice of Black Women*. Baylor University Press, 2025. 144 pages. \$29.99.

Yarborough's concise volume makes a timely contribution to homiletics, especially as the field, like other areas of practical theology, wrestles with how preaching can faithfully address declining engagement with religious services in the United States. By investigating preaching that has historically existed at the religious margins and outside of the pulpit, Yarborough provides rich examples of preachers who can show a way forward in this current moment. While articulating the expansive homiletical practices of Black women, Yarborough invites practitioners of preaching to think expansively about their own practice – including how they may show up in spaces outside of the pulpit to proclaim the wholeness, justice, and freedom of the gospel.

Throughout the book, Yarborough aims to accomplish three tasks: (1) “remove homiletical limitations of space and location”; (2) “explore what Black women preachers throughout history teach us about preaching”; and (3) “excavate the unique homiletical insights that emerge from these preachers” (3). These tasks are grounded in three underlying and corresponding assumptions. The first assumption is that preaching can be performed in spaces outside of the physical space of the church pulpit. The second is that Black women have preached effectively in ulterior spaces that have not been historically authorized, or even recognized, by institutional churches as locations where preaching *can* be realized. The third assumption is that because the church and homiletics have not recognized spaces beyond the pulpit as valid places for preaching, they have overlooked the valuable homiletical insights of Black women preachers who shared the gospel in those spaces after being excluded from others.

Building compellingly on the work of scholars who have illumined and elevated the homiletical practices of Black women, Yarborough's invitation to preachers, especially Black women, is to interrogate and recalibrate the assumptions both of what preaching is and where preaching can happen. Yarborough casts a bold and empowering vision that will resonate as liberative for many who sense the call to preach but have been relegated to the margins by not having their call fully affirmed by their faith communities.

Yarborough's work carefully balances its critique of homiletics' neglect of Black women preachers with a constructive intent, demonstrating a clear way forward rather than merely suggesting one. While outlining the absence of Black women in both Black homiletical literature and general studies of women in homiletics, Yarborough also contends that most scholars of Black women preachers have not gone far enough in their appreciation of certain practitioners, past and present. This is because they, too, have held onto the dominant understanding that preaching can only be accomplished in a “church” and its “pulpit.” To counter this assumption, Yarborough constructively proposes that scholars who share these concerns should follow the path laid by Lisa Thompson's seminal work *Ingenuity*, in which outsiders to the pulpit are reconsidered as authoritative preachers in alternative spaces. Like Thompson, Yarborough seeks to redefine notions of legitimate preaching contexts.

Yarborough moves the book from theoretical to practical by examining the proclamation of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Her detailed portrayal of these well-known historical figures as preachers provides readers with clear examples to support Yarborough's claims. Yet some readers may be disappointed to find only three examples or that lesser-known figures were not included. Yet Yarborough clearly states that her project is a starting point for future scholarship and encourages scholars to continue the work. Students will appreciate the rich descriptions and new insights that Yarborough provides about these preaching exemplars. This study does not simply confirm that these women were preachers or that they preached beyond the pulpit; more importantly, it reveals homiletical wisdom in their preaching to inspire readers as they discern their own voices and the spaces where the Spirit is calling them.

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Rebecca L. Copeland, *Entangled Being: Unoriginal Sin and Wicked Problems*. Baylor University Press, 2024. 250 pages. \$47.99.

Rebecca Copeland's *Entangled Being* takes up the timely and important task of seeking the language and categories necessary to account for the reality of structural evil in the world within a Christian theological framework in order to clarify what an appropriate and faithful response should be. The book is structured in two parts. Part I treats the substance of her systematic proposal. Here Copeland presents an overview of the ways Christians have traditionally understood and categorized sin and argues for the need of her newly proposed category, "unoriginal sin," to describe broad human culpability within the globalized and intergenerational "wicked problems" we face (chapter 1). In doing so, Copeland seeks to tighten the theo-logic that would then require a Christian response to such problems. Chapters 2 and 3 seek to recover an understanding of repentance that includes taking responsibility for structural harms and engaging in the work of their repair. Throughout this discussion she interacts with the issue of global climate change as a guiding example. Part II engages three additional case studies to demonstrate further the utility of her theological framework: further investigation into environmental injustices, the problem of economic globalization and exploitation, and the problem of systemic health disparity.

Copeland's book has many valuable features that recommend it to theologians, pastors, and informed laity engaged with the question of how we are to think about the world's wicked problems and frame them productively within the life of the church. The discussion of repentance and responsibility in chapter 2 is itself worth the price of the book as she sorts through the western moral inheritance of individualistic notions of moral responsibility and carves out ample room in her critique for a more relational, future-oriented, and globally-scaled approach. Particularly instructive here is her engagement with recent discussions of moral luck and her constructive interaction with womanist and *mujerista* theologians in recommending a profitable way forward. No doubt, this rich section of the book will be especially useful for homileticians seeking thoughtful ways to address such topics using the standard rubrics of Christian theology.

While Copeland is clearly onto something in detecting the need for new language and categories, it is precisely the systematics aspect of the book, located in chapter 1, that is least compelling and most in need of expansion. Many readers will ask themselves why "sin" should be the most appropriate category of analysis for dealing with wicked problems when the obligation to resist evil is already part of the baptismal vows in most major Christian denominations. For Copeland, this choice does more work in being "more competent to account for Christian action and responsibility in the complicated world we actually inhabit" (11), but it is not fully clear that that is true, and Copeland does not fully argue the case or provide us with an account of evil. A more detailed discussion of biblical hamartiological frameworks might have aided her in making the case that such are often made with reference to larger societal and ecological systems—the Priestly hamartiology in the Pentateuch being a case in point. A deeper

exploration of that and other available frameworks might have helped to shore up her case for an application of the category of sin for systemic problems apart from individual culpability. Perhaps the biggest issue, however, is the treatment here of original sin, which seems rather critical here as the category over and against which her new category “unoriginal sin” is offered. The interaction with original sin here is overly brief and done mainly with a view toward the congenital sense of St. Augustine’s original theory (the *peccatum originale originans*) and much less with regard to its reception and its relationship to the structural problem of the impaired human will (*peccatum originale originatum*), which strikes this reviewer as much more relevant and important to the theme of this book. If original sin in this latter sense already names a structural problem as well as a challenge in addressing structural problems, why should unoriginal sin be thought of as a separable category over and against it rather than a feature of it? These are just a few of the many questions that this aspect of the project leaves unanswered.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Copeland has done the world and the church a service in bringing wicked problems within the domain of the church’s traditional area of central concerns, and preachers and congregations will benefit from the ways she has taught us to understand and take up our work of repair.

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Aimee Allison Hein. *Theology in Motion: Migration, History, and Responsibility*. Fortress Press, 2024. 291 pages. \$39.00.

In *Theology in Motion: Migration, History, and Responsibility*, Aimee Allison Hein argues that Christian reflection on migration must move beyond the familiar debate between humanitarian concern and national sovereignty toward an ethic grounded in historical relationships and moral responsibility. Rather than treating migration primarily as a contemporary policy problem, Hein situates it within the longer history of colonial expansion, imperial policy, and economic domination that has shaped global patterns of displacement. Written primarily for scholars and students of Christian ethics and migration studies, the book also addresses church leaders seeking theological resources for responding to migration in ecclesial contexts.

Hein begins by examining the historical narratives that structure contemporary immigration debates. Chapter 1 challenges the foundational myth of the “discovery” of the Americas, arguing that the continent was not discovered but invaded and that the doctrine of discovery provided “legal cover for theft” (5). By foregrounding Indigenous histories and the violence of settler colonialism, Hein contends that remembering history accurately is a moral prerequisite for ethical decision-making. Distorted narratives about the nation’s origins obscure structural conditions that continue to shape migration today. As Hein observes, before migrants began crossing the southern border, “the border moved across people” (36). Contemporary claims about the nation’s right to exclude, therefore, cannot be separated from the earlier history of territorial expansion that produced those borders.

Chapter 2 traces the continuing legacy of these myths in US political and legal structures. Drawing on Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Hein argues that early US policies toward Indigenous nations established a template for later imperial projects. The United States, she suggests, developed as a fiscal-military state oriented toward territorial expansion. This pattern continues to shape immigration policy and foreign intervention. Migration from Central America cannot be understood apart from the economic and military policies through which the United States helped create conditions that forced people to migrate. For Hein, this relationship implies a continuing moral obligation: the United States “remains responsible for creating paths of migration” (51).

Against this historical backdrop, Chapter 3 develops the book’s central ethical framework. Hein critiques both communitarian approaches that prioritize state sovereignty and cosmopolitan approaches emphasizing universal human rights. While each offers important insights, she argues that neither adequately addresses the relational and historical dynamics that generate migration. Drawing on the responsibility ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr and Charles Curran, Hein proposes a framework in which moral action is understood as a response within an ongoing web of relationships shaped by past actions and future consequences. Justice, she insists, requires “accurate narratives” that attend to the voices left out, silenced, and harmed by historical processes (82).

Chapter 4 extends this framework through a theological exploration of reparative justice. Hein argues that Christian repentance must involve concrete action to repair broken relationships rather than merely acknowledging wrongdoing. Distinguishing between compensation and reparations, she contends that justice requires publicly recognizing injustice and working toward relational restoration. Truth-telling, therefore, becomes a central practice, since it is “both a reparation measure in itself and a precondition to all other reparations” (144).

The final chapters turn toward ecclesiology and praxis. Chapter 5 reimagines Christian discipleship as solidarity with those harmed by systems of empire, drawing on the work of Indigenous and Latine theologians to challenge Euro-American theological dominance. The church, Hein argues, must become a community that tells difficult historical truths and aligns itself with those marginalized by national and global power structures. Chapter 6 concludes with case studies illustrating how Christian communities can embody this vision through practices of hospitality, sanctuary, and cross-cultural friendship. Such practices demonstrate that ethical responsibility requires active resistance to social sin. As Hein observes, neutrality becomes a form of complicity, since “either we work to actively dismantle social sin ... or we contribute to its normalization” (249).

One of the book’s most significant contributions lies in its insistence that migration ethics must take history seriously. By situating migration within the longer story of colonialism and imperial power, Hein challenges theological approaches that treat migration solely as a humanitarian or legal problem. Her interdisciplinary engagement with history, Christian ethics, and ecclesiology provides a compelling framework for understanding migration as a matter of relational responsibility.

At times, readers seeking detailed policy proposals may find Hein’s analysis more theological than practical. Nevertheless, this emphasis is consistent with the book’s aim of reshaping the conceptual framework through which Christians interpret migration. *Theology in Motion* will be particularly valuable for scholars of Christian ethics and for clergy seeking to engage migration as a central challenge for contemporary Christian witness.

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Mitri Raheb and Graham McGeoch, eds. *Theology after Gaza: A Global Anthology*. Cascade Books, 2025. 367 pages. \$39.

The ongoing violence and genocide in Gaza represent not only a humanitarian catastrophe but also the unmasking of deep-seated hypocrisy within the Western world and a profound epistemological and ethical crisis for Western Christian theology. *Theology after Gaza: A Global Anthology* arrives as a timely collection of essays responding to the existential threat and suffering of the Palestinian people. The book is organized into five sections comprising nineteen chapters. The first chapter begins by re-situating Gaza within its proper theological and historical context. Mitri Raheb reconstructs Gaza's identity, reminding readers that from the early church and Byzantine era, the region served as a thriving hub of Christian faith and thought (4). This historiographical shift restores a long-standing legacy erased by the sanctioned memory of colonial powers, bringing a voice long treated as a peripheral exception into the center of theological discourse. In chapter 2, Boulos and Eid critique the 'two-state solution,' arguing it has devolved into a tool for justifying Israeli expansionism and Palestinian subordination. As an alternative, they prioritize a more fundamental right to 'self-determination' over formal legal statehood, calling for international legal discourse to be repurposed as a mechanism for dismantling colonial structures of domination (36).

The second section provides the political and theological orientation necessary for a *Theology after Gaza*. Raheb argues that Israel is the last settler-colonial project of the Western empire (44), a project he understands as inherently genocidal. Western democratic powers have enabled this crisis and that Western knowledge production has been complicit in legitimizing it. For Raheb, the primary task of contemporary theology is its own decolonization. Sarojini Nadar extends this argument by insisting that the pursuit of neutrality in Western theology is itself an ethical failure. Drawing on liberation traditions, she proposes a Palestinian liberation theology rooted in the epistemological privilege of the oppressed. This is complemented by Atalia Omer's internal critique of Jewish theology, where she characterizes Zionism as a "Golden Calf" and calls for a restorative theological direction that reclaims the ethical traditions of the Jewish diaspora while accepting responsibility for the Palestinian people.

The third section expands this inquiry through a diverse intersectional framework, situating the crisis in Gaza as a manifestation of a global imperial logic rather than an isolated event. Contributors from various Global South contexts—including East Asia, Latin America, and Africa—identify common threads of settler colonialism and necropolitical mechanisms that transcend regional borders. Kwok Pui-Lan and Nicolas Panotto observe that Christian Zionism continues to exert significant influence over conservative Christianity in Asia and Latin America, obstructing solidarity with Palestine. They insist that the theological paradigms of the Global South must also be decolonized. Similarly, Hatem Bazian contends that Western colonial power persistently shapes Middle Eastern socio-political structures, asserting that "Muslim theology today is a by-product of colonial discourses" (187). He critiques the silencing of calls for justice in Gaza by religious elites and argues for a reappraisal of Islamic theology through the lens of human suffering.

Section 4 interrogates the institutional and hermeneutical complicity of the Western church in the erasure of Palestinian life. Yousef Kamal Alkhouri characterizes the potential extinction of Gaza's Christian community as an "ecclesiocide," rooted in the historical complicity of Western Christianity with settler-colonial projects. This erasure is further facilitated by the geopolitical imagination of the 'Holy Land,' which Laura Salah Nasrallah

critiques for privileging abstract biblical topographies over the material reality of occupied bodies, thereby obscuring their suffering and plight. The section concludes with a sharp rebuke of the ‘both-sidesism’ prevalent in progressive Christian media and the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism to silence Palestinian narratives in ecumenical contexts, demanding that the church abandon imperial frameworks to recover its ethical integrity.

Section 5 pivots toward constructive resistance and the reimagination of theological praxis from the rubble of Gaza and the persistence of its people—both the living and the dead. Carlos Mendoza-Alvarez introduces ‘combative hope,’ a decolonial praxis of ‘re-existence’ (287) that subverts colonial domination through networks of communal care and conviviality. This theme of persistence is deepened by Mark Lewis Taylor’s call for memorial practices that transform public mourning into a political spirituality for resistance, asserting the presence of the dead against the logic of elimination. Jin Young Choi frames storytelling and writing as modes of resistance emerging from an “occupied and combat psyche” (328), linking the life and death of Jesus to the Palestinian struggle as a cruciform resistance that survives imperial biopolitics. Finally, Renee Hattar frames intangible heritage preservation as non-violent resistance. This historical mandate fosters resilience and identity, providing a foundation for peacebuilding and safeguarding human experience (345).

For preachers in the West, addressing Gaza is often fraught with difficulty, hindered by collective guilt over Auschwitz and a pervasive fear of being labeled anti-Semitic. Even when prophetic voices emerge to condemn military violence, they frequently fail to recognize how deeply the current suffering of Palestinians is entangled with Western global hegemony and Christian theology. This book serves as a vital reminder that Gaza is not an isolated incident but a universal crisis that demands our collective responsibility. It suggests that liberation from the necropolitical mechanisms of empire is necessary not only for the oppressed but for the oppressor as well—a transformation possible only through solidarity and resistance. For those wrestling with how to preach on Palestine, this volume provides a necessary lens to unmask the invisible structures of empire and offers a clear direction for a ministry of solidarity.

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Gareth Atkins and Martin V. Clarke, eds. *Amazing Grace at 250: Global Heritage and Contested Legacies*. Routledge, 2026. 294 pages. \$152.

While John Newton's hymn "Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)" was first published on page 53 of his and William Cowper's *Olney Hymns in Three Books* in 1779, his diary reports that the hymn was first sung by his congregation on New Year's Day, 1773 (6). So it was that scholars of various traditions took part in a year of presentations and celebrations in and around Olney in 2023. This volume creates a permanent record of those presentations.

The introduction begins by thoroughly exploring Newton's famous conversion from a shipper of enslaved people to an Anglican priest, pietist preacher, and hymn writer. Then the editors discuss the development of the *Olney Hymns* and "Amazing grace!" in particular. This in itself is a fascinating essay. The book then explores the global impact of the hymn, how it has been interpreted musically, and the theologically and socially challenging implications of both the hymn and its spread in three sections, encompassing fifteen essays. The authors, while predominantly from the United Kingdom, also represent the US, Canada, and Asia. This is fitting for a hymn that truly found its fame in North America decades after the author's death and then developed an international impact.

The first six essays, under the heading "Global Heritage," explore this reality. Special attention is given to its journey into and influences on German hymnody, told by Walter Kurt Kreyszig; Portuguese hymnody, shared by Marcell Silva Stuernagel; and the Christian churches of Hong Kong, examined by Yee-Nok Enoch Lam. Janet Wooton discusses how the hymn returned to popular use in the British Isles in the second half of the twentieth century. In the process she charts much of the upheaval and innovation in British Christianity prior to the Dunblane Conferences of the 1960s and the renaissance of hymn writing that carried through the 1970s and 80s.

The second section, titled "Music and Musicians," begins by examining the process by which the tune NEW BRITAIN, which first appeared in the American book *Columbia Harmony* in 1829, and which wasn't associated with our hymn until 1835, achieved such ubiquity.¹ Historian Daniel Johnson examines this journey as well as other tunes to which the text has been sung. Other essays examine the adoption of the hymn into black gospel and varied instrumentations and how it has been adapted in what is known as "retuned" congregational song.

In the final section, essayists Gillian Warson, Simon Lee, Fiona Evison, Mark Porter, and Rommi Smith discuss the problematic nineteenth century approach to physical disability in the hymn, influences of the hymn on modern areas outside of the church, contemporary situations, and even the creation of a new composition using and inspired by the text. In the Foreword, Anthony G. Reddie, Professor of Black Theology at the University of Oxford, points out the problematic issues of colonialism and race that come with this hymn and are often left unexplored. This might also be hinted at in the absence of scholarly voices from the developing parts of the church in Africa and South America. This is now an international hymn with international implications. While Newton cannot be held responsible for failing to address post-colonialism, we must be. For all that has been said here, there is clearly much more to say.

¹ Not all of this is unusual; most hymns—the texts—are written separately from their tunes, with associations being made by hymnal editors rather than authors or composers. Hymns are not simply lyrics for their tunes, even though modern hymnals often make that appear to be the case.

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Juliette J. Day. *Hearing Our Prayers: An Exploration of Liturgical Listening*. Liturgical Press Academics, 2024. 225pp. \$49.95.

Hearing Our Prayers is innovative in its focus on the reception of sound in worship. The author approaches worship from a listening-centered perspective. The author highlights listening as a core liturgical practice, noting that its central role in worship has not been sufficiently emphasized in ecclesial practice or academic discourse (1–2). Day attends to worshippers’ auditory participation and examines the reception of the diverse and complex sounds in worship. By doing so, this book encourages readers to delve into what it means to listen liturgically.

This research offers a multifaceted analysis of the sounds and their reception. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of “liturgical soundscapes,” which articulates the complexity and totality of liturgical sound. This term describes the distinctive auditory environment of worship shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Based on the notion of listening as an interface between the environment and the listener, the author explores the reception of ephemeral liturgical sounds by examining the circumstances. Chapter 2 considers listening as an active, essential liturgical practice involving both God and worshippers. This theology shapes the chapters that follow. Chapter 3 makes attentive listening to ritual sounds integral to ritual action by arguing that listening necessarily accompanies ritual (56). Moreover, the term “ritualized listening” highlights listening itself as a ritual act (65). Chapter 4 deals with liturgical speech and music as central intentional sounds in liturgy. It discusses their functions in fostering communal identity.

Chapters 5 and 6 expand the discourse by incorporating silence and noise that have often been overlooked in discussions of liturgical listening. Chapter 5 explores the theological reception of silence, conceptualizing it as a form of liturgical sound. The author specifies various types of silence in the context and purpose of worship, appreciating their values. Chapter 6 reconsiders sound that has been classified as “noise” in worship. Chapter 7 presents aural attentiveness as a requisite capacity for liturgical listening. Chapter 8 examines aural architecture and furnishing, which shape the spatial and acoustic dimensions of liturgical soundscapes.

Regarding this book’s strengths, first, Day introduces listening as a hermeneutical practice. She is concerned with how worshippers interpret sounds in worship, attending to their theological significance. Specifically, it reconsiders the values of silence and noise. For instance, she recognizes silence as a form of “sound” to be listened to (97) and interprets it as the place where divine hearing and divine silence reside (103, 116). Likewise, noise is reexamined from a more neutral perspective to avoid negative value judgments. Through theological reflection in a liturgical context, the author distinguishes between “noise as disruption” and “noise as a socially constructed category of otherness” (129).

Second, in relation to homiletics, the book highlights attentive listening as an essential liturgical practice in the preaching event. By recognizing the audience as “co-authors of the sermon,” Day encourages readers to perceive them as active participants in the preaching process (69). Furthermore, she emphasizes the role of the preacher as listener, insofar as preachers themselves listen to the Word of God (67–68). The book also invites readers to understand

preaching fundamentally as an aural event, even as sermons are increasingly visualized in the digital age. How the preacher's voice is produced, mediated, and transmitted in a designated space facilitates a deeper consideration of what preaching as sound means in a digital world.

A few minor suggestions may be offered. In contemporary worship contexts, the significance of digitally mediated sounds and the digital media that transmit them continues to grow. It would be worthwhile to consider how these sounds might be interpreted and negotiated with the discussion of this book. In addition, the book would benefit from greater attention to those without auditory capacity; thus, further exploration of how deaf or hard-of-hearing participants experience liturgical sounds would be a valuable extension.

Overall, this book is provocative in that it places listening at the very center of liturgical theology. Day's consideration of the theological and liturgical values and functions of listening renews prevailing understandings of listening and the listener. This reexamination and redefinition provide significant insight into how sounds in worship ought to be received and interpreted. Moreover, her research strengthens the integrity between liturgical listening, liturgical speaking, and ritual engagement, thereby suggesting ways to foster worshippers' full and active participation.

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Mark Porter. *For the Warming of the Earth: Music, Faith, and Ecological Crisis*. SCM Press, 2024. 210 pages. \$52.00.

In *For the Warming of the Earth*, Mark Porter takes up a question that churches, musicians, and theological educators can no longer afford to treat as marginal: what might Christian musical practice sound like in a time of ecological crisis? Drawing on more than forty interviews with activists, songwriters, Christian leaders, and musicians, Porter examines emerging forms of music-making that respond to climate change through worship, protest, lament, education, and attention to the more-than-human world. The result is a timely and thoughtful study that helps name a growing field of practice that many readers will know only in fragments.

The book is organized around five clusters of musical innovation: worship and climate albums, activism and acts of protest, communication and song festivals, grief and ecological requiems, and sound and natural environments. This structure makes clear that Porter is not offering a narrow manual on “creation care worship.” He is instead mapping a wider landscape of Christian musical responses to ecological crisis. That broad scope is one of the book’s chief strengths. Porter shows that the relationship between music, faith, and ecology is not exhausted by songs that celebrate the beauty of creation, but also includes practices of grief, public witness, coalition-building, and ecological listening.

Porter’s method is primarily ethnographic and descriptive, and that is to the book’s benefit. Rather than forcing the diverse examples into a single ideal model, he attends carefully to the different theological, musical, and practical logics at work in each setting. Public reception of the book has rightly emphasized this feature. Porter seems less interested in finding one correct solution than in helping readers perceive a range of contextually appropriate responses. In that sense, the book offers a useful taxonomy of a neglected field and gives scholars and practitioners better language for discussing how music might mediate relationships among faith, activism, grief, place, and ecological responsibility.

This makes the book especially valuable for readers in liturgical theology, practical theology, religion and ecology, church music, and hymnology. It would also serve graduate students and clergy who are trying to think more carefully about how worship relates to climate crisis without reducing that question either to generic activism or to vague aesthetic appreciation of nature. Porter helps illuminate a genuine void in contemporary discussions of worship music. In many church contexts, ecological concern remains underdeveloped liturgically and musically, even when it is affirmed morally. Porter’s study usefully presses against that gap.

At the same time, the book’s breadth may also create some of its limitations. A project built around diverse “snapshots” of musical innovation can leave readers wanting a thicker synthesis of how these practices might move from creative or specialist settings into the ordinary life of congregations. As a reader formed by North American evangelical worship culture, I found myself asking how Porter’s examples might translate into larger churches shaped by familiar contemporary worship idioms, scale, and programmatic habits. That question does not diminish the value of the book’s descriptive work. It does, however, point to a significant challenge of reception. The communities most in need of ecological liturgical imagination may also be the ones least prepared to receive these experiments. Public reviewers have noted a similar tension between Porter’s welcome openness and the reader’s desire for stronger synthesis.

Even so, Porter achieves something important. He broadens the theological imagination around what faithful music-making might entail in a warming world. He shows that Christian responses to ecological crisis may take the form not only of praise but also lament, protest, requiem, and renewed attentiveness to creaturely sound. For homileticians and worship leaders alike, that insight matters. Preaching and worship both depend on habits of perception, and Porter's book helps readers notice dimensions of creation, crisis, and hope that churches have too often left musically unaddressed. *For the Warming of the Earth* is a significant contribution to an emerging conversation, and it deserves a wide hearing among scholars and religious leaders willing to ask what faithful worship might sound like on a damaged yet beloved earth.

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