"Sermon Criticism and Homiletical Imagination: Preachers in the Age of Generative AI"

Abstract

The advent of generative AI has raised questions about the identity and role of preachers. This study does not aim to exclusively spotlight the preacher's identity by identifying shortcomings in generative AI and emphasizing the functional uniqueness that only human preachers can provide. Rather, it seeks to harness the creative synergy emerging from this uncomfortable tension and unfamiliarity.

To this end, the study first examines sermon criticism and homiletical imagination. According to Paul Wilson's argument, sermon criticism involves an initial engagement with Scripture using a fourfold reading method—historical, allegorical, moral, and prophetic—to explore theologically rich and God-centered readings that shape sermons in profound ways. Homiletical imagination serves as the driving force enabling such criticism.

Secondly, the study fosters perspectives and attitudes necessary for sermon criticism and imagination, including perspectives often ignored or overlooked. It will examine ethical issues, such as an ethic of listening, which demands heightened sensitivity to previously unheard or excluded voices, and an ethic of knowing, which confronts epistemological biases and limitations inherent in dominant value systems.

The ethical reflections on sermon criticism and imagination encourage preachers to continually practice improvisation and creativity in the ever-evolving preaching environment. These reflections allow for a reevaluation of the preacher's identity as a holistic way of life, where preaching is not merely spoken but lived.

Introduction: Identity and Fear

One of Christianity's fears related to postmodernism was the mistrust of grand narratives. As the grand narrative of Christianity—creation, fall, redemption, and recreation—constitutes a critical part of Christian identity, most Christian sermons have interpreted Scripture, faith, and the gospel within this grand narrative framework. This narrative has enabled the Israelite community to remember and hope in God's covenant and acts of salvation and to live by ethical attributes that align with their identity and mission.

However, the postmodern approach, which raises questions about grand narratives, often posed challenges to traditional Christianity by emphasizing the value of dynamics and paradoxes that transcend established knowledge systems. Though this perspective critiques how humans understand and accept truth, it often appeared as a threat that unsettled Christian identity and boundaries. For example, interpretations and perspectives that did not align with grand narratives were sometimes marginalized, trivialized, or suppressed.

The rise of generative AI, labeled a revolution, has introduced similar complexities and tensions across various domains like art, media, ethics, and education. A 2023 survey conducted by a pastoral research institute revealed that while many Protestant church attendees and pastors were aware of ChatGPT and its usage in ministry, there were significant concerns regarding its application in sermon preparation. Most objections cited the potential reduction of personal meditation and research, diminishing the preacher's role and effort in sermon crafting.

How should preachers navigate their calling in a context where generative AI can produce countless sermons with efficiency? This study seeks to identify and engage with the creative synergies that emerge from the tension between human preachers and AI rather than exclusively highlighting the shortcomings of AI or the functional uniqueness of preachers. By revisiting sermon criticism and imagination, this research aims to explore how preachers can

embrace improvisation and creativity, which are rooted in love, existential fervor, and spirituality, to address today's complex challenges.

Sermon/Theological Criticism

Preachers may consider exegetical or historical and grammatical understandings of Scripture sufficient for sermon preparation. In this regard, generative AI offers abundant resources like illustrations, existing sermons, and exegetical work. While such tools can assist preachers, sermons cannot be fully shaped by mere examples and interpretations. If the preacher fails to discern God's specific actions and words relevant to the current context, the experience of divine grace in the sermon may be limited.

Paul Wilson's framework emphasizes integrating the theological and spiritual senses of Scripture. This reading creates analogies and connections between biblical texts and today's situations through imaginative resonance. For Wilson, sermon criticism integrates historical criticism, theological criticism, and the imaginative exploration of Scripture to mediate between the text, God, and the congregation.

Homiletical Imagination

Sermon criticism demands homiletical imagination, which helps discover God within the intersection of theology, pastoral care, and ethics. Charles Bartow noted that participants' engagement with sermons requires "a fired imagination." For example, interpreting Acts 2 requires preachers to use imagination to apply the early disciples' testimony about the Holy Spirit to contemporary contexts. While imagination might seem ambiguous, it is a divine gift integral to human creativity and reflection of the image of God.

Thomas Troeger highlighted three forms of imagination crucial to preaching: empathetic imagination, which broadens listeners' perspectives; visionary imagination, which discerns

God's unexpected movements; and traditional imagination, which engages symbols and practices in the congregation's spiritual life. These dimensions of imagination allow preachers to address diverse contexts creatively and inclusively, fostering a dynamic participation in God's ongoing work.

Hospitality: Ethics in Preaching in the AI Era

Generative AI's reliance on dominant narratives and readily accessible data raises ethical challenges for preaching. Gayatri Spivak's insights on "interrupting the silence" encourage preachers to engage voices and perspectives often excluded from mainstream narratives. Similarly, Christine Pohl's call to recover hospitality emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized individuals in both interpretation and community formation.

An ethic of listening requires preachers to discern and embrace diverse narratives within their congregations and beyond. This approach challenges the preacher to engage vulnerably and imaginatively with Scripture and the world. Generative AI, while a valuable tool, invites preachers to expand their knowledge and discernment, ensuring that sermons resonate authentically with both the divine and the lived realities of their communities.

Conclusion

Preaching in the age of generative AI is not about replacing the preacher but reimagining the calling to preach as an ongoing, dynamic participation in God's creative work. By embracing ethical perspectives and fostering homiletical imagination, preachers can craft sermons that embody divine grace and resonate with the complexities of contemporary life. This endeavor transforms preaching into a lived vocation, rooted in improvisation, creativity, and love.