



## Chapter 4

# An experiment in ‘mediated’ homiletics: Can ChatGPT preach in a local, Reformed framework?

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### Abstract

This contribution opens with a brief review of the relationship between technology and Theology. After indicating how the chapter will methodologically unfold, two Bible texts are given, from which a homiletical experiment is conducted. The exegetical background and Reformed-homiletical expectations on these texts are given in two resulting sermons. The texts of these two sermons, one written by a human being and one written by ChatGPT, are reprinted and evaluated, in outline, by the authors of this contribution. Further evaluations are invited.

### Introduction: Can a sermon be media-free?

The entire history of Christianity, from the world in which the Bible came into being (Frevel, 2005:1–29) and throughout the Christian centuries, is characterised by, amongst other matters, faith and technological possibilities being in interaction. They affect one another. The three most important technological turning points in this regard, are the ancient Near Eastern developments of the instruments of writing (cf. e.g. Powell, 2009), the Gutenberg press in the mid-15th century and the internet since the 1980s (Wheeler, 2019).<sup>1</sup> The relationship between faith and technologically

1 The popular understanding of the earliest origins of the internet in South Africa, most recently again in Du Toit, 2023, is mistaken. (Hence, so is, for instance, the Wikipedia

is never straightforward, as either simply adoption or rejection – although such responses may always be found. Critical interaction and, over time, mutual steering usually characterise this enduring, unfolding relationship. This relates to all new technologies, whether that new invention had been the steam engine and railway system, newspapers, photography, the telephone, radio, motion pictures, nuclear power, space travel, and then, the internet. On the latter, the newest (though long-unfolding: from ancient thought, via science fiction literature and films, concretised in the newest technological developments) innovation related to the internet, is artificial intelligence (AI). Since November 2022, the AI version that has received the most public attention, by far and quite dramatically, is ChatGPT (in its various, fast-developing versions).

In each of these listed and many other instances of technological change, the to-and-fro of rejection and acceptance, of use and abuse, of review and a more considered reception, of direction-finding and direction-giving (always from and to assorted spheres of society), have played out variously, though not in unrelated ways. Stark alternatives and less dichotomous options hence now present themselves; from these past instances, we may of course learn, though not equally much (given the dissimilar technologies) nor always equally easily (given the diverse contexts). Perhaps it is easiest to state the two most directly contrasting views

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article in this regard: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet\\_in\\_South\\_Africa#cite\\_ref-3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_in_South_Africa#cite_ref-3); viewed on 10 May 2023, which incorporates a reference to Du Toit, 2023.) Lawrie, 1997 already outlined these details (initially on the <http://apies.frd.ac.za/uninet/history> website, which is now defunct but has been archived on <http://archive.hmvh.net/txtfiles/interbbs/SAInternetHistory.pdf>). The somewhat earlier beginnings of the internet in South Africa than Du Toit 2023 indicates, had been related to – important for the topic of this chapter – specifically church pro-democratic activities in the late 1980s; cf. Lombaard, 2003:16–27 (which has now also been archived on [www.tingchong.com/about/Birth%20of%20the%20Internet%20in%20SA.pdf](http://www.tingchong.com/about/Birth%20of%20the%20Internet%20in%20SA.pdf)).

on the relationship between the divine and technology, from which two outermost positions different alternatives can then be navigated. Interestingly, instances of each of these two divergent views can already be traced in antiquity, in the 5th to 4th centuries before the Christian era (BCE, which is often also understood as 'before the common era'), in the ancient Near East and in pre-Hellenistic Greece.

The account, famously known as the Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1–9, a composite text which reached its current form probably in early 5th century BCE Jerusalem; cf. e.g. Westermann 1984:531–557), includes thematically an early warning on the one-sidedly self-serving use of technology.

From a fully different kind of background, the ancient Greek world of drama techniques from the 4th century BCE onwards, we have the interesting theatrical example known as *ἀπὸ μηχανῆς θεός*, or in its later and more well-known Latin formulation, *deus ex machina*, both of which formulations mean 'god from the machine/device'. In a theatre performance (cf. Mastrorade 1990:247–294), when the plot seemed unresolvable, a mechanical arm (or crane), understood by the audience to represent an act of divine intervention, could swing onto the stage and save the hero from all the troubles. In such a conception, different to the Genesis 11:1–9 instance, the divine could thus use technology to the benefit of humanity; symbolically, at least.

Interestingly, in both these instances, though from remarkably different cultures, there was no question on whether the divine and human inventions stood in some kind of relationship to one another. The idea that the physical and the metaphysical, which is to say: human design and the influence of the divine, were unrelated spheres of experience or existence, did not come up. Undeniably, all aspects of life were viewed as integrated with all other aspects of life. The idea that technology fell outside of the purview of the divine, or that the divine afforded no role to technology, was in that existential frame of reference an unrealistic trajectory of

thought. It was the much more recent influences, of the past half a millennium, which contrived such a conceptual divorce of the different spheres of life from one another. This was a mental separation which most religious people would never fully succumb to, as powerful as the cultural and scientific impulses towards such a split had been in the modern era (since ± 1500) and especially in the late modern era (since ± 1800), with their emphasis on a certain kind of rationalism, to the exclusion of other forms of rationality.

Not acceding to this ‘conceptual divorce of the different spheres of life from one another’ (as formulated in the previous paragraph), but rather keeping to the more realistic sense that ‘all aspects of life [are] integrated with all other aspects of life’, the theological and the technological are here considered to be in a reciprocally influential relationship. From this position, it is simply natural to reflect on the use of human innovations in the faith-full act of preaching. We can also draw on ancient culture – the two options indicated above – to form well-considered, influential beacons to guide our navigations in this regard. Hence, as a contemporary, loosely analogous parallel to those ageless dual possibilities (and, if perhaps understood as mutually exclusive options, duel possibilities), let us consider: Where could ChatGPT (and the various alternatives to it) be placed on such a continuum when it comes to preaching the word of God?<sup>2</sup> Between a firm ‘No, avoid’ and a resolute ‘Yes, utilise’ as the two outermost beacons, are sermons and ChatGPT (and its alternatives) compatible?

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2 The fine distinction in formulation between preaching the word of God and preaching from the Word of God, should be carefully maintained. In the background here lies the classic Reformed formulation by Bullinger, *Praedicatio verbi dei est verbum dei*. This confession, that ‘The preaching of the Word of God is the word of God’, casts homiletics as a theologically deeply meaningful act (cf. Locher, 1954:47–57), which ought to fill one with trepidation, humility, courage and faith. Thorough exegesis, finely attuned contextual sensitivities and deep discernment characterise such sermons.

To concretise the questions:

- Is ChatGPT an instrument that will lead us to self-aggrandisement with the, now perhaps, superlative quality of our sermons?
- Is ChatGPT something that God could use to save us from the well-recognised difficulties of creating good sermons?
- Somewhere between these two ‘Beware’ and ‘Proceed’ options, are there perhaps fully different possibilities? Are there other reasonable, feasible, theologically fitting and positively human prospects?

### **Methodology of this contribution**

From this brief review of the relationship between faith and technology, it is already clear that sermons and media have always been intertwined and continually will be. Homiletics has since the first sermon we know about from the Bible (Nehemiah 7:72b-8:18),<sup>3</sup> been ‘mediated’; that is: to preach means to make use of the media of the time. Let us hence investigate the newest technological possibility and what it offers homiletics.

The following experiment was set up to compare a sermon by a person and a sermon by a machine. Simply formulated, the previous sentence means: a sermon written by a trained theologian and a sermon written by ChatGPT are reprinted below. These two sermons then form the basis for evaluation. That appraisal will be at the hand of the usual criteria set for good homiletics in the Reformed tradition. It should be noted that the valuation will not be exhaustive,

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3     ‘In Nehemiah 7:72b-8:18 we see the beginnings of an expression of faith in which the reading of Scripture and its exposition is at once transposed back to a mythologically-idealised time of Moses *and* instituted as part of the festival culture of Israel, to be maintained in perpetuity. In the Torah, past and present, text explication and sense application are combined, in order to bestow on the faithful their (re)new(ed) religious identity (Lombaard, 2008:148).

but will indicate outlines of an appraisal; intentionally so. A fuller assessment is not offered, because the intent is that our readers here will enhance the value of this contribution, and further contextualise it, by conducting their evaluations in this regard. Moreover, the aspect of the delivery of the sermon falls outside of our scope here. As important as the quality of oral and symbolic communication and other matters are during the act of preaching, they cannot be evaluated here, on paper. Nor would that be useful for this experiment since this 'test drive' relates to the composition of a sermon.

Hence, what follows are the two chosen Bible texts – one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. This follows an indication of the key exegetical considerations required when these texts are studied. Then follows an overview of the usual criteria employed when considering the quality of a sermon in the Reformed church tradition. The latter focus, on the Reformed tradition, is not only because of the particular church backgrounds of the two authors here (respectively Dutch Reformed Church and Uniting Reformed Church) and of the Reformed, though thoroughly ecumenical, nature of the Faculty of Theology and Religion within which the two authors used to serve. More significant here are the diverse understandings of the nature of preaching, of what constitutes a good sermon, in the different Christian denominations. To name only the most well-known of these denominations: in the Roman Catholic Church (with its high ecclesiology), the Orthodox churches (with their foundationally symbolic orientations), the Reformation churches (with the prominence of the Bible within Lutheranism and Calvinism), the charismatic and Pentecostal churches (who hold the direct sensing of the Holy Spirit as primary) and African Instituted churches (with their culturally-grounded experiential emphases), what is viewed as a good sermon differs. In each of these denominations, deep theology and long history have found expression in distinctive senses of what ought to be found in a sermon for the preaching to be considered as good. To give fair expression to all of these and other denominations in this regard, will not be possible.

Already with the focus here on primarily the Reformed (i.e. Calvinist) views, much material has had to be condensed here. Doing so within the Reformed tradition, with which we are most familiar, has a redeeming value that such abridgment would not all too easily become reductionist. Moreover, this denominational focus once again invites readers to engage in their assessments of the two sermons shown.

A last methodological consideration here relates to the prompts used to create a sermon on ChatGPT. The importance of the prompts relates also to the validity of the experiment: setting up in a pre-determined manner this web service for either success or failure, when the quality of the sermons is later compared, would render this experiment inadequate. After all, the purpose of this exercise is not to play humans and machines off against one another, but rather to compare. We want to see what the similarities and differences are between the sermons rendered. To prove a human preacher or a ChatGPT sermon as either superior or inferior to the other is not the intent here; rather, we hope to understand better – the purpose of science.

That we already had an extant sermon, not written to be included in an experiment such as this, also helped to remove the possible, albeit perhaps unintended competitive dimension from such an experiment. Moreover, we could fairly design the different aspects of the ChatGPT prompt, so as later to compare what is indeed fairly comparable.

The art of writing ChatGPT prompts includes simplicity; on the other hand, not giving enough information in such prompts will naturally render an inadequate result. The authors here realise the balance required to navigate well this matter. Hence, because the first author was responsible for the text of the sermon, the second author undertook three pre-trial attempts at refining the aspects of the prompts eventually used.

The different aspects of the ChatGPT prompt for this experiment therefore were:

- a sermon of 1 300 to 1 400 words (= 20 to 25 minutes);

- written in British English;
- situated strongly in the Reformed church tradition;
- to be preached to an audience of well-educated university students;
- with the sermon on both Exodus 22 and John 8;
- with both those texts historically read and well exegeted;
- employing aspects of 'new hermeneutics' in homiletics;
- applying the meanings of those texts to a South African urban context, and
- where the denomination is in danger of splitting in two on the matter of Bible interpretation.

In what follows, the two Bible texts are reprinted, and the exegetically important aspects of these texts are summarised. After that, criteria within the Reformed church tradition of good homiletics are given, in brief. Then the two sermons are related and evaluated, upon which follows an invitation.

**Texts: Exodus 21, Exodus 22 and John 8**

The Bible texts used for this sermon experiment are from Exodus and John (New Revised Standard Version).

*Exodus 21*

**18** When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.

*Exodus 22*

**1** When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'...

**15** Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back.

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**16** The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

**17** When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, 'There is the sound of war in the camp.'

**18** Moses replied:

'It is not the sound of victory,  
it is not the sound of defeat;  
it is the sound of singing that I hear.'

**19** When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.

### *John 8*

**2** Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

**3** The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them,

**4** they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.'

**5** Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'

**6** They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

**7** When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'

**8** And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

**9** When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

## Exegetical orientation

Because this contribution is not meant to illustrate exegetical technique, only the key insights are listed here. None of the insights listed here are controversial; only broad consensus matters are indicated.

The exegetical approach was historical (rather than for instance structuralist), analysing how these two texts had come into being: the underlying traditions, the textual and editorial developments, the contextual placements within the history of the texts and also the aspect of ancient intertextuality. Narratological insights were also employed: how the stories had been recounted. However, this narratological approach was not followed in its a-historical version (in which historical-analytical exegesis is avoided); rather, the editorial layers of the text were narratologically analysed. (This combination of the historical and narratological approaches works especially well with the Fourth Gospel, given its literary qualities.)

Key academic texts, which informed the theological framework of the sermon on these two particular Bible texts, are:

- Schmid, K. 2016. Christentum ohne Altes Testament? *Communio* 45, 443–456.
- Van Deventer, H. 2008. Did someone say ‘history’? In Africa we say, ‘His story’! A study in African biblical hermeneutics with reference to the book of Daniel. *Old Testament Essays* 21/3, 713–728.

These two academic texts had informed a text which had already by then been submitted for publication, and which has since been published:

- Lombaard, C. 2023. Proposal on the Bible and African Christian Spirituality, 2020 to 2050. In O.M. Lumanze (Ed.), *What is the Old Testament? Understanding the Hebrew Scriptures anew*, pp. 312–239. Aba, Nigeria: Centre of Biblical Studies, Research & Development [CBSRD] LIFE College of Theology.

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- Only two of the commentaries employed are listed here:
  - Houtman, C. 2000. Exodus (Vol. 3). Historical Commentary on the Old Testament. Leuven: Peeters.
  - Barrett, C.K. 1978. The Gospel according to St John. An introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text (2nd ed.). London: SPCK.

### **Key insights**

These are key insights to the text:

- Exodus 22 is a composite text, combining a few narrative strands, edited together.
- Post-exilic versions of this text (after 539 BCE) were an important unifying factor in the then-emerging Jewish identity around the decalogue.
- John 8 is a late addition (end 3rd century/early 4th century) to the earlier text of the Gospel of John (end 1st century).
- John 8 links theologically, and deliberately, to the surrounding texts in the Gospel of John.
- John 8 has word-play links, apparently deliberately, to the text of Exodus 22.

### **Reformed homiletical orientation: What are the characteristics of a sermon in the Reformed tradition?**

According to Cilliers (2004:32), the act of preaching happens when the voice of God is heard via the voice of Scripture/ the text, in the voice of the time (congregation's context) and expressed through the distinctive voice of the preacher. When the convergence of these four distinct voices results in a unified 'speech', the sermon might be characterised as *viva vox evangelii* (the living Word of the Gospel). This implies four aspects, which are summarised in the sections that follow.

### **Biblical and current context**

The Bible consists of accounts documenting encounters with the divine and believers' reflections on God's revelations and redemptive actions. The authors and editors of the Old Testament, as well as those who were followers of Jesus in the New Testament, documented the experiences pertaining to God's salvific words and actions. The Bible thus serves as a reflective representation of the diverse range of religious experiences documented by individuals throughout more than a millennium. The assertions made in the Bible have therefore undergone reflection across generations. It remains essential to approach the interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of the heart, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as much as, from the perspective of the mind, with reasoning consideration (at the same time, not keeping heart and mind, or faith and reason, apart).

A comprehensive collection of Bible commentaries on each book of the Bible is available, providing valuable and diverse, informed insights for readers seeking to comprehend the intended messages within the contexts of its biblical audiences. These commentaries should of course be approached with a critical mindset, as they serve as a useful tool for enhancing understanding and interpretation.

Christians, those who belong to the ecclesiastical community and gather on the designated day of Sundays, anticipate receiving divine communication, tailored specifically for them, via the medium of a sermon. The foundation of their religious beliefs stems from the Scriptures, which have deeply influenced their personal experiences, because the Bible is experienced as a transformative gift. The intimate interconnection between the understanding of the biblical text within its originating frameworks and its relevance to the community of faith, is always evident in the upcoming worship service scheduled for the following Sunday: the preacher's ability to deliver a sermon is contingent upon more than just offering an interpretation of the text. The incorporation of the listeners' backgrounds on that particular

Sunday is integrated into the sermon message, and the exegesis is presented in a manner that effectively conveys and maintains the listeners' engagement throughout the discourse (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021:3). Therefore, it is imperative that preaching be conducted within a specific, rather than widely generalised context. Accordingly, Cilliers (2013:2), in his reassessment of a prophetic sermon, provides a concise definition of preaching as 'the communication of the gospel in a manner that is comprehensible to individuals within a particular context'. It is crucial to note that, although there are more considerations for a sermon, vital aspects are its prophetic, situational and contextual natures.

### **The role of the preacher (or sermon maker)**

Regarding the role of the preacher, we would like briefly to draw on the work of Pieterse and Wepener (2021:1–8). These two South African scholars of Liturgy and Homiletics assert that it is essential for the preacher to start the process of creating a sermon by addressing the current context. This includes the congregation's needs and the immediate environment: the town or urban centre, nation and the world in which the preacher and congregation live and operate (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021:8). Preachers dare not assume that the contents of their sermons are always predetermined solely by their thoughts. It is important to prioritise active engagement with individuals within the congregation, also using pastoral work, while also including the practice of reading diverse daily news sources (Lombaard, 1999:22–46). Additionally, it is crucial to monitor actively and to analyse the ongoing conversation within the particular setting.

Preachers initiate this process by drawing from their backgrounds and circumstances. By taking into consideration the specific circumstances and backgrounds of the audience, a preacher can more effectively engage with and interpret the selected biblical text, to discern parallel and analogous – identical is impossible – meanings for the sermon.

Moreover, it is necessary to analyse the historical and cultural backdrops in which the aforementioned Bible text came into being, as it related to its initial audiences. Additionally, a comprehensive examination of diverse informed comments about the text should be undertaken, as found in the scholarly (rather than only devotional) commentaries. When a preacher engages in the process of understanding the historical contexts and circumstances of the original audiences, who had hence experienced the divine interventions in their lives, this may well lead to a clash between the preacher's contemporary reality and the world depicted in the text. The act of comprehending the message from such a text serves to address the subject matter presented within the written discourse, so enabling the interpreter-preacher to explore often uncharted realms within that specific, current context. This process also facilitates the sharpening and refining, or the questioning and redefining, of the preacher's established notions or inclinations, ultimately leading to a re-evaluation of their perspectives, perhaps also inducing personal transformation (cf. Lombaard, 2015:1-6).

According to Pieterse and Wepener (2021:1-8), this aforementioned process, accompanying the act of interpreting biblical texts when approached with prayer and in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, leads to the message of a sermon. During the sermon, preachers could then primarily engage in testifying to the audience about their encounter with the text and the transformative impact it had on their spiritual journey.

Following the aforementioned encounter with the text, a further phase of introspection and spiritual contemplation ensues, during which the preacher attempts systematically to organise the concepts presented in the sermon. Preachers engage in introspection and deliberate over the content they want to convey in their sermons.

Additionally, it is crucial to consider the objectives they want to achieve with the delivery of the sermon. What is the primary emphasis and purpose of the sermon? What are the possible arrangements for the few pages of the sermon, or what

are the potential narrative structures that might be employed? A sermon may, to be sure, be understood as a narrative structure, consisting of an introduction, a development and a conclusion. It should be natural for preachers to keep this in mind throughout their preparation process.

Concurrently, the interpretation of a sermon by its listeners is influenced by several filters, shaped also by their accumulated comprehension of the Bible text over time. Individuals have their own, unique life worlds, including a distinct set of inquiries, problems and personal encounters. Individuals engage in the process of interpreting the message conveyed in a sermon, by constructing a concise version tailored to their unique circumstances. That is to say, people interpret and relate the message to their existential circumstances. This dynamic does not constitute a problem. When the sermon resonates with individuals, within their own lived experiences, it may be said that the message of the text has successfully reached them. The Holy Spirit thus manifests the divine presence and influence within the context of a worship session, where the proclamation of biblical teachings takes place. The Holy Spirit imparts the holy influence and effects onto the individuals who receive this message (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021:1–8).

### **Oral presentation**

Preaching is not just about the sermon on the paper. The act of preaching extends beyond this, as the use of personal characteristics, such as bodily expressions, emotions, body language and vocal delivery, play a role in effectively presenting a sermon that is both impactful and sincere. Cilliers (2013:1–15) elaborates in this regard in his work on the role of the voice. According to him, the presence of a voice encompasses (theologically, philosophically and phenomenologically) a subjective component: the preacher generates an acoustic space that aids in the manifestation of the congregation's identity. It might be argued that without auditory perception of an individual's voice (except, of course, where this is not possible, such as when people have

impaired hearing), genuine contact and true communication with someone is often unattainable, or at the very least, compromised.

When discussing the concept of a voice, associations on the perception of sound and hearing often arise. Consequently, the consideration of sound and hearing also encompasses the field of acoustics. In this sense, preaching serves as a means of conveying not only knowledge related to God and faith, but as an oft-repeated activity, constitutes also as a manifestation of God's divine message beyond time, overcoming the barriers of historical context, limited understanding and resistance to listening. This is indeed about hearing – to allude to the famous 1898 Francis Barraud painting and the iconic 20th-century British gramophone company – 'His Master's Voice'.

A sermon encompasses more than the dissemination of religious knowledge; it goes beyond the simple representation of words from ancient parchments. The phenomenon of the sermon may therefore be described, in somewhat clinical and less 'warm' language than above, as a linguistic occurrence, specifically about the auditory perception of spoken language. The institution of the sermon is characterised by its singular nature, lacking repetition as a phenomenon; possessing distinctiveness. Indeed, even as a single occurrence, these features in some way apply to a sermon: it is not possible to replicate or deliver sermons again, since the voice of God comes across within a specific time and location. A sermon is, therefore, also characterised by its historical situatedness, its dependence on circumstances, its vitality and hence its contextual capacity for redemption. Sermons at the same time transcend conceptual or doctrinal accuracy and exegetical rigour – based as a sermon caringly is on these matters, it then builds further; it, as it were, moves beyond these aspects, extending their reach to the here and now. The words in question, the sermon text, require a process of acoustic reorganisation and, we confess, refinement by the Spirit, specifically in relation to auditory perception, to transform into vocal expression that effectively communicates the divine message (Cilliers, 2013:2).

### **Reformed worship service**

Reformed preaching should not be considered in isolation from other aspects of being church. According to Wepener and Klomp (2015:1–8), the worship service should be seen as a whole entity, within which the act of preaching seamlessly integrates these other aspects. As Kloppers (2003:80–88) indicates, the liturgy may be conceptualised as a kind of artistic expression, akin to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a work of art as a whole range of combined art forms), such as an opera, where several components harmoniously converge. In a Reformed worship session, the local congregation convenes to engage in the act of attentive listening to the preaching. Every week, individuals participate in the liturgical worship service, which serves as an integral component of their religious practice.

Cilliers (2004:186–187) accurately asserts that there is a notable scarcity of homiletical literature that has prayer as its primary focus. Prayer is all-encompassing for liturgy, litany and preaching; as for life. The act of prayer alters one's preaching voice. The individual expresses a profound conviction on the matter at hand, which culminates in the assertion that sermons not only require prayer but may also be considered a kind of prayer. In summary, those who are unable to engage in prayer, are unable to engage in preaching (Cilliers, 2004:186–187).

According to Cilliers (2004:188) and Laubscher (2019:275), the preacher's involvement with the local congregation makes them an integral participant in the worship event. The individual who preaches is assigned the responsibility of bearing testimony in the sermon to the own encounter with the text over the week (based on the foregoing years of theological education), which has transformed the preacher's perspective on the prevailing issues and inquiries, in that specific milieu.

The act of delivering a sermon is the preaching event in the worship service, with the recipients intended to comprehend the intended message conveyed by the speaker. The act of speaking and listening, in unison, together

create the preaching event, which is therefore inherently participatory. According to Pieterse and Wepener (2021:4), the experiential manifestation of Christ in the worship service is seen as a fulfilment of divine promise. During the sermon, the divine presence is dynamically manifested via the agency of the Holy Spirit. The act of communicating in a worship service therefore involves a complicated interplay between inter-human discourse and heavenly speech (Pieterse & Wepener, 2021:4).

Given the above exegetical and homiletic orientations, we can now move on to the texts of the two sermons.

## Two sermons

### A sermon by a person

#### **The writing's on the floor. (Faith seeking understanding?)<sup>4</sup>**

'The writing's on the wall' – an expression we know rather well. And it means: things stop here. We have reached a negative point from which we cannot turn away.

We often forget that this expression – 'The writing's on the wall' – comes from the Bible, from the book of Daniel. But its meaning remains the same.

In the book of Daniel, a human hand magically writes a divine message, which may be restated as: 'Things fall apart' – as the famous Chinua Achebe novel was titled. That is: destruction.

So, if the writing is not on the wall, but on the floor, what would that mean?

Perhaps the opposite: that good things start here...?

Good things for the Bible; for faith; for the community of believers; for you.

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4 Sermon at the Dutch Reformed Congregation  
*Universiteitsoord*, Pretoria, 20 February 2022, at the Prayer  
Day for Theology.

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That is: when the writing is on the ... floor.

Strange as this idea may sound, that the writing is on the floor, this is precisely what we read together a few moments ago from the Bible. Two texts about divine writing. Strange texts, in many ways – with almost mystical moments.

And yet, they write our story, in a way; your story...

These two Bible texts write the story of the faith practice of churches, and the story of the study of faith in universities.

How can I say *that*?

Well, as they say, have faith – Let's together follow the train of thought:

Believers have at various times confessed that for us the Bible *is* the Word of God, or that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, or that the Bible is words *about* God; or that the Bible *dialogues* with us on God – inviting, mystifying, satisfying, infuriating and more.

What we tend to forget with such competing confessions is that, within the Bible itself, we only twice see God writing. We read both of those texts this morning. Only in these two Bible texts do we find God actively scripting words; God's own hand lettering something.

In the Exodus description, we read that God writes the Ten Commandments on tablets; in John chapter 8, we see that Jesus writes in the sand.

In clever ways, the two accounts are related:

- The one quotes the other.
- In both cases, the writing is by divine finger.
- In both cases, to which end...?

We know, don't we, to which endings:

- Dramatically, in the Exodus text, Moses throws down the tablets of the Law. They break. At the foot of the mountain, the shards remain lying, in pieces. In time, imagine them covered by wind-blown sand; eventually,

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God's writing is weather-beaten into mere gravel, into the rough desert sand.

- John 8 shows us Jesus, twice etching something lightly into the ground. No one knows what Jesus writes.

In both cases, soon, God's words are blown away in the wind.

You can *picture* this: God's words, mere dust drifting away in that desert climate...

Twice, you could *see* in your mind's eye, here in Exodus 22 and in John 8, real Holy Writ.

Both times, presently, nothing is left of the tablets or the imprints in the sand.

The implications for our Christian faith seem frightening!:

- We do have faith, or perhaps: we want to have faith;
- For that, one way or another, we require something to hold on to. If not a remnant of the actual cross of Jesus, if not an icon as a painted symbol of the Trinity, if not a direct revelation in which my very being is taken up to God; if not any of those, then at least, at least – let me have the writings of God...
- But, as Bob Dylan almost sang, these writings, my friend, are blowing in the wind; the writings are blowing in the wind...

Exodus 22 and John 8 show us faith without Scriptures...

What? That's heresy! How can that be? – 'Faith without Scriptures' ...?

Of course, 'faith without scriptures' as non-faith is not true. In many, many ways, that is simply not true.

*For one*, here we have, in the Bible, these two accounts telling us something. The Bible itself relates for us these two... mystifying events: God's own words disappearing into dust.

What is more, both these texts are much like each of us: complex, composite beings, with a history in the

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background; if you get to know us, each of us may at first seem simple. Straightforward. But a closer look, if anyone dares, makes you *all the more engaging*. The same with these Scriptures we read together. Completely life-like, both of them have a history in the background. Both texts tell something that has already been told for a long time. Both of them are buttoned directly onto Bible texts that have already shaped faith. That is why we see here: already *in the Bible*, these two accounts take up earlier confessions and then tell them anew. With these two texts, as with each of us: there is a history in the background, and precisely therefore faith is again refreshed.

That has been the task of the Bible, already as it had come into being, and as it has since then been read and applied, always; and reread and applied again. Through years, decades, centuries, the Bible has been creating faith; reinventing or reinvigorating the experience with God; through the years, your experience *of God*.

The Bible does not intend to create faith *in its self*. Always, our faith is foremost *in God*.

Nor do *I* produce *my* faith in God; I cannot generate belief. It is in the encounter with the Bible that I find faith created within me.

Differently put:

- In our journey with God... no, in God's journey with us, it is, for *each* of us, not primarily I who read the Bible. It is the Bible that reads me.
- In being engaged with the Scriptures, it is not our *accomplishments* that bring us, in the first place, to understand the Bible. We merely find ourselves *understood* by the Bible. God touches you.

And that is how our faith has wandered through the centuries and has travelled the world. In this way we live with God; better said: in this way, God lives with us.

During all this time, the Bible speaks anew; Scripture asserts *itself*, in each time and place. Already *in the Bible*

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texts that happens – as we see from the two texts we consider together this morning. The Bible asserts itself, by showing *away* from itself, to God.

As should we. In each church's life; in each individual's life: we do not live, work believe to showcase ourselves. We live *away* from ourselves, for God, neighbour, world ...

That is why, for almost a thousand years now, Theology has been studied at universities – taught and investigated, with insights sought for new times, in different places, under changed circumstances. Always, *en route*. Properly, in humility. As we seek (see Luke 10:27) with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind, to love the Lord our God and those around us. Faith seeking understanding – as the thousand-year-old formulation summarises this.

Faith seeking understanding...

Such 'writing' of ours, our faith, is on the floor too: it keeps being blown away, like desert dust.

For two reasons:

- So that our faith remains primarily in God.
- So that we do not stagnate, but keep to God's journey in our time and place.

\* \* \*

In confessing this, I speak from a denomination that is breaking in two.

To see the church to which one belongs split at its seams is a forsaken experience.

And why are we broken and breaking? Ironically: on the Bible. More accurately: on our understanding of the Bible. As is the case with quite a few other denominations across our continent, and in the rest of the world too.

It is not on God that we differ. We all find ourselves *overcome* by the same faith – in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We experience our given grace nowhere else.

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And then – how bizarre – we deploy the Bible as a weapon of faith destruction.

May God, whom we love, forgive us:

When we put the Bible between us;

When we, in doing so, lose the God of love for one another in our trench fights.

Amen

### **A sermon created by ChatGPT<sup>5</sup>**

#### **Embracing unity through the power of biblical interpretation**

##### *Introduction*

Grace and peace to all of you, my beloved university students, who have gathered here today in search of wisdom, guidance, and a deeper understanding of our faith. As we delve into God's Word, let us open our hearts and minds to the powerful message that lies within the pages of Exodus 22 and John 8. These texts, rich in historical significance and well exegeted, carry profound meaning that is applicable to our current context as denizens of South African urban life. Today, we shall explore these passages and seek to find unity in the face of our denomination's struggle with Bible interpretation.

##### *Exegesis of Exodus 22*

In Exodus 22, we find ourselves immersed in a legal framework designed to promote justice and fairness within the Hebrew community. It covers various areas of human interaction, addressing issues such as theft, damage, and moral transgressions. Within this framework, we gain insights into the nature of God's character and our responsibility as his people.

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5 The prompts employed to obtain this sermon, were discussed above.

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One particular verse that captivates our attention is Exodus 22:21, where God instructs His people to show compassion to the stranger, the widow, and the fatherless. Such teaching reveals God's heart for the marginalised and voiceless, compelling us to extend love, compassion, and justice to those in need. This commandment presents an opportunity to examine our own hearts and evaluate how we treat those who are vulnerable in our South African urban context.

In the face of our denomination's divisive struggle with Bible interpretation, we must apply the principles of Exodus 22. We are called to show compassion and love towards fellow believers who may embrace different understandings of Scripture. Instead of allowing division to consume our fellowship, let us extend grace, understanding, and a willingness to engage in humble dialogue.

### *Exegesis of John 8*

John 8, a chapter filled with profound teaching and confrontation, begins with the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus' response challenges the religious leaders' legalistic mindset and exposes their hypocrisy. Instead of condemning the woman, Jesus extends forgiveness and, in doing so, reminds us of the transformative power of grace.

As educated university students, we are charged with embracing knowledge and utilising it for the betterment of society. However, we must not forget that true knowledge is not found solely in intellectual prowess but also in our understanding of the grace and love demonstrated by Christ. John 8:12 holds a powerful revelation: Jesus is the light of the world, guiding us out from the darkness of ignorance and into a life illuminated by his truth.

In a South African urban context where our denomination is in danger of splitting over Bible interpretation, Jesus' teachings in John 8 remind us to approach our differences with humility and love. Just as Christ extended forgiveness to the adulterous woman, so too must we extend grace to one another, recognising that none of us holds a monopoly

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on biblical understanding. Let us commit to engaging in respectful dialogue, seeking the wisdom of his Holy Spirit and the unity that comes from his truth.

### *Application to our South African urban context*

In our South African urban context, the danger of splitting our denomination on matters of Bible interpretation looms ominously. It is evident that our diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences shape the way we understand and interpret Scripture. However, we must not allow these differences to lead to division and strife.

We find hope and guidance in the example set by our biblical texts. Just as Exodus 22 encourages us to show compassion towards the marginalised, we should extend the same spirit of compassion to our fellow believers who hold differing interpretations. Likewise, by embracing the transformative power of grace highlighted in John 8, we can approach our differences with humility and love.

Let us not forget that our unity as believers is of immense importance in a city that is marred by division and inequality. Our call is to stand united, using our diverse interpretations as a catalyst for growth, understanding, and a deeper appreciation for the richness of God's Word.

### *Closing*

As we conclude this sermon, my dear university students, let us carry with us the reminder of our responsibility to be ambassadors of unity and love in the midst of divisive struggles. May we find solace in God's enduring truths, understanding that our love for one another supersedes our differences. Let us commit to engaging in respectful dialogue, seeking the wisdom that comes from the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we do so, we will ensure the continued flourishing of our denomination and bear witness to the transformative power of biblical interpretation in our South African urban context.

Amen.

## Outlines of an evaluation

Although the purpose of this section is to give only modest comparative remarks on the two sermons (one by a human being and one by ChatGPT), we would first like to consider again the purpose of preaching, as discussed earlier. The objective of preaching is to convey the gospel, the scriptural texts, to the audience within a particular setting (context and time) and circumstance. Furthermore, preaching entails the proclamation of the redemptive acts which have significance for humanity. Embracing this gospel, individuals experience transformative encounters, leading to the initiation of a renewed existence inside the realm of Christ. We also indicated that preaching includes the instructional practice in a religious community, aimed at fostering spiritual growth and deepening the faith of its members, while also facilitating a greater understanding of the principles and virtues associated with a life devoted to Christ. Additionally, the purpose of preaching is to motivate and empower the members of the congregation to engage in acts of compassion towards everyone.

Having said that, just to remind the reader that these two sermons of course stand loose from the broader liturgy and worship service; for this experiment, the emphasis is on the sermon itself. Secondly, the voice of the preacher is here also not audible, as we are working only with the texts provided. An evaluation of an audible sermon in both cases could have significantly altered the assessment of these two sermons. Thirdly, from the first (human) sermon it is evident that the preacher possesses exegetical knowledge, as the sermon was more textual/scriptural than the ChatGPT sermon. Fourthly, whereas in the first (human) sermon, the Old and New Testament texts are brought into discussion with one another in the sermon, there is no such clear link made in the AI (ChatGPT) sermon. Fifthly, the first (human) sermon was theologically sound, with the theological depth being evident. Perhaps because the preacher had a specific focus in mind; therefore the sermon was also more coherent. It might be possible that if we gave further specific prompts to ChatGPT, for example, the verses in central focus in both

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chosen Bible texts, the sermon might have been constituted differently. Lastly, it was clear that the human preacher had a better understanding of the audience and was familiar with the context; this cannot be said of the ChatGPT sermon, as there was only a general reference to context.

When employing appropriate prompts for ChatGPT, it is conceivable that it could generate sermons that are deemed satisfactory; also, in only written form. Nevertheless, several additional theological questions arise when considering and assessing an AI-generated ChatGPT sermon, including the significance of prayer and the Holy Spirit, the genuineness of the sermon maker/preacher, the emotional investment in the preached message and the transformative journey undergone by the preacher during the sermon creation process.

Further questions which can be asked:

- What does the sermon say about God?
- What does the sermon say about Jesus?
- What does the sermon say about the (role of the) Holy Spirit?
- What does the sermon say about the Bible contexts?
- What does the sermon say about the specific current context?
- How are these contexts – ancient and modern – brought into discussion with each other?
- What is the assignment/task set before the audience?
- Can hope be found in the sermon?
- Which/whose voices are being heard in the sermon?
- Does the listener in the congregation experience the living voice of the gospel (*viva vox evangelii*) in the preaching event?

We would like to invite readers, based on our orienting points (exegesis, criteria for Reformed preaching, etc.) and their insights, now to compare the two sermons themselves in greater detail, for further assessment and engagement.

## Conclusion

Preaching is, *inter alia*, about what to say to whom, and when. It is about the art of connecting the gospel (what) to the audience (whom), at a specific moment in time (when). This is true of all preaching, but, we will contend: that it is particularly true of what could be called prophetic preaching. False prophecy could have good content, and even sound like the gospel (what); it could be seemingly addressed to the relevant people (whom) ... but it misses the time, i.e. on the timing (when). Therefore, false prophecy often sounds popular ... but it is still false: the 'right' content, delivered to the 'right' people, but it does not fit into the 'right' time. False prophecy might be correct, but it is still wrong; as a matter of fact, it can be so correct, that it is so wrong.

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