The Metaphors We Preach By: Preaching as Graffiti

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Abstract
This article describes and discusses preaching as graffiti. That is, it is an article about the metaphors used for preaching and the potential of novel metaphors. One of the ways in which people conceptualise and describe preaching is through metaphors. These are the metaphors 'we preach by'. Some metaphors are conventional. They express the familiar but do not communicate all that there is say about the nature of preaching. Other metaphors are novel metaphors. These metaphors bring fresh perspectives to the practice of preaching. This can be seen through the novel metaphor of preaching as graffiti. It is a metaphor that associates preaching with graffiti through their shared performative nature. It also resonates theologically with the metaphorical use of the language of 'writing' in the Scriptures to describe the behaviour-changing influence of God's Word on people's lives. Furthermore, it is a metaphor that carries inferences that highlight features of preaching that are sometimes hidden or downplayed in other more conventional metaphors. These features include the artistic, transgressive, the interruptive, and the ephemeral nature of preaching as it contends with other, sometimes unrecognised, words spoken into people's lives.

Keywords
Preaching; metaphors; graffiti; art

Introduction

'Shifting metaphors means changing perspectives — making new connections and seeing in new ways — for both the creator of and the audience for the metaphor.'[1]

This article describes and discusses preaching as graffiti. That is, it is an article about the metaphors used for preaching and the potential of novel metaphors. One of the ways people describe and conceptualise

[1] Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Longrove, IL: Waveland, 2018), p. 289.

preaching is by metaphors. These metaphors come from a variety of sources. These metaphors are more than literary ornaments but shape and express the understanding of the practice of preaching. Some metaphors are conventional and familiar. Other metaphors, however, novel metaphors, can challenge dominant understandings and suggest alternative perspectives on practice. In this article, therefore, I describe and discuss the significance of the metaphors used for preaching and the insights which can be gained through using the novel metaphor of preaching as graffiti. I proceed as follows. First, I introduce the nature of the metaphors 'we preach by', their significance for shaping understanding and practice, and the contribution made by novel metaphors. Second, I describe and discuss preaching as graffiti. I do this with reference to the nature of graffiti as writing, performance theory, and Scripture. Third I describe and discuss some of the inferences that follow from conceptualising preaching as graffiti. Finally, I draw the article to a conclusion. Throughout the article, I interact with literature on metaphor, graffiti, and preaching. Like a good novel metaphor and some forms of graffiti, the goal is to be playful and provocative.

The Metaphors We Preach By

In this section I introduce the 'metaphors we preach by'.[2] One common way people conceptualise, describe, and discuss preaching is through using metaphors. This approach lies at the heart of Thomas Long's popular textbook, *The Witness of Preaching*.[3] In this book, he asks, 'What does it mean to preach?'.[4] He then answers this question with reference to three '"master" metaphors' for preaching, those of 'herald', 'pastor', and 'storyteller/poet', before adding his own favoured metaphor of 'witness'. As will be demonstrated below, these are merely four of many metaphors for preaching.

[2] This is a deliberate play on the title of the influential book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003; first published, 1980).
[3] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).
[4] Long, *Witness*, pp. 11–57.

To state the above, however, begs the question of what a metaphor is. This question is important because the nature of metaphors and their function is an area of study in its own right. On the one hand, in the literature there is an emphasis on metaphor as a function of language. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on metaphor as a function of thought. This, in turn, leads to consideration of the relationship between metaphor in language and thought.[5] David L. Ritchie's definition holds the linguistic and the conceptual understandings together when he writes that a metaphor is 'seeing, experiencing, or talking about something in terms of something else'.[6] This definition has two additional benefits. First, it indicates that metaphors consist of two main components brought into comparison. These are the topic and the metaphorical description. In the literature on metaphor, these are sometimes described as the 'tenor' and the 'vehicle', or the 'target domain' and the 'source domain'.[7] Second, Ritchie's definition blurs the strict grammatical lines between metaphors and similes. This is not to say that they are identical. Instead, a simile can be regarded as a more explicit form of 'signalled' metaphor while recognising that not all metaphors are similes.[8] In this article, therefore, I am drawing on current understandings of metaphors which highlight metaphors as the way in which people understand their experiences, shape their thinking, and express their understandings.

When it comes specifically to the topic of preaching, people use a variety of metaphors. [9] Many of these metaphors come directly from

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[5] Zsófia Demjén and Elena Semino, 'Introduction: Metaphor and Language', in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language,* ed. by Elena Semino and Zsófia Demjén (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1–10.

[6] David L. Ritchie, *Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 8. This definition is consistent with the slightly longer 'consensus' definition given by Demjén and Semino 'that metaphor involves the perception of similarities or correspondences between unlike entities and processes, so that we can see, experience, think and communicate about one thing in terms of another' ('Introduction', p. 1).

[7] This language is used throughout the literature, e.g. Ritchie, *Metaphor*, pp. 10–11.

[8] Aletta G. Dorst, 'Textual Patterning of Metaphor', in *Handbook of Metaphor*, ed. by Semino and Demjén, pp. 178–92.

[9] Some metaphors are expressed in terms of the preacher, and some are expressed in terms of the practice of preaching. Both are inextricably connected in both conventional and novel metaphors. It is because preaching is 'heralding' that the preacher is a 'herald' and because preaching is 'Jazz' that the preacher is a 'Jazz musician'. I would suggest that generally metaphorical development moves from the practice to the preacher. In this article, I present the

the Scriptures. These scriptural metaphors include the preacher as a herald, pastor, witness, teacher, ambassador, fisher, steward, and approved worker.[10] However, how people own, adopt, and develop these scriptural metaphors can vary considerably. Thus, for some, the metaphor of the preacher as a 'fisherman' (sic) (Mark 1:16–20) means that it is valid for people to use the language of 'bait', 'lure', and 'net' to describe how they should try to win others to the Christian faith.[11] Others, however, while challenging the gendered and violent nature of the metaphor, still value the emphasis associated with the metaphor on the 'call' to ministry in the context of life.[12] Therefore, while some metaphors for preaching come directly from Scripture, how people appropriate them can vary according to different views on the nature and interpretation of Scripture.

While many metaphors have a direct biblical basis, others emerge from theological reflection on other metaphors in conjunction with the practice of preaching. So, for example, if God is love, then 'God is lover', and preachers who seek to communicate this God do so as 'lovers'.[13] As demonstrated, such development by theological reflection does not necessarily abandon biblical allusion. Yet the approach is different from that discussed above. The emphasis is more theologically reflective than biblically exegetical. Moreover, these reflections can engage with associations beyond the text. Thus, Charles Campbell considers the historical practice of street preaching, including naked street preaching, in the light of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, to talk about preachers as 'holy fools' and 'sacred jesters'.[14] In such instances, we have metaphors extended and generated through theological reflection.

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different metaphors the way they are framed in the literature but focus on the practice of preaching in the development of my own discussion of preaching as graffiti.

[10] John Stott lists some of these biblical metaphors in *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 135–37.

[11] Noel C. Gibson, *The Fisherman's Basket: Open Air and Other Methods of Evangelism* (New South Wales: Freedom in Christ Ministries, 1984).

[12] Lincoln E. Galloway, 'Preacher as Fisher', in *Slow of Speech and Unclean Lips*, ed. by Robert Stephen Reid (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), pp. 109–18.

[13] Lucy Lind Hogan, 'Preacher as Lover', in *Slow of Speech*, ed. by Reid, pp. 35–56.

[14] Charles L. Campbell, 'Preacher as Ridiculous Person: Naked Street Preaching and Homiletical Foolishness', in *Slow of Speech*, ed. by Reid, pp. 89–101 (p. 97).

Other and often novel metaphors come from the association of preaching with similar and yet different practices. This involves a move to the contemporary. We see this with metaphors related to the performing arts. Thus, we have preaching as art,[15] as theatre,[16] as community theatre,[17] as Jazz,[18] as Blues.[19] In these cases, the associations may not always be obvious. Instead, the similarities belong at the level of detail, conceptuality, and practice. Such associations will require explanation. Despite this explanation, some will treat such metaphors with suspicion or rejection. This suspicion may be due to a perceived lack of biblical or theological rationale. Or it may be that people consider the metaphors inappropriate for preaching. Thus, when Joseph M. Webb discusses preaching as 'comedy', he opens his book with responses to biblical, theological, ethical, and rhetorical objections.[20] Consequently, proponents might need to not merely explain but to defend such novel metaphors. There are, therefore, a wide variety of metaphors from various sources used to conceptualise and describe the practice of preaching.

While a variety of metaphors are used to describe the practice of preaching, they are not mere literary ornaments. Instead, the metaphors people preach by are a matter of identity concerning how they both understand and practise preaching. Kate Bruce highlights this in her discussion of various images for preaching when she asks,

> Just who do you think you are as a preacher? The question is a serious one. How the preacher imagines, sees or looks upon their role will affect the way they engage with the task of preaching. The metaphors that master us shape our practice.[21]

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15 Darius L. Salter, *Preaching as Art: Biblical Storytelling for a Media Generation* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2013).

16 Alec Gilmore, *Preaching as Theatre* (London: SCM Press, 1996).

17 Stuart Blythe, 'Collaborative Preaching as Community Theatre', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 14, no. 3 (2014), 5–21.

18 Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004).

19 Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in A Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in An Age of Despair* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

20 Joseph M. Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998). While Webb's book is about preaching 'and' comedy, he goes beyond discussing humour in a sermon to discussing the 'comic sermon'. As such, I would contend that he is discussing preaching 'as' comedy.

21 Kate Bruce, *Igniting the Heart: Preaching and the Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 2015), p. 107.

This claim by Bruce can be related to what Robert Reid, in reference to preaching, calls 'tropes'.[22] Drawing on the work of Kenneth Burke on metaphor, Reid states that a trope is a 'mental model', one which 'we take on, like a mantle, when we step into the pulpit'.[23] Consequently, such tropes are a matter of 'preaching identity' and preaching 'difference'.[24] The significance of metaphors in shaping thinking is supported further by the influential work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. For they argue it is through metaphors that 'we define our reality' and from which we 'draw inferences' and upon which we 'set goals, make commitments, and execute plans'.[25] Metaphors, therefore, including those used for preaching, are more than semantic ornaments but represent ways of understanding, experiencing, and living in the world.[26]

The identity-shaping nature of metaphors for preaching is heightened by their theological content. Consequently, metaphors for preaching encapsulate and reveal not merely theoretical understandings of the nature of preaching but theological understandings. Therefore, just as there are a variety of metaphors for preaching, there are a variety of theologies expressed in and through these metaphors. Reid, in discussing the different metaphors for preaching, helpfully suggests that at the heart of the theological differences in various metaphors is the matter of 'agency'. Agency is how people understand 'the relationship between the human and Divine in preaching'.[27] Therefore, questions of agency, how people see God as operative in the event, are a feature of the theological nature of metaphors for preaching. This is demonstrated in Long's book *Witness*.[28] In comparing metaphors, he makes it clear that the differences are not merely stylistic or semantic but theological and accompanied by practical inferences. Consequently, as Long demonstrates, the extent to which preachers believe that the effectual

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22 Robert Stephen Reid, 'Introduction', in *Slow of Speech*, ed. by Reid, pp. 1–12 (pp. 6–9).
23 Reid, 'Introduction', p. 6.
24 Reid, Introduction', p. 8.
25 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, p. 158.
26 The work of Lakoff and Johnson on metaphors is discussed and developed in a variety of the literature.
27 Reid, 'Introduction', pp. 2–3.
28 Long, *Witness*. See note 3 above.

nature of the preaching event is dependent upon the transcendent action of God can impact the extent to which preachers feel that they need to give attention to practical matters of rhetoric.[29]

While however, there are a variety of identity-shaping metaphors for preaching, some metaphors are more prevalent than others. This can be because of their close association with Scripture, historical longevity, an apparent clear association with the practice they describe, or simply regular use. Whatever the reason, such 'conventional metaphors' are those where 'the language community as a whole has accepted the word, expression or conceptual frame and has incorporated it into the standard repertoire of the language'.[30] Thus as discussed above, Long suggests that in at least parts of the preaching community of the Global North, there a number of conventional or 'master' metaphors. Moreover, he suggests that while people might have different opinions and perspectives,

> The herald image was the most prevalent metaphor advanced by homileticians in the twentieth century when they sought to describe what they believed the role of the preacher ought to be, though it has probably not been the most influential for the actual practice of preaching.[31]

This metaphor of herald comes from the biblical language of preaching as 'proclamation'. Thus, the famous twentieth-century Scottish preacher James S. Stewart entitled his Warrack Lectures, *Heralds of God*, stating 'this is demonstrably the New Testament conception of the preacher's task'.[32] In turn, as discussed by both Long and Bruce, it is a metaphor that gained theological support from the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth.[33] Indeed, since Christian preaching claims something of a divine nature and, unlike much other public speaking, requires engaging with a sacred text, the metaphor of the preacher as herald has much to commend it. Furthermore, as a conventional metaphor, it enables a shared understanding of what people mean when they say preaching. While the inferences associated with the metaphor can be discussed and

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[29] Long, *Witness*, p. 21.
[30] Gill Philip, 'Conventional and Novel Metaphors in Language', in *Handbook of Metaphor,* ed. by Semino and Demjén, pp. 219–32 (p. 223).
[31] Long, *Witness*, 20.
[32] James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), p. 5.
[33] Long, *Witness*, pp. 20–30; Bruce, *Igniting*, pp. 121–27.

debated, the general idea is clear: someone proclaims a message received from another.[34]

The above said, the existence of conventional metaphors for preaching is not without its difficulties. For example, they can be so commonly accepted by those who use them that they lose their metaphorical nature. That is, people treat them as literal descriptions of the practice.[35] This is problematic because metaphors not only disclose similarities but obscure differences.[36] This means that their description is only ever partial while suggesting the definitive. The fact is, there are ways in which a preacher is like a herald but also ways in which they are not. A related problem with conventional metaphors is that they can subjugate the significance of other metaphors. Aaron P. Edwards, in his thoughtful and detailed work, argues contra Long that 'the "herald" should be seen not as a *function* of the preacher but as a fundamental *identity*' and that the other images come '*underneath*' the image of herald and are informed by it.[37] To be sure, this 'ordering' allows the identity of the herald to be maintained 'without discounting' what the other perspectives emphasise.[38] Yet, in this strategy, it appears that the alternative images can only complement and not critique the dominant idea. Thus, they are minimised. Furthermore, depending on their use and interpretation, the privileging of only certain conventional metaphors with their attendant inferences can leave some excluded from that which is called the practice of preaching. Thus, Anna Carter Florence turned to 'preaching as testimony' to allow the voices of marginalised women to be heard as preaching.[39] Likewise, Moss offered 'Blue Note preaching' to articulate an expression of Black preaching

[34] It is interesting to note that Long does not include the metaphor of the 'preacher as teacher' as one of his master metaphors. I would contend that this is another important conventional metaphor. However, in some circles the relationship between teaching and preaching is somewhat contested and that requires a discussion beyond the scope of this article.

[35] In traditional metaphorical theory, writers described such metaphors as 'dead' metaphors (Ritchie, *Metaphor*, p. 209).

[36] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, p. 10.

[37] Aaron P. Edwards, *A Theology of Preaching and Dialectic: Scriptural Tension, Heraldic Proclamation and the Pneumatological Moment* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), p. 131 (italics original).

[38] Edwards, *Theology*, p. 131.

[39] Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

because, in his experience, the preaching he knew 'was not confirmed or ratified by seminaries or western gatekeepers'.[40] Thus, while conventional metaphors are useful, on their own they do not describe the full variety of the nature of the practice of preaching and can indeed be exclusive.

In addition to conventional metaphors for preaching, there are also novel metaphors. Some of these, like Blues and Jazz have been mentioned above. Like conventional metaphors, they operate by providing a 'coherent structure, highlighting some things and hiding others'.[41] In contrast to the conventional metaphors, however, novel metaphors can offer fresh and creative perspectives for understanding and practice. On this, Gill Philip helpfully explains,

> At the level of language, novelty (the product of a creative mind) occurs when words are used metaphorically in ways which differ from their conventional applications […] At the level of thought, novelty introduces new elements into the existing conceptual frame which force the concept to be re-elaborated.[42]

Novel metaphors, therefore, can be simply playful in their appeal. In terms of language, they can present something in more creative and compelling ways and since 'the brain is pre-programmed to notice the unusual, so novel metaphors — once encountered — stick in our mind'.[43] More significantly, novel metaphors invite new ways of understanding and conceptualising the practice under consideration. This requires sufficient 'similarity' between the topic and the metaphor but also some 'cognitive effort' for the associations to be fully understood.[44] The level of novelty will have an impact on the amount of cognitive effort required to make sense of the metaphor, and Philip talks about the hesitation that occurs 'as we rapidly try to connect the meaning we expected and the word that actually appears, running through our mental repository of meanings of the unexpected word'.[45] Of course, both conventionality and novelty are relative terms based

[40] Moss, *Blue Note Preaching*, p. vii.
[41] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, p. 139.
[42] Philip, 'Conventional and Novel', p. 224.
[43] Philip, 'Conventional and Novel', p. 224.
[44] Philip, 'Conventional and Novel', p. 224.
[45] Philip, 'Conventional and Novel', p. 225.

upon prior knowledge and experience. Novel metaphors, therefore, may require greater explanation and signalling when people introduce them in order to help map the metaphorical associations between the topic and the metaphoric vehicle.[46]

In sum, one of the ways people discuss and understand preaching is by way of metaphors. These metaphors come from a variety of different sources. These metaphors can represent and reinforce important convictions regarding the nature of preaching and its attendant practice. Some metaphors have a conventional nature based on the common ground of established associations. In contrast to these, novel metaphors can enable different perspectives as they employ different associations. I will now demonstrate this more fully through a discussion of preaching as graffiti.

Preaching as Graffiti Writing

To describe preaching as graffiti is to use a novel metaphor. It describes preaching in terms of a seldom or little used comparison.[47] This requires some discussion. In this section, therefore, I will discuss the association between preaching and graffiti. First, I clarify that by graffiti I mean graffiti writing. Second, I highlight the performative connection between preaching and graffiti. Third, I offer a biblical and theological reflection on preaching as graffiti. In this way I will establish the mapping between preaching as the topic and graffiti as the vehicle of meaning.

The term 'graffiti' finds its origins in the Latin meaning 'to scratch'. It is a plural term, the singular being 'graffito'. Graffiti itself has been around for as long as people have intentionally made marks on

[46] The language of 'signalling' is used in the literature to describe the processes through which the metaphorical nature of a word may be introduced and highlighted.

[47] In the literature which I have read, I am only aware of one minor reference to preaching and graffiti. I will refer to it below. To be sure there are places that discuss graffiti or street art as preaching, such as 'Public Art as Prophetic Word', <https://nextchurch.net/public-art-as-prophetic-word/> [accessed 19 August 2022]. Although related, graffiti as preaching is a different metaphorical construction from preaching as graffiti in terms of which element is the topic, and which is the vehicle. I am discussing preaching as graffiti.

rocks or walls.[48] However, the 'modern graffiti movement' began in Philadelphia and New York in the mid to late 1960s.[49] Since then, it has been a movement which has developed. These developments have included the variety of surfaces on which graffiti is written, the materials used to produce the graffiti, the content of the writing, the style of the writing, the size of the writing, the inclusion of embellishments to accompany the writing, the presence of images, images as street murals, and the public's perceptions of graffiti. Practitioners and observers contest these developments and the accompanying views of what constitutes graffiti.[50] Nevertheless, modern graffiti, in various forms, is now, like its historical precursors, a global phenomenon.[51]

While graffiti takes a variety of shapes and forms, one early and regular concept associated with graffiti is that graffiti is 'writing'. This can include slogans and statements or word-based images.[52] Early modern practitioners certainly referred to themselves as writers, and a variety of writers commonly describe them in this way.[53] As the modern movement developed, with cultural, ethnic, and regional variations, the writing became more elaborate. This was expressed not merely through the addition of embellishments such as 'arrows, halos, and crowns' but in 'the way that letters were designed and executed, not as expedients but as expression unto themselves'.[54] As Susan Phillips writes in her introduction to graffiti,

> As a medium of communication, graffiti lies somewhere between art and language. Words become signifiers, solutions, and slogans; that is, they cease to be individual words but become symbols and images, which communicate

[48] The 'Introduction' in *Scribbling Through History: Graffiti, Places and People from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. by Chloé Ragazzoli, Ömür Harmansah, Chiara Salvador, and Elizabeth Frood (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 1–15, is helpful for such introductory details.
[49] Roger Gastman, *Wall Writers: Graffiti in Its Innocence* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2016), p. 18.
[50] Something of the diversity of practices and opinions can be read in the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, ed. by Jeffrey Ian Ross (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
[51] Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2010), pp. 394–95.
[52] I do not consider all street art to be graffiti if it is primarily mural based, but I see graffiti as a particular expression of street art. The relationship between graffiti and street art is variously discussed in the literature.
[53] Gastman and Neelon, *History*, p. 5.
[54] Gastman and Neelon, *History*, p. 74.

> at a variety of levels. These word images are laden with visual modifiers of style, color, placement, and form.[55]

Phillips also points out that some graffiti writing correlates 'more closely to spoken words than other types'.[56] Reflecting upon graffiti associated with communist struggle, she states, 'We can imagine people at a demonstration yelling these words or picture such slogans in leaflets strewn across city streets. This type of graffiti is closely correlated to words as they exist both in speech and formalised writing.'[57] This type of correlation between the spoken word and written graffiti certainly seems evident in written slogans such as, 'It's only Rock n' Roll',[58] 'Support the Miners', [59] 'Boring',[60] 'God Bless America',[61] 'Make Love not War',[62] obscene references, and religious statements such as 'Pray',[63] 'Worship God',[64] and 'Jesus Saves'.[65] However, it is not so evident in other word-based forms where other considerations may play a more significant part than a didactic message.[66] Be this as it may, at the core, graffiti writing is 'an art of the word'.[67] It is an artistic word-based act of communication where the words and letters are central to the imagery even if it is accompanied by more explicit pictures.[68] (See Figure 1 for some different examples of graffiti writing accompanied by an explicit image.) This is what I mean by graffiti in this article.

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55 Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbangin' Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 39.
56 Phillips, *Wallbangin',* p. 43.
57 Phillips, *Wallbangin*, p. 41.
58 Roger Perry, *The Writing on the Wall: Replica Reissue with Archive Shots and New Features* (London: Plain Crisp Books, 2015; first published, 1976), p. 27.
59 Perry, Writing, p. 18.
60 Banksy, *Wall and Pieces* (London: Century, 2006), pp. 126–27.
61 Gastman, *Wall Writers*, pp. 2–3.
62 Miyase Christensen and Tindra Thor, 'The Reciprocal City: Performing Solidarity – Mediating Space Through Street Art and Graffiti', *International Communication Gazette*, 79, no. 6–7 (2017), 584–612, (p. 586).
63 Gastman, *Wall Writers*, p. 24.
64 Gastman, *Wall Writers*, p. 55.
65 Gastman and Neelon, *History*, p. 54.
66 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 39.
67 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 40.
68 Again, the point here is not that words are not images or artistic but to distinguish this from murals and street art while recognising that the lines of difference may be thin.

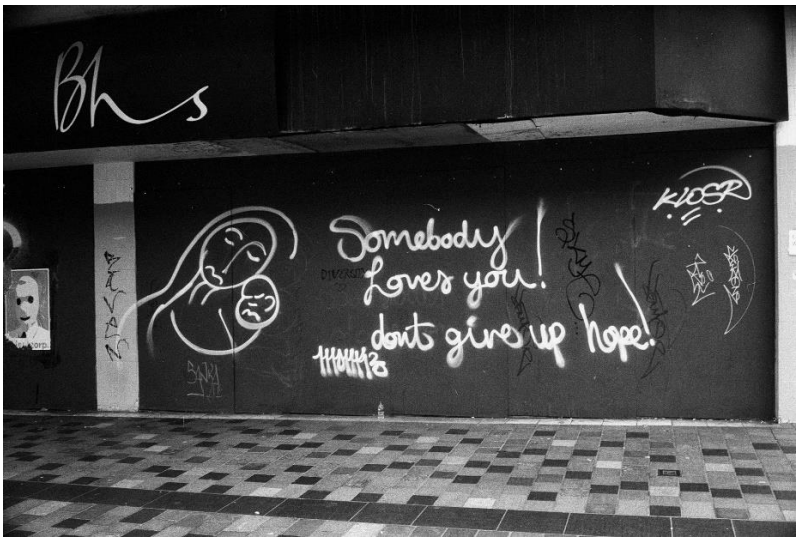

Figure 1: Photographer Stephen Blythe, Glasgow, 2020. Used with permission.

Following the above, the metaphorical ground association between preaching and graffiti is the 'word based' performative nature of both practices.[69] To be sure, some graffiti writers, given the illegal nature of their activities, may wish to remain hidden from all but perhaps a few colleagues while producing their work. Yet, even then, self-expression, recognition, and identity are important aspects of graffiti writing as encapsulated in the 'tagging' of a 'name' in one's own neighbourhood and then beyond.[70] Furthermore, some graffiti writers have gained not merely an insider but a wider recognition and status for their work.[71] Be this as it may, both preaching and graffiti typically involve a person intentionally expressing themselves in a public place with an intended audience.[72] As such, in different ways, graffiti, like

[69] Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 40.

[70] Lee Bofkin, *Global Street Art: The Street Artists and Trends Taking Over the World* (New York, NY: Firefly Books, 2014), p. 13.

[71] This can include notoriety such as Banksy (though not all would see his stencilled work as graffiti writing) or legal and gallery-based graffiti. See Ronald Kramer, 'Straight from the Underground: New York City's Legal Graffiti Writing Culture', in *Handbook of Graffiti,* ed. by Jeffrey Ian Ross, pp. 113–23.

[72] A common feature of graffiti and preaching is that at times the performance is intended for insider audiences and at times for more general audiences.

preaching, involves the various aspects of performativity that are 'Being', 'Doing', 'Showing doing', and 'Explaining "showing doing"'.[73] The latter refers to reflexivity, evidenced in how writers would practise their work and rate the work of others and in the subsequent literature on the subject.[74] More specifically, however, some writers and commentators describe graffiti as performance art.[75] As such, graffiti as a metaphor for preaching belongs most closely to those metaphors described above that come from the performing arts, such as theatre, Jazz, and Blues. Indeed, it is Moss in his work on 'Blue Note' preaching who makes one of the few brief references to preaching as graffiti in his discussion of Hip Hop.[76]

While the primary association between preaching and graffiti are their performative natures, the metaphor is not without biblical allusion or theological potential. In this respect, it is interesting to note that writers on both ancient and modern graffiti describe the practice with reference to the idiom of 'the writing on the wall'.[77] It is unclear to what extent the various writers on graffiti relate this idiom to Scripture. Yet, in her book *Wallbangin'*, Phillips includes a lengthy quotation from Daniel 5:5–7, 17, 23–31.[78] She later describes that incident of the disembodied handwriting 'upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace' (KJV) and what follows as 'perhaps the most famous interpretation of graffiti'.[79] This interpretation was one of judgement. In contrast, in John 7:53–8:11, in what Chris Keith described as 'perhaps

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73 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, Routledge, 2006), p. 28. I have argued elsewhere that preaching is a performance, including Blythe, 'Collaborative Preaching'.

74 Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 20–26.

75 Jedd Ferrell, 'Foreward: Graffiti, Street Art and the Politics of Complexity', in *Handbook of Graffiti*, ed. by Jeffrey Ian Ross, pp. xxx–xxxvii (p. xxx), Stefano Bloch, 'Challenging the Defence of Graffiti, in Defence of Graffiti', in *Handbook of Graffiti*, ed. by Jeffrey Ian Ross, pp. 440–51 (p. 446).

76 Moss, *Blue Note Preaching*, p. 56.

77 For example, Perry, *Writing*, and Karen B. Stern, *Writing on the Wall: Graffiti and the Forgotten Jews of Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

78 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, pp. xx–xxi.

79 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 16.

the most popular story in gospel tradition',[80] Jesus engages in some 'reverse graffiti',[81] writes in the dust, and refuses to condemn the woman caught in adultery.[82] Both these Scriptures invite intertextual reflection upon the Decalogue given to Moses on 'tables of stone, written with the finger of God' (Exod 31:18, RSV).[83] Both incidents involved an interpreter to explain the significance of what was written.[84] Both of these Scripture passages are also concerned with behaviour. Theologically this resonates with the divine intention to give a 'new' covenant written not on stone but people's hearts (Jer 31:31–34, Heb 8:8–12). In turn, for his part, Paul suggests in 2 Corinthians 3:3 that such heart writing occurs by the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel by ministers of the new covenant. Thus, Martin Luther described Paul's ministry as the 'hand' or the 'pencil' or 'pen' of the writer who is the Spirit.[85] Drawing on such biblical allusion and reflection, it seems valid to claim that preaching is the practice of seeking in the name of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit to *write transformative words on the walls of people's hearts*.[86] To be sure, this language is metaphorical. In a large part it is scriptural. It also resonates with preaching understood as graffiti writing.

In this section, therefore, I have described and discussed graffiti as a novel metaphor for preaching. I have done this with reference to the nature of graffiti as writing, their shared performative nature, and theological reflection on Scripture. In the following section, I draw out and discuss some of the inferences of conceptualising preaching in this way.

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[80] Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 1.

[81] Fiona McDonald describes 'reverse graffiti' as 'a message fingered into the dust' as on a car (*The Popular History of Graffiti from the Ancient World to the Present* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), Kindle, loc. 1494).

[82] The various discussions concerning the textual integrity of this passage, notwithstanding.

[83] Several commentators on Dan 5:5 make the connection with Exod 31:18, e.g., John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 246. Some commentators have also made this intertextual connection to John 8:6, 8, and Keith gives a detailed defence of this intertextual allusion in *Pericope Adulterae,* pp. 175–202.

[84] Massimo Leone discusses the importance of this in Daniel in, 'God's Graffiti: On the Social Aesthetics of Divine Writing', *Aesthetics*, 23, no. 1, (2013), 110–34 (p. 133).

[85] Cited by Scott M. Manetsch, *2 Corinthians* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), p. 146.

[86] Italics mine.

Inferences

To conceptualise preaching as graffiti invites several inferences that extend the understanding of the nature and practice of preaching. As is the function of novel metaphors, this brings to light sometimes hidden, marginalised, or fresh perspectives on the practice of preaching. In this section, I discuss four potential inferences of preaching as graffiti.

To conceptualise preaching as graffiti is to speak of a form of preaching that pays attention to language's artistic nature. Preachers can communicate meaning in a variety of ways. As John S. McClure points out, some language is 'denotative', and some language is 'connotative'.[87] As described and defined by McClure, denotative language aims for controlled semantic clarity.[88] In contrast, connotative language, including the 'artistic' style, is more open, imaginative, and creative, making use of 'figures of speech such as metaphors and similes'.[89] As with graffiti, so in preaching, the performer may choose where they place emphasis given the context.[90] Yet, in preaching, even such a choice is undeniably rhetorical. That is, it is a choice which recognises the persuasive nature of all language and the artistic nature of at least some language in the communication of 'truth'.[91] Certainly, some theological approaches to preaching, including those associated with the metaphor of the herald, are unwilling to highlight the significance of the rhetorical.[92] Yet, this is not so in other traditions, such as in the African American preaching tradition.[93] In his interpretation of this tradition, Moss states, 'the Blue Note preacher views the preaching task as art. Words are the preacher's craft, like the paintbrush of the painter and the instrument of the composer' and again, 'they draw with the paintbrush of the Word, strokes of tone, colors of oratory, auditory dynamics on a

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87 John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 61–85.
88 McClure, *Four*, pp. 72–85.
89 McClure, *Four*, p. 61.
90 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 29.
91 For McClure, the 'Semantic Code' is about how preachers communicate 'meaning' through language and is related to convictions regarding the nature of truth (pp. 56–58).
92 Long, *Witness*, p. 21.
93 Frank A. Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), pp. 56–69.

drab canvas of a broken world'.[94] Of course, there can be a danger that an overemphasis on the rhetorical and the beautiful devoid of theological content can lead to mere entertainment. Yet as Frank Thomas points out, this need not be the case.[95] Furthermore, the artistic may not only be rhetorically valid but rhetorically necessary in preaching, which wishes to capture people's imaginations so that they can see and live in the world differently. Thus, Thomas defines one feature of prophetic or 'dangerous' sermons as being that they use 'the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates the human spirit by touching the emotive chords of wonder, mystery, and hope'.[96] Preaching as graffiti leans into this rhetorical tradition of giving attention to the artistic as an integral part of communicating the message.

Second, to talk about preaching as graffiti invites us to consider the transgressive nature of preaching. A commonly associated feature of graffiti is that it is illegal.[97] As indicated above, however, not all graffiti is illegal.[98] In turn, legality is a relative concept. Be this as it may, people regularly perceive graffiti as a practice that transgresses dominant and controlling social norms regarding acceptable behaviour, property rights, the nature of art, and the public space. This condemnation seems far from commissioned graffiti work, gallery displays, and the public appreciation of a Banksy.[99] Indeed, it seems far from the practice of preaching, which, at least in the Global North, regularly occurs in designated spaces among law-abiding congregations, protected by law and gathered in liturgical assembly.[100] Yet, this domestic liturgical picture is not all there is to say about the nature and practice of preaching. Rather, historically, globally, and practically, preaching is a much more varied practice in terms of location, occasion, intended audiences,

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[94] Moss, *Blue Note Preaching*, pp. 26 and 14.
[95] Frank A. Thomas, *The God of the Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), pp. 21–34.
[96] Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), p. 20.
[97] Phillips argues that if it is legal, it is not graffiti, though she admits this is a complex and contested idea (*Wallbangin'*, pp. 18–20).
[98] Kramer, 'Straight from the Underground'.
[99] Ferrell discusses some of the 'contradictions' in the legality of graffiti in 'Graffiti, Street Art', pp. xxxvii–xxxix.
[100] Most general books on homiletics assume this context.

purposes, and indeed legality. This is not least the case with preaching, which like graffiti, has operated under the threat of punishment, has sought to engage the wider public or has participated in some form of prophetic protest. Among such preaching, we may include preaching by slave preachers, women preachers, open-air evangelists, and civil-rights preachers. In turn, and perhaps just as significantly, we may also include those who preach in the regular liturgical contexts but who, in the words of the theologian Willie Jennings, resist the pull 'toward a respectability politic resourced by a respectability preaching', a pull that 'turns preachers into propagandists for nation-states, and/or plantation capitalism, and/or white supremacy, and/or patriarchy with its gender-binding normativity, and a host of other life designers working toward the pleasures of control'.[101] While not all graffiti is transgressive, this was undoubtedly a characteristic of the early modern graffiti movement. Likewise, while not all preaching is transgressive, we can be reminded that Jesus, who came preaching, ended up on a cross. Charles Campbell reminds us of this in his recent book on preaching and the 'grotesque'. He does so when he refers to the '*Alexamenos graffito* (c. 238–244)', which pictures a human form with an ass's head hanging on a cross, a young man giving adoration, and the mocking tag line, '*Alexamenos worships his God*'.[102] Therefore, to talk about preaching as graffiti highlights a historic and living expression of preaching that crosses boundaries and blurs lines of what might be considered socially acceptable for the sake of the gospel message it proclaims.

Third, and following on from the above, describing preaching as graffiti highlights the 'interruptive' nature of preaching.[103] That is, the message proclaimed is a message that enters a dialogue with the other sometimes unnoticed pervasive messages that shape and influence people's beliefs and behaviours. Lee Bofkin makes the simple but important point that when graffiti writing started in New York in the 1960s, advertising signage was everywhere and 'huge embellished names punctuated the city's skyline'.[104] In adding their names to those names

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[101] Willie Jennings, 'Foreword' in Charles L. Campbell, *The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque* (Louisville, IL: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), pp. ix–xii (pp. x–xi).
[102] Campbell, *Scandal*, p. 7.
[103] Christensen and Thor, 'The Reciprocal', p. 591.
[104] Bofkin, *Global*, p. 12.

and to the street political propaganda surrounding such events as the 1968 Presidential campaign, the early writers did not necessarily see their behaviour as political.[105] However, some later writers and street artists see their actions as challenging the control and commodification of public space through multi-national advertising.[106] Such writers point to the 'visual pollution' of 'advertising on the sides of buses, billboards and the like' and see graffiti as a way of challenging the hegemonic control of space.[107] Indeed, in this perspective, particular significance is given to graffiti that subverts existing advertising through its addition.[108] (In Figure 1 the graffiti is written beside the logo of the store 'British Home Stores'.) Graffiti may sometimes be written on a clean wall, but even when this is so, few spaces carry no implicit or explicit messages. Likewise, few people are blank canvases or only inhabit liturgical spaces. They have been written over and written in by many experiences, as have the preachers' lives. Thus, Jennings describes sermon preparation as 'wrestling each week with difficult texts in order to offer a word from God that is bound up with and yet aimed at the cacophony of voices, the myriad of struggles, and the forest of feelings, dreams, and memories that weave together a congregation'.[109] As such, preaching may require not merely writing words, but 'new' words on the walls of people's hearts.[110] For such preaching to be interruptive requires 'negotiating a hearing' with the rhetorical world of the listeners.[111] It means paying attention to the 'moral imagination' of the preacher and listeners and understanding what it means to work with and against different perspectives.[112] In turn, it requires the preacher to enter deeper into the sometimes 'grotesque' realities of people's existence to speak of God yet present.[113] To preach as graffiti is to speak in dialogue with the other voices influencing people's beliefs and behaviours.

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105 Gastman, *Wall*, p. 58.
106 Christensen and Thor, 'The Reciprocal', p. 607.
107 Christensen and Thor, 'The Reciprocal', p. 607.
108 Christensen and Thor, 'The Reciprocal', p. 607.
109 Jennings, 'Foreword', p. ix.
110 This is a phrase I remember being spoken into the troubled religious history of Northern Ireland in 2004 and set against the backdrop of divisive wall murals.
111 This is the dominant theme in McClure's book, *Four*.
112 This is the dominant concern in Frank A Thomas's book, *Surviving A Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020).
113 This is a dominant concern in Campbell's book, *Scandal*.

Four, to describe preaching as graffiti is to consider the 'ephemeral' nature of preaching. For graffiti, ephemerality refers to the potential 'fleeting nature of the marks'.[114] Once made, they can be removed, written over, and altered with no guarantee of permanence.[115] One writer puts it as follows: 'The art that remains behind is, by its public and often illicit nature, vulnerable to all sorts of erasure. Exposed to the elements, buffed into oblivion, gone over by other artists, or lost to changes in the built environment, it is unlikely to last.'[116] (Figure 1 gives an idea of words written over, partially obscured, and partially erased.) Ephemerality also refers to the act of writing graffiti.[117] As such, graffiti is not merely the product, but the performance, the event, with an almost need for it to be re-performed over and over if it is to continue to exist and have a lasting impact.[118] Reflection on this becomes almost theological as graffiti commentators speak about the ephemeral quality of graffiti as 'simultaneously proclaiming presence and absence' and as representing 'being and becoming'.[119] To be sure, regular preaching or preaching 'as teaching' may aim to build knowledge in some educative way. However, the resulting product may be more of a messy montage than a scaffolded learning process. For both listeners and contexts are changing. Like graffiti writers on freight trains, the physical surface may quite literally be here today but gone tomorrow, or at least not regularly turning up on a Sunday. In turn, as Campbell states, 'Dynamic, unsettled change, not static security, is at the heart of our faith. For we live in the interval between the old age that is dying and the new that is being born.'[120] Preachers may imagine a more permanent outcome for their preaching and prefer the idea of tablets of stone to writing in the dust. Yet even tablets of stone can be broken. Instead, ephemerality calls for faith in something as 'foolish' as words sprayed into the air looking for somewhere to stick. In turn, however, the constancy of this act bears witness, not merely to a God who spoke, but a God who speaks.

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114 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, pp. 29–30. On this subject, Phillips draws upon the work of other authors, including the Spanish writer Armando Silva.
115 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 30.
116 Ferrell, 'Graffiti, Street Art', p. xxxvi.
117 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 30.
118 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 31.
119 Cited in Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, pp. 32–33.
120 Campbell, *Scandal*, p. 55.

Certainly, graffiti writers have found the significance of their work 'elongated' through photography, digital reproduction, and sharing on social media.[121] Similarly, preachers find their sermons recorded not merely on paper or audio but live streamed on video. This is significant because each mediated performance decontextualises and resituates the original. Perhaps more significantly, the expectation of mediation, as with graffiti, can influence the nature of the actual event for an anticipated wider audience.[122] As with graffiti writers, preachers therefore need to consider the weight that they give to local, situated, and ephemeral performances as being at the core of their practice.

Conclusion

One of the ways in which people understand and articulate preaching is through metaphors. These metaphors vary in source, content, and nature. By the nature of metaphors, these metaphors reveal similarities while hiding differences. Conventional metaphors express the familiar. Such metaphors, however, only offer a limited perspective on the nature and practice of preaching. Novel metaphors bring fresh perspectives, although such metaphors may require discussion and defence regarding their associations and inferences.

To describe preaching as graffiti, particularly graffiti writing, is to use a novel metaphor. It is a metaphor that finds its ground association with preaching, as with some other novel metaphors, in its performative nature. Scripturally and theologically, it connects with the metaphorical use of the language of writing in the Scriptures to describe the behaviour-changing influence of God's Word on people's lives. Thus, in this article, I have posited preaching as graffiti as the writing of transformative words on the walls of people's hearts.

The metaphor of preaching as graffiti highlights some features of preaching that can sometimes be hidden or downplayed in other and perhaps more conventional metaphors. These features include the artistic, the transgressive, the interruptive, and the ephemeral nature of

[121] Ferrell, 'Graffiti, Street Art', pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.
[122] Ferrell, 'Graffiti, Street Art', pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

the practice. Together they imply that preaching as graffiti is a practice that knowingly engages in not merely private but public discourse. In so doing, preaching as graffiti knowingly contends with other voices which seek to influence people's lives. However, as the discussion above demonstrates, preaching as graffiti is merely one metaphor among many. It hides as well as reveals. It is novel rather than conventional. Its value, however, as a novel metaphor, is precisely in the fresh thinking it stimulates about the nature and practice of preaching and what preachers believe they are trying to do when preaching.