

## **The lexis of Christian sermons in English**

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### **Abstract**

The character of lexis of Christian sermons in English is distinct from the lexis of other occupational genres, because the context and the content are guided by the pragmatics of a sermon. A sermon is delivered to the believers with a mission to engage them in the biblical passages in a manner that is motivating, interesting and pertinent. This research aims to demonstrate the unique and consistent features of ecclesiastical expressions, such as glory to God, thanks be to God, God wills it etc; the specific patterns of association of words such as 'lamb of God,' 'the mournful mother,' 'comforter' etc., and collocations such as 'have mercy,' 'live in peace,' etc. The study also includes the semantic relations of words in sermons which are unusual in general English. The sermons of popular contemporary speakers Billy Graham, Joyce Meyer, Benny Hinn and D.G.S. Dinakaran will be discussed in the paper. An attempt would also be made in identifying the commonality in lexis of sermons.

### **Sermons**

Sermons, since the origin of Christianity, have been the primary source to combat popular anti-biblical beliefs and practices inherited over a period of time. They are also used as vehicles for motivating and educating the laity on the basics of Christian doctrines. The English word "sermon" originated from the Latin word, 'sermonis,' which means a connected discourse, that is, to join or weave together thoughts about a single topic. The Cambridge dictionary defines it as "a part of a Christian church ceremony in which a priest gives a talk on a religious or moral subject, often based on something written in the Bible." It is a perfect blend of theology and rhetoric delivered to the congregation on biblical, ecclesiastical and moral topics from an elevated place of worship called pulpit or an ambo. Despite the challenges, sermon continues to remain the most popular form of spreading the word of God presented through scriptures. A sermon is, therefore, God's truth which has the power to change lives. Lawrence O. Richards states "God does not communicate ideas. He communicates Himself" (Creative Bible Teaching 22).

Traditionally, Christian sermons are delivered after reading scriptures. In a way, it is a detailed description of scriptures read; and the preacher is understood to be guided by the Holy Spirit in transmitting God's word to the congregation. The congregation is expected to follow the biblical precepts religiously. They have great power and capacity to bring about change in individuals, institutions and societies (Mt.28:19-20). There are tremendous opportunities to present the truth of God from the scriptures that fit for all sorts of occasions such as weddings, funerals, revivals, prayer meetings etc. Through sermons, the preacher can touch different people in different ways and address them in powerful, timely and relevant way.

A good sermon is a well organized and comprehensible discourse meant to stimulate the imagination of the Christian congregation. The mission of a Sermonist is to engage the believers in the biblical teachings in a manner that is motivating, interesting and pertinent. A sermon primarily deals with any biblical passage and relates to the work of God, which has been realised through Jesus Christ. The preacher orients his sermons in such a way that

spiritual and temporal needs of the congregation are taken care of. He tries to ensure that listeners' faith in God is renewed and multiplied in manifold during the discourse.

While talking about 'God's love' or 'God is love' the preacher brings in a sharp contrast between divine love and human love. Human love is conditional based on attraction or something that makes us feel good towards others because our needs or emotions are taken care of. However, God's love is unconditional as found in Romans 5:8 "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us. In that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" The very purpose of articulating on the love of God is to motivate the congregants to imbibe the attitude of love towards our neighbours as mentioned in Mark 12:31.

On 'forgiveness', a pastor often emphasizes on the attitude of forgiveness by quoting the verses in Bible "Judge not, you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37). The preacher expects the laity to develop a passion for forgiveness towards others in order to be forgiven by God.

While dealing with the Grace of God, the preacher explains how God translates his love into action by moving heaven and earth to save sinners who could not lift a finger to save themselves. The usual practice of preachers is to point out to specific contemporary examples and instances of how God helps the faithful in their trials and tribulations. And they also reiterate the importance of being faithful in order to receive God's blessing in their lives. The effectiveness of the sermon lies in using the contextually appropriate lexis which is easily understandable. Apart from this, the facial expressions, body language and voice should also be relevant and meaningful.

As Lloyd M. Perry says:

Great preaching is always in the present tense. It must speak to the concerns of the day in the thought forms and language of the day. It is important, therefore, that this propositional sentence be true to the impact of Scripture and also that it be relevant to human experience (Biblical Preaching for Today's World 58).

The core of any sermon is evangelism which means preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ- the Son of God, who has been believed to be sent to the earth to save people from their original and inherent sins. The expression 'evangelism' has been derived from the Latin word 'evangelium' which means 'good news.' The preachers are evangelists who deliver messages on the importance of being sinless and how one can lead a worthy life to receive the grace of God through His son- Jesus Christ.

### **Focus of the study**

This study focuses on the lexical meanings of sermons that are distinct from general meanings. It deals with the frequency of biblical and sermonical expressions of the preachers on the select topics. It is also aimed at identifying the lexical commonality, collocations, associated meanings, lexical uniqueness, comparison of general and sermonical meanings in sermons.

### **Methodology**

For the purpose of the present study, four sermonists – Billy Graham, D.G.S. Dhinakaran, Joyce Meyer and Benny Hinn are considered. All are popular and contemporary speakers known for their preaching across the globe.

Dr. Billy Graham (b.7 November 1918) is an American evangelist belonging to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and is credited with delivering more than 400 sermons in 185 countries. Duraiswamy Geoffery Samuel Dhinakaran (b 1 July 1935 –d 20 February 2008) popularly known as Dr. D.G.S. Dhinakaran was an Indian preacher and

founder of Jesus Calls ministry, known for delivering impactful sermons with his inimitable style of using personal anecdotes. Joyce Meyer (b. 4 June 1943) is an American known for her sermons marked with self-deprecating humour. Toufik Benedictus – Benny Hinn (b. 3 December 1952) is celebrated for his miracle crusades. Although controversial, Benny Hinn has the tremendous power to draw millions of people to his crusades.

For the purpose of the research, the sermons available on YouTube were listened and lexical features of each sermonist were noted by identifying the specific words/phrases often employed by the speakers. In addition, the books authored by the speakers themselves were read for understanding their unique style of presentation and the lexis. Listening and reading helped in classifying the distinct and common features of select topics.

Bar graphical representations of the sermonical and biblical words/phrases were plotted to get a cogent comprehension. The lexical meanings of sermons and general were compared. Collocations in the sermons were also identified and tabulated.

## **The comprehensive study**

### **1. Sermon on Sin**

While delivering sermons on the topic ‘Sin’ the preachers have commonly used certain expressions such as ‘torment,’ ‘condemn,’ ‘devil,’ ‘perdition’ etc. Dr. Billy Graham has employed select words such as ‘Word of the law,’ ‘wickedness’ and personal pronouns ‘you and ‘your.’ Benny Hinn has a distinct list of expressions such as ‘lust of the flesh,’ ‘wait upon the Lord,’ ‘walk in this way’ etc. Dr. D.G. S. Dhinakaran has differently articulated on the same topic using words such as ‘miracle,’ ‘unforgiving spirit,’ ‘throne’ etc.,. Joyce Meyer is typical in her selection of words such as ‘forgiveness,’ ‘Godliness,’ ‘painful death’ etc., that are easily comprehensible by the laity. ‘Miracle,’ ‘grace,’ ‘God’s promise,’ ‘holy spirit’ are some of the biblical expressions, while ‘power,’ ‘possible,’ ‘forever,’ ‘favour,’ ‘prosper’ are sermonical expressions associated with the topic.

‘Repent for sins and shed tears,’ ‘weep bitterly,’ ‘Jesus bore all the sufferings for the sinners,’ ‘your sins are forgiven’ are some of the phrases and clauses often employed. Certain biblical idioms that convey spiritual and heavenly meanings were also used; for example, ‘heavenly father’ (God), ‘vessels of wrath’, Son or Lamb of God are expressions which are unique in nature and are sermonical in context. [6, 13, 18, 21]

### **2. Sermon on God’s Love**

One of the deepest desires of the believers is to be loved by God for physical as well as spiritual needs in life. Therefore, the church sermons are often intended to assure the congregation that God’s love is free and abundantly shared with those who follow the Ten Commandments and other precepts of the Bible religiously. The congregation is reassured on the unconditional love of God by referring to the scripture - “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (KJV Romans 5: 8). Dr. Billy Graham has used phrases and words such as ‘broken hearts,’ ‘holy spirit,’ ‘God’s law,’ ‘Love of Jesus Christ,’ ‘deliverance from temptation’ etc., in order to strengthen the faith of the people. Dr. D.G.S. Dhinakaran chose to use the expression ‘binds’ in ‘God’s love binds us and protects us from all evils and temptations.’ ‘Transgressions,’ ‘iniquities,’ ‘blood of Jesus,’ ‘crucifixion’ were some of the expressions used to portray the love of God and His concern for the people. Joyce Meyer emphasized on the ‘impact’ of God’s love in ‘desperate circumstances’ which can be built on ‘trust.’ She also used phrases such as ‘strike a chord,’ ‘forgiveness’ etc. Pastor Benny Hinn presented God’s love by citing a parable – the Prodigal

Son from the Bible, he preferred to use ‘awesome,’ ‘God’s mind,’ ‘understand,’ ‘hope’, etc. [8, 9, 13, 15].

### **3. Sermon on Grace**

In an attempt to enthuse the audience on the ‘Grace of God,’ Dr. Billy Graham chose to use sermonical expressions such as ‘gratitude,’ ‘sincere recognition,’ ‘riches,’ ‘desires’ etc., in order to connect the biblical message to the audience. Dr. Dhinakaran also employs both biblical and sermonical expressions such as ‘God’s son,’ ‘miracle,’ ‘fulfil,’ ‘power’ etc. Joyce Meyer used expressions such as ‘perfection,’ ‘trust,’ ‘change,’ ‘blood relationship,’ ‘inherit’ etc. “Grace is a gift” ‘glorious truth,’ ‘abiding in God’s love,’ were some of the phrases/ clauses chosen by Mr. Benny Hinn.

“The Lord is the source of Grace,” “The Lord gives grace and mercy,” “Submit everything to Father’s will” are recurrently used jargon on the topic. God’s children are treated as the ‘vessels of grace,’ who are blessed with ‘peace and joy.’ [10, 12, 20, 21]

### **4. Sermon on Salvation**

The scripture teaches that “no amount of human goodness, human works, human morality, or religious activity can gain acceptance with God or get anyone into heaven.” “There is no one righteous, not even one.” (Romans 3:10). Sermons on salvation are delivered to enlighten the people on the state of estranged relationship of man with God as aptly mentioned in Isaiah 59:2 “But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused Him to reject you and not listen to your prayers.” And in Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The sermons on salvation were aimed at emphasizing the very essence of salvation through God’s love, God’s grace and the blood of Jesus Christ, who was crucified for the sins of humanity. While delivering sermons on this topic Dr. Billy Graham preferred to use biblical lexis ‘cross,’ ‘save,’ ‘heaven’ etc in order to connect the people to the biblical significance attached to ‘salvation’ and the method through which one can ‘save’ oneself from eternal damnation.

Dr. D.G.S. Dhinakaran, on the other hand, used expressions such as ‘multitude of sins,’ ‘faith,’ ‘gracious Lord’ etc., and also used personal pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your.’ All these expressions are unique and apt to the topic. Joyce Meyer has preferred to use “shed blood,’ bondage,’ ‘Kingdom of God’ to share her thoughts on salvation. Pastor Benny Hinn judiciously used expressions such as ‘transgressions,’ ‘word of God’ ‘creative’ etc. [11, 16, 17, 18]

The sermons are known for their uniqueness in meaning, and are distinct from any other forms of genres. For example, Satan is called the ‘the son of perdition’ and an enemy to ‘the son of God – Jesus Christ.’ God is presented as the guardian who “protects” His people “amidst the perils of the world.” “pleading with the Lord” and “seeking His grace and salvation” are some common expressions in Church liturgy.

### **Summary of findings**

The findings of the study comprise the characteristics of sermons, uniqueness of lexis and distinct features of the sermonists. Bar graphs represent the frequency of biblical and sermonical expressions. The patterns of association, collocations, and lexical commonality in sermons are also identified.

## 1. Characteristics of sermons

- A good sermon engages the audience by contextualizing the biblical text.
- It also aims at preaching the gospel (good news) which says what God has done and still does for his people.
- A good sermon connects God's word (the Bible) to the lives of His people.
- A sermon is well organized and easy to understand, and aims to engage the imaginations of the listeners.
- Sermonist often uses very short and comforting sentences such as God loves you; we are children of God; God cleanses all your sins; you are blessed etc. to rekindle and strengthen the believers morally, spiritually and psychologically.
- In any context, if difficult expressions are used, they are explained immediately.
- Certain expressions such as sin, forgiveness, grace, kingdom of God are repeated for emphasis.
- Contemporary and Biblical examples are provided in plenty.
- Intonation is well followed.
- Sermons are essentially biblical, secondarily ecclesiastical and terrestrially sermonic. Ex: salvation – biblical, love - ecclesiastical, humility – sermonic.

## 2. Uniqueness of lexis

The lexico-grammar of Christian sermons in English is understood to be distinct from the lexis of other occupational genres, because the context and the content are guided by the pragmatics of a sermon.

'Sin' and 'Hell' are biblical and ecclesiastical expressions which create a sense of fear, and remind the listeners to keep themselves away from sins in order to avoid the wrath of God resulting in infinite suffering in hell. These expressions are unique to Christian sermons and they are not used in any occupational genres.

The very purpose of biblical discourses or rhetoric is to sensitize the parishioner on the sins inherited since ages which can be cleansed only by God through His son Jesus Christ. 'Forgiveness and grace' are used to inherit 'the Kingdom of God' – the 'Heaven.' 'Redemption' which means 'deliverance' is possible only through the 'deliverer'- Jesus Christ.

'God's love,' 'God is love,' 'everlasting love,' 'sacrificial love,' and 'God loves the sinners' are some of the expressions used in the context of 'salvation.' While dealing with love, the preacher tries to bring in a sharp contrast between the worldly love and heavenly love of God. The word 'Agape' is used as an adjective to 'love' which means God's love towards His people. The preacher calls upon the people to be worthy of receiving God's love to inherit His heavenly riches.

The pronouns 'you' and 'he' are usually uttered several times during the course of a sermon to establish a connection between the believer and God. The preacher is believed to be a link between God and His disciple. As a mediator, he tries to convince the believer in the teachings of Bible. This feature often distinguishes itself from other occupational genres.

As the objective of a sermon is to move a person towards faith in God and Christ, the language used in sermons is powerful and stylistic. An impactful sermon spurs the laity to serve God and His creation better. Sermons invite the congregation to call upon God and

Christ to absolve their sins and help them lead a virtuous life. A sermonist uses words and individual style of delivery to produce constructive results

The Proverbs 12:18, in the Bible states that “the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Also, in Genesis, God is quoted to have said the following:

“Let there be light and there was light (Genesis 1:3).

“Let the land produce vegetation . . . and it was so . . . (Genesis 1:11, 12).

“Let the land produce living creatures . . . and it was so . . .” (Genesis 1:24).

God’s words resonate with authority at the time of creation. Moreover, scriptures say that words can be used to produce positive or negative effects. Also, it has been said in the New Testament that Jesus used words productively in healing and in performing miracles. Words have the power to bring in change and to raise hope in people. Words leave people with a positive transformation in their outlook of life. The sermonists use words sometimes authoritatively, sometimes productively and sometimes humbly depending on the topic to leave a lasting impression on the congregation. Words have the potential to resonate in times of need to help and guide the believers.

### **3. Distinct features of the sermonists**

The aim of Christian sermons is to persuade the sinners to repent and turn to God. In the present study, it is observed that the sermonists Billy Graham, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer and DGS Dhinakaran use words and personalized style to leave an enduring influence on the congregation. Furthermore, the academic background, personal lives and experiences of the sermonists help shape the lexis of their sermons. This customized approach of the four sermonists could be one of the reasons for using distinct lexis despite presenting the sermons on the same topic.

Secondly, the sermonist’s style of delivering also influences the congregation. Onoja, clearly states that sermonists employ anaphora, tone, rhetorical questions, diction, complex sentences and use of archaic language to present an effective sermon [34]. The assertive tone becomes authoritative as the sermons delve deep into the Bible and the sermonists’ sound knowledge emerges. The use and comprehension of the lexis of sermons also aid in keeping the congregation exclusive and creates a sense of belonging or exclusiveness among the people who are involved. Onoja further states that on a similar topic the preachers use extensive vocabulary as language is used in different ways by different people [34]. Also whenever a difficult word or context is introduced in the sermon, the sermonist follows it immediately by elaborate explanation. Lot of efforts are put in to make the laity correlate with the examples.

All the sermons delivered on the chosen topics were aimed at motivating the listeners to shun the path of sin and turn to God for ‘grace’ and ‘salvation’ offered through His abundant love. The purpose of all sermons is a reminiscent of the utterance made by Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 “all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for proof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (KJV)

An investigation into the language of the sermons in general and lexis in particular reveals the fact that the effectiveness of the sermons depends on variable factors such as the context, delivery style of the sermonist, listeners’ levels of knowledge, mood etc..

The lexis of the preachers is mostly drawn from the Bible; for example, the word ‘Communion’ which means ‘sharing’ is used in the context of calling upon believers to ‘have a holy communion with God’ in order to inherit the heavenly bliss. The word ‘anoint’ means to consecrate or declare ‘Holy.’ This is emphasised to communicate the importance of being

sinless in order to receive the blessings of God- Almighty. These expressions have roots in Latin language and are often employed in sermons.

#### 4. Comparison of general meaning and lexical meaning in sermons

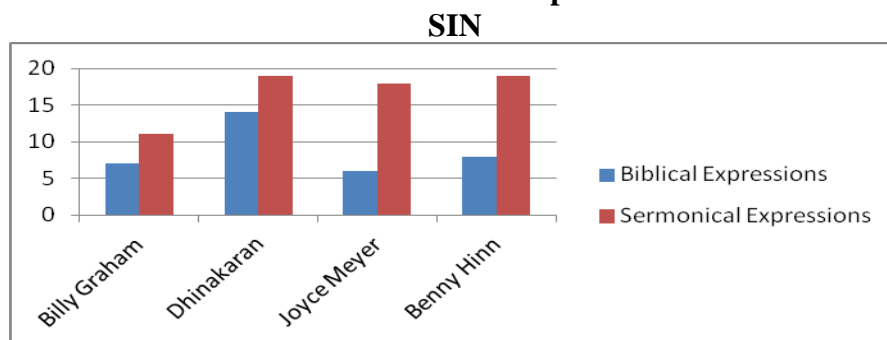
The lexical meanings of sermons are distinct from the general meanings. Some examples are given below

S. No.	Word	General	Sermonical /Biblical
1.	Lamb of God	A lamb owned by God	Jesus Christ
2.	Comforter	One who comforts	Holy spirit
3.	Mournful mother	A mother in grief	Mary, mother of Jesus Christ
4.	Word of God	God's word	The Bible/Scripture
5.	Eternal home	Permanent home	Heaven
6.	Salvation	Redemption	Forgiveness of sins
7.	Grace	Elegance	God's kindness/mercy
8.	Sin	Misdeed	Disobedience to God
9.	Saviour	One who saves	God
10.	King	Ruler	Jesus Christ

The terminology of the Bible is unique and conveys figurative meanings. Some of the expressions are incomprehensible to a non-believer as the context and content in which the lexis is used determines the meaning of a word. Thus, the semantic relations of words in sermons are peculiar to the genre and distinct from general usage.

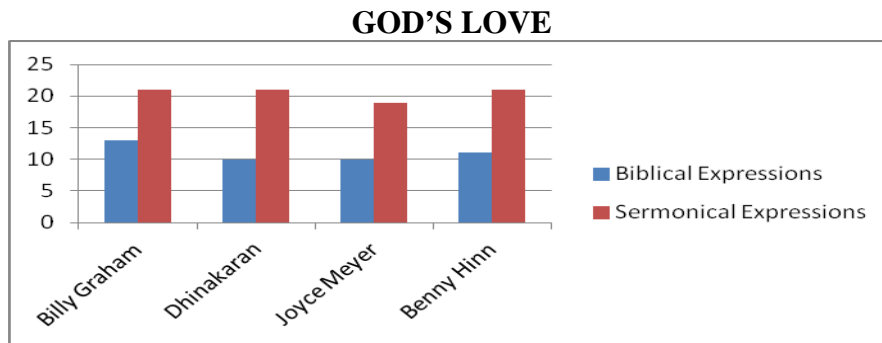
The words used in sermons on select topics by the preachers - Billy Graham, Dhinakaran, Joyce Meyer and Benny Hinn are represented graphically to get a clear picture of the amount of biblical expressions and sermonical expressions used in their respective sermons. Furthermore, the reasons behind the usage of these expressions are discussed.

#### Graphical illustration of biblical and sermonical expressions



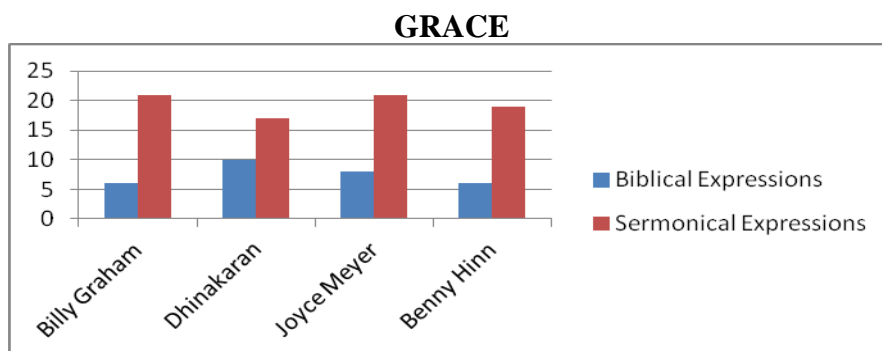
**Figure 1.**

In Figure 1,' Dhinakaran, Joyce Meyer and Benny Hinn use more sermonical expressions than Billy Graham. All the four prefer to use more sermonical than biblical expressions. Among the four, Joyce Meyer uses very few biblical expressions. [1, 8, 13, 16]



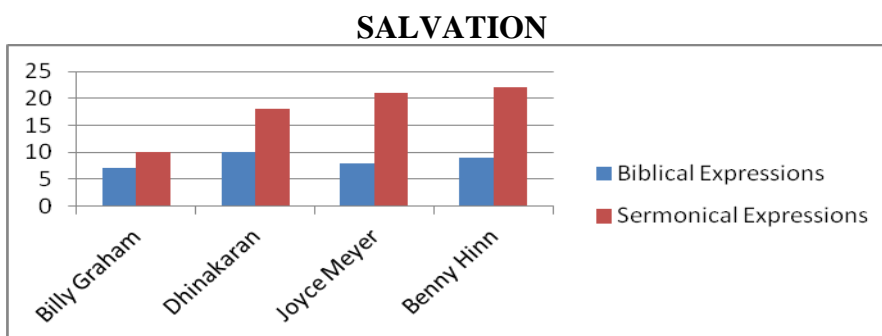
**Figure 2**

In Figure 2, While, Dhinakaran, Joyce Meyer and Benny Hinn use almost double the sermonical expressions than biblical; Billy Graham relatively uses more Biblical expressions. [2, 3, 7, 9]



**Figure 3.**

In Figure. 3, all the four Sermonists use almost similar number of sermonical expressions, while Dhinakaran employs more number of biblical expressions compared to the other three. [4, 6,14,15]



**Figure 4.**

In Figure 4, Benny Hinn uses the highest number of sermonical expressions followed by Joyce Meyer and Dhinakaran. Billy Graham more or less uses similar number of sermonical and biblical expressions. Dhinakaran uses slightly more biblical expressions than others. [5, 10,11,12]



### Patterns of Association

It is found that, the phrases used in sermons are associated with some meaning(s)/person(s). These phrases can be comprehended in the given context and the congregation does not expect any explanation from the sermonist.

The following are some of the phrases and their associated meanings

S. No.	Phrase/Word	Associated Meaning
1.	Servant of God	Believer / follower of Christ
2.	Lamb of God	Jesus Christ
3.	Crown of thorns	Persecution
4.	Divine radiance	Glory of God
5.	Only begotten son	Jesus Christ
6.	Holy Spirit	Comforter
7.	Eternal damnation	Hell
8.	Eternal home	Heaven
9.	Blood of Jesus	Salvation/atonement of sins
10.	Throne of Judgement	God's seat

Apart from these phrases, there are certain collocations which are significantly used in sermons. Some of them are 'have mercy,' 'plead with,' 'have faith,' etc. are consistently used by the sermonists.

### A list of collocations

Spiritual connection	Lord's will	Divine communion	Holy cross
Grace of God	Heavenly father	Saviour's heart	Covenant on the cross
Jesus heals	Son of God	Divine radiance	Wept bitterly
God's kingdom	Crown of thorns	Word of God	Majestic personality
Blood of Jesus	Eternal home	Glorified body	Born again

### Commonality in lexis of the sermons

From the graphical representation and the above tables, it is clearly observed that all the four pastors used more sermonical expressions than biblical. The preachers presumably used more sermonical expressions in order to reach the target audience effortlessly. The sermonists selected for the study belong to different generations, countries and gender. In spite of certain variations in lexis, it is clearly observed that the purpose and style are almost same.

The preachers are found deriving their lexis and language from the messages delivered by Jesus Christ who was admired for using commonplace examples and parables in His sermons to engage the audience in spiritual realm. They also consider Paul as their role model in strengthening the faith of listeners.

The expressions, such as 'sons of God,' 'beloved,' 'chosen people,' 'heirs of the kingdom of God' are often found in sermons to assure solace and peace to the congregants suffering from despondency in a world of violence. The chosen terminology drawn from biblical passages is inalienable and meant to orient the laity embrace and follow the path of God for eternal bliss.

### Conclusion

It is understood that Christian sermons are meant to relate a biblical text to the context of the congregants. Preaching is also meant "to open up our hearts and minds for those, who

together with us, struggle for their God-given dignity,” and for the transformation of this globalized world, in the light of the Gospel. The authenticity of sermon comes from the heart of the preacher whose sincerity, simplicity and humility draws many to hear the “word of God.”[37] While delivering the sermons, the preachers choose to employ unique lexis that distinguishes it from other genres.

The study also reveals the fact that, all the four sermonists are inimitable in their own style in employing biblical and ecclesiastical expressions for creating meaning out of the text that suits the context. Moreover, they try to impress upon the congregants the need for transformation as expected in the sermons of Paul and Jesus Christ. Sometimes, the preachers try to draw parallels between the contemporary cultural and poetical resources with that of biblical contexts to generate thirst for spiritual bliss in the hearts of believers.

The intonation and the diction of the select sermonists have made them popular apart from being erudite scholars in the scriptures of the Bible.

An effective sermon, however, is often marked by its characteristics of communication, interaction and participation.

In an attempt to propagate the biblical philosophy of ‘transformation’ ‘salvation’ and ‘inheritance of eternal kingdom’, the select preachers are considered authoritative in both physical and spiritual worlds of knowledge. The study establishes the fact that the language of sermons or liturgical language is distinct in its grammar, lexis and style from other conventional forms of speech.

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