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PUBLIC THEOLOGY

AI Might Teach, But It Can't Preach

No, our future children or grandchildren will not be evangelized by a robot.
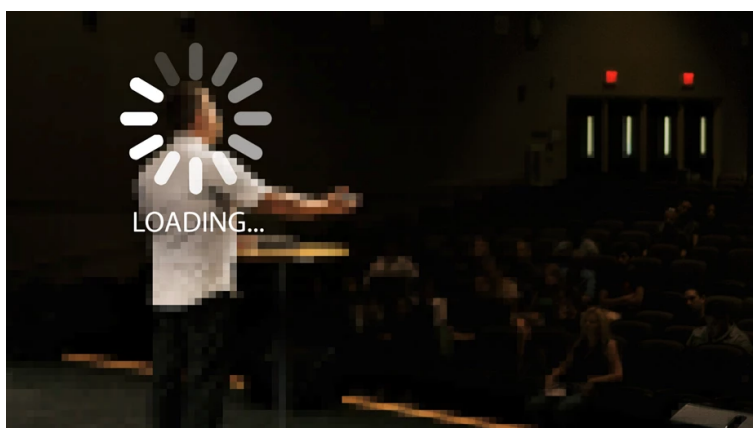
RUSSELL MOORE/POSTEDJANUARY 26, 2023

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This piece was adapted from Russell Moore's newsletter. Subscribe [here](#).

ChatGPT, the [eerily](#) [accurate](#) artificial intelligence (AI) information-gathering and writing chatbot that launched this past November, is worrying a growing number of people.

Teachers are wondering how a genuine high-school or college essay will be possible again when any student could produce, within minutes, a fully formed, original, footnoted paper. Some ask whether this or future AI could do job-performance reviews for employees. And some are starting to ponder whether the smart tech could be headed for another place: the pulpits of our churches.

Journalist Matt Labash, in a delightfully "neo-Luddite" rant in his newsletter, [noted](#) that New York rabbi Josh Franklin had the chatbot write an entire sermon for him. He didn't tell his congregation until afterward that the sermon was written by someone else.

When he asked them to guess who wrote it, they identified the late rabbi Jonathan Sacks—perhaps the most renowned Jewish preacher of the past 20 years. Imagine the synagogue's reaction when they were told that the sermon they liked so much was assembled with zero human contribution.

Is that the future of Christian preaching? You might respond, "Of course not." Maybe you just can't believe such a thing could happen. But imagine trying to explain Google or a smartphone Bible app to a person 30 years ago. What if everywhere-accessible AI could write completely orthodox, biblically anchored, and compellingly argued sermons for pastors every week?

Garrison Keillor [told a story](#) about a man whose pastor asked whether he believed in infant baptism. The man responded, "Believe in it? ... I've seen it done!" If we're asking whether artificial intelligence can know the Bible, research themes and backgrounds, and write

applications to life and imperatives for action—well, we've seen it done.

But the real question is not about technological possibility. It's not really about church leadership ethics either. Rather, the question is about what preaching actually *is*.

When I first told my pastor that I thought maybe God was calling me to full-time ministry—at age 12 or so—he told me I would preach in three weeks on a Sunday night. I said, "I don't mean he's calling me *now*; I mean, like, when I grow up." He answered, "Well, I'm calling you *now*, and I'm going to teach you what to do." And he did. He gave me a book of "sermon starters," outlines of biblical texts, and possible applications. He offered some tips for speaking and on interpreting the text.

When that Sunday night came around, I went into the little bathroom beside the baptistery of our Baptist church and threw up both right before and right after preaching. The sermon was awful—and I'm glad it wasn't recorded.

I wouldn't recommend handling the situation quite that way, but there was something beautiful in it. He knew that I would look out on a congregation of people whom I loved and who loved me—who taught me in Sunday school and Training Union and Vacation Bible School and Bible sword drills. He knew I would see their familiar faces beaming back at me, reassuring that they were for me no matter how I stammered or lost my place.

He knew that afterward they would encourage me and pray for me, no matter how bad the sermon was. And he knew that the very presence of this little guy in the pulpit would remind the congregation that the gospel went forward into the future—that God was still "sending the light" and calling out the called.

In that moment, something happened for me—beyond the content on the page or the way I said the words. In fact, I'm not sure I could even really describe what that "something" was.

Over the years, when teaching seminary classes or ministering in pastor cohorts, I found that the primary problem for most of my students was not a lack of competence in discerning biblical truth or speaking in front of crowds.

I know there are some current and aspiring preachers who don't take the Bible or the task of preaching seriously. (Know it? I've seen it!) But that was seldom the case with virtually anyone I ever taught. Rather, for some, the tendency was to collate commentaries and then diagram the text down to points and subpoints and sub-subpoints.

What many of those students eventually started to see was that the preaching moment is more than the sum of its parts. And in the best of cases, our audiences should witness the same thing. Yes, preaching needs someone who knows the text and can convey that to the people—but it's not just about transmitting information.

The preacher is delivering *good news*. That's true even when the sermon speaks of God's judgment. After John the Baptist told his listeners they were vipers who should flee the wrath to come, chaff that would soon be burned with unquenchable fire, Luke writes, "With many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them" (3:18).

When you hear a sermon, you're not hearing the equivalent of a motivational speech or even a biblical, theological, or ethical seminar. An AI program will likely be able to do all of that—maybe even with special attention paid to doctrinal tradition, denominational affiliation, and preferred Bible translation.

Since ChatGPT can replicate the writing of Ernest Hemingway or William Shakespeare on command, there's no reason why it couldn't follow the instruction to write a sermon in the style of, say, Charles Spurgeon, John Piper, or Joel Osteen.

To the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul writes of himself and those with him this way: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). When we listen to the Word preached, we are hearing not just a word *about* God but a word *from* God.

Can the ambassador garble the communication from the embassy? Sure. Could an unscrupulous diplomat rewrite the transmission? It happens all the time. And that's why the congregation needs biblical grounding and the Spirit's wisdom to weigh the message.

The gravity of preaching the Word isn't the same as gathering data and presenting it. At its best, we as the audience are hearing from a fellow redeemed sinner—one who has grappled with the text. As we listen, we are less like researchers looking for information than like the parents of a missing-in-action soldier waiting for the officer at the door to give us news of our child.

In fact, the stakes are even higher—the Good News is even more joyous.

The message—whether "Your child has been found alive" or "Your child is gone"—could utterly upend the parents' lives. The wording of the message matters to a degree. But the point here is that this type of message shouldn't come by text or email. Such life-altering news needs to be delivered by a human, in person.

A chatbot can research. A chatbot can write. Perhaps a chatbot can even orate. But a chatbot can't preach.

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