

Artificial Preaching? Exploring the Ethical Limitations of and Opportunities for Using Large Language Models in Sermon Development

Logan T. Thompson, M.Div.
Preaching and Teaching Minister
Mansfield Church of Christ, Mansfield, TX

Abstract: *Christians are wise to assess new technologies with conservatism and healthy skepticism. Rapidly developing tools in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI) are no exception—especially for the preaching ministry of the church. The power and allure of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT make AI worthy of critical assessment as a potential aid in sermon development. However, should preachers adopt AI as a tool in sermon development? If so, what limits ought to guide its use? This article addresses these urgent questions by weighing the benefits and risks of AI in homiletics. It lays out the relevant ethical considerations for discerning AI's use, arguing that LLMs can serve as a valuable aid to preachers within well-defined boundaries. To preserve the authenticity and integrity of both the preacher and the gospel message, AI's adoption requires clear limitations, ongoing ethical reflection, and—above all—the homiletical virtue of patience.*

Introduction

For centuries, preachers have drawn upon virtually every available tool in their calling to proclaim the word of God: from scroll and codex to search engine and LED screen. The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI)—especially large language models (LLMs) like OpenAI's ChatGPT—presents both novel challenges and familiar questions: “*Should* modern preachers adopt this latest technology? And, if so, *how* do they faithfully steward the use of this new machine in the proclamation of the gospel and the furtherance of God's kingdom in the world?”

The list of such inquiries regarding the adoption and ethical implementation of generative AI is long, and it is expanding nearly as fast as both the power and number of practical applications for LLMs grow. However, like the incandescent light bulb and the smartphone before it, AI and LLMs are here to stay. Some see AI as a threat,¹ while others are ready to embrace it wholeheartedly—lest they be left behind.² Those called to serve local congregations from the pulpit have the responsibility to wrestle seriously with such questions and to consider *whether* and *how* AI will be used by the people of God who find themselves living in the digital age.³ As Daniel Crouch writes concerning this modern technology, our task as Christians in

¹ Ned Desmond, “The Threat of Artificial Intelligence,” *First Things*, August/September 2021, 39–43.

² E.g., Gregg Kober argues that business leaders must “[cultivate] an AI-first mindset...viewing AI not as a tool but as an integral element for improving the productivity of personal practices [and] embracing its potential to augment human capabilities.” See Gregg Kober, “AI-First Leadership: Embracing the Future of Work,” Harvard Business Publishing, January 24, 2025, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/ai-first-leadership-embracing-the-future-of-work/>.

³ As Brad East rightly observes, *whether* ought to be “the first question for ministers regarding any new technology,” and his answer to that question when it comes to the use of LLMs in pulpit ministry is a resounding No. Surely, many preachers will come to the same conclusion and reject the use of AI in their ministries altogether. This article, however, argues for a tentative “Yes” to the primary ethical question regarding these technologies, and its goal is to answer the secondary question of *how* by determining ethical limitations for the use of AI in sermon development for preachers who decide to use them. For the case *against* the use of AI, see Brad East, “AI Has No Place in the Pulpit,” *Christianity Today*, September 27, 2023, accessed November 20, 2025, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/09/ai-has-no-place-in-pulpit-chatgpt-llm-openai-preaching-past/>.

approaching any tool is “neither reactionary rejection nor naïve embrace. It is the harder thing: to discern how these tools reshape the conditions of learning and living, and to order our practices so that technology serves rather than supplants the formation of persons.”⁴

This article seeks to contribute to this important conversation about the use of AI in homiletics. First, it maps the current AI landscape regarding LLM capabilities for sermon development. Then, using a four-question framework suggested by Andy Crouch, this article examines the ethical use of LLMs across three notable aspects of the sermon development process—the cognitive, the creative, and the formative. As this article will show, the calling and craft of preaching demand the homiletical virtue of patience in all three aspects, which places ethical limitations on the scope and application of AI for pulpit ministry. In light of these constraints, this article’s exploration of these three aspects seeks to name specific ways preachers *may consider* or *must avoid* using LLMs as they carry out their calling to preach.

Mapping the AI Landscape

No preacher needs a complete understanding of a technology to use it well.⁵ Still, to discern a technology’s ethical use, we must have at least a general understanding of its form, function, and impact beyond its apparent utility. Because AI is an emerging and rapidly developing technology, laying this foundation is inherently difficult, especially within the scope of this article. Even so, defining a few key terms within the vast landscape of AI is a necessary first step in discerning whether to adopt AI tools into one’s preaching practice.

To begin, *artificial intelligence* (AI) is a broad term whose references “[extend] from speculative machines that match human intelligence to fairly simple algorithms.”⁶ When an AI program is able to synthesize and assess past successes and failures in achieving desired outcomes, it falls within the category of *machine learning*. Machine learning can either be supervised or reinforced by human beings who manually review an AI’s algorithmic output and “tag” correct solutions (or, more often, entire sets of training data) to aid in its future accuracy, or it can be unsupervised, meaning that the AI “discovers its own patterns” without human intervention.⁷ *Artificial neural networks* function independently without the aid of human beings and “were developed to mimic the way in which neurons work in a human or animal brain” and how they take in, process, and generalize information from their environment and experiences.⁸ In other words, artificial neural networks are “a series of programming algorithms that allow AI to process information so that it can ‘think’ and ‘learn.’”⁹ Working together, multiple neural networks conduct a more complex form of machine learning known as *deep learning*.¹⁰ Should

⁴ Daniel Crouch, “Artificial Assistance, Spiritual Impediment: AI Chatbots and the Risk to Human Flourishing,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 39.

⁵ Rachael A. Keefe, “Where Is the Spirit? Reflections on Engaging AI in Sermon Preparation,” *Interpretation* 79, no. 2 (2025): 137, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00209643241308587>.

⁶ Paul Scherz, “AI as Person, Paradigm, and Structure: Notes toward an Ethics of AI,” *Theological Studies* 85, no. 1 (2024): 124, n. 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00405639231223891>.

⁷ Matthew J. Gaudet, “An Introduction to the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, Special Issue no. 1 (2022): 4–5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.55476/001c.34121>.

⁸ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5.

⁹ Keefe, “Where Is the Spirit?” 137.

¹⁰ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5. For a scientific overview of deep learning, see Yann LeCun, Yoshua Bengio, and Geoffrey Hinton, “Deep Learning,” *Nature* 521, no. 7553 (2015): 436–44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nature14539>.

the capabilities of these AI systems develop to the point where they equal or surpass human intelligence, the technology will be said to have achieved *artificial general intelligence* (AGI), a reality imagined in science fiction for nearly a century but yet to come to fruition.¹¹

Two more terms, which build on and implement the AI technologies defined thus far, are most relevant to the topic of this article. The first is *large language model* (LLM). An LLM is an AI tool that “uses machine learning to both generate and predict language” based on its training data.¹² The most familiar and widely used type of LLMs today is *generative pre-trained transformers*, or GPTs. They are trained on many terabytes of data, most of which are sourced from publicly available online sources. Based on that training, chat-oriented GPTs respond to a user’s prompts by inferring the most probable next word based on the previous words in a sequence.¹³ While LLMs can be employed for a wide range of language-related tasks, many GPT-based systems are further fine-tuned to generate longer, more conversational responses to prompts. In addition to OpenAI’s ChatGPT (mentioned above), other popular GPTs in use at the time of this writing—by both individuals and corporations all over the globe—are Anthropic’s Claude, Google’s Gemini, and xAI’s Grok. Much more could be said about how these AI technologies were developed and how they function today; however, this basic glossary provides an adequate foundation for the investigation in this essay: *Should* preachers use these AI tools as they prepare their sermons? And, if so, with what limits?

The Allure (and Asking Price) of AI

Upon first experiencing any new, well-functioning technology, most people express some level of amazement: “*It’s like magic*,” we might say.¹⁴ This is especially true for text-based generative AI, given its sheer power and speed, as well as its ability to simulate human language and conversation. For preachers, whose primary responsibility each week is to prepare and deliver a message of several thousand words,¹⁵ the allure of AI as a tool for sermon development comes as no surprise.¹⁶ If typing a prompt into an LLM can produce the thousands of words that preachers need for a sermon, and if a second prompt can then format those words into a pulpit-ready outline or manuscript, then why would they *not* consider taking advantage of this modern

¹¹ Gaudet, “Ethics of Artificial Intelligence,” 5.

¹² Keefe, “Where is the Spirit?,” 137.

¹³ Keefe, “Where is the Spirit?,” 137.

¹⁴ In an interview with Jay Kim, Andy Crouch keenly observes that almost every company that has implemented and advertised AI in its programs uses iconography that includes either “a starburst” or “a wand,” “which represent...a little magical moment” promised by these digital tools. See Practicing the Way, “Andy Crouch & Jay Kim on the Future of the Church,” 1:04:28–1:05:29, August 12, 2025, accessed November 21, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2j8053yxbE>; Elsewhere, Crouch calls this “magical” experience the “superpower zone,” moments when any technology “[equips] human beings to vastly increase the sensation of power while vastly reducing the sensation of effort.” Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), 42.

¹⁵ A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center of nearly 50,000 sermons found that the average sermon in the U.S. is 37 minutes long. Assuming the general rule of 150 words per minute as the proper rate for public speaking in English, most sermons contain at least 3,000 words, and in certain streams of the faith, sermons often will amount to over 8,000 words. Pew Research Center, “The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons,” December 16, 2019, accessed November 18, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/16/the-digital-pulpit-a-nationwide-analysis-of-online-sermons/>.

¹⁶ As one preacher opines, “It’s like a mini research paper you have to prepare every week.” See Deena Prichep, “Clergy Grapple with the Ethics of Using AI to Write Sermons,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 17, 2025, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/07/17/nx-s1-5468637/clergy-grapple-with-the-ethics-of-using-ai-to-write-sermons>.

technology, freeing up time for the supposedly more relational tasks of ministry and saving them from the stress and anxiety of last-minute sermon preparation on a Saturday night?

Andy Crouch suggests two promises and two consequences that help to illuminate the competing desires that lie beneath the surface of this homiletical dilemma. In his assessment of the history of human technological development, Crouch concludes that “Every technical advance in human history has been borne on the wings of two promises.”¹⁷ The first promise of every new technology is that of enhanced capabilities (“*Now you’ll be able to...*”), which guarantees “[to expand] human experience and capacity in some way.”¹⁸ The second promise is the promise of alleviated burdens (“*You’ll no longer have to...*”), which offers “[relief from] toil, drudgery, stress, and, for that matter, skill.”¹⁹ Here, Crouch exposes a reality that those with a vested interest in any new technology would rather keep hidden: the cost of adopting it. In other words, there are *always* negative consequences in using a new technology—even when its promises to expand some capability or to alleviate some perceived burden of the human condition are, in one way or another, fulfilled. As Crouch names them, the drawbacks of every technical advance in human history are “*restricted capabilities*” (the consequence of “*You’ll no longer be able to...*”) and “*enforced burdens*” (the consequence of “*Now you’ll have to...*”).²⁰

Take the smartphone, for example. First, it promises to expand human communication capabilities. *Now, you will be able to hear and to read messages from others, instantly and regardless of where in the world they might be.* Second, as a device with many functions beyond communication, the smartphone promises to alleviate the physical burden of carrying multiple tools for various tasks: a camera for taking photos, a calendar for keeping up with your schedule, a GPS for driving to an appointment, a level for hanging a shelf in your office, and many more. *You will no longer have to carry the weight of all these tools with you wherever you go—you will not even need to own these other devices at all.*

However, with these promises comes an asking price; there are drawbacks to smartphone adoption. They restrict capabilities and skills that human beings possessed before: We may be able to punch any location into our phone’s GPS and arrive on time, but eventually we will lose the ability to distinguish north from south with only stars and landmarks to guide us. We may be able to communicate with family and friends across the country, but we now find it more difficult to engage in meaningful relationships with our neighbor across the street. Furthermore, smartphones impose new burdens upon us even as they alleviate others: We no longer need to carry dozens of separate devices for certain tasks, but we must ensure that this single device’s battery is adequately charged before we leave home for the day. We no longer need to keep a notebook with our contacts’ home addresses and phone numbers; now we rely entirely on our smartphone’s memory chip rather than our own brains because our capacity to remember information has decreased from lack of use.²¹

As the example of the smartphone shows, the promises (*enhanced capabilities, alleviated burdens*) and consequences (*restricted capabilities, enforced burdens*) that Crouch has identified together serve as a helpful lens for assessing any technology that becomes available, including

¹⁷ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 138.

¹⁸ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 139.

¹⁹ Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 139.

²⁰ “The new technology will enforce new requirements, new behaviors, new patterns of life, whether you wanted it to or not.” Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For*, 141. Emphasis original.

²¹ Crouch notes and briefly assesses several more technological examples, both ancient and modern: player pianos, robot vacuums, digital video streaming services, telescopes, roads, and even writing. See *The Life We’re Looking For*, 138–46.

AI.²² The next section of this article applies Crouch's framework for weighing the promises and consequences to LLMs like ChatGPT to determine the ethical limits of their adoption as a tool for sermon development.

Assessing LLMs as a Tool for Sermon Development

Melissa Florer-Bixler writes that LLMs aim to empower the preacher “to create sermons with greater impact in a fraction of the time.”²³ More specifically, they promise to enhance the preacher’s ability to research the biblical text and to write the various movements of the sermon. They promise to alleviate the burden of time that must be given to these duties for the preacher, as well as to other responsibilities that are delegated to fellow staff members or volunteers in the church, allowing them to spend their energy elsewhere, serving the congregation in other important ways without detracting from the quality or impact of the Sunday sermon. The homiletical possibilities of LLMs are appealing, and they target at least two primary aspects of the sermon-writing process: the cognitive and the creative.

The cognitive aspect of sermon development includes the task of exegeting Scripture, as well as interpreting one’s cultural and congregational contexts. It is the sum of the preacher’s skills in critical thinking, “a multifaceted cognitive process that involves the capacity to think clearly and rationally, understand logical connections between ideas, evaluate arguments, and identify inconsistencies in reasoning.”²⁴ From summarizing multiple commentators’ interpretations of a particular passage of Scripture to mapping out an entire year of sermons for one local congregation, LLMs promise to aid and increase the efficiency of almost any cognitive task required in preaching.

The creative aspect of sermon development is most prevalent in the step between study and delivery: writing the sermon. Whether preachers prefer to write their sermons on paper or type them on a screen, or whether they tend to speak from an outline or a full manuscript, their calling is to prepare the words they deliver to their congregations *before* stepping into the pulpit. Here lies the alleged “magic” of LLMs. Their power to generate thousands of words almost instantly promises to expand the preacher’s capacity to write sermons and to alleviate the hours-long burden that it would have taken to compose them without the assistance of AI.

As several of the scholars already cited have cautioned, however, it is vital that the preachers ask themselves at this point, “What is the asking price of the adoption of LLMs as a tool for writing my sermons?” One word that summarizes the chief drawback well is *atrophy*: the unrestricted use of LLMs in sermon development ultimately will inhibit the preacher’s cognitive and creative capabilities, enforcing in turn new and various burdens on them as these skills decrease, hampering their overall ministry to the church. This tradeoff results from a phenomenon psychologists call “offloading,” which is “particularly concerning in the context of

²² As Keith D. Stanglin puts it, the consideration of a technology’s negative consequences is precisely what “breaks the spell.” “AI in Congregational Ministry: Human Nature and the Significance of Process and Product,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 94–95.

²³ Melissa Florer-Bixler, “A Pulpit without a Context,” *The Christian Century* (July 2024): 29.

²⁴ Michael Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking,” *Societies* 15, no. 6 (2025): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010006>.

critical thinking, which requires active cognitive engagement to analyze and evaluate information effectively.”²⁵

In a study of nearly 700 people examining the impact of AI use on critical thinking skills, Gerlich and his team found that the more often individuals used AI tools at work, the more likely they were to offload cognitive tasks, resulting in lower critical thinking scores.²⁶ These researchers conclude that “while AI tools offer undeniable benefits in terms of efficiency and accessibility, they may inadvertently diminish users’ engagement in deep, reflective thinking processes.”²⁷ In other words, there is a significant inner cost paid by the user in exchange for the higher external efficiency of using AI. This reveals that a preacher’s use of LLMs to write messages is not a matter of the cognitive and the creative aspects of sermon development—it is, most importantly, a matter of the formative aspect as well.

Preachers proclaim the gospel Sunday after Sunday, not for the sake of efficiency, but for the sake of formation.²⁸ They are called to make disciples of Jesus, and their preaching aims to help transform not only the congregation into His image, but—first and foremost through the entirety of their preaching—to open themselves to the inner work of the Holy Spirit. This formation takes place for preachers in many ways, but certainly in the process of developing their sermons. As practical theologian Mason Lee has shown, sermon development is one of the most powerful opportunities for preachers to be transformed into more Christlike individuals through the cultivation of patience.²⁹ Lee names despair and pride as two contrary vices of the “homiletical virtue” of patience.³⁰ Both of these vices arise in the course of sermon writing, and the danger of LLMs lies in their potential to be used out of despair or pride rather than out of a desire to be formed by patiently waiting for God to inspire the words the preacher will deliver.

The preacher is prone to experience despair whenever resistance arises in the process of writing a sermon. Obstacles to putting the finishing touch on a final draft may include something as common and well-known as writer’s block (creative despair). They may also include the experience of struggling to grasp the most pressing real and felt needs of the congregation to whom preachers are called to speak (pastoral despair). Finally, preachers may come across their own internal resistance to the sheer otherness of the gospel itself—that, yes, even the one called to deliver the good news is in dire need of hearing it, too (formative despair). However, no matter the despairing barrier that preachers encounter on the way to completing their sermons each week, in the digital age, they may be tempted to eschew the patience required to wait for creative, pastoral, or formative inspiration to strike, turning instead to an LLM to rescue them from the struggle to write.

²⁵ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 2; See also Sandra Grinschgl, Frank Papenmeier, and Hauke S. Meyerhoff, “Consequences of Cognitive Offloading: Boosting Performance but Diminishing Memory,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 9 (2021): 1477–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218211008060>.

²⁶ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 13.

²⁷ Gerlich, “AI Tools in Society,” 23.

²⁸ As Scott Gibson writes, “Discipleship through our sermons is what we’re after. Discipleship, then, is developing mature, well-rounded Christians who not only are fed through preaching and the wider ministry of the church but also are able to feed others and themselves well.... *We preach to help disciples mature*” (emphasis added). Scott Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 14.

²⁹ Mason Lee, *Learning to Speak of God: Patience as a Homiletical Virtue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 146–64.

³⁰ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 138; 124–27.

Another vice, however, sits on the other side of the spectrum: that of pride in one's own homiletical abilities. "The vice of pride," Lee says, "suggests we can accomplish what we desire through our own power" rather than recognizing our creaturely finitude and relying upon the power of God to accomplish His good work in preachers and their preaching.³¹ For instance, young preachers using an LLM in their sermon development might succumb to pride by overestimating the depth of their knowledge of patristics: Seeking to use AI in researching a sermon on sanctification, they might prompt an LLM for quotations from writers of the early church, but fail to recognize that in its response, the AI had not quoted a particular church father verbatim but had merely conflated key elements of the figure's theology, falsely attributing a "hallucinated" quotation to him.³²

Pride may also surface within the heart of a longtime preacher who chooses to use an LLM. For example, if such a preacher wanted to save time on sermon preparation in order to conduct an additional hospital visit (or, perhaps the reasoning is less altruistic and is driven more by vocational burnout or simple laziness), they might prompt the AI to organize a smattering of disordered sermonic ideas about that Sunday's text into a pulpit-ready manuscript, overly confident that years of preaching experience have engendered a level of rhetorical skill that will overcome whatever flaws or inconsistencies may be present in the manuscript the LLM produces.

Regardless of age or experience, the vices of both despair and pride may inhibit preachers from recognizing the biases that influence LLM output. One such bias is readily apparent but easily overlooked: Since the algorithms behind LLMs are trained to return human prompts with a sequence of words, each of which is simply the next most probable in the sentence of which they are a part, the use of these tools inherently involves an algorithmic bias toward language and ideas that will meet their users' expectations. But if, as Will Willimon writes, "Preaching arises from the conviction that Christ really is present, or could likely show up, in Word and sacrament, speaking for himself, walking freely among his people,"³³ then preachers who seek to use these AI tools with homiletical patience ought to pause and ask, "Does the message of the gospel always meet human expectations?" The resurrection was not statistically probable, based on the

³¹ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 129. See also Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 12:9.

³² The term "hallucination" refers to LLMs' propensity for "confabulation" in their responses to human prompts. As Ethan and Lilach Mollick explain, "[LLMs] are prone to producing incorrect, but plausible facts, a phenomenon known as confabulation or hallucination. These errors can be deeply woven into the AI's outputs and are hard to detect. While the AI can produce results that appear remarkably insightful and helpful, it can also make up 'facts' that sound entirely plausible and weave those into its output. While different LLMs have different rates of these sorts of errors...they are most common when asking for quotes, sources, citations, or other detailed information." Ethan R. Mollick and Lilach Mollick, "Assigning AI: Seven Approaches for Students, with Prompts," *Social Science Research Network Electronic Journal*, September 23, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4475995>; Surely, LLMs are bound to become more accurate in terms of their factual reliability as the technology develops over time (similar to that of the crowdsourced online encyclopedia Wikipedia); however, preachers will always need to verify any information provided by AI—and herein lies one of the greatest risks for preachers who use them.

³³ Will Willimon, *Accidental Preacher: A Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 142; Willimon here cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's definition of preaching. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 101.

historical data. Surely, the resurrected Christ continues to inspire new and surprising words that preachers at first would not expect.³⁴

A second bias that influences LLM output is cultural bias. As Casey T. Sigmon notes, “Generative AI’s learning has mostly been centered on Western views and the English language,” leading to the increased likelihood of an LLM excluding non-Western perspectives in its output.³⁵ Even more troubling is the fact that—because they are trained using data publicly available on the internet—LLMs are capable of giving responses that contain “racist, sexist, ageist, ableist, homophobic, antisemitic, xenophobic, deceitful, derogatory, culturally insensitive, hostile, and other forms of adverse content.”³⁶ Having made this observation, Glenn Kleiman points out that although the companies who create and maintain these AI tools have made efforts to improve their algorithms’ ability to identify and eliminate harmful content from LLM responses, “the issues of who will decide what is acceptable in what contexts, what criteria will be used to filter information, and how solutions can be implemented while respecting freedom of expression, are far from solved.”³⁷ Most preachers are unlikely to come across such adverse content when prompting LLMs for homiletical purposes. Nevertheless, if they are to maximize both “cultural engagement and sermon relevance” in messages aided by LLMs, they must not allow despair or pride to prevent them from doing the patient work required to ascertain the biases that lie beneath any response that AI gives.³⁸

Although the temptation to the vices of despair or pride is never directly caused by an LLM (or any other tool, for that matter), the imagined scenarios and relevant considerations given above may resonate with preachers who have encountered similar temptations in their sermon writing—instances in which the use of AI would have the potential to foster impatience or to perpetuate harmful biases. Ultimately, a consideration of these homiletical pitfalls highlights the ever-present need for preachers to cultivate the virtue of patience for their own sake, as well as that of their hearers, especially in the digital age. Lee summarizes it well: “In the pursuit of our good end, patience governs our passionate responses to sorrow by protecting us from despair that would lead us to give up early and pride that would lead us to conclude prematurely.”³⁹

Caution and calls for deep, ongoing ethical reflection are essential when considering adopting AI tools in one’s ministry. Even so, the outright dismissal of LLMs for sermon development by some is not a viable option. As Catholic ethicist and theologian Paul Scherz argues, “Even if all [Christians] were to forgo AI, we would still live in a world shaped by it.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Andy Crouch contrasts AI’s bias toward providing answers we expect with the teaching ministry of Jesus. Of the more than 150 questions posed to Jesus in the four Gospels, he answers fewer than ten. See *Practicing the Way*, “Future of the Church,” 36:15.

³⁵ Casey T. Sigmon, *Engaging the Gadfly: Reflective Online, Hybrid, and In-Person Preaching in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2025), 140.

³⁶ Glenn Kleiman, “Teaching Students to Write with AI: The SPACE Framework,” Medium, January 5, 2023, accessed March 18, 2026, <https://medium.com/the-generator/teaching-students-to-write-with-ai-the-space-framework-fl0003ec48bc>.

³⁷ Kleiman, “Teaching Students.”

³⁸ Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 9.

³⁹ Lee, *Learning to Speak of God*, 129.

⁴⁰ Scherz, “AI as Person,” 144; In his essay, Scherz identifies the weaknesses of several common moral lenses for determining the ethical use of AI tools and recommends “a new, more sophisticated instrumentalist approach.” Scherz, “AI as Person,” 142.

And as this article has posited, there *are* ethical uses of AI for homileticians—so long as they first identify the proper limitations of AI use in the development of their sermons. Thus, within the ethical constraints outlined above, the final section of this article aims to suggest several ways that preachers *may* use an LLM as a tool to accomplish or to enhance the cognitive, creative, and formative aspects of preaching. These suggestions are determined to avoid the vices of despair and pride while, at the same time, allowing for the cultivation of patience in both preachers and their congregations.

Proposed Uses for LLMs as a Tool for Sermon Development

Using LLMs for Cognitive Tasks

Large language models offer great potential for cognitive tasks. Outside of sermon development, LLMs and other AI tools may be used for less significant, “economically valuable” cognitive responsibilities within congregational ministry.⁴¹ These might include formatting documents or other printed communication, synchronizing calendars for the reservation of church facilities, compiling quarterly reports on financial contributions, or ordering office supplies at optimal intervals throughout the year. When it comes to the cognitive aspect of sermon craft, LLMs’ ability to summarize enormous swaths of data on the Bible in general or on commentators’ interpretations of a specific passage throughout history is one of the first ways that many preachers might consider implementing these tools. In order to avoid the atrophy of one’s critical thinking skills, however, preachers should view LLMs not as *authoritative resources for*, but rather as *supplementary assistants* in their research.⁴²

For example, if the sermon text is Gal 2:19–21, to offload the cognitive aspect of sermon research by prompting an LLM to conduct a full textual analysis of the passage, or to complete an assessment of its historical and literary contexts, or to select its most relevant pastoral application for modern hearers, all likely constitute unethical uses of the tool.⁴³ The preacher must “take the lead” of AI when it comes to the cognitive aspect of sermon research. This includes tasks like reading and contemplating the passage, studying and learning its literary context, engaging with relevant commentaries, and carefully considering which truth from the biblical text the congregation most needs to hear that Sunday. Within the ethical limitations suggested above, however, it would be permissible for the preacher to prompt the LLM to summarize the main positions of the *pistis Christou* debate (relevant to one’s interpretation of verse 20), to name the most prominent interpreters for each viewpoint and to provide links to books or articles where the preacher can engage what others have written, or (once the preacher has carried out the initial study independently) perhaps even to engage in spiritual reflection through a simulated conversation with the LLM—so long as these uses are not motivated by pride or despair and allow for the cultivation of patience within the preacher.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Practicing the Way, “Future of the Church,” 52:10.

⁴² In the field of education, Mollick and Mollick advocate for this practice of assigning various roles to LLMs for the task of learning (e.g., AI as tutor, coach, teammate, and simulator). See “Assigning AI,” 2; For preachers, prompting an LLM to serve as a research assistant (or simply engaging the AI with this mindset) is a simple way to ensure that it serves as an “ally of labor rather than an independent entity” in the process of sermon development. Scherz, “AI as Person,” 142.

⁴³ As Keefe writes, such a wide-open use of AI promises only to “short-circuit the relationship between the human and Holy Spirit.” “Where Is the Spirit?,” 143.

⁴⁴ A recent case study of college students’ engagement with Psalm 1 highlights the capabilities of LLMs to this end: “By offering a broad overview of biblical scholarship and presenting a range of interpretations, [LLMs] can potentially allow users to engage with the text more deeply.” Kenan Casey, Matthew Sokoloski, Loren Warf, and

Using LLMs for Creative Tasks

For many preachers, the discovery of the sermon's main idea is the largest homiletical hurdle to overcome each week. Ever-present is the fear of *not* "having something to say" come Sunday morning. Since breakthroughs are often elusive, the creative aspect of sermon development presents the greatest temptation toward a despairing use of AI. Many preachers may go so far as to discern that prompting an LLM to generate words for their sermons is never on the table, as the risks that this implementation poses (of shrinking one's creative capacities or undermining one's credibility with the congregation, to name only two), are far too great.⁴⁵

There are, however, ways to use LLMs in the creative aspect of preaching and broader congregational ministry that avoid such risks. Within well-discerned ethical constraints, preachers may use LLMs to spark, to synthesize, and to smooth their own creativity, rather than short-circuit it. Examples include prompting the AI in such a way that it will function as a more robust thesaurus (*Help me find a synonym for "promise" that starts with the letter V, but carries less emotional weight than "vow"*) or as a brainstorming assistant (*Suggest titles for a sermon series on the topic of wisdom, rooted in the book of Proverbs, and that begin with the word "at"*). Such uses of LLMs within the creative aspect of preaching may lead to more memorable sermon content that will "stick with" the preacher's hearers and help them in their discipleship to Jesus for a longer period of time.

AI tools can also aid in the creative work of writing sermons by scouring the internet for news stories that will help illustrate biblical truth. For example, a preacher might read Jesus's final image in the Sermon on the Mount of a house with its foundation built on sand crashing to the ground and wonder if any human structures have fallen for similar reasons in more recent times. They could then prompt an LLM: *Give me a real-world example of a building or system that passed inspections but later proved to be unstable*. Or if the sermon text is John 15:1–2, the preacher might wonder how modern viticultural practices compare to those in Jesus's day and ask the AI to find examples of how pruning leads to greater fruitfulness in modern farming, weaving the results into their message.⁴⁶ Preachers should not rely solely on AI to unearth modern illustrations, as the biblical text will always intersect with the local community and the preacher's own life; however, using LLMs to search online for rhetorically powerful stories of people from around the world (of which the preacher would not otherwise have become aware) is one way that AI can assist in making the text more relevant to or resonate more fully with the congregation.

Finally (but most tentatively), preachers may consider using AI to smooth a sermon outline or manuscript they have written. For example, they can upload their work and ask an LLM to proofread the document, suggesting revisions to its most important rhetorical parts (i.e., the introduction, transitions, and conclusion). They can ask the AI to identify any redundancy

Wesley Baker, "Even the Bots Cry Out: A Case Study on the Use of ChatGPT for Spiritual Reflection," *Journal of Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (Jan 2026): 23. The authors of this study are not alone in cautioning users to verify independently any information that AI provides (see n. 32 above).

⁴⁵ Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, 140.

⁴⁶ Both of these examples go beyond the cognitive task of simply finding illustrations (which could be accomplished with a basic query into an internet search engine) because, in the context of an LLM chat thread, they ask the AI to function as the preacher's creative assistant. LLMs possess a greater capacity to fine-tune searches through simulated conversation, such that the resulting illustrations are better suited to the exegetical, theological, and pastoral contexts, as first determined by the preacher and then prompted into an LLM.

that could be cut from the message, putting the sermon's main point into greater focus, or they might ask it to recommend how they might deliver important points more memorably. Having an LLM serve as an objective "reader" of sermons may help preachers receive valid criticism that they might not receive as readily from a parishioner or ministry colleague. This role for AI in creative tasks may also present preachers with critiques that such individuals in their orbit might be less willing to give out of a desire to protect the preacher's self-esteem. Nevertheless, preachers should weigh the benefits and consequences of this particular use of generative AI carefully, as it toes the line of the ethical constraints outlined in this essay.⁴⁷

Using LLMs for Formative Ends

As stated above, the formative aspect of preaching is also its primary aim. In other words, the *telos* of all aspects of homiletics (the cognitive, the creative, and others not discussed here) and their specific tasks is the transformation of Jesus's disciples into His image. Thus, all of the tasks for which a preacher might implement AI tools are not only cognitive or creative in function, but also formative in their end. The following suggested uses, while creative and cognitive in their function (respectively), are more explicit in the formation they seek to accomplish.

One case in which preachers might consider using LLMs to cultivate the spiritual formation of their congregation is to submit a sermon outline or manuscript and prompt the AI to generate several small-group discussion questions based on its content. Many churches today have a ministry in which smaller groups from within the congregation gather regularly for more intimate fellowship, and providing group leaders with questions based on a recent sermon would empower such groups to engage in intentional conversations about their discipleship to Jesus. Some preachers may reject this use of AI because it seems disingenuous, opting always to write their own small group discussion questions; however, because this creative use of LLMs is both rooted in authentic preaching and implemented for the facilitation of organic spiritual conversation among human beings, it falls within the ethical constraints laid out in this essay.

A final suggested use concerns the preacher's own formation in the process of developing their sermons. The preacher John Stott is said to have coined the adage that each minute of preaching requires an hour of preparation. However, in the modern Western church, where the professionalization of ministry has led many lay churchgoers to offload their service to those employed by their congregation, such ample time to research and write seems impossible.⁴⁸ Add to that pressure the many distractions of ministry in the digital age, and it is no wonder that many preachers experience significant despair in writing their sermons, unable to establish healthy study rhythms that would provide them with the time to craft sermons with homiletical patience. One way that LLMs can enhance the preacher's life of study and alleviate the burden of despair

⁴⁷ Additionally, at their current stage of development, LLMs do not match the level of creativity of human beings working together, and once individuals have interacted with GPTs for some time, it becomes possible to identify whether something was written by AI. As Ethan Mollick observes, "AI tends to act like a single creative person with predictable patterns. You'll see the same themes over and over... Thus, there is a paradox: while AI is more creative than most individuals, it lacks the diversity that comes from multiple perspectives." See Ethan Mollick, "'Against Brain Damage': AI Can Help, or Hurt, Our Thinking," *One Useful Thing*, July 7, 2025, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/against-brain-damage>.

⁴⁸ Although he rejects the use of AI tools for preaching, East acknowledges that sometimes these heavy expectations are placed on preachers by the elders in their churches, precipitating the stressful circumstances in which the despairing use of LLMs becomes an attractive way out. He writes, "Elders, give your pastors the time needed to study and serve the church in all their fallibility and finitude. Such limits cannot and should not be overcome." see East, "AI Has No Place."

is by helping create a weekly schedule that encourages healthy rhythms of Bible reading and prayer, research and reflection on the week's text, pastoral discernment, and writing their sermons. Preachers could prompt the AI with all their regular commitments and responsibilities, and, in a simulated "conversation" with an LLM, work through each day of the week to establish a plan for making time to encounter God and patiently to wait for the inspiring work of the Spirit on their hearts.

Conclusion

This article set out to help preachers determine the ethical limitations and potential opportunities for using LLMs in their sermon development, as well as to suggest specific ways that preachers might implement these AI tools in pulpit ministry. Here at the article's end, it is crucial that the reader recall the importance of homiletical patience, a conscious pursuit that helps to "break the spell" cast by AI. The process by which preachers develop every sermon—from the reading of and research on the biblical text, to the Spirit's inspiration of its main idea, to the composition of its words, to its delivery before the congregation—is not an exercise in enchanting the congregation with the "magic" of human technological development. Rather, the word of God is preached in order to proclaim the long-anticipated miracle of Jesus's birth, the patient ministry of his life, the long-suffering of his death—and the ongoing hope of those who await his return, rooted in the reality of his resurrection. May all preachers who choose to implement LLMs in the cognitive, creative, and formative aspects of their ministries do so with the kind of homiletical patience that honors and proclaims this message.

For Further Reading

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