ChatGPT's Gospel Preaching Process: A Grounded Theory Study

En Rui Chua[1]

[1]Affiliation not available

March 25, 2024

Abstract

Preprint: ChatGPT's Gospel Preaching Process: A Grounded Theory Study

This article has been revised and accepted for publication in Theology and Science, published by Taylor & Francis.

Abstract:

Recent strides in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have made using AI to automate the process of sermon preparation a possibility. However, AI's process of preaching is still poorly understood. This paper contributes by evaluating 27 evangelistic sermons generated by ChatGPT using Grounded Theory to study its process of preaching the gospel. The study revealed ChatGPT's use of sharing personal testimony, delivering the gospel as found in the Bible, and appealing to unbelievers to preach the gospel. The necessity of the transformative power of the gospel was identified as the core category. Theological comprehensiveness and orthodoxy of the sermons were also evaluated.

Chua En Rui[a]*

[a]Independent Researcher, Singapore, Singapore

*corresponding author: Chua En Rui

Email: enruichua@gmail.com

Introduction

Launched on 30th November 2022, ChatGPT is a Transformer-based Language Model that has astounded many with its remarkably human-like ability to perform sophisticated and complex tasks[1]. Since its launch,

it has gained tremendous popularity, attaining a hundred million users in just 2 months[2]. Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Natural Language Processing (NLP), it can generate human-like responses to questions and statements in a conversational manner[3]. Its surprising capabilities have prompted users worldwide to employ it for a wide range of purposes.

Reportedly, ChatGPT has been utilized to assist researchers in writing essays, summarizing literature data and even identifying research gaps[4]. It has also demonstrated the ability to achieve a passing or near-passing result on the United States Medical Licensing Examination as well as aiding in translation, solving mathematical problems, and coding[5]. Its successor, GPT-4 is touted to be even better with early studies indicating its superior performance on bar exams compared to ChatGPT and even outperforming human test-takers[6]. Generative AIs like ChatGPT and GPT4 have the potential to revolutionize existing educational practices and traditional approaches to research writing due to their powerful capabilities. Consequently, it is no surprise that educators and academics have eagerly sought to study and evaluate the ethical implementation of AI language models in their respective fields.

Within the Christian community, the rise of AI and Large Language Models (LLM) capable of drafting competent essays raises important questions regarding the place and role of AI within the church. Scholars such as William Young have previously explored the concept of "Digital Clergy" and how AI could potentially assist preachers in drafting sermons[7]. Though the latter may be more achievable due to its narrower focus, it remains a creative and intricate task, as Young aptly summarises,

Composing a sermon arguably is a much more highly creative endeavor. A sermon must be theologically grounded, soundly argued, and culturally relevant. Ideally, it also will be moving and inspirational with rhetorical flourish—a far cry from a corporate earnings report[8].

Considering the current capabilities of AI, can it truly aid preachers in composing a competent sermon? A small study by Dale Chamberlain on ChurchLeaders demonstrated that ChatGPT was able to summarize and accurately communicate fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith[9]. Pastors and leaders from both the Christian and Jewish communities have also experimented with employing the use of ChatGPT in sermon writing[10]. Notably, Rabbi Joshua Franklin reportedly used ChatGPT to craft a sermon which he then delivered to his congregation at the Jewish Center of the Hamptons. While the sermon was well received, congregants expressed a common sentiment of a lack of empathy and human touch within the sermon. This observation prompted many who participated in similar various small-scale experiments to conclude that AI will not be able to replace humans in crafting sermons[11]. However, given the current rapid progression of generative AI, it is conceivable that more human-like responses could very well be achieved. This could potentially lead to a novel form of online preaching which utilizes AI-generated sermons. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the digital church and brought about an increased availability and utilization of online streaming services. A study conducted in February 2021 on Protestant churches in the United States found 85% of churchgoers attending churches that offered a live stream of their service, with 76% of them stating their church posted a video that can be watched anytime[12]. These figures mark a significant rise from September 2019 when only 41% of churches were reported to have streamed or uploaded any portion of their church service online[13]. According to the same study, 80% of the churchgoers who attended a church that had an online service watched worship services through an online medium. The integration of AI-generated sermons with technologies capable of producing hyper-realistic videos and audio could potentially bring about synthetic sermon videos, thereby making virtual congregations with content created by AI a tangible reality. Pastors could also leverage generative AI technology as a tool to assist them in crafting sermons or even automate this process entirely in the future. Despite the potential implications on the theology and practice of preaching, the use of AI in the Christian context has seen a notable lack of comprehensive studies compared to other fields. Further research is needed to explore the impact of AI in preaching and its broader implications within the Christian community.

Besides the aforementioned articles concerning sermons generated by ChatGPT and their references, the researcher found a lack of empirical studies that have attempted to investigate the use of AI in automating the process of sermon composition. A thorough literature search on Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar

yielded no results regarding empirical studies on the use of AI in preaching. Thus far, studies conducted in this area have been limited to small-scale, journalistic studies that did not employ a rigorous methodology to analyze the content and structure of the sermons. Instead, these studies focused primarily on the personal emotional impact of the sermon content as a means of evaluating the potential for AI to assist in sermon preparation. This research paper aims to address this gap by adopting a Grounded Theory approach to gain a better understanding of the process of sermon composition by ChatGPT, using the gospel message as a specific case study. Additionally, the paper seeks to evaluate the capability of ChatGPT to generate theologically sound sermons that resemble sermons crafted by human preachers. The author hopes that this study will stimulate further discourse on the use of AI in preaching and teaching within the church, considering its theological and ethical implications. The ultimate goal is to effectively utilize AI as a tool to enhance the education and ministry of the church within a biblical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Before outlining the chosen methodology and results, the nature of preaching, its essential components, and the core themes of the gospel message will be summarized. This will form the context in which this study takes place and help to develop sensitizing concepts as part of the Grounded Theory methodology. Additionally, it will help to serve as a framework to evaluate ChatGPT's ability to craft a theologically accurate sermon on the gospel. The summary and evaluation will be from an Evangelical Protestant perspective. It is worth noting the researcher comes from a Pentecostal church in Singapore.

A sermon can be defined as "the portion of a religious service in which a preacher offers commentary or guidance through a theological or religious lens"[14]. An evangelistic sermon stands apart from a typical sermon as its primary aim is to present the Gospel message and bring about the conversion of non-Christians to the Christian faith. Based on this definition, a sermon can be divided into two distinct parts, the delivery of the sermon and the content that is delivered. The delivery of a sermon is a public speech or address that is delivered to a congregation that has "observable linguistic and social actions that can be analyzed empirically"[15]. On the other hand, the contents of the sermon are constructed upon Christian biblical text, distilled through the preacher's hermeneutics. This aspect should be examined theologically. Both the delivery and content of the sermons will be explored in this study using a Grounded Theory approach.

Preaching

Preaching is a form of religious discourse that serves "to create, mediate and reflect ideology to persuade the reader of the veracity of the Christian doctrine"[16]. J.I. Packer succinctly describes the role of the preacher as that to "mediate meetings with God"[17]. To achieve this, preachers often engage in biblical exposition, the sharing of personal testimony, and utilize illustrations to effectively communicate their message to the congregation. Preaching encompasses "things such as exhortation, exposition, admonition, encouragement, and comfort"[18], all with the ultimate goal of impacting people to Christ[19]. However, the method and focus of preaching can vary based on the preacher's education and theological convictions.

In the field of homiletics, some view the task of the preacher to be heralding or proclaiming the truth[20]. They place special emphasis on the preacher's focus to deliver and convey the message that is within scripture. Others take a different approach, highlighting the preacher's responsibility to guide the audience toward the direction that was outlined in the sermon. This perspective places a stronger emphasis on the persuasive nature of preaching and advocates for increased creativity in the preaching process[21]. The present study aims to examine which approach ChatGPT aligns with when preaching the gospel.

The Gospel

The gospel is central to the Christian faith as it is the Bible's response to the issue of sin that Christianity claims all humans need to tackle. This significance is evident through the prevalent use of passages related to the gospel and the preaching of the gospel among churches as revealed in a survey conducted by LifeWay Research[22]. In essence, the gospel is the message of Jesus Christ's birth, sinless life, vicarious death, and subsequent resurrection that redeems mankind from sin and death[23]. Sin hinders man from being in communion with a holy God and without paying the penalty of sin, eternal fellowship with God is unattainable. The process of the removal of sin is based on the "substitutionary atonement" of Jesus. Wellman's interviews with Evangelicals highlight this aspect as a central theme[24]. By placing faith in Jesus Christ and believing in him as Lord and Saviour, individuals can receive salvation through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Christianity asserts that this is the sole means by which humanity can be reconciled with Christ and inherit eternal life. Preachers will often call on the congregation to respond to the Gospel message by repenting and believing in Christ. This often involves leading them in a prayer commonly known as "the Sinner's Prayer" where an unbeliever acknowledges their sin, recognizes the redeeming work of Christ, and professes their faith in Jesus Christ.

Wayne Grudem outlines key elements of the gospel message that must be conveyed when preaching the gospel message. These elements are (1) all people have sinned; (2) the penalty for sin is death; (3) Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins; (4) invitation to respond to Christ personally in repentance and faith; (5) a promise of forgiveness and eternal life[25]. In evaluating the evangelistic sermons generated by ChatGPT, their theological comprehensiveness and adherence to the fundamental evangelical doctrine of the gospel will be assessed based on these five key elements.

Methodology

This section will provide a detailed explanation of the methodology employed in generating evangelistic sermons using ChatGPT. Furthermore, the process of utilizing a Grounded Theory approach for analysis will be elaborated on.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of three distinct rounds utilizing the free version of ChatGPT available on OpenAI's website[26]. A total of 27 sermons were generated throughout these rounds. In the first round of data collection, fifteen sermon texts were generated using the prompt: "Write an evangelistic sermon about the gospel with references from the Bible. Conclude with a prayer". The ChatGPT Feb 13 version was utilized for this round. In the second round of data collection, seven sermon texts were generated using the prompt: "Write an evangelistic sermon about the gospel with references from the Bible. Include personal illustrations. Conclude with a prayer." For this round, the ChatGPT Mar 14 version was utilized. Lastly, in the third round of data collection, five sermon texts were generated using the prompt: "Write an evangelistic sermon about the gospel." This rounded utilized the ChatGPT May 3 version. The generated texts were processed by removing additional information that did not constitute part of the sermon which would be delivered such as the title of the generated sermon and its section headers.

The first prompt was designed to generate sermons that follow the typical sermon structure employed by evangelical preachers. This was intended to simulate inputs that Christian users might provide. The second prompt was formulated to facilitate theoretical sampling and investigate the incorporation of personal illustrations within the sermon, as explained in the subsequent sections. Lastly, the prompt used in the final round aimed to compare how ChatGPT would generate an evangelistic sermon with minimal instructions from the user.

4

Data Analysis

This paper utilizes the Grounded Theory approach to conduct a content analysis of sermons generated by ChatGPT, following the model proposed by Charmaz[27]. This methodology has been adopted for the study of homiletics by scholars such as Pieterse[28]. Extensive explanations of Grounded theory and its place in research can be found in common literature and would not be expounded on within this paper. This paper would be following the methodology outlined by Pieterse, following a constructivist epistemology where the analyst and authors of texts are co-constructing the categories and concepts[29]. Grounded Theory is particularly suitable for studying the content of sermons as it enables the analysis of concept relationships within a Christian social and cultural context. Chramaz directs the researcher to examine processes and make the study of action the central focus of research. In relation to this paper, the actions of the preacher during sermon delivery are the primary focus. Thus, during the initial coding phase, codes were formulated as "Preacher claims... Preacher asserts... Preacher invites...etc."

Before coding commenced, a review of current literature on preaching, the Gospel message, and evangelism was conducted to develop sensitizing concepts. According to Charmaz, through familiarization with literature in the area of study being conducted, the researcher would be able to develop sensitizing concepts which she defines as "background ideas that inform the overall research problem"[30]. This literature review highlighted the issue of Sin, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, eternal life, and reconciliation with God as prominent ideas. The idea of preaching being an event to impact people to Christ also arose. These concepts informed the data analysis throughout the study.

In the initial coding phase of the first set of sermon texts, the sermon was first segmented based on the preacher's communicative focus. These segments were then further coded according to the actions of the preacher within each segment using Microsoft Word and Excel. This reflexive process involved constant comparison of codes and segments to ensure consistency across all sermons. The initial coding process was repeated until every sermon was analyzed. The codes were subsequently organized into categories through continuous comparison of codes and segments. Certain codes were selected based on their overriding significance. During the initial coding phase, it became apparent that the sermons indicated the preacher's personal witness to the transformative power of the gospel in people's lives, but its relationship to other categories remained unclear and required further investigation. Consequently, sermons incorporating personal illustrations of the preacher were generated to explore this aspect further.

During the focused coding phase, the second set of sermons was first coded line-by-line. These codes were then compared to the existing initial categories from the first set of sermon texts. The initial categories were then further enriched, and the properties and dimensions of the existing categories were specified. Memos were written and analyzed to help enrich the core category. This was followed by a final stage of theoretical coding, where advanced memos were compared, sorted, and categories reviewed. During this phase, the necessity of the transformative power of the gospel was identified as the central category. Associations between themes were drawn based on the data and initial literature review. At this stage, an additional five sermons were generated to examine the structure and content of an evangelistic sermon with minimal prompts. As no new categories emerged during the coding process, it was determined that "theoretical saturation" had been achieved.

Each sermon was then examined for the presence of the five key elements that constitute the gospel call and their occurrence in each sermon was quantified to assess the effectiveness of ChatGPT in generating theologically comprehensive evangelistic sermons. Every Bible scripture quoted within the generated sermon texts was scrutinized to ensure verbatim quotations from the Bible using the Google Search engine and available online Bible translations. Finally, the structure of the sermons was compared to existing literature.

Results

During the coding process, three major categories emerged in relation to the preaching of the gospel emerged: (1) sharing personal testimony, (2) delivering the gospel as found in the Bible, and (3) appealing to unbelievers. These categories revolved around the core category of the transformative power of the gospel. An overview of the categories with quotes is provided in Table 1. Figure 1 presents a visual model depicting the relationships between each category in the process of preaching the gospel through ChatGPT. The sermons were observed to follow a consistent structure. The preacher would first assert that the gospel possesses the power to transform the listener's life. Subsequently, a summary of the gospel message, supported by relevant Bible verses, would be provided. The structure and incorporation of the preacher's personal testimony within the sermon varied depending on the type of prompt used. The sermons concluded with an appeal and invitation for unbelievers (non-Christians) to embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Finally, each sermon would end with the preacher leading the listeners in a prayer.

Sharing Personal Testimony

In the opening paragraphs of their sermons, preachers would often emphasize the immense importance of the gospel message and bear witness to its global impact on numerous lives. They then propose the possibility of the gospel transforming the lives of the listeners as well. This transformed life is described as one characterized by "hope" and "love", qualities that are highly desirable for individuals. Additionally, supernatural blessings such as "eternal life" were also frequently mentioned.

Preachers also recounted their personal experiences with the gospel and drew on comparisons between their lives before and after embracing the gospel. This serves to establish the ability and the necessity of the transformative power of the gospel. Prior to their belief in the gospel, preachers commonly describe a sense of purposelessness, loneliness, and emotional brokenness. They often depict their past lives as devoid of meaning and filled with various struggles. For instance, one preacher shared the following reflection on their past:

Growing up, I had heard about Jesus, but I didn't fully understand the gospel until I was in college. I was struggling with feeling empty and lost in life. I felt like there had to be something more to life than just going through the motions.

Preachers would conclude their testimony by affirming that their belief in the gospel was the pivotal moment where their lives turned around for the better. Life after embracing the gospel is characterized by a sense of rebirth and the experience of a new, purposeful, peaceful, and hopeful existence. Some preachers also describe God to be an active force in their life, providing them with divine strength which helped the preachers to overcome struggles in their life.

It is important to note that in all the sermons analyzed, the personal testimony shared by the preachers focused solely on describing their lives before and after their conversion, no past story was recounted and elaborated on. Most sermons included references to the transformative power of the gospel in the lives of others which were typically located in the introductory paragraphs. However, the inclusion and style of personal testimony varied depending on the round of data collection, indicating a close connection between the input prompts used and the incorporation of personal testimony within the sermon. An overview of the placement of personal testimony within the sermon categorized by the rounds of data collection can be found in Figure 2.

Delivering the Gospel as Found in the Bible

Making up the main body of the sermon, preachers would expound upon and present the gospel message as presented in the Bible to the listeners. The primary objective of the preachers was to emphasize the necessity for the listeners to embrace the gospel, place their faith in Jesus, and experience transformation through

God. Preachers typically started by explaining the issue of sin, followed by describing the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. Subsequently, they would then delve into how the listeners can attain salvation and the ensuing outcomes of salvation, often highlighting various blessings. Some preachers also addressed believers at this juncture, emphasizing the imperative of sharing the gospel. Scripture references were frequently employed to substantiate the theological aspects of the gospel message.

Sinful Humans

Preachers would commence their proclamation of the gospel by asserting the universal reality of sin and its implications for humanity's standing before God. Preachers frequently quoted or paraphrased Romans 3:23 here to establish this biblical fact. Interestingly, most preachers did not explain or give examples of what constitutes sin. Instead, they focused on describing the effects of sin and utilized less common expressions such as "fallen short of the glory of God" to provide the listeners with a general understanding of what sin is. On rare occasions when sin was defined, it was typically portrayed as an act of disobedience to God or as a failure to meet His perfect standards. Preachers explained that sin renders humans guilty in the sight of God, making them deserving of death, often described as eternal separation from God. However, only two preachers mentioned the concept of hell in their sermons, and approximately 33% (N = 9) of preachers referred to sin as the cause of physical death in humanity.

By presenting these concepts, the preachers sought to underscore the imperative for non-Christian listeners to seek a solution to the problem of sin, as the alternative would result in perishing and experiencing eternal separation from God.

Redemptive Work of Jesus Christ

The preachers frequently presented God's love for humanity as the underlying motivation for sending Jesus to die on the cross, thereby providing redemption for mankind. They emphasized that Jesus' sacrificial act demonstrated God's profound love for both the listeners and all of humanity. The preachers explained that through Jesus' death, the penalty of sin was paid, offering salvation to anyone who believes. Notably, John 3:16 was often quoted, emerging as the most frequently cited verse in the sermons. By referencing this verse, the preachers established the gospel as the remedy for sin and a pathway to salvation for unbelievers. While Jesus as a savior was frequently mentioned or alluded to in the sermons, it is important to note that only 44% (N = 12) of the sermons explicitly claimed the gospel to be the exclusive means of salvation. Other preachers did not assert the exclusivity of the gospel message in relation to salvation.

Receiving Salvation

Preachers presented the process of receiving salvation and accepting the gospel message to involve two key actions: placing faith in Jesus Christ and repentance. All preachers emphasized the necessity of believing in Jesus to receive salvation, while the concept of repentance was elaborated on by only 44% (N = 12) of the preachers within the sermon. The topic of repentance typically emerged when the invitation to respond and believe in the gospel message was extended to the listeners. In their explanations, preachers commonly described biblical repentance as an act of turning away from sin and following the ways of God.

It is worth noting that one sermon implied that receiving salvation involves both repentance and baptism, citing Acts 2:38. However, the preacher did not explicitly state that baptism is necessary for salvation. Instead, the significance of baptism was explained, followed by urging for non-Christian listeners to place their faith in Jesus for salvation, citing Romans 10:9.

So, how do we receive this gift of salvation? In Acts 2:38, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Repentance means turning away from our sins and turning to God. Baptism is a public declaration of our faith in Jesus and our desire to follow Him. If you haven't yet put your faith in Jesus, I urge you to

do so today. The Bible says in Romans 10:9, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Results of Salvation

The promise of eternal life emerged as the most frequently mentioned result of salvation, appearing in all sermons. The preachers emphasized that through belief in Jesus, God forgives the sins of individuals, reconciling them with himself. This meant that believers are no longer considered guilty of sin in the eyes of God and are no longer deserving of His wrath. Some preachers further expanded on the concept of believers being adopted into the family of God, emphasizing that through their faith, they become his children. This aspect of salvation highlights the potential for unbelievers to develop a close and intimate relationship with God if they choose to believe.

Preachers also commonly mentioned that believers would receive the Holy Spirit who empowers them to live a new life fully dedicated to Christ. the personal testimonies of some preachers highlighted the various spiritual blessings of this transformed life, describing it as abundant. Some preachers mentioned that living for Christ would require sacrifice on the believer's part and described the sacrifice to be "worth it".

The gospel is not just a one-time decision, but it is a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus Christ. As Luke 9:23 says, "Then he said to them all: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'" Following Jesus may not always be easy, but it is worth it.

Another significant aspect emphasized by preachers is the responsibility of believers to share the gospel with others, bringing hope to their lives. This call to action is directed towards both existing believers and new converts, with the aim of mobilizing them to live out their faith and actively spread the message of the gospel.

Appealing to Unbelievers

To conclude the sermon, preachers would make a direct appeal to the listeners, urging them to believe in the gospel and inviting unbelievers to respond to the gospel message by repenting and placing their faith in Jesus. Spiritual blessings and the promise of eternal life are often reiterated here to appeal more to unbelievers. Following the invitation, the preacher leads the congregation in prayer, facilitating the actualization of faith and the reception of salvation. The prayer begins with expressing gratitude for the work of Jesus on the cross, followed by confessing sins and professing faith in Jesus Christ. It usually concludes with giving thanks to God and making requests for empowerment to live a life for Christ. Some preachers may also offer a benediction after the prayer, one preacher said: "May the Lord bless you and keep you, and may His face shine upon you always. Amen."

Throughout the entire sermon, a clear rhetorical structure is employed to appeal to non-Christian listeners and encourage them to accept the gospel message. With reference to the three classical types of Aristotelian appeal to the audience, as summarized by Virtanen & Halmari[31], the preachers primarily used *ethos* and *pathos* , with *pathos* being the main focus. *Ethos* was established through personal testimonies and the quotation of Bible scripture. The use of personal testimony makes the message more relatable to the audience and implicitly appeals to the lived experiences of the listeners creating a bond between the preacher and the listeners. This helps establish the credibility of the preacher and serves as evidence to legitimize the claims of the Bible in the eyes of non-Christian listeners. Once the credibility of the Bible is established as a divinely inspired truth, it becomes a persuasive tool for both Christian and non-Christian listeners.

The emotional appeal, or *pathos,* within the sermon, is evoked through the discourse, triggering emotions such as fear and excitement in the listeners. Unbelievers may experience fear when confronted with the potential consequences of their sins, including punishment and condemnation by God. This fear highlights the necessity of the gospel message. Additionally, the presentation of spiritual blessings, such as eternal life and a transformed life, elicits emotions of hope and excitement, as listeners envision the possibility of

obtaining such blessings. These emotional responses drive non-Christians to accept the message and desire a transformative experience through the gospel.

Theological Comprehensiveness and Accuracy

The five key elements were analyzed and categorized into respective sub-themes to assess the comprehensiveness of each sermon. The findings revealed that approximately 78% (N = 21) of the sermons incorporated all five key elements. Every sermon included all key elements except "A promise of forgiveness and eternal life", where some preachers omitted the promise of forgiveness. A summary of the analysis can be found in Table 2. All verses found within the sermons were determined to have been quoted verbatim from the Bible albeit using different Bible translations. Theological points raised by the preachers were consistent with evangelical doctrine of the gospel such as the teachings of substitutionary atonement and salvation by faith alone[32].

Discussion

In the following section, the structure and elements of preaching and their effectiveness are further examined based on existing literature. The transferability of this study and possibilities for future research are discussed and explored.

The sermon structure adopted by ChatGPT was observed to be more inductive in nature. An inductive sermon begins with an introduction that only contains the first point of the sermon. Subsequent points raised build on each other till the complete idea of the sermon is developed before the preacher states the idea of the sermon[33]. When delivering an inductive sermon, the preacher would work towards a biblical solution to a human problem, fostering a conversational tone rather than a lecturing style. ChatGPT was observed to first introduce the issue of sin and conclude the sermon with the core idea and solution to the issue of sin by acknowledging the necessity of the transformative power of the gospel and the need to accept it. This narrative-driven approach has a "special appeal to inhabitants of a culture dominated by television and motion pictures"[34]. This allows the preacher better connect with modern audiences. Inductive sermons are also effective with indifferent or hostile audiences who may reject the central idea if stated at the beginning. This preaching style aids in sharing the gospel with skeptical unbelievers and making an impact on the lives of the listeners, as demonstrated in a study by Stoorvogel, van Vuuren, and de Jong[35].

Another observed technique used by ChatGPT is the inclusion of personal testimonies within the sermon. This helps establish a bond between the preacher and the listener, as well as lends authority to the preacher as someone who has personally experienced the transformative power of the gospel and can lead others to a similar experience, thereby enhancing the appeal to listeners[36]. The use of invitations and calls to respond to the gospel is common in the generated sermons and proves effective in generating intentions for change among listeners[37].

The inclusion of rhetorical elements and invitation, coupled with the inductive nature of the sermon, aims to persuade listeners of the core message and direct them toward the sermon's intended direction. Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that ChatGPT is capable of structuring and generating comprehensive evangelistic sermons that are specifically targeted toward non-Christian listeners, resembling those delivered by human preachers.

Regarding the transferability of this study, it is important to note the limitations associated with the small sample size and ChatGPT's sensitivity to input prompts. However, the results provide valuable insights for future studies on the use of AI in automating the preaching process. They shed light on ChatGPT's approach to preaching through the development of a substantive grounded theory, which could contribute to the formulation of a formal theory on ChatGPT's preaching process.

This study has established that ChatGPT is capable of generating theologically sound and comprehensive evangelistic sermons that closely resemble those delivered by human preachers. It has also demonstrated ChatGPT's ability to fabricate personal testimonies that summarize human experiences of divine intervention, although specific examples were not provided. Furthermore, ChatGPT has shown proficiency in crafting and leading prayers to God, a feature not observed in previous journalistic studies. These findings highlight the potential for using AI language models, such as ChatGPT, to automate the sermon preparation process and potentially explore the concept of digital clergy. However, further investigation is needed to determine the receptiveness of human congregants to sermons generated by AI and their effectiveness in instilling a desire for change among the congregants.

Further studies are needed to explore the implications of these findings for the nature and practice of preaching, prayer, and the role of humans within the Christian context. Additionally, it is crucial to delve deeper into the theological and ethical issues surrounding the use of AI in the sermon preparation process to enrich the ongoing discussions in this area[38]. The impact of AI on the role of church clergy and their relationship with congregants also warrants investigation. Understanding the receptivity and sentiments of human listeners towards AI-generated sermons is essential to gain insight into the feasibility of automating the preaching process using AI language models.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, it is evident that ChatGPT employs a distinct process in preaching the gospel, which encompasses sharing of personal testimony, delivering the gospel as found in the Bible, and appealing to unbelievers by utilizing various forms of rhetoric. Central to this process is the fundamental belief in the necessity of the transformative power of the gospel. Notably, ChatGPT's approach to preaching the gospel exhibits an inductive nature, presenting information gradually and building a coherent message. Moreover, it managed to present the gospel message comprehensively and demonstrated adherence to mainline evangelical understanding of the gospel. The findings of this study highlight the potential for utilizing AI to automate the sermon preparation process.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

OpenAI, "Introducing ChatGPT"; Wang et al., "What Does ChatGPT Say: The DAO from Algorithmic Intelligence to Linguistic Intelligence."

[2] Dan Milmo, "ChatGPT Reaches 100 Million Users Two Months after Launch."

[3] OpenAI, "Introducing ChatGPT."

[4] Liebrenz et al., "Generating Scholarly Content with ChatGPT: Ethical Challenges for Medical Publishing."

[5] Gilson et al., "How Does ChatGPT Perform on the United States Medical Licensing Examination? The Implications of Large Language Models for Medical Education and Knowledge Assessment"; Kung et al., "Performance of ChatGPT on USMLE: Potential for AI-Assisted Medical Education Using Large Language Models"; Shen et al., "ChatGPT and Other Large Language Models Are Double-Edged Swords."

[6] Katz et al., "GPT-4 Passes the Bar Exam."

[7] Young, "Reverend Robot: Automation And Clergy."

8 Young, 491.

9 Dale Chamberlain, "How Well Does ChatGPT Understand Christian Theology?"

10 David Crary, "ChatGPT Is Coming for Religion and Lazy Pastors Might Use It to Write Their Sermons— But It 'Has No Soul'"; Associated Press, "ChatGPT AI Robots Writing Church Sermons Causing Hell for Pastors."

11 Jennifer A. Kingson, "Religious Leaders Experiment with ChatGPT Sermons."

12 Aaron Earls, "Churchgoers Proud of Church's COVID-19 Response."

3 Aaron Earls, "Livestreaming Services Hasn't Been an Option for Many Churches."

4 Pew Research Center, "The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons."

15 Pieterse, "Grounded Theory Approach in Sermon Analysis of Sermons on Poverty and Directed at the Poor as Listeners," 116.

6 Adam, "Persuasion In Religious Discourse: Enhancing Credibility In Sermon Titles And Openings," 7.

7 J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* .

8 R.C. Sproul, "Preaching and Teaching."

9 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* ; Colin Smith, "Preaching."

20 Karl Barth, *Homiletics* , 49–50; Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* .

21 Ronald Boyd-Macmillan, *Explosive Preaching: Letters on Detonating the Gospel in the 21st Century* .

22 Aaron Earls, "Most Popular Sermon Passages, Topics in 2021."

23 John N. Akers et al., "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration"; Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* .

24 James K. Wellman, *Evangelical Vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* .

25 Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* , 692–98.

26 OpenAI, "Introducing ChatGPT."

27 Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* .

28 Pieterse, "The Grounded Theory Methodology to Conduct Content Analysis of Sermons and Interviews: Critique and Response."

29 Pieterse.

30 Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods," 259.

31 Virtanen and Halmari, "Persuasion across Genres."

32 John N. Akers et al., "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration."

33 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* , 77–96.

34 Haddon W. Robinson, 90.

35 Stoorvogel, Van Vuuren, and De Jong, "Sermons That Have Changed My Life: A Qualitative Study of the Factors in Sermons That Elicit Change."

36 Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching, Second Edition* , 11–51.

[37] Stoorvogel, Van Vuuren, and De Jong, "Moving Sermons: A Field Experiment on the Persuasive Effects of Preaching."

[38] Young, "Reverend Robot: Automation And Clergy." See paper for specific theological questions raised.

Table 1. Overview of Categories

Main Category	Sub-Categories	Sample of Coded Text
Sharing Personal Testimony	Witnessed Impact of the Gospel	[. . .] the message that brings hope, forgiveness, and eternal life. It is a message that has transformed the lives of millions of people around the world, and it can transform your life too.
	Personal Impact of the gospel	It was during this time that I encountered the gospel, and it transformed me. [. . .] Through his death and resurrection, I was given new life and a new purpose. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" [. . .] Through my own personal struggles and challenges, I have found peace and strength in Jesus Christ. As Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."
	Importance of the gospel	The gospel is the most important message in the world, and it has the power to transform your life completely.
Delivering the Gospel as Found in the Bible	Sinful Humans	The Gospel tells us that we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This means that we are all guilty before God, and we cannot save ourselves from the penalty of sin, which is death.

Main Category	Sub-Categories	Sample of Coded Text
	Redemptive Work of Jesus Christ	But God, in His great love and mercy, sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins so that we may have eternal life. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This is the essence of the Gospel.
	Receiving Salvation	To receive this gift of salvation, we must repent of our sins and put our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. [. . .] This means that we must turn away from our sinful ways and turn to God, [. . .]
	Results of Salvation	The gospel offers us forgiveness of our sins and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live a life pleasing to God. When we do this, we are adopted into God's family as His children. Galatians 3:26 says, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." This means that we can have a personal relationship with God and experience His love, grace, and power in our lives.
Appealing to Unbelievers	Appeal for Faith and Repentance	I urge you to consider the gospel and to put your faith in Jesus Christ. He is the only way to be saved and to have eternal life. As Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."
	Sinner's Prayer	Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Today, we surrender our lives to You and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Main Category	Sub-Categories	Sample of Coded Text
	Thanksgiving and Prayer for Blessings	Fill us with Your Holy Spirit and empower us to live for You. Help us to share the good news of the gospel with others so they too may experience Your love and salvation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Table 2. Summary of analysis for five key elements of the gospel

Related Code(s)	Coding Instructions	Coding Instructions
All people have sinned	All people have sinned	
Humans identified as sinners	Preacher's claim that mankind possess sin/ are sinful.	Preacher's claim that mankind possess sin/ are sinful.
The penalty for sin is death	The penalty for sin is death	
Separation from God^	Preacher's statement about sin alienating mankind from God and/ or eternal separation from God.	Preacher's statement about sin alienating mankind from God and/ or eternal separation from God.
Physical Death^	Preacher's claim that sin is the cause of humans experiencing physical death.	Preacher's claim that sin is the cause of humans experiencing physical death.
Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins	Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins	Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins
Atoning work of Christ's death	Preacher's statements about Jesus paying the penalty of sin for all through his death on the cross. Through his death and subsequent resurrection, he conquered sin and death.	Preacher's statements about Jesus paying the penalty of sin for all through his death on the cross. Through his death and subsequent resurrection, he conquered sin and death.
Invitation to respond to Christ personally in repentance and faith	Invitation to respond to Christ personally in repentance and faith	Invitation to respond to Christ personally in repentance and faith
Appeal for faith and repentance^	Preacher inviting listeners to place their faith in Jesus and turn away from their sins.	Preacher inviting listeners to place their faith in Jesus and turn away from their sins.
Sinner's Prayer^	Preacher inviting listener to exercise faith and follow in prayer as he leads out in prayer consisting of a confession of sin and a profession of faith in Jesus.	Preacher inviting listener to exercise faith and follow in prayer as he leads out in prayer consisting of a confession of sin and a profession of faith in Jesus.
A promise of forgiveness and eternal life	A promise of forgiveness and eternal life	A promise of forgiveness and eternal life
Forgiveness of Sins^&	Preacher's claims that they can receive forgiveness of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ.	Preacher's claims that they can receive forgiveness of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ.

14

Related Code(s)	Coding Instructions	Coding Instructions
Promise of Eternal Life[&]	Preacher's claims that they will continue to live eternity in heaven if they believe in the Gospel.	Preacher's claims that they will continue to live eternity in heaven if they believe in the Gospel.
Total sermons with all key elements	Total sermons with all key elements	Total sermons with all key elements

[^] Presence of either code for key element to be considered present within the sermon. [&] Presence of both codes for key element to be considered present within the sermon.

Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2

First Set of Sermons	Second Set of Sermons	Third Set of Sermons
Introduction	Introduction	Introduction
↓	↓	↓
Main body	Preacher's life before believing in the gospel	Main body
↓	↓	↓
Conclusion and prayer	Main body	Preacher's life before and after believing in the gospel
	↓	↓
	Preacher's life after believing in the gospel	Conclusion and prayer
	↓	
	Conclusion and prayer	

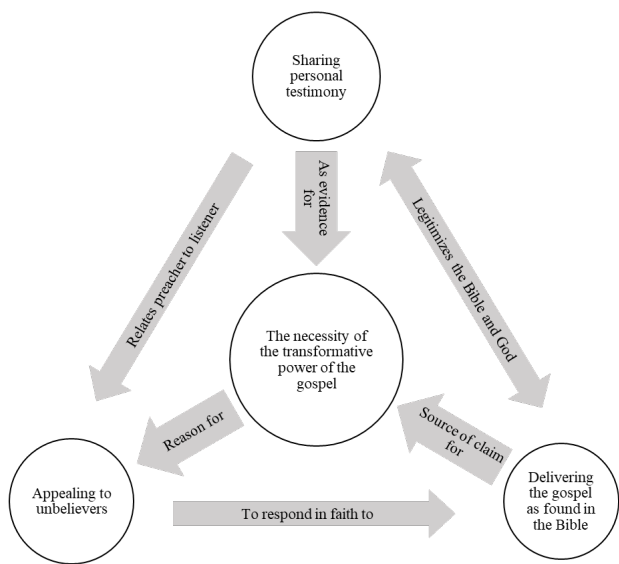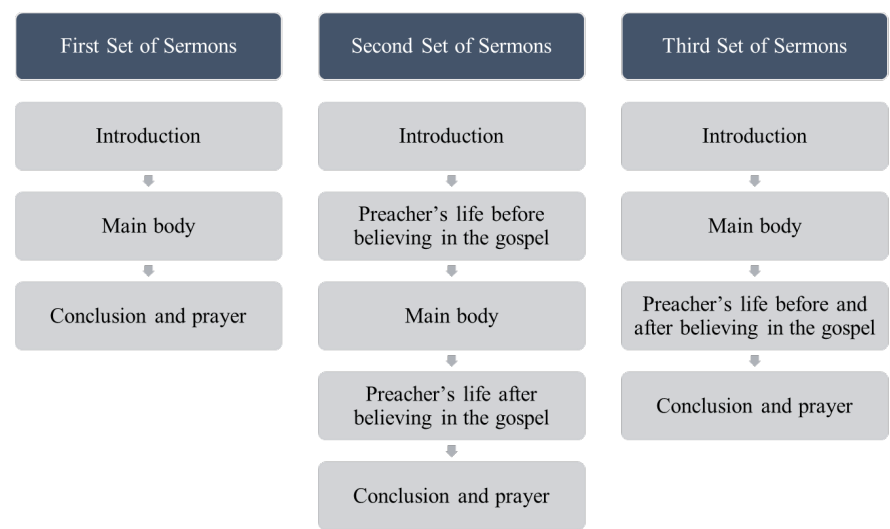# Figure Captions

Model of ChatGPT's process of preaching the gospel

Overview of personal testimony within the sermon