

Voices: Wisely using AI for sermon and lesson preparation

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There is a great deal of concern regarding the dangers of artificial intelligence. Many of these concerns are well-founded.

Those discussing the dangers of deep fakes—AI-generated false representations in video or audio form—have valid concerns. The use of AI to control drones in warfare may be one of the most serious threats. And yes, concerns over the use of AI in sermon preparation are warranted.

However, the rejection of AI as a serious tool for research and study, based on the assertion using AI to write sermons is lazy, is a misuse of a powerful tool. As a tool, AI is best suited for research and analysis of large bodies of text. Artificial intelligence could make a pastor or Bible teacher lazy, but it doesn't have to.

Current language model AI—such as ChatGPT, Google Bard or LaMDA—are complex tools that handle large amounts of data in ways that mimic human interactions. They are highly developed tools that can be used well or poorly, just like any other tool.

I have used various AI platforms in research for a few months now and have found them to be highly effective if used properly. The key in using these tools is controlling and monitoring the data they are accessing.

ChatGPT no longer allows me to define data sets, nor will it cite its sources. So, I no longer use ChatGPT.

Google Bard allows me to define specific data sets, restrict it from using certain data, and require it to cite the data it has used. It allows me to get

answers to complex questions that would have taken me much longer to work through.

An example using Google Bard

Consider the following question entered into and the response received from Google Bard.

I asked: “Analyze the writings of the Apostle Paul in the original koine Greek for repeated patterns in the syntax. Create a list of verses with similar syntactical patterns, provide insight into Paul’s use of repeated patterns. Cite your sources.”

Google Bard responded: “Sure, here is an analysis of the repeated patterns in the syntax of the Apostle Paul’s writings in the original Koine Greek:

- “The use of participles is one of the most common syntactical patterns in Paul’s writings. Participles are verbs that are used as adjectives or adverbs, and they can be used to add information or description to a sentence. For example, in Romans 8:28, Paul writes, ‘And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.’ In this verse, the participle ‘loving’ modifies the noun ‘those’ and tells us something about the people who are being referred to. [Source: The New International Version (NIV)]
- “The use of rhetorical questions is another common syntactical pattern in Paul’s writings. Rhetorical questions are questions that are not meant to be answered, but rather to make a point or to emphasize an idea. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:12, Paul writes, ‘But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?’ In this verse, Paul is not asking for an answer to his question, but rather he is using it to

make the point that the resurrection of Christ is a central tenet of Christianity. [Source: The NIV]

- “The use of chiasmus is a literary device that involves the repetition of words or phrases in reverse order. Chiasmus is often used in Paul’s writings to emphasize important points or to create a sense of balance or symmetry. For example, in Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, ‘I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’ In this verse, the chiasmus ‘I have been crucified with Christ ... Christ lives in me’ emphasizes the idea that Paul’s life is now lived in union with Christ. [Source: The NIV]”

“These are just a few examples of the repeated patterns in the syntax of the Apostle Paul’s writings. These patterns can be used to help us understand Paul’s arguments, to identify the key points of his message, and to appreciate his literary style.

“In addition to the sources I have already cited, I also consulted the following resources:

- *The Syntax of the Pauline Epistles* by Stanley E. Porter
- *The Rhetorical Structure of Paul’s Letters* by James D. Hester
- *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters* by David A. Black”

Now, it is true, I could have done the work myself, and someone might call it lazy to use AI, but it would have taken me weeks if not months to accomplish what Google Bard did in a few minutes. Did it do the best job possible? I doubt it. Did it find some very interesting insight into Paul’s use of repeated syntactical patterns? I think it did.

AI is a tool

Yes, it would be very lazy to allow an AI to write your sermons for you. But it is not lazy to use the right tool for the task. If I want to do an in-depth analysis of a large body of text, look for patterns, find quotes, examine historical comments in obscure texts, then AI is a powerful tool.

Tools don't make people lazy. They offer the possibility for a craftsman to do far more than he could without them. This never has stopped people from using tools poorly, but that is not the fault or failure of the tool. It is the fault of the craftsman.

Knowing what tools to use for a given task is vital. I could use a hammer to open a jar, but that is likely to make a mess of things. Current language model AI can write a sermon for you, but that is far from the best use of this tool.

One of the most powerful uses of this tool is the analysis of large-scale text, the works of a given theologian, the sermons of a specific preacher, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the text of the Bible itself.

AI's ability to interact with the text in complex ways, find patterns, summarize, categorize and do so quickly and efficiently is a great asset for anyone digging deeply into the historical, literary, grammatical and cultural questions encountered in biblical exegesis.

Some further examples of questions and responses from Google Bard follow.

Me: "Using the data set 'literal commentaries' provide a summary of comments on Genesis chapter 34 with regard to the 'Problem of Evil.' Cite your sources."

Google Bard: “Sure, here is a summary of comments on Genesis chapter 34 with regard to the ‘Problem of Evil’ from literal commentaries:

- “Augustine: In his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine argues that the rape of Dinah was a punishment from God for Jacob’s sins. He writes, ‘The rape of Dinah was a just punishment for Jacob’s sins, because he had not circumcised his children, as God had commanded him.’ (Book 5, Chapter 20) [Source: *Literal Commentary on Genesis* by Augustine]
- “Calvin: In his *Commentary on Genesis*, John Calvin argues that the rape of Dinah was a result of human sinfulness. He writes, ‘The rape of Dinah was a tragic event, but it was also a reminder of the sinfulness of human nature. Even though Jacob and his family were God’s chosen people, they were still capable of evil.’ (Chapter 34) [Source: *Commentary on Genesis* by John Calvin]
- “Matthew Henry: In his *Commentary on the Bible*, Matthew Henry argues that the rape of Dinah was a test of Jacob’s faith. He writes, ‘The rape of Dinah was a difficult test for Jacob, but it also [was] an opportunity for him to grow in his faith. By trusting in God, Jacob was able to overcome this trial and emerge stronger.’ (Genesis 34:1-31) [Source: *Commentary on the Bible* by Matthew Henry]

“These are just a few examples of the comments on Genesis chapter 34 with regard to the ‘Problem of Evil’ from literal commentaries. These commentaries offer different perspectives on the event, but they all agree that it was a tragedy that was ultimately caused by human sinfulness.

“In addition to the sources I have already cited, I also consulted the following resources:

- *The Problem of Evil in Genesis 34* by Mark Smith

- *The Rape of Dinah: A Theological Interpretation* by Ellen Davis
- *The Story of Dinah: A Feminist Perspective* by Phyllis Trible”

Me: “Using the data set ‘my theologians’ provide an argument and counter response for freewill vs. election, include citation of Bible verses. Cite your sources.”

Google Bard: “Sure, here is an argument and counter response for freewill vs. election, including citation of Bible verses and sources:

“Argument for freewill:

- “Humans have freewill because we can make choices that are not predetermined. This is evident in our everyday lives, as we often have to make difficult decisions that could go either way. For example, we can choose whether or not to believe in God, whether or not to follow his commandments, and whether or not to do good or evil. [Source: *The Problem of Evil* by Alvin Plantinga]
- “If we did not have freewill, then our choices would be predetermined by God, and we would not be truly responsible for our actions. This would also mean that God is responsible for all the evil in the world, since he would have predetermined it. [Source: *Theodicy* by William Rowe]

“Counter response:

- “God does not have to control our choices in order to be sovereign. He can still be sovereign even if we have freewill, as long as he knows what we are going to choose and allows us to make those choices anyway. This is called ‘foreknowledge’ and it is a key aspect of God’s sovereignty. [Source: *God’s Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* by

John Calvin]

- “If God has foreknowledge of our choices, then he can still work all things together for good, even if we make bad choices. This is because God can use our bad choices to bring about his ultimate plan for the world. [Source: ‘Romans 8:28’ (New International Version)]

“Argument for election:

- “God has elected some people to be saved, and others to be damned. This is not based on our own merits, but on God’s sovereign will. This is evident in passages like Romans 8:29, which says, ‘For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.’ [Source: ‘Romans 8:29’ (New International Version)]

- “If God has elected some people to be saved, then it means that our salvation is not ultimately up to us. It is up to God to decide who will be saved.

“Counter response:

- “The idea of election can seem unfair, as it means that some people are born with a greater chance of being saved than others. However, it is important to remember that God is not unjust. He knows what is best for us and he only elects those who he knows will be saved. [Source: ‘Romans 9:15-16’ (New International Version)]

- “In addition, election does not mean that we have no role to play in our salvation. We still have to choose to follow God and to accept his grace. However, our choices are not ultimately what determines our salvation. It is God’s grace that saves us, regardless of our choices. [Source: ‘Ephesians 2:8-9’ (New International Version)]

“Ultimately, the question of freewill vs. election is a complex one that has been debated by theologians for centuries. There is no easy answer, and each individual must decide for themselves what they believe.”

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