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The Pastor as Romantic Author: AI, Preaching, and the Unacknowledged Inheritance of Authenticity

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Abstract

This article interrogates contemporary reactions to sermons produced with generative technologies through a historical–conceptual lens, arguing that widespread judgments of such outputs as "soulless," "generic," or lacking a "beating heart" are best explained by an unacknowledged inheritance from nineteenth-century Romantic expressivism. Rather than treating resistance to machine authorship as a theological verdict on computational incapacity, the study reconstructs how Romanticism centered authorship in sincere self-expression and solitary genius, displacing earlier heraldic expectations that prized fidelity to a received message. Methodologically, the analysis combines intellectual history with discourse analysis of global Christian experiments in synthetic composition (2020–2025), denominational guidance, and media commentary to map evaluative language about empathy, presence, and struggle. Findings show that signature critiques—insistence on lived experience, emotive immediacy, and visible spiritual labor—track Romantic values, whereas premodern postils, lectionaries, and printed collections reflect a utilitarian, office-anchored model of mediated authorship. Reframing the debate through this genealogy clarifies which objections are theological and which are cultural, enabling more precise judgments about the admissible roles of computational tools. The article proposes a two-axis matrix contrasting expressive-authorship criteria (voice, pathos, autobiographical index) with heraldic-fidelity criteria (doctrinal conformity, tradition-consistent rhetoric, communal authorization), and specifies use-cases where automated systems serve as instruments under pastoral oversight rather than as independent authors. Contributions include: (1) theorizing the "pastor as Romantic author"; (2) a typology of authenticity claims in homiletic criticism; and (3) policy-adjacent recommendations on disclosure, provenance, and sermonic labor. Recognizing Romantic inheritances allows churches to choose their authorship ideal consciously, evaluating generative media not by reflex but by clearly articulated theological priorities.

Keywords: postmodern originality, authorship accountability, provenance disclosure, algorithmic mediation, human agency in AI systems, copyright and AI

1. Introduction

Over the last two years, Christian communities in the United States and abroad have experimented with generative artificial intelligence like ChatGPT in liturgical and pastoral work, producing reactions that range from pragmatic curiosity to principled alarm. Survey data captured from pastors in 2024 recorded a mixture of optimism about the assistive potential of large language models (LLMs) and deep unease about its spiritual and social effects, with majorities of clergy both affirming that God can work through technological means and warning that AI may amplify loneliness and bias (Religion News Service, 2024). Journalistic coverage has consistently captured the same ambivalence at the congregational level: clergy describe AI-written homilies as technically competent yet "soulless," and congregants frequently judge such sermons to be emotionally flat and pastorally thin (Crary, 2023). Parallel public-opinion reporting reinforces the pastoral picture: more than half of self-identified Christians say they would be disappointed to discover algorithms in the worship pipeline, particularly within preaching and prayer (Scripps News, 2024). At the same time, ecclesial actors are building domain-constrained tools for catechesis and research, indicating that experimentation coexists with caution rather than surrendering to it (cf. Chicago Booth Review, 2024). The Holy See has likewise framed these smart machines as a moral and spiritual question for the church catholic, emphasizing both human dignity and the need for wise governance (Francis, 2024). Technology-

use trends within religion more broadly, such as increased reliance on digital platforms for devotional practices, suggest that debates about these systems are unfolding within longer trajectories of mediated religious life (Pew Research Center, 2023). In short, the pastoral field is negotiating adoption under conditions of ethical uncertainty, cultural anxiety, and practical need.

A second strand of background concerns the cultural grammar by which modern readers evaluate "authentic" communication, especially in the long wake of Romanticism. Contemporary philosophy often describes authenticity as a normative ideal that privileges expressive selfhood and inwardness, an account consolidated in late modern culture as individuals value speech that transparently manifests the inner life of a speaker (Varga & Guignon, 2023). Sociological theory has recently revisited these Romantic inheritances, showing how authenticity continues to shape expectations of moral agency, creativity, and authority even when older metaphysical frameworks have been critiqued (Watts & Houtman, 2024). In adjacent debates about autonomous writing tools and authorship, ethicists argue that generative systems are parasitic on a "hypercommons" of human labor and language, thereby unsettling the author-function that modern institutions rely upon to anchor responsibility, credit, and intention (Islam & Greenwood, 2024). Within theological discourse, recent scholarship has highlighted that mediated authorship is hardly foreign to religious traditions; rather, dictation, collaboration, and editorial layering have long characterized the production and transmission of sacred texts, thereby complicating modern assumptions about solitary genius and univocal intention (Hutson & McMaken, 2025). These converging literatures suggest that contemporary judgments about machine-generated preaching are not value-neutral assessments of technical quality but enactments of a historically specific aesthetic-ethical ideal. When congregants demand a sermon that "feels" as though it originates in pastoral singular struggle, they perform a Romantic logic even if they articulate a theological rationale. The present article situates controversies over computationally composed homilies within that logic to clarify what, precisely, is being defended when "authenticity" is invoked.

The issue to be addressed, therefore, is not whether machines can draft coherent prose but whether many churches have (often tacitly) made Romantic expressivism the criterion of homiletic legitimacy. Objections that an AI-written sermon lacks a "compassionate, beating heart," or that outsourcing writing is like "bringing a robot to lift the weights," treat the felt trace of the pastor's inner labor as the proper ground of authority rather than fidelity to apostolic teaching or pastoral office (Crary, 2023; Noble, 2025). One Southern Baptist seminary dean argued, "Yes, [AI] can write a passably competent sermon. But no, [it] can't replicate the passion of actual preaching. It lacks a soul – I don't know how else to say it;" yet ethnographic and journalistic snapshots also show ministers adopting the tools in carefully bounded ways (fact finding, language polishing, or curriculum prototyping) precisely to preserve time for the spiritual and relational labor that congregations prize (Scripps News, 2024; Houston Chronicle, 2025). This normative entanglement yields practical contradictions: the same communities that reject algorithmically-authored sermons may quietly rely on algorithmic assistance elsewhere in the worship economy, blurring the line between tool and author. Catholic magisterial reflection underscores the point by calling for discernment that protects human dignity and agency without foreclosing legitimate technological aid, thereby refusing a simple ban-permit binary (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2025; Francis, 2024). The unresolved tension is that a Romantic author ideal and an older heraldic model of pastoral authority currently coexist without an explicit adjudication between them. Absent such clarification, debates collapse into rhetoric about "realness" rather than principled criteria for ecclesial communication. Addressing that impasse requires a framework that distinguishes between authorship as expressive originality and authorship as fiduciary stewardship of a received message.

To resolve this, the article first foregrounds a postmodern conception of originality as relational, intertextual, and institutionally conferred, an effect of practices, infrastructures, and audiences rather than a private essence of the solitary author. Only then does the argument situate Romantic expressivism as one historically powerful, but not exhaustive, regime for adjudicating authentic speech (Varga & Guignon, 2023; Islam & Greenwood, 2024; Klein et al., 2025). On this view, originality appears where communities recognize novelty within a web of citations, genres, and norms, a dynamic codified today in legal and policy grammars that tether authorship to accountable human agency rather than to metaphysical genius (U.S. Copyright Office, 2025). The article therefore reconstructs modern expressivist assumptions and contrasts them not simply with pre-modern confessional accounts, but with postmodern and theological accounts in which religious "originality" has always been negotiated at the intersection of office, tradition, and communal reception—what counts as a "new" sermon is what the church can own, test, and authorize (Varga & Guignon, 2023; Hutson & McMaken, 2025). It then examines representative machine-mediated preaching episodes and survey data to map where evaluative criteria presuppose Romantic authorship (e.g., a demand for audible interiority) and where they presuppose heraldic stewardship (e.g., fidelity to apostolic teaching), while also showing how postmodern originality reframes both as recognition regimes rather than natural

kinds (Crary, 2023; Religion News Service, 2024). A third section engages current ethics-of-AI and humanities scholarship to specify when generative systems operate as derivative instruments within legitimate pastoral agency and when they substitute for the very exercise of that agency by dissolving provenance and responsibility (Islam & Greenwood, 2024; Klein et al., 2025). A fourth section places ecclesial policy statements in dialogue with these analyses to propose norms that preserve recognizable authorship in the postmodern sense: accountable speech performed by a designated servant of the Word within a tradition-governed community (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2025; Francis, 2024). The resulting framework neither baptizes AI with technological utopianism nor rejects it under an unexamined aesthetic of sincerity; instead, it rearticulates homiletic authenticity as truthful, traceable, and accountable proclamation whose originality is measured by ecclesial recognition, not merely by autobiographical intensity (U.S. Copyright Office, 2025; Hutson & McMaken, 2025).

2. Literature Review

The scholarship on authenticity provides the conceptual grammar for analyzing contemporary Christian resistance to AI in preaching, and recent syntheses underscore how modern intuitions about "sincerity," "voice," and "ownership" are historically contingent. Philosophical work characterizes authenticity as a normative ideal of self-disclosure and practical self-constitution, not a mere psychological state, thereby linking truthful expression to the authorial subject (Mertel, 2025). Classic humanistic treatments—although earlier—remain interpretively central because they identify Romanticism's shift from mimetic craft to expressive selfhood as the anchor of modern authorship (Abrams, 1953; Trilling, 1972; Taylor, 1991). Contemporary reference essays on Romantic aesthetics further document the elevation of authorial individuality and feeling as criteria of value, a move that saturates subsequent cultural fields, including religion (Gorodeisky, 2016). This philosophical archive clarifies why many congregants now treat spiritual credibility of a sermon as inseparable from its visible tether to the inner life of a living agent (Šeba, 2021). In other words, the modern sermon inherits a Romantic horizon in which originality and moral authority co-vary with personal expressivism (Zhu, 2024). This inheritance is frequently unacknowledged in ecclesial debate but remains operative in judgments about machine mediation (Mekler, & Hornbæk, 2019; Yocum, 2017). Mapping these commitments is thus prerequisite to adjudicating whether generative sermons can be received as authentic proclamation.

Homiletics literature since 2023 extends these philosophical stakes into ministerial formation, emphasizing preaching as a praxis that integrates theological integrity, pastoral wisdom, and performative presence. Recent essays argue that homiletical theory is not merely method but a pedagogical paradigm shaping how preachers construe authority and audience responsibility (McDonald, 2024). Emerging "wisdom homiletics" frames preaching as discernment-in-community, foregrounding prudence and pastoral judgment rather than novelty alone (O'Lynn, 2024). Additional proposals highlight place-centered pedagogy and formation, thereby relocating sermonic authority in practices of attentive listening and situated witness rather than in purely textual inventiveness (Clark, 2024). Homiletical debates about computationally generated sermons therefore intersect a field already re-centering moral formation and communal accountability as conditions of credible proclamation. New work also treats listeners as technologically entangled agents whose cognition is shaped by digital systems, an empirical premise with direct implications for augmented sermon preparation (Kruger, 2025). When modern audiences demand a unique, soul-baring voice, they diverge from a historically common model of delegated authorship. Recognizing this discontinuity is crucial for locating contemporary forms of machine-mediated preaching within an older genealogy of sermon helps. This reframing challenges the reflex that equates spiritual authenticity with solitary originality.

Historical studies of sermon production complicate modern intuitions by documenting traditions of mediated authorship in which fidelity, not originality, was the governing virtue. Research on late medieval and Reformation preaching details the widespread use of postils and model sermons, which functioned as authoritative aids for clergy charged with feeding congregations reliably rather than inventively (Frymire, 2017). The print economy amplified these tools, normalizing compilation, adaptation, and the authorized reuse of master sermons across liturgical calendars (Long, 2008). Contemporary observers have noted in satire, such as collections effectively marketed to let priests "sleep well," that render explicit a pastoral economy premised on transmission rather than individuation (Plate, 2025). In that earlier ecology, the heraldic office conferred legitimacy; the orthodoxy of the message, not the originality of the preacher, determined authority. Such materials reveal that "authenticity" in preaching has long been defined by right teaching and ecclesial continuity, not romanticized authorial struggle (Espinosa, 2001). When modern audiences demand a unique, soul-baring voice, they diverge from a historically common model of delegated authorship. Recognizing this discontinuity is crucial for locating contemporary forms of machine-generated preaching within an older genealogy of sermon helps.

Empirical and journalistic documentation from 2023–2025 show that churches experimenting with the technology

in worship have encountered both curiosity and resistance, often along the very lines Romantic expressivism would predict. In Europe, publicized services partially scripted by LLMs sparked debate about presence, sincerity, and pastoral mediation, with congregants frequently describing the results as emotionally thin or generic (e.g., Germany and Finland cases). In Finland, a 2024–2025 set of trials drew international attention, illustrating how lay perception foregrounds the absence of lived experience in machine outputs (Associated Press, 2025). Qualitative studies now complement reportage: interviews and chat-log analyses of Scandinavian preachers indicate uses for brainstorming and exegetical scaffolding rather than substitution, precisely to preserve locus-of-authorship in the human minister (Mannerfelt, 2025). Findings converge on a practical compromise (machine as subordinate instrument) paired with an insistence that pastoral agency anchors credibility. This compromise, while pragmatic, arguably reinscribes the Romantic author function under a theological register. The social meanings at stake thus exceed technical accuracy and turn on recognizable patterns of authorial presence (Vanhoozer, 2010). Consequently, empirical evaluation of AI-in-worship must be coupled to hermeneutics of authorship (Putrawan, 2025).

U.S. attitudes among pastors and congregants reveal a similar ambivalence shaped by expectations of moral agency and spiritual empathy. A 2024 Barna–Gloo survey reported that pastors are more cautious than both Christians and the general public, even while majorities grant that God can work through technological means, suggesting that resistance concentrates on authorship and agency rather than divine instrumentality (Religion News Service, 2024). Pastoral innovators in large churches describe intelligent platforms as an ideation aid and administrative accelerator but add explicit theological guardrails to maintain the primacy of prayerful labor and scriptural accountability (Houston Chronicle, 2025). European leadership interviews likewise emphasize that LLMs cannot bear responsibility or empathy and therefore lack agency in the thick sense. They must remain subordinate to human pastoral judgment (Nord, 2025). Comparative perspectives from Christian education underline opportunities and cautions, urging catechetical frameworks that form discernment rather than outsource it (Przygoda et al., 2025). Together these data suggest that where LLMs appear to displace the moral labor of sermon preparation, legitimacy erodes; where it augments that labor, legitimacy can be preserved. The regulative ideal is not "no technology," but "no abdication of human authorship." That ideal again mirrors Romantic expressivism translated into ecclesial ethics.

Concurrently, a fast-growing ecology of sermon aids encodes design assumptions about authorship that range from brainstorming companions to near-complete outline generators. Since 2023, the OpenBible.info AI Sermon Outline Generator (https://www.openbible.info/labs/ai-sermons/) has provided thesis statements and outlines keyed to selected biblical passages, transparently positioning itself as a drafting tool rather than a preacher replacement (OpenBible.info, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Subsequent updates migrated from GPT-3 to GPT-4 Turbo, explicitly to reduce platitudes and increase textual specificity, which tacitly acknowledges quality deficits perceived as "inauthentic" by users (OpenBible.info, 2023d). Commercial platforms have followed: Logos' "Sermon Assistant" (https://support.logos.com/hc/en-us/articles/23526222122125-What-can-I-do-with-Sermon-Assistant) integrates context-aware outlines, illustrations, and application prompts inside a broader study suite, framing the technology as embedded augmentation within human-led sermon construction (Logos, 2024). Media and ministry reviews likewise stress the role of the machine in overcoming creative blocks and repurposing content for discipleship, while warning against spiritual abdication (ChurchTechToday, 2024; Christ Over All, 2025). This toolscape normalizes mediated authorship as pastoral craft, so long as human discernment and voice remain primary. The moral center of gravity is therefore not the presence of assistance but the preservation of so-called accountable agency. Tool design that foregrounds provenance, editability, and theological guardrails better aligns with homiletic formation in theological terms.

Recent legal and policy developments fortify the normative expectation that protectable authorship entails human creativity, a standard that indirectly reinforces ecclesial instincts about agency and accountability. The U.S. Copyright Office's March 2023 guidance and its January 2025 report on copyrightability reaffirm that works generated autonomously by these models ack authorship, while human selection, coordination, and arrangement can be protected when sufficiently creative (U.S. Copyright Office, 2023; U.S. Copyright Office, 2025). Appellate decisions have likewise upheld refusals to register purely machine-generated works, emphasizing the absence of traditional human authorship (United States Court of Appeals, 2025). Practitioner summaries note convergences and divergences across jurisdictions, but the U.S. baseline remains human creatorship, with disclosure duties for augmented content (Cooley LLP, 2024). These rulings neither decide theological questions nor prescribe ministerial practice; however, they stabilize a civic grammar in which authorship is a locus of responsibility (Schmid, 2017). That civic grammar resonates with pastoral objections to "robot sermons," which frequently invoke authorship to defend moral and spiritual accountability (Darwall, 2009). In this environment, churches that

have integrated these tools in pastoral processes but preserve human authorship comport with both legal clarity and theological prudence. The legal emphasis on human originality thus indirectly amplifies Romantic-era intuitions about expressive agency.

Humanities-facing scholarship adds critical nuance by interrogating the political economy of authorship and the ethics of training data, which in turn reframes ecclesial concerns about originality and authority. One influential 2024 essay describes generative writing models as drawing from a "hypercommons," raising questions about moral agency and recognition in environments where authorship is radically distributed (Islam & Greenwood, 2024). A 2025 humanities consortium proposes "provocations" that differentiate word-making from meaning-making, urging vigilance against the extraction of humanistic labor into opaque corporate infrastructures (Klein et al., 2025). When viewed through these lenses, homiletic anxieties are not merely romantic nostalgia but prudential worries about diluting communal sources of meaning into decontextualized synthesis. Additional work on religious texts in natural language processing (NLP) cautions that sacred corpora carry cultural and proselytizing histories that complicate repurposing for computational objectives (Hutchinson, 2024). These arguments underwrite ecclesial claims that proclamation requires contextual responsibility, not just fluent generation. They also suggest design requirements—traceability, consent, and communal governance—for any tool deployed in sermon preparation. In short, the humanities remind religious practitioners that the ethics of authorship extends beyond the pulpit to the infrastructures that shape it.

Theology and textual studies contribute a further counterweight by highlighting long-standing patterns of mediated authorship within sacred traditions, thereby destabilizing the assumption that originality is the sole guarantor of authority. Recent interdisciplinary work juxtaposes amanuensis-mediated scriptural composition with contemporary LLM co-construction, arguing that authority can reside in collaborative processes ordered to communal ends (Hutson & McMaken, 2025). This scholarship does not flatten distinctions between divine-human cooperation and human-algorithm interplay; rather, it identifies family resemblances—distributed labor, interpretive framing, and editorial choices—that have always characterized authoritative texts. Such accounts expose how originality and authority need not be synonymous so long as there is accountable discernment and ecclesial reception (Plaatjies-Van Huffel, 2019). When placed alongside historical sermon helps, these theological reflections furnish a matrix in which intelligent systems may be framed as tool rather than author. The decisive question becomes whether pastors transparently exercise the interpretive agency that communities recognize as authoritative. That question is pastoral and communal, not merely technical. It is also the pivot on which authenticity, rightly construed, might be reconciled with mediated assistance. Yet this framing risks falling into what Romantic creatives often assume—that creativity originates internally and then becomes externally visible through writing, art, or speech (Millen, 2010). The underlying expectation is that a pastor fully internalizes the sermon, an assumption impossible to confirm but nonetheless regarded by the congregation as necessary for authentic proclamation.

Cross-national qualitative studies of Christian leaders corroborate the emerging consensus: machines can serve catechetical and administrative functions while leaving proclamational moral core with ordained agents. Interviews in Germany emphasize that the tool lacks agency and compassion—qualities leaders associate with pastoral presence—even as some acknowledge efficiencies in study and planning (Nord, 2025). Comparative analyses in religious education advise explicit formation in discernment when adopting digital tools, thus preserving human judgment as the seat of authority (Przygoda et al., 2025). Scandinavian fieldwork observes that preachers who retain authorship in sermon drafting experience using augmented writing as beneficial scaffolding, whereas those who outsource prose perceive diminished credibility risks (Mannerfelt, 2025). U.S. pastoral cases illustrate a similar pattern: LLMs like ChatGPT and Claude are welcomed for ideation and logistics but bounded by practices of prayerful composition and scriptural testing (Houston Chronicle, 2025). The pattern suggests a durable equilibrium: retain human authorship as theologically normative while leveraging algorithmns to extend pastoral capacity. This equilibrium squares with legal authorship regimes and with homiletical formation literature. It also refracts Romantic values through ecclesial commitments rather than abandoning them outright.

Synthesizing these literatures yields a researchable claim: resistance to generative sermons expresses a culturally specific authorship model amplified by legal policy, pedagogical formation, and infrastructural ethics, while historical and theological precedents allow for mediated tools under the primacy of human agency. Romantic expressivism explains why congregations expect the lived struggle of a human preacher to be audible in proclamation, yet historical sermon economies and scriptural composition display robust forms of non-original mediation (Varga & Guignon, 2023; Frymire, 2017; Hutson & McMaken, 2025). Contemporary homiletics, legal policy, and humanities scholarship converge on a criterion—accountable human authorship—that can host smart tools as instrument without conceding "authority" to it (McDonald, 2024; U.S. Copyright Office, 2025; Islam &

Greenwood, 2024). The live questions are therefore empirical and normative: which uses enhance pastoral prudence, and which erode the perceived expressive and "moral labor" communities rightly demand from preachers? Tool design and institutional policy, it has been argued, should align with traceability, disclosure, and formation so that communities can evaluate authorship claims intelligibly (OpenBible.info, 2023d; Logos, 2024). Future research should test how disclosure, co-writing protocols, and liturgical context shape congregational perceptions of authenticity across traditions and demographics (Kruger, 2025; RNS/Barna, 2024). Such work would clarify whether resistance attaches to the machine *per se* or to threatened authorial agency.

3. Originality and Authorship: Theological Framing of AI-Generated Content

Given these considerations, it is not surprising that introducing machine-based systems into sermon-writing and liturgy has prompted a rich discussion about authorship, creativity, and what constitutes an "authentic" sacred message. Christian preaching has long placed a premium on fidelity to Scripture and sincerity of delivery, rather than on originality for its own sake – many famous sermons draw on timeless biblical truths or even reuse prior compositions (Krato, 2020; Merida, 2009). Nevertheless, there is an expectation that a preacher speak from personal conviction and spiritual experience (Satterlee, 2007). This expectation is challenged when content is generated by an algorithm drawing on impersonal data. Theologically, numerous voices have argued that AI-generated sermons lack the vital quality of authentic witness. As one Catholic commentator put it, "Artificial intelligence may draft a good sermon… but they will also be like the program that creates them – sufficient but empty. Real preaching is more about the person and the lived life behind the words, than the words themselves" (Wolfe, 2023). In this view, homiletic power comes not merely from well-crafted rhetoric but from the congregation's knowledge that the preacher embodies the message. The preacher's own faith journey, struggles, and prayer life give "soul" to the sermon, something a machine, by definition, cannot replicate (Crary, 2023). This sentiment was echoed by multiple clergy across traditions. For example, a Baptist pastor of 32 years wrote that "AI will never be able to preach a decent sermon. Why? Because the gospel is more than words. It's the evidence of a changed life… When listening to a sermon, what a congregation is looking for is evidence that the pastor has been with Jesus" (Crary, 2023). Similarly, a New Testament scholar who experimented with a generated Christmas sermon admitted it met many technical criteria and even included solid theology, yet ultimately "lacks any human warmth… The preaching of Artificial Intelligence can't convincingly sympathize with the human plight" (Crary, 2023). These responses frame generative content as lacking the incarnational aspect of preaching – the empathy, love, and lived truth conveyed by a believer sharing God's word. As one parishioner bluntly asked, "I'm not sure that AI can actually express the emotions of love and kindness and empathy… We must practice love and express that… Not only feel it, but we must express it" (Wood, 2023). The rhetorical implication is that only a human, transformed by faith, can fully express such qualities in a sermon or prayer. However, these examples draw on earlier generations of computational models and do not account for the fact that agents can now be trained on the experiences of individuals, thereby rendering this line of argument increasingly tenuous (Xu et al., 2025).

Regardless, alongside questions of spiritual authenticity are ethical concerns about originality and intellectual honesty. Using a tool to produce material that a pastor then presents as his or her own work blurs lines of authorship for those that do not understand how use of the models work. Some argue this veers into "plagiarism" or dishonesty if not transparently acknowledged: "Plagiarism is still plagiarism, even if you are plagiarizing a computer," writes one evangelical commentator, warning that generative writing makes it "even easier" for tempted pastors to copy sermons not their own (Noble, 2025). This outdated definition of plagiarism notwithstanding (Hutson, 2024), in many denominations, preaching someone else's sermon verbatim without attribution is considered unethical and even grounds for disciplinary action (Gibson, 2008). This extends by analogy to AI: if a pastor simply reads out a generated sermon, effectively a composite of the words and ideas of others, without any personal contribution, it can be seen as a form of misrepresentation. The Gospel Coalition's Andrew Noble (2025), for instance, urged pastors to limit GenAI use precisely for this reason, noting that it can encourage a shortcut mentality that "breaks two of the Ten Commandments: stealing and coveting" when a pastor presents generated wisdom as if it were his own "inspiration." Several church leaders have publicly stated that relying on machines for core pastoral tasks may stunt ministerial spiritual growth and formation (Patternson, 2025). Preaching is viewed as a spiritual discipline – "an act of love" toward a congregation – that forces the preacher to pray, study, and wrestle with the text and the needs of the people, according to Noble (2025). Bypassing that process by letting a machine do the heavy lifting is likened to "going to a gym and bringing a robot to lift the weights" for you. The result might be technically impressive, but the pastor misses out on developing "spiritual muscles" of insight, compassion, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. In short, the argument is that the very process of crafting a sermon is spiritually formative for the preacher, and outsourcing that process can undermine this formative dimension. A parallel claim appears in English studies, where faculty often stress that "writing as thinking," thereby placing renewed emphasis

on the internal state of the individual as the locus of creativity and authority (Menary, 2007).

On the other hand, not all theological voices see human originality as an absolute requirement for effective ministry. It is well noted that Christian preaching has always involved synthesis and sources beyond the preacher alone (Edwards, 2004). The Bible itself is accepted as a received text, and "good" preachers are expected to consult commentaries, historical sermons, and community wisdom (Wilson, 2018). The young Presbyterian pastor Yi-Li Lin (2023), after months of experimenting with ChatGPT in ministry, reflected that "sermon preparation or preaching is not a one-person job." In his words, "a sermon's foundation is built not only on one's own devotions but also on the writings of other pastors and spiritual predecessors." Preachers routinely draw on "the influence of numerous people living and dead," from biblical authors and Church Fathers to contemporary theologians and mentors – all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Seen in this light, an intelligent system could be viewed as just another tool for gathering and synthesizing this broader Christian wisdom. Lin argues that if preaching is understood as a collaborative and Spirit-led process involving the preacher, the congregation's context, tradition, and God, then "within these actions, there is room for the work of AI too" (Lin, 2023). This perspective frames LLMs as a potential asset in assembling content or offering insights that the preacher can then prayerfully evaluate. Still, even proponents of using the technology as aids stop well short of advocating for fully autonomous preaching. The consensus is that 100% AI-generated sermons, delivered verbatim, are inadvisable because they inevitably "miss the context of the speaker and the congregation" (Lin, 2023). Ergo, the emerging theological framing pits an ideal of originarity as personal authenticity (with warnings against AI-produced pseudo-sermons that are seen as "soulless" or "plagiarized") against an acknowledgment that homiletic originality has always been relative (with algorithmic machines seen by some as an advanced form of a concordance or research assistant) (Logg, 2017). The balance many advocate is to let the automated-writing assist with ideas or efficiency, but to ensure the human preacher remains the true author–curator of the message, imbuing it with pastoral insight, emotional resonance, and spiritual authority (Christensen, 2020).

4. Authority and the Redistribution of Preaching Power

One of the deepest questions raised by AI in liturgy is how it might redistribute authority in worship (Kent, 2023). Traditionally, Christian communities grant significant authority to the preacher or worship leader as the mediator of God's word during a service (Duck, 2021). This authority is not merely about knowledge; it is also conferred by ordination, communal trust, and the belief that the Holy Spirit works through the human leader (Johnson, 2023). If an algorithmic system contributes to or even replaces parts of this role, does authority shift – or is it diminished? Early cases suggest that both perception and reality of authority do change when AI is involved. In the Texas AI-generated service, Pastor Jay Cooper himself felt uneasy about his pastoral role in that experiment. Afterward he stated plainly, "Even if [my own sermon is] not as eloquent or if it's a little messy or last minute, it needs to be from the heart of the pastor" (Patterson, 2023). His reflection implies that congregational acceptance of a sermon depends on an understanding that pastoral heart and intention are behind the words. No matter how eloquent an output, if it is perceived as coming from a faceless machine, the congregation may feel the pastoral authority is absent – the message has no flesh-and-blood shepherd standing behind it (Šeba, 2021). In Cooper's case, he had explicitly told the congregation the service was AI-planned, and the result was that people "in some way [found it] prevented us from connecting with each other," as he described (Patterson, 2023). The normal relational authority of worship – that dynamic where preacher and people connect – was disrupted. It is telling that congregants in that experiment did not credit the machine as a spiritual authority in any sense; rather, they treated it as a curiosity, while looking to their human pastor to evaluate and contextualize it. In effect, Pastor Cooper had to reclaim authority by guiding a post-service discussion on what was sacred (or not) about the AI-mediated worship experience (Wood, 2023; Giatti, 2023). This suggests that, for now, congregations still locate spiritual authority firmly in human leaders, and generative words carry weight only insofar as they are endorsed or filtered through those leaders.

From a doctrinal perspective, many theologians affirm that genuine preaching requires a human representative. "When we listen to the Word preached, we are hearing not just a word about God but a word from God," writes Russell Moore. "Such life-altering news needs to be delivered by a human, in person… A chatbot can research. A chatbot can write… But a chatbot can't preach" (Crary, 2023). Here, "preach" implies more than recitation – it implies bearing witness with authority. The preacher in the Christian tradition is often seen as standing in a line of prophets and apostles, authorized not because of eloquence but because of a divine calling and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. An algorithm, no matter how sophisticated, has no such calling. It can assemble facts and even mimic rhetorical style, but it operates on statistical prediction, not faith, and it cannot embody the message. This point was made poignantly by a Baptist leader who noted that an AI will "always have to – literally – take someone else's words for it… it won't ever be a sermon that will convince anyone to come and follow Jesus" (Crary, 2023).

In other words, the authority to inspire repentance or discipleship comes from the Holy Spirit working through the credible witness of the preacher's life and conviction, not just the content of the speech. If congregants suspect that a sermon was cobbled together by a machine (effectively "someone else's words" in disguise), the moral and spiritual authority of that sermon may evaporate. This concern for credibility and trust is practical as well: if church members discover their pastor has been routinely using AI to generate sermons without telling anyone, it could lead to feelings of betrayal. Indeed, some authors caution that "if you're embarrassed to admit you use GenAI [for sermons], then that's a sign you shouldn't" (Noble, 2025). The possibility of division or distrust arising from secret use based upon these testimonies seems real – it seems to touch on issues of transparency and the congregational confidence that their pastor is genuinely laboring in prayer and study on their behalf. Empirical studies confirm this dynamic in other domains: users often rate machine-generated content highly when unaware of its origin, yet report feeling duped, angry, or betrayed once disclosure occurs (Carpenter, 2024). These findings suggest that perceptions of authenticity hinge less on the intrinsic quality of the text than on knowledge of its provenance, underscoring how disclosure practices profoundly shape trust.

However, not everyone sees such use as undermining pastoral authority; some propose it can be a subordinate instrument that leaves ultimate authority intact. As mentioned earlier, treating these tools as an "intern" or research assistant means the ordained minister remains the final arbiter of truth and doctrine (Patterson, 2023). In this model, an agent might help a pastor gather information or even draft liturgical texts, but the pastor must then exercise discernment – accepting, rejecting, or modifying the machine contributions in line with scripture and the needs of the flock. The authority hierarchy here places the creative process firmly under human (and for believers, divine) supervision. A relevant historical analogy is the use of lectionaries and scripted liturgies in many churches (Sanford, 1995). For example, in the Catholic Mass, priests do not extemporize the Eucharistic Prayers; they read from an authorized missal (Turner, 2015). Yet, no Catholic would say the priest lacks authority in that moment – it is simply that the authority is vested in the tradition of the Church and the office of the priest, rather than his personal authorship of those specific words. By comparison, one could imagine an AI-generated prayer or liturgical element being used with episcopal or pastoral sanction, thus retaining its authoritative character because the church leadership intentionally included it. Such scenarios have not yet widely unfolded, but they represent one possible future: AI could become another source of prepared text that church authorities might approve for use, analogous to how hymnals or prayer books are compiled.

At present, though, the introduction has mostly highlighted how central the human element is to perceived authority in worship. Parishioners and clergy alike consistently return to language of embodiment and presence – the pastoral heart, soul, witness, suffering, and prayer life are seen as integral to authoritative preaching (Wolfe, 2023). Effective preachers, it is said, are often those who, through their own trials and empathy, can speak "a word in season" that connects deeply with listener lives. The argument then would be that AI has no life, no trials, and no empathy, therefore, it has not "been with Jesus" in devotional terms (Crary, 2023). Therefore, it cannot yet replace or even substantially share in the sacramental authority that congregations attribute to their human spiritual leaders. Instead, its appropriate role at the moment is seen as strictly ancillary – useful for generating ideas or streamlining tasks, but ultimately subject to pastoral judgment and personal proclamation of the Word (Patterson, 2023; Lin, 2023). Thus, while machine-generated texts may produce rhetorically polished or even theologically accurate sermons, they carry no intrinsic authority in the eyes of worshippers. Authority in worship is not reducible to verbal competence; it is mediated through the presence of the human preacher and the tradition that authorizes that role. The moment such mediation is perceived to be absent—or worse, replaced by a faceless mechanism—the trust of the assembly falters. This collapse of confidence is more than a pastoral inconvenience; it illustrates with unsettling clarity that in Christian theology, the channel of proclamation is never incidental but constitutive of meaning itself. A sermon delivered without recognizable human embodiment does not simply lack ornament; it risks nullifying the very conditions under which speech can be received as the Word.

5. Historical Parallels: Mediated Authorship in Christian Worship

To put these developments in perspective, it is helpful to compare AI-assisted worship to earlier forms of mediated or borrowed authorship in church history. While machine capabilities are unprecedented, the core questions it raises – about originality, authenticity, and authority – echo debates from other technological and cultural shifts in the past (MacNeil & Mak, 2007). In fact, Christian worship has rarely been purely original to one person; it often relies on inherited texts and shared resources (Segler & Bradley, 2006). For centuries, clergy have made use of prayer books, lectionaries, hymnals, and published sermons as they plan services. For example, the 16th-century *Book of Common Prayer* provided Anglican ministers with set liturgies and collects, ensuring uniformity but also meaning the local priest was not inventing prayers from scratch (Stoute, 1986). In the medieval and early modern periods, it was not uncommon for a parish priest with limited education to read a homily written by a Church

Father or another authority to the congregation rather than compose his own (Schuth, 2006). The congregation, for its part, valued the orthodoxy of the message over the originality of the messenger. Likewise, in Protestant revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, famous sermons by the likes of John Wesley or Charles Spurgeon were often transcribed and printed in pamphlets that circulated widely among smaller churches (Hayden, 2018). There is evidence that some pastors would borrow or adapt these printed sermons for use in their own pulpits. In 19th-century America, entire books of "sermon outlines" and illustrations were published to help overworked pastors craft their weekly messages (Caudle, 1995). In other words, sermon helps and second-hand sources have long been part of preacher toolkit. As one contemporary Presbyterian article observed, "the use of others' sermons in whole or in part is nothing new" (Taylor, 2014). What has varied is the attitude toward such use: sometimes it was expected and encouraged (as in using officially sanctioned homilies), and other times it was frowned upon (as in passing off the work of another as one's own in a culture that values individual creativity).

The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the rise of online sermon databases and subscription homily services, which in many ways set the stage for AI (Dubis, 2001). Long before ChatGPT, pastors who struggled with preaching could purchase pre-written sermons or subscribe to weekly homily newsletters for $12.95 for three-month periods (Smith & Smith, 2001). In Catholic circles, for example, services like ePriest (https://epriest.com/) and CatholicSermons.com (https://catholicsermons.com/) have offered "homily packs" – pre-crafted sermon scripts based on the lectionary readings – for a yearly fee. Many Catholic priests quietly use these as a starting point, then tweak anecdotes or emphasis to suit their parish. In Protestant circles, websites with archives of sermons from famous preachers or user-shared sermon manuscripts became popular (e.g. Grace to You https://www.gty.org/sermons/archive). By the 2010s, it was easy to search online and find dozens of sample sermons on any given Bible passage. These innovations provoked their own discussions about authenticity (Healey, 2010). Some denominational leaders warned of a "plagiarism epidemic" when it became evident that a few pastors were downloading entire sermons from the internet and preaching them verbatim. Congregations, when they found out, often felt deceived and let down by such practices (Williams, 2008). It is noteworthy, though, that not all reuse was condemned; reuse accompanied by attribution or obvious in the context (such as reading a Charles Spurgeon sermon as a historical example) could be viewed as legitimate (Spurgeon, 1883). The line between acceptable resource use and unacceptable impersonation has always been somewhat blurry. A century ago, a rural Methodist preacher reading a published sermon by D. L. Moody might have been welcomed as bringing great teaching to his flock, whereas today a pastor lifting text from an online source without credit is apt to be criticized. This shift relates to modern ideals of authenticity and the personal connection expected in pastoral leadership.

Computational authorship enters this historical continuum as the newest form of "homily help" – but one that is qualitatively different because of its creative flexibility. Unlike a static book of sermons, a generative system can produce bespoke content on any topic nearly instantaneously. That intensifies the underlying issue: it makes cut-and-paste preaching easier than ever, raising the stakes of the authenticity question. Yet one can also view algorithmic composition as simply the next step in the long evolution of preaching aids, from quill-penned sermon manuscripts to printed sermon collections to internet databases. As Thom Hiatt (2023) noted in a church communications article, "Homily services like these have been available to priests for many years… pastors no doubt shared their favorite homilies with each other via email, facsimile, and Xerox copies. And I don't fault them for it. Why reinvent the wheel, so long as you can at least customize it and make it sound local and personal?" His attitude reflects a practical view that what matters is not who originated the words, but whether they are effectively adapted to the community and delivered with pastoral sincerity. Many clergy hold a similar pragmatic stance: using LLMs or any aid is acceptable if it serves the gospel and if the pastor still exercises pastoral judgment and care. In this sense, there are parallels between the generative sermons of today and historical use of "canned" sermons or homiletic guides. Each has spurred debate about the balance of efficiency versus authenticity. And in each case, the consensus tends to be that aids are permissible as long as they supplement rather than replace the preacher's own engagement with the message. A witty update of a biblical adage appeared in one commentary: "Some trust in chariots, others in Chatbots, but we trust in the name of the Lord" (Noble, 2025) – a play on Psalm 20:7. The point is that technological tools (from chariots to search engines) come and go, but the core reliance of the church must remain on God's power, not human (or machine) cleverness.

It is also instructive to recall that new media have often caused theological anxieties initially. The printing press, for example, enabled the mass distribution of sermons and Bibles, which some in the late medieval church feared would lead to misinterpretation or loss of clerical control (Caravale, 2018). Over time, printing became an accepted and celebrated part of Christian life, even as it undeniably changed the authority dynamics (shifting some power from clergy to lay readers). In the 20th century, the arrival of radio and television evangelism similarly raised questions: Could watching a preacher on TV "count" as church? Was the televangelist a pastor to his viewers, or

just a content provider? Some of those questions resonate with what people ask about AI sermons: Can reading a prayer from ChatGPT "count" as genuine prayer? If a congregation unknowingly listens to an AI-written sermon, does it still convey God's word to them? Historical precedents suggest that the church tends to adapt and find a middle ground. Print and broadcast media did not destroy preaching; rather, one could argue, they expanded its reach and also led to new norms (e.g., expectations of higher-quality oratory, or the use of sermon disclaimers like citing sources). Likewise, the role of the algorithm in worship will probably be negotiated and bounded by new norms and perhaps official guidelines. There is already discussion in some denominational circles about formulating policies for the use of computational tools in sermon preparation, often framed in terms of disclosure and oversight. Yet the deeper issue is not transparency protocols but the underlying assumption that genuine proclamation must originate in an identifiable, individualized struggle. This expectation reflects a Romantic inheritance that equates authority with expressive originality, even though the longer history of Christian preaching often located legitimacy in office, tradition, and fidelity to the received word. By clinging to a model in which the preacher's internal creative process is the guarantor of meaning, contemporary debates risk anachronistically importing nineteenth-century aesthetics into theological discourse. The irony is that such expectations obscure the heraldic model that dominated for centuries, in which mediated texts were trusted precisely because they bore institutional and communal sanction. From this perspective, the anxiety surrounding machine-mediated assistance in sermon writing says less about the technology itself than about the persistence of Romantic ideals in defining what counts as authentic communication. What is at stake, then, is not simply whether tools distort or diminish God's truth, but how authority and meaning are being measured—by expressive interiority or by communal recognition.

5. Conclusion

The use of generative systems in preaching and beyond surfaces longstanding arguments about authorship, control, and originality. Much of the resistance still leans on a Romantic assumption that authority is guaranteed by interiority—by the preacher or writer proving that content emerged from an inner reservoir of sincerity and struggle. Yet history shows otherwise: sermons were long transmitted through postils, lectionaries, and printed collections, where legitimacy rested on communal sanction and fidelity to tradition rather than on solitary genius. Romantic expressivism remains a powerful cultural inheritance, but as an evaluative framework for contemporary content creation it is increasingly untenable. The significance of this argument lies in showing that current anxieties are less about technical quality than about inherited ideals of originality and authorship, ideals that obscure the fact that authority has always been mediated.

Future research should map how these assumptions function across creative and scholarly domains, where similar disputes about disclosure, provenance, and contributorship now unfold. Scholars of literature and religion alike must interrogate how notions of originality migrate between theology, law, and publishing, and how institutional norms can recalibrate authorship around accountability rather than unverifiable interior states. Studies should also examine audience reception more closely: how do communities evaluate trust when computational mediation is disclosed, and what practices can sustain credibility across different contexts? By reframing originality as transparent, traceable, and communally recognized, future inquiry can clarify how content creation—religious or otherwise—might evolve without relying on Romantic definitions that no longer serve as adequate measures of meaning or authority.

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