OPENAI'S CHATGPT

by Scott McCurley, Academic Dean and Head of the School of Rhetoric

November 30th, 2022 might just go down as a *hinge-point* in history. On that date, OpenAI, a company co-founded by Elon Musk, launched to the public ChatGPT. To be sure, there are other AI interfaces out there, but this release has galvanized the general public's attention, having reached 100 million users in just two months. To put that in perspective, it took Instagram two years and Facebook four years, to reach that milestone. Wednesday afternoon of last week, I gathered all SOR students and faculty together in the Moomaw to discuss this development. In the following article I want to highlight my initial reflections on this as well as some of the things I said and demonstrated for the students.

For those in the community who have not been paying attention to this development, it's perhaps easiest to understand this new chatbot by comparing it to a familiar one, the ubiquitous Google search. Let's say I want to know how to cook that once-a-year Thanksgiving turkey. Into the search bar we type, "best method for baking a turkey." We are all familiar with what that produces – *links* to websites that provide the information we want. When you open the ChatGPT webpage, similarly, you have a search bar into which you can type the same six words. The result? Not links, but rather *text* – it types out, write in front of you, in rather natural language (replete with ingredient list) a "popular and reliable method" for cooking a turkey. How did it do that? I certainly have no idea at a technical level, but the

layman explanations I have encountered describe a process wherein the chatbot synthesizes from the digital data it has 'digested' or learned from, and then provides, in the form of original text, a response to your query.

A phrase within that last sentence has educators everywhere wringing their hands – *original text*. This was not cut and pasted from previously written material. You can ask the AI to write you a thousand-word essay on the subject matter of your choice and will kick it out rather quickly. Whether it is yet 'smart enough' to write an A paper is apparently up for debate and it is clear that it will produce errors, but these problems will seemingly be worked out in the future. Headlines in the *Atlantic* recently have included *The End of High-School English* and *The College Essay is Dead*. While pondering the possible implications for the venerable student essay, one of these authors wrote, *"The question isn't 'How will we get around this?' but rather 'Is this still worth doing?'"* In probing for a metaphor, he also asked, *"Is this moment more like the invention of the calculator, saving me from the tedium of long division, or more like the invention of the player piano, robbing us of what can be communicated only through human emotion?"* What is the promise and what is the peril of this new technology?

In a recent *Christianity Today* article entitled *AI Might Teach, But it Can't Preach,* Russell Moore stated, *But the real question is not about technological possibility. It's not really about church leadership ethics either. Rather, the question is about what preaching actually is.* While readily acknowledging that the technology can in fact write a sermon, he wanted to press the ontology (the nature of the being) of

the thing itself – the sermon. This too, is paramount for educators – what is the nature of education (and where does the essay fit into that)? Are we in want of mere information or being formed up. At New Covenant we have answered that definitively – it is the latter, not the former.

When we gathered the SOR last week and asked for a show of hands, it looked as if only about half the students had heard of this while fewer than ten percent had signed up and used it themselves. I took the time to let them know a little about the chatbot, the basics of how it worked and how it was different than an internet search engine, and then I pulled up my AI ChatGPT account and, while projected on the big screen for all to see, fed it two of our vaunted summer reading questions, to which AI instantly produced a couple of decent answers. Why would I do that? First, because I believe we are only months away from most high school and college students becoming familiar with the technology – so why pretend it's not there? Second, because it gave us an opportunity to discuss again the purpose and nature of education. Yes, teachers will need to make adjustments to accommodate this new tool, exploring both its potential promise as an aide to our aims, and to mitigate its potential peril as a thief thereof. But this does not forestall the deeper question that remains squarely with the student themselves – will they take the long and arduous path to becoming an educated son or daughter of God, or will the temptation of the shortcut rob them of that reality?