News
Analysis



Recent AI-generated content of Charlie Kirk found on social media. (RNS illustration)

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Megachurch pastor Jack Graham was in the middle of his Sunday message to Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, this past weekend when he paused to cue up an unusual sermon illustration. After encouraging people to respond to the killing of conservative Christian activist Charlie Kirk by turning to God, he instructed the congregation to listen to a roughly minute-long audio clip of what sounded like Kirk delivering a short speech.

"Hear what Charlie is saying regarding what happened to him this past week," Graham said.

As the clip, which encouraged listeners to "pick up your cross, and get back in the fight," ended, the congregation burst into applause. A few seconds later, they rose to their feet in a standing ovation.

But the clip they listened to was not, in fact, Charlie Kirk from beyond the grave. As Graham made clear when he introduced the segment, the congregation was listening to a production generated entirely by artificial intelligence: The clip, which has gone viral online, was a cloned version of Kirk's voice delivering what appeared to be an AI-generated response from a chatbot asked what Kirk would say in the wake of his own death.

It's unclear where the video originated, but at least two other large evangelical Protestant churches — Dream City Church in Arizona and Awaken Church, San Marcos in California — also played it during their services that day. Pastors at both churches made clear the clips were AI; even so, the segment triggered applause each time.

The message was part of a wave of AI-generated content that flooded social media in the wake of Kirk's killing, with supporters and even Kirk's former colleagues sharing images, videos and audio messages that featured the felled activist and that were made by artificial intelligence. Amid outrage over Kirk's killing and debate

about his legacy, the surge, which has been most visible on social media platforms, showcased a new form of public mourning and remembrance, one in which the dead are grieved with hyperreal but entirely fictional reconstructions crafted in seconds by AI services.

AI-generated images and videos of Kirk appeared within hours of his death, some growing in popularity over the next few days. Many featured religious themes, a byproduct of Kirk's own personal and political shift toward evangelical Christianity near the end of his life.

Imagining Kirk in heaven was a common theme. In one clip, which has racked up hundreds of thousands of views on Facebook and X, Kirk stares into a camera as soft piano music plays.

"I'm Charlie. My faith cost me my life, but now I stand forever in glory," the AI-generated Kirk says.

The fictional Kirk then introduces four historical Christian martyrs and saints — Paul, Stephen, Andrew and Peter. These, also AI-generated characters, briefly recount their own stories of martyrdom before the AI Kirk urges listeners to root themselves in a "Bible-believing church," join in a "spiritual" battle and "overwhelm the world with Jesus."

Other clips are shorter, but more direct. One depicts an AI-generated Kirk taking selfies in heaven with prominent Americans who were assassinated, such as Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy as well as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. As the digital Kirk poses with the historical icons in a cloudy vista, "Knocking on Heaven's Door" plays in the background.

Many AI-generated clips depict Kirk with Jesus Christ. One shows Kirk sitting in the same tent where he was shot and killed, but then suddenly leaping out of his chair and running up a staircase to a smiling Jesus. Another features an AI-generated Kirk praying on a park bench as Scripture is flashed across the screen and "Come Jesus Come" by CeCe Winans plays in the background. Eventually, a radiant Jesus arrives, and the two embrace.

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Yet another shows Jesus and Kirk, holding a Make America Great Again hat, walking toward the camera among the clouds.

"Welcome, my son," Jesus says, embracing the AI Kirk. "Your work is done. Come rest."

Apparent AI-generated images have even been used by Kirk's former co-workers. Andrew Kolvet, who produced "The Charlie Kirk Show" and has hosted the program multiple times since Kirk's killing, posted what appears to be an AI-generated image of Kirk alongside other assassinated Americans from U.S. history such as King and Lincoln, as well as Jesus Christ. (The image sparked criticism, with detractors noting that the real-life Kirk criticized King. The Rev. Bernice King, one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughters, said of the image, "there are so many things wrong with this.")

Depictions of famous figures in heaven, or even in relationship with Jesus, are hardly unusual. But the particular utilization of AI to commemorate Kirk — with content flooding the internet within hours of his death — may be an outgrowth of the technology's wide use among devotees of President Donald Trump. That includes the Trump administration itself: On several occasions, AI-generated images and memes have appeared on official government accounts.

As Charlie Warzel, who writes on technology and media, observed in The Atlantic in August, the "high-resolution, low-budget look of generative-AI images appears to be fusing with the meme-loving aesthetic of the MAGA movement."

Warzel added: "At least in the fever swamps of social media, AI art is becoming MAGA-coded. The GOP is becoming the party of AI slop."

Kirk, of course, was an avid Trump supporter who played a significant role in helping the president return to power, and some of the AI-generated content that proliferated after the activist's death has been tied to conservative causes. Many images, for instance, linked Kirk's death to the stabbing of Iryna Zarutska, a Ukrainian refugee whose slaying on a bus in Charlotte, North Carolina, became a source of outrage for Kirk and other conservatives shortly before Kirk's own assassination. One widely shared image shows an AI-generated Kirk comforting Zarutska as she sits on the bus where she was killed, bleeding. At least one person created a video version of the image that features the hymn "How Great Thou Art." A similar AI-generated video shows Kirk embracing Zarutska on the bus as they both

flap newly grown angel wings.

Another AI-generated video pushed a pro-Israel message — a topic that has sparked division among conservatives, and which Kirk was reportedly trying to mitigate shortly before his death. In the video, an AI-generated Kirk, adorned with angel wings and a white robe, speaks from heaven as he declares: "I'm in a better place now, but America and Israel will never be the same." The AI Kirk insists that the U.S. and Israel are both based on "faith, on freedom, on family," shortly before a bald eagle is shown landing on his head as he stands in front of Israeli and U.S. flags.

Despite their viral nature, it's unclear precisely what role these virtually enhanced remembrances play in the lives of those who mourn Kirk's death. But social media boosters of the creations often frame them as a form of catharsis: On TikTok, influencer Taylor Diazmercado posted a short video of herself last week reacting to the AI-generated audio clip of Kirk — which she clearly labeled as such — that would later be used in churches. As an entirely fabricated voice speaks lines Kirk never said in life, Diazmercado can be seen visibly weeping, frequently wiping away tears as she nods along in-between sobs.

Beneath the video, which had 123,000 likes as of Wednesday (Sept. 17), she added a short caption: "What a man."