



TODD KORPI

AI

GOES TO
CHURCH

— PASTORAL WISDOM —
FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



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1

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

AS A CHILD COMING OF AGE in the late '80s and '90s, I was enthralled by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG). Gene Roddenberry's hit sequel ran for seven seasons between 1987 and 1994 and told the tale of the legendary flagship USS *Enterprise*, captained by stoic and heroic Frenchman Jean-Luc Picard. Being a part of the generational subgrouping frequently dubbed "elder millennials," TNG hit the airwaves at the height of my childhood imaginary years. I was smitten.

In addition to the battles with Klingons and Romulans, the technological offerings of the twenty-fourth-century starship fascinated me: a laptop computer, sitting on the desk of Picard's ready room, that seemed so slender by the standards of the day; the "Personal Access Display Devices," or PADDs (that at some level were undoubtedly an inspiration for our modern iPads and tablets), the ability to travel faster than the speed of light, and more.¹ And, of course, there was Lieutenant Commander Data.

On the *Enterprise*, Commander Data was a mainstay. The embodiment of the android before Google was even a thought, Data was a physical embodiment of an artificial intelligence (AI). Even by twenty-fourth-century standards, he was a technological marvel—sentient, capable of vast computation that rivaled the *Enterprise's* onboard computer system, and capable of evolving and growing in a semblance of personhood. While an AI, Data was also on a lifelong quest to grow into being more human, and many

plotlines within the franchise leaned on the ethical considerations of such a quest (e.g., Can an android command a starship?). Subsequent movies and spinoff series introduced new practical and ethical considerations, such as the introduction of Data’s “emotion chip” in the motion picture *Star Trek: Generations* in 1994.

You may or may not have been as Trek crazy as I was in my early childhood, but chances are shows like *Star Trek* and *Black Mirror*, and movies like *Star Wars*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and others shaped many of your expectations about what a future with artificial life forms might look like.

But it is increasingly apparent that much of what Gene Roddenberry and George Lucas anticipated for the distant future (or a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away) is breaking into the present. The technological developments made within the digital age have had such a compounding effect that what would have been considered massive technological breakthroughs thirty years ago are often nothing more than little blips in the news cycle:

“Oh cool, they may have discovered a path toward an unlimited fuel source—that’s nice.”²

“Hey hon, did you see that my AirPods have a ‘Live Listen’ feature that can turn your phone into a hypersensitive directional microphone?³ Anyway, what do you want to do for dinner?”

I was ten years old when the Roslin Institute cloned the first mammal, a Finn-Dorset sheep named Dolly. It felt like that was all anyone could talk about when they weren’t talking about the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. Yet when I read about advances in the field of in vitro gametogenesis (IVG)—a technological advancement that has the possibility to turn any human cell into egg cells capable of fertilization (and consequently, life)—in an issue of the *New Yorker* in 2023, no one I talked to seemed the least bit impressed, or even interested.⁴

Technological advancement is so commonplace that it produces a sort of white noise effect. Until we stumble onto its

usefulness, it feels like a steep—and potentially futile—learning curve to which one must commit. After all, not all technologies are here to stay—such as the early 2010s partnership between Nokia and Microsoft that was supposed to revolutionize the smartphone industry. Most North American homes have at least one box somewhere with outdated cords, old phones, and maybe even a VCR, should one get the inspiration to watch some old home movies.

If we're not careful, we can also find ourselves grossly behind on some technological advancements that are likely here to stay and that may wield tremendous influence on both our individual lives and on human civilization as a whole. It is difficult to closely follow every tech advancement so, for many, the debut of ChatGPT in November 2022 by developer OpenAI probably seemed like a massive leap that came out of nowhere. If you're not familiar with ChatGPT, it is what is called a large language model AI or an LLM. That's simply a fancy way of saying that it is a bot that sources its bank of knowledge from the internet as well as the ongoing use of end users (i.e., you and me).

In the fall of 2022, I was just a pastor and a missiologist who was still struggling to get Siri to respond to my voice commands correctly, and out jumped this AI resource onto the main stage of public conversation.⁵ ChatGPT made previous iterations of virtual assistants and AI seem ancient by comparison. For most of us, ChatGPT has already dramatically altered how many of us operate day to day. I readily use Chat (as well as an emerging suite of other AI tools such as Claude, Motion, Apple Intelligence, and more) for complex idea synthesizing and brainstorming—things that would have previously taken me hours, now completed in a manner of seconds.

Since the debut of ChatGPT, just about every online resource claims to be recently upgraded with AI capabilities, though many used AI before and are simply trying to capitalize on the

marketing frenzy. The possibilities seem endless and are expanding at a rapid pace. AI has the potential to be “a shift in human experience more significant than any that has occurred for nearly six centuries—since the advent of the movable-type printing press.”⁶

AI AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The relationship between technology and the Christian church has always been evolving. While the church often gets a bad reputation for being a late adopter of emerging technologies, that’s not entirely true—*especially* when it is used to reach people with the gospel. It may be more accurate to say that local churches may lag behind adopting new technologies, while the “sodality” parts of our faith—missions agencies, evangelistic organizations, church planting networks, and more—are at the cutting edge of technological adoption, dreaming up ways to use every possible means and method to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷

While we often associate the word *technology* with the electronic developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the term derives from the Greek word *technē*, meaning “art,” “craft,” or “skill.” So while, yes, your smartphone is a form of technology, so were the letters composed by Paul and sent to his churches. When viewed in this light, Paul’s letter writing was a primitive form of “multisite” ministry, allowing him to be simultaneously present in one location (where he was ministering physically at the time) and present in another, with a proxy (such as Phoebe) reading his letter to another of his churches.⁸

The Roman roadway system is another example of what was, by the standards of the time, a monumental technological achievement, which Christians used to spread the gospel (e.g., Acts 8:26-40). Later technological developments, such as Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press, the advent of radio

technology, the use of automobiles and air travel for missionary work, and the widespread embrace of television broadcasting are only a few cursory examples of where the church has been an early adopter of technological development.

The digital age has seen similar pioneering efforts as churches adopt new digital technologies early. Life.Church, based out of Edmond, Oklahoma, and America's largest church, gave us not only the YouVersion Bible app in 2008, but they also launched a virtual reality campus in the Metaverse almost as quickly as the platform became available.⁹ By 2021, the YouVersion Bible app had reached more than five hundred million downloads worldwide. To date, it is an entry road into cultural contexts written off as "post-Christian" by many, such as France, where YouVersion has more downloads per capita than any other place on earth. But long before that, Christians were finding ways to connect, worship, and share the gospel online—including the first virtual worship service held on Ecunet on January 28, 1986, in response to the *Challenger* accident.¹⁰

Of course, for every early adopter of digital tech in Christian spaces, there are also a host of late adopters—even resisters. Among the most notable examples with regard to technology and Christian traditions are communities such as the Amish, who take a long-form skeptical approach to technological adoption. But by late adopters, I'm not so much referring to our Amish sisters and brothers as I am to the pastor who is still treating their church's social media like an online bulletin board from the '90s, existing to communicate one-way information.

I'm referring to the fact that digital technology is viewed by many church leaders as a luxury for large churches with bigger budgets and more people power. What's more, ministry that takes place *within* digital environments is largely relegated to second-class status—a peripheral ministry that often consists of posting church news on a church's official social media feed and, since

the coronavirus pandemic, some form of live streaming the Sunday service. While some church leaders are jumping into pioneering feats, others are more skeptical, even developing an adversarial posture to a technology that shapes even the lives of those who don't directly participate in it.¹¹

But the internet isn't a fad that's going to blow over. And by all appearances, AI and other Web 3.0 developments (e.g., virtual reality, augmented reality, blockchain, etc.) are going to further integrate the human existence into a hybrid one—constantly simultaneously online and offline—and dramatically change our lives. The winds of AI integration are blowing across human civilization, whether we want them to or not. We can choose to be reactive or proactive. As the people of God—especially those of us who are in some form of Christian leadership, whether in the local church, the academy, or in some form of church-proximate ministry—it is crucial we choose the latter path, one of conscious engagement and participation in the public conversation around how to think well about and steward this human creation.

There is already a sense of urgency to this task, as the widespread adoption of AI tools is dramatically outpacing our careful reflection and discourse on the subject. This is especially true as it pertains to the arenas of theology, Christian ethics, ecclesiology, and missiology. While in our pluralist societies, it is foolhardy and ignorant to assume that Christianity is the *only* moral voice giving guidance to these questions, it is certainly true that in both the West and the Majority World, Christianity has been a significant moral voice historically and still is at present. The question for the Christian is, then, why wouldn't we want to be a part of this discussion? In fact, why wouldn't we want to *lead* it?

If the people in our churches and in our ministries are going to use AI in greater and greater capacities as the technology evolves (and they will), isn't dialoguing about what it means to

steward AI from a Christian perspective a matter of urgent discipleship? If our commission is to join the Holy Spirit in his reconciliatory mission in the world, beckoning people to be reconciled to the Father through the victory and present reign of Christ (and it is), shouldn't we explore how AI can aid in our participation in that mission?

These, and more, form the basis for why I've embarked upon composing this book. It behooves us as Christians to think theologically and ethically about what it means to live as humans in the age of AI and about the potential opportunities and challenges that may arise from its widespread adoption, both in the short-term and long-term future. Contrary to popular belief, technology is not acultural, neutral in its orientation, or immune from pitfalls that can harm vulnerable populations. We therefore must think ethically about technology from a Christian perspective.

We also must think ecclesialogically and missiologically about the proliferation of AI. We must not simply theoretically consider the ramifications of this technology, but also the very real and practical uses to aid in our work of cultivating vibrant and flourishing church communities that are on mission with God in the world.

THE PURPOSE AND CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

Around the same time ChatGPT made its debut in 2022, I was asked to lead the research for a new collaborative effort called the Digital Mission Consortia.¹² This was formed through a partnership between ministries and institutions who are leading the way in the field of digital ministry, including OneHope, the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center, YouVersion, Talbot School of Theology, Alpha, and many more. Through that research (and the subsequent work resulting from it), equipping Christians, local churches, and ministries to engage effectively with digital technology and in digital environments has become a significant part

of my life's work. AI already impacts a significant part of our lives, and its rapid proliferation only serves to forecast greater impact in the future. So the necessity for this book was clear: that it might equip you and me to better navigate living our faith in our common AI future.

In this book I address both theoretical and practical concerns around AI. In between those two spaces—idea and practice—is where I feel this work is most needed. We simply can't move forward with pragmatic recommendations for using AI, as much as the modern appetite longs for some variation of “five tips to maximize x , y , and z .” We need the groundwork of *thinking* well about what we *do*. But academics are often, rightly, criticized for living too much in the realm of ideas. This book is written as a connective tissue that links idea with practice.

We will touch on the basics of what AI is and the current state of play; and then we will dive more into specific topics, such as issues around social justice, pastoral care, and what it means to be human in an age where machines can increasingly mimic human behavior and reason. We will explore some of the issues I envision as being on the horizon. Not all are topics of conversation now, but I write much of this in the hope of beginning conversations that will inevitably happen soon, so we might get a firm theological footing before we are forced to navigate them.

But since there are concerns regarding the coming impact of AI, as we will see, its impact has already been far reaching for many years, often in ways so subtle as to escape our notice. This impact is not simply in the marketplace, government, or our private lives, but AI has also come to church. It has been sitting in our seats on Sundays without us realizing it. It shapes our ministry practice in ways we often overlook. And it stands to do much more in the short-term future.

Almost weekly, I have conversations with visitors to our church who visited us because they found us online, either because our

church populates high in Google (because of an AI-powered practice called *search engine optimization*, or “SEO”) or because their social media algorithm inserted one of our content pieces in their feed. Simple tools we take for granted—like predictive text in Microsoft Outlook, automated audio and visual enhancements when we upload sermons in platforms like YouTube, smart scheduling tools, targeted ads, and more—AI already permeates how we function in church life as well as in the Christian life more broadly.

We need an awareness both of the present opportunities and challenges AI presents when it goes to church as well as of the future ones. What function can AI hold in good sermon preparation? How can AI create margin in your schedule so you can make a greater difference in people’s lives? How can AI help you reach people you wouldn’t otherwise be able to reach with the gospel? What cautions do we need to consider—such as the potential threats AI operation poses to our mandate to steward creation wisely? How do we respond to “AI friends” or bots that blur lines between personal and digital interactions? By engaging these questions, we start to see AI not just as a tool to optimize our lives, but as a call to deeper discernment and reflection about how to apply pastoral wisdom to our hybrid, incarnational-and-artificial world.

My hope in setting out on this journey with you is, first, to provide you with best practices for *thinking well* about AI and our place and calling as the people of God, and second, to know how to put that good thinking into practice. In that, I desire to make this work more “evergreen” than books on technological development often are. While I will, of course, mention examples of best practices in what I call “ministry AI,” I try to steer clear of the nitty-gritty details of particular AI resources, developers, or technological practices.

I do this for two reasons. The first is that I’m a missiologist, not an AI developer. Thus, my expertise is better employed in the arena of how the church engages with the technology for the sake

of the gospel, rather than the particularities of how a technology is used. If you're wanting thirty ways to maximize your use of ChatGPT, I'm not your guy and this isn't the right book. But if you're wanting to develop a foundation for how to think about AI and apply that thinking to your life, to your church, or to your vocation, then I commend this book to you in the hope that it will be beneficial.

The second reason is that technology is evolving at a rapid pace. To place much stock in a particular tech practice is to consign this work to an outdated status almost immediately. I sincerely desire to give you something of more enduring benefit, rather than something quickly lumped in with a stack of books on how to create engaging Vine videos and leverage your MySpace account to talk to people about Jesus.

Additionally, I approach this subject matter with as much neutrality and objectivity as possible. Surely, that is impossible to do completely. However, I would count myself as neither an overly eager adopter of technology nor a hard resister to it. Despite coming of age with some exposure to tech (our family got our first internet desktop computer with a dial-up internet connection when I was eleven), I am also at an age where I somewhat begrudgingly eye roll every time a new social media platform comes out, because I just simply don't want to learn a new one! Unlike my children, I have vivid memories of running to get a snack when my favorite show went on a commercial break—because there was no such thing as pausing television. Yet my high school friendships, and typing skills, were profoundly shaped by long chats on AOL Instant Messenger.

We Millennials often get a lot of undeserved bad press, but one thing our generation uniquely affords the contemporary conversations around digital landscape is a deep appreciation of the value of tech as well as its potentially disastrous consequences, having lived part of our lives before, and part after, the digital revolution.

Thus, my hope is to be as neutral a mediator as possible in this conversation. To those who may be overeager about AI's potential, my hope is that you'll see some potential cautions and guardrails to consider, lest we afflict the world with unintended consequences in our haste. To those who are reluctant, my hope is that your heart and passion for the gospel and for people will inspire you to take the ministry potential of AI more seriously and consider how you might navigate this emerging ecosystem with clarity and authority.

Not long ago I spoke at a conference for church leaders on the subject of digital ministry. This particular session was on using social media for ministry, and I was fortunate to find myself in a room primarily full of church planters, pastors of revitalizing churches, and leaders of small churches. Almost everyone in the room represented small congregations with limited staffing and limited budgets, but big vision and unquenchable passion to serve their communities.

As the conversation unfolded, it naturally turned to the ministry implications of AI, though that was not my intention for the session. We discussed how algorithms impact how people view a church's social media content. We talked about how tools such as OpusClip and Sermon Shots can turn sermon content into reels or how SpeakAI can translate that same content into a host of other languages or how Canva's AI integration can make slide deck creation a snap—all doable with a skeleton crew and a shoestring budget. The reality is that for many in that room, and for many other churches who do not have large staffs and massive budgets, the ever-expanding library of AI tools can equip churches to do ministry in cost-effective and time-saving ways. For larger churches this can mean more focused staffing on pastoral functions over execution-oriented functions. I looked around that room to see something I don't often see when the topic of digital ministry comes up—*hope*. Not a hope because of anything inherently holy

about AI. But rather a hope that the AI-optimized resources can lower the threshold for churches of all sizes and varieties to participate in ministry in digital environments. That excites me.

There remain looming questions that must be addressed about our common humanity, identity, pace, work, and more that remain largely ignored, however. These are the existential questions that I have deep concerns about Christians overlooking and the church being ill equipped to respond to. These too must be addressed—thinking well *and* putting that thinking into practice, for the glory of God and the ongoing work of the gospel.

My hope is that we will walk away from this journey together with a deep conviction that God still desires to reconcile the world to himself through his Son Jesus the Messiah and by the abiding ministry of the Holy Spirit who, before we even encounter people, is already ministering to them, inviting us to discern where he is at work and to join him. I'm convinced one of the most significant frontiers in which the Spirit is at work is precisely where most of us spend a great deal of our time—in digital environments and interacting with digital tools. To that end, the Spirit of God is calling us to join him in his work in and through digital technology.

The next frontier of gospel ministry lies in digital environments and using digital tools like AI. But this requires us to think well about the relationship between AI and the people of God, so that we might promote human flourishing and dignity, and use every means at our disposal to compel people far from Jesus to be reconciled to him.

Let's see what's out there.

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