

“How Should God’s Church Respond to AI?”

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Genesis 1:26-31; Matthew 14:22-33

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We are continuing our fall sermon series, Christian Questions with More Than One Answer...and today, in contrast to so many of the questions we’ve asked this fall, some of which are questions that God’s Church has wrestled with for centuries, this morning’s question is BRAND NEW:

How should God’s Church respond to AI?

Did you hear about the pastor out in California who created an AI duplicate of himself?

Using “almost two million words of his sermons, podcasts, books, text messages and emails,” Justin Lester –pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in the Bay area--“cloned his [own] voice and—[on a screen]—created his digital twin.”

He told his congregation that if he’s asleep or traveling, they don’t have to wait to talk to him—they can have 24/7 access to “this other version of me.”

One Sunday, the Rev. Lester shook hands with a parishioner, and “then watched her walk to the car” as she began “chatting on her phone with” the AI version of himself.¹

Should I put this one to a vote?

Digital twins of Nick, Lauren, Mary Kathleen, Leigh and me?

All in favor...I’m not putting that to a vote.

¹ Eli Saslow, “When His Church Goes Dark, They Talk to His Digital Twin,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2026.

Needless to say, I've got all sorts of objections—pastoral objections, theological objections—to what Justin Lester is doing. But it raises a good question:

How should God's Church use AI, talk about AI, think about AI?

This past May, Pope Leo entered the fray.
In his encyclical, he said the following:

“...artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean. Nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil...or bear responsibility for consequences.”²

I think Pope Leo is right.
But not everyone involved with AI agrees.

Christopher Olah, “one of Anthropic’s billionaire co-founders,” was invited to the Vatican recently.

During his visit, he stated:

“We keep finding things that are mysterious....We find internal states that functionally mirror joy, satisfaction, fear, grief and unease.”³

All of which raises questions about what consciousness really means.

² [Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Leo XIV Magnifica Humanitas \(15 May 2026\)](#)

³ Elizabeth Dias, “Religious Scholars Met With Anthropic. What They Heard Stunned Them.” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2026.

Now it's not just the Vatican that's weighing in.

Our own denomination produced a paper on AI this past summer, which I only learned about this past week. It's titled: "The Algorithm and the Almighty." (By the way, I'd love to know who was on the Presbyterian committee that came up with that title, but that's a puzzle for another day...)

I will say it's worth taking the time to read.
Part of it goes like this:

In the face of "great uncertainty...our responsibility is to discern what God is doing in the world and seek to align ourselves with God's work, using the tools we have created—even when those tools may be freighted with complex questions, deep concerns and enormous potential."⁴

It's that phrase "great uncertainty" that stands out for me.
It speaks to the ambiguous character of AI—
the harm it might do as well as the hope that it could bring.

So perhaps the first and most faithful response God's Church can make is to begin with that uncertainty.

To admit what we DO NOT KNOW.
Which isn't always an easy thing to do, is it?
Never mind AI for a moment.

Not too long ago, it was a Wednesday, my day off, which in our household means "honey-do-list."

⁴ [The Algorithm and the Almighty | Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#)

The grocery store!
Off I went, got our groceries, was in the check-out line.
The woman who scanned my groceries that day was so kind.
Just joy, emanating from her...she brightened my day.

As I was walking out of the store, I looked at the receipt—and I noticed something unusual. There was a 5% discount on my groceries at the bottom of the receipt.

Not just the specials, but 5% on everything.
Why did I get a 5% discount?

I looked again...and there was the answer, in fine print.
SENIOR DISCOUNT.

I did not know how to feel about that!
On the one hand, it was 5% off groceries.
On the other hand...I'm a decade away from qualifying for any senior discounts.

I shrugged the whole thing off, but wouldn't you know it, three weeks later, with a DIFFERENT clerk checking out my groceries...the same thing happened AGAIN!

Now—not knowing why I keep receiving a senior discount at the grocery store...that's one thing.

But the ambiguous and unknown nature of AI, which could affect our future in countless ways, for good or for ill...that's something else entirely.

How will AI impact the job market?
What kind of effect will AI have on the environment?

Who will be accountable legally...if and when AI causes harm?

Or, on the flip side...

What diseases might AI help eradicate?

What kind of health could AI bring, not only to countries like ours but to the poorest countries in the world?

At this moment, we do not know.

Have any of you felt OVERWHELMED by all the headlines about AI, and said to yourself, “I don’t know what to make of all this...”??

Hold on to that feeling for a moment.

It’s why I chose our second text for today.

A familiar story, right?

The disciples are in a boat.

The waves are tossing the boat all over the place.

The boat, Matthew writes, is “far from the land, for the wind was against them.”

And then Jesus approaches the boat, walking on the water.

That’s the part that captures everyone’s attention.

But I hope you did not miss what happens at the beginning.

The most interesting part of this text, I think, is how the disciples end up in a sea of uncertainty, in danger of being overwhelmed by the waves and the wind...

How did they get there?

According to the text, the answer is Jesus.

The first verse of our text goes like this:

“Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side...”

Do you see what’s going on here?
 Jesus sends his disciples into the waves, into the wind.
 Now why would he do that?

Maybe it’s because Jesus believes that’s where his church belongs.
 Not in safe, secure places, but in the world’s most vulnerable places.

You see, we’re all in the boat.

As Pope Leo put it:

“...the inalienable dignity of the human person, the common good...and social justice...demand[s] that we assess whether the power of digital infrastructures and algorithms...protects the vulnerable, ensures fair access to opportunities and remains directed toward the good of all.”⁵

The Church cannot turn its back on AI.
 It must look at AI through the lens of gospel.
 And what lens is that?

View number one—has to do with God.

Do you remember our first text for today?
 Genesis 1:

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them...have dominion

⁵ [Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Leo XIV Magnifica Humanitas \(15 May 2026\)](#)

over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

What does this tell us about God?

That the God we bear witness to...is INCARNATIONAL.

It means God does not stay removed from us.

God shows up in each of us.

It means that every person has the image of God inside of them, and that we were created for one another, created for community and called to find the image of God in each other.

To the degree that AI helps us do so...we should use it.

To the degree that AI distracts us from seeking the image of God in one another...we should work to change it.

Which leads me to view #2.

The second lens with which the gospel asks us to view AI is not only what we know about God, but what the gospel teaches about life's GOAL.

In the age of AI, it's easier than ever to get distracted.

To imagine that we should spend our days striving for more efficiency and self-optimization.

Show of hands, have any of you, in the past 6 months, used AI to help you save some time?

Efficiency and saving time...those can be marvelous uses of AI.

But when it comes to being God's church in the world, living an efficient life...that's not the goal. Paying attention to the image of God,

in stranger and neighbor and one another, especially those without as much power and resources...that's the goal.

Our former Heritage Lecturer, Craig Barnes, retired as the President of Princeton Seminary at the end of 2022. A decade prior to that, shortly after he started his tenure at Princeton, he received an email from the pastor of the first church he ever served. He had left that congregation 20 years earlier. But the pastor wanted Dr. Barnes to know that Scott was in his second year of seminary at Princeton.

You see, Scott was just a boy when Craig Barnes knew him 20 years earlier.

At that time, he went by "Scottie".

Barnes writes:

"Scottie was a five-year-old cherished son of that church. I remember him bouncing around Sunday school with his older brother and twirling on his father's hand while being led through the church parking lot."

"Over the years [however]...it became clear that something was amiss with the mother of this family.

"...we began to see her husband and the boys
in worship without her.

"When she did come she was disheveled and inattentive."

One day the father went to see Barnes, and described his wife's alcoholism that was destroying everything. On one occasion, she literally almost burned the house down.

Now, it just so happened that about that time, Barnes received a call to become pastor at another church. So he lost touch with the family—until he got that email about Scottie—now Scott—who was a student at Princeton.

The two got together, and Scott brought Barnes up to speed on the previous 20 years. How his father lost his job and the house, how his mother drank herself into “an almost vegetative state” and ended up in a nursing home.

And Barnes also learned about his former church.

- How the congregation “rallied to offer babysitting, covered dishes...and prayers.”
- How Scott and his brother “were given star roles in the Christmas pageants” and “found their best friends in the youth group and went on mission trips.”

Barnes writes:

“Everyone knew the family’s problems but there was never a word of judgment or even pity. They were just being the church...”

“When I asked Scott about his sense of call [to ministry], he said it was pretty simple—he’s never been able to get over the love of a congregation that kept showing up at his door...when there was only heartache on the other side...”

Year after year after year, they kept showing up.

Year after year, it was the face of God show up at his door.

“Now,” Scott said, “it’s my turn.”⁶

⁶ M. Craig Barnes, “The Rest of the Story,” *The Christian Century*, April 16, 2013.

The social psychologist and author, Jonathan Haidt, has remarked about AI that, “One of the most profound effects...it’s already having is [to convince us that] we don’t need each other as much.”⁷

Maybe that’s why that kind clerk at Publix gave me the senior discount last month. Maybe it was her way of telling a total stranger:
we need each other.

Or maybe I just looked old.
I don’t know.
But I do know this.

No matter what happens with AI in our future,
when it comes to showing neighbors
and strangers and friends—
how much we need them in our lives—
we don’t AI need to do it.

We just need to show up for them.
We just need to be the image of God for them.
We just need to say, “Jesus, it’s my turn.”

Amen.

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, interviewed by David Brooks on The Atlantic’s podcast, “The Permanent Questions,”: [Should We Ban AI for Kids? - The Atlantic](#).