



THE ALLIANCE
for SECURE AI

Creatures *AT THE* *Threshold*

*An eight-week group study exploring questions of
discipleship, worship, and obedience in the age of AI*

Where to Begin

There is a temptation, when technology changes rapidly, to treat it as someone else's concern. As a pastor, I have heard all the excuses and explanations. Like... the engineers will figure it out; the regulators will catch up eventually; the church has more important things to attend to and be concerned with; what could I do anyway... I am just a single person, right?

This study starts from a different place, one of empowerment. The church has something to say. Rooted in the unchanging truth of Scripture, we reject the idea that this problem is too big or too distant for us to engage. God has given us talents, influence, and calling for a reason. Living out the Great Commission means embodying the truth, justice, and mercy of the gospel— not just proclaiming it.

We are living in an extraordinary time where change seems ever constant. The invention of artificial intelligence is one of the most consequential changes in the history of human civilization, and our communities of faith have both a responsibility and a particular set of gifts to bring to the table as we figure out how to implement, regulate, and build this new technology. As Solomon, the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes (wisdom) teaches us, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” While I am certainly not saying that there has been AI before now, there have been inventions and Christians have always been called to respond. This study takes a look at examples of responding to creation each week, both scripturally and in the “modern era”.

Each week, we begin with a genuine scientific discovery or development. We bring it into conversation with Scripture and the wisdom of the Christian tradition. We trust that the questions will get harder as we go, and we believe that is a sign we are doing the work faithfully. We are excited that you are choosing to join us for this study. We are confident that your group will be blessed and encouraged, walking away with practical steps to address the questions arising from the advent of AI, and wisdom on how their families will respond to this new technology.

How to Use This Guide

- Open each session with a prayer, scripture reading, reflection quote from a Christian leader, and three to five minutes of plain-language explanation of the scientific concept relevant to the theological reflection.
- View the five discussion questions as a menu rather than a checklist. Choose two or three that fit your group's energy and the time you have. Remember to hold space for responses before jumping in with an answer. Sit in the complexity of each question and give participants time to form their own thoughts.
- Each activity is designed for fifteen to twenty minutes. Do not skip it. The experiential and embodied learning often unlocks things that discussion alone cannot reach. If you need to, alter the format of the study to incorporate the activities.
- We have included a story for each lesson that is totally optional. These can be used as take-home resources, catalysts for discussion, or supplemental resources. These are totally fictional, but the kind of questions real people are wrestling with everyday.
- If anyone in your congregation works in technology, science, or AI, invite them to join a relevant session as a conversation partner, not an expert to defer to, but a person with a particular vantage point to share. There are lots of opinions and beliefs about this technology. We are not asking you to be an expert in technology, but an expert in your own beliefs, values, relationships, and theology as you wrestle with admittedly difficult questions.
- Resist the urge to tie each session up neatly. The knots are part of the gift. Sit in the mystery and tension that lots of well-meaning folks are wrestling with as they design, build, and regulate these models.
- Have fun. Laugh. Pray. Share a meal. Welcome silly questions and embrace creative solutions, even those that do not work. The goal of this study is not to reach answers or draw conclusions but to build the body of Christ through discussion, disagreement, and discernment.



Week 1

What Is Mind?

Neuroscience, AI, and the Breath of Life

Genesis 2:7 | Psalm 139:13-16

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The Science

We are now building machines that generate language, reason through problems, and produce what looks, to the untrained eye, like understanding. The scientists who build these systems argue among themselves about whether anything like genuine comprehension is happening, or whether these are very sophisticated patterns dressed up in the clothing of thought. Neuroscience adds a harder question still. According to brain researchers, what we call ‘a mind’ emerges from electrochemical processes in the brain, that grief and joy and the recognition of a neighbor's face all arise from the same material substance as the ground we walk on. Even our deepest loves express themselves through biochemistry and releasing particular neurochemicals. This is not to say that it is less authentic or meaningful. We are, it seems, more creaturely than we previously may have supposed.

Theological Deepening

This does not diminish us. It may, in fact, restore us to something we had begun to forget. The breath God breathes into the dust of Genesis is not a ghost installed in a machine; it is the gift of participation in a life that belongs, first and always, to God. This is a gift. The soul is not a thing we possess separate from our bodies; it is the self held in relationship, known by name, loved before we had done anything to deserve it. The question AI asks us is not whether mind can be manufactured. The question is what the mind is for. Once created, God gave a few simple commands:

- Tend to this garden and its creatures.
- Be fruitful, and multiply.
- Consume this, not that.

Limitation and consumption are at the very core of humanity. Feast and famine. Desire and restriction. As we seek to navigate the world, we are still called to tend to the place we are given as a gift, the one God determined was good, make babies, be fruitful, consume as needed, and to avoid certain things. Of course, we know how that went...

Discussion Questions

1. What did you grow up believing the soul was? Was it something separate from your body, or something woven through it? Has that understanding shifted over the years?
2. When a language model produces a poem that moves you, or expresses what looks like distress, what is your instinctive response? What does that response tell you about your assumptions?
3. Neuroscience tells us that thought and feeling arise from physical processes in the brain. Does that discovery seem to you like a threat to faith, or like a deeper form of the mystery Genesis already names?
4. Psalm 139 says God knit you together in your mother's womb and knows your thoughts from afar. How do you hold that intimate, personal language alongside what biology tells us about how minds develop?
5. What do you believe is the most important difference between a human mind and an artificial intelligence system? What theological conviction is underneath your answer?

Group Activity:

The Breath Test

Divide into pairs. One person plays a human; one plays an AI, answering as they imagine such a system might answer, but without announcing which role they hold. The third member of a trio, or the group watching each pair, asks four questions designed to detect genuine inner life: questions about grief, about forgiveness, about wonder, about a moment when they changed their mind because someone else was right. After five minutes, discuss together: Which questions best revealed something? What does that tell us about what we believe the soul actually is?





Did God have something in mind?

Pastor Elena had been visiting Rosewood Memory Care for eleven years, and she knew every resident the way you come to know the particular trees along a road you have traveled a long time. Intimate, familiar, but still distant.

One Tuesday afternoon, she sat with Harold, who had not recognized his own daughter in months. She took his hand and began to hum an old hymn, the kind that was already old when her grandmother taught it to her, and Harold's eyes cleared, just for a moment while she hummed Jesus Loves Me. He hummed along. He squeezed her fingers. Later, a well-meaning volunteer showed her an application on a tablet that could hold a conversation, remember a patient's name, and produce something that looked, if you did not look carefully, like warmth. "It never forgets him," the volunteer said, and she meant it kindly.

Elena sat with that on the long drive home. She felt cold. She sat with it the way you sit with something that will not be hurried but cannot be released. The application was remarkable. She could not deny that. But what had happened with Harold was not retrieval. It was recognition, the kind that moves in both directions between two people who are genuinely present to one another. Something passed between them that she could not name and did not try to. She thought of the breath in Genesis, of dust becoming a living being not by information but by gift, and she wondered whether what made that moment holy and beautiful and somber was not Harold's neurons arranging themselves correctly but the simple fact that two creatures who needed each other had found themselves, for a moment, together.

Frankly, she felt hurt too. Replaceable. Unremarkable. She did not bring a policy proposal to the elder meeting that followed. She brought the question she had been carrying since the drive home, the one she believed the community needed to sit with before it could act rightly. What do we believe a person is, she asked them, and what does our answer require of us?

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

– St Augustine of Hippo



Week 2

Creation and Creativity

Are We Sub-Creators, and If So, to What End?

Genesis 1:1 and 1:26-27 | John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. (Genesis 1:1)

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

The Science

Artificial intelligence systems are capable of generating paintings, musical compositions, poetry, and architecture. In fact, they are quite good at it. For a few weeks, an AI gospel artist named Solomon Ray held the #1 spot on Spotify in the gospel category with songs like Good Temptation, I Got a Song, and Devil is a Liar. All of which strike me as deeply ironic.

AI bots do not imagine in the way we use that term, say when we speak of a child imagining a world. They recombine and interpolate from the vast archive of what human beings have already made. And yet the outputs are sometimes genuinely surprising, sometimes beautiful, sometimes genuinely novel in ways their makers did not anticipate. Creativity, scientists are discovering, may be less a miraculous flame and more a structural property of sufficiently complex systems that have learned the patterns of a domain.

There is a famous scene in the Robin Williams film *Dead Poets Society* where he instructs his students to rip pages out and throw away their books, because the book attempts to construct models for poetry rather than doing something worth doing. He warns them: “This is a battle, a war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls.” Perhaps he was onto something.

Theological Deepening

J.R.R. Tolkien argued that we make things because we are made by a Maker, that the impulse to create is the most God-like thing we do, a kind of echo of the original act in which all things came to be through the Word. C.S. Lewis extended this: he believed that good stories, good art, and good work participate in the truth of things rather than merely representing it. If creativity is structural, as the scientists suggest, then perhaps what Tolkien and Lewis were pointing toward is more literal than we realized. God made a world with structure, with pattern, with grammar. We discover grammar and work within it. The question is not whether AI can make things. The question is whether what it makes serves the good, the true, and the beautiful, or merely accumulates novelty.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever made something, whether a meal, a garden, a piece of writing, or a repair to something broken, and felt that it was more than the sum of its parts?
2. If an AI system generates a painting that moves you to tears, what do you think is happening? Does the absence of intention or inner life in the maker change the meaning of what was made?
3. John calls Jesus the Logos, the rational Word through which all things were made. What does it mean that the universe has structure deep enough to be discovered, learned, and in some way imitated?
4. Have you ever been tricked into thinking something created using AI was actually real? How did that experience feel, and do you worry that others around you might be taken advantage of (elderly, children, voters, etc.) using this technology?
5. Theologian and poet Wendell Berry writes that we cannot learn to be better than we are from ourselves alone. What does that suggest about the limits of technology as a source of genuine renewal or beauty?

Group Activity:

Two Poems, One Question

Provide each participant with a copy of Wendell Berry’s “Mad Farmer Liberation Front” and a copy of the AI generated copy of “Make a new poem in the style of Wendell Berry’s Mad Farmer poems” that are attached below. DO NOT tell them which was created by Berry and which was an imitation from a machine. Ask the group to vote on which felt more alive and discuss. You might want to ask them to close their eyes and raise their hand before voting, or invite a discussion before voting. *P.S. Both poems are provided at the end of the guide in supplemental material.*

Next, play a song by Solomon Ray, the AI generated gospel artist, and then play a song from a human gospel band. Which felt more soulful? Why?



Creation and Creativity

Marcus had been writing worship songs for twelve years, slowly and with some difficulty, in the hour before his children woke and the day made its noisy demands. To create songs is his calling in life. He writes his songs the way a man tends a garden or holds a butterfly, which is to say imperfectly, with love and gentleness. He writes with the knowledge that not everything he planted would come to anything.

Last week, the pastor suggested using an artificial intelligence tool to generate lyrics for short devotional videos during the worship service. This stung a bit. Within an hour the machine had produced thirty passable worship songs. Some were actually pretty good, if he was being honest. He was suddenly worried about his job and the livelihood of his family.

Then a teenager found him after a Sunday service, her eyes red. She had been watching the reels at two in the morning during a hard week, the kind of week that is hard in the way only being seventeen can make a week hard, and one of the generated lyrics had stopped her. She had written it in her journal. Marcus stood there holding that information and feeling something he could not cleanly name, a flurry of grief and anger. It was no longer about his economic concerns but the lack of authenticity, like this girl had been duped.

He brought it to his small group, not as a problem to be solved but as a question to be wrestled with. Was the lyric less true because nothing had suffered or worried or went through pages or ink to create it? Was the girl's comfort less real because it had come from a machine? Nobody had a tidy answer.

"It is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better than we are."

– Wendell Berry



Week 3

The Knowledge Problem

Babel, Bias, and the Limits of What We Can See

Genesis 11:1-9 | 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

The Science

AI systems are trained on data that human beings produce. This means they inherit (or steal), at massive scale, the blindspots, the prejudices, and the omissions of the culture that produced the data. Researchers have documented this in hiring tools that discriminate against women, in facial recognition systems that misidentify people of color at far higher rates, and in medical algorithms trained almost entirely on the bodies of white men. The systems do not choose to be unjust rather, they reflect, faithfully and at speed, the injustice embedded in what they were given to learn from.

Theological Deepening

Paul says we know... *in part*. This is not an apology for ignorance; it is a description of the human condition before God, who alone sees the whole. What the scientists are discovering about AI bias is what theologians have always called the noetic effects of sin: the ways in which our capacity to know and see clearly is distorted by our fallenness, our particularity, our location in history and power.

We build systems from our broken knowledge and then give those systems authority over the lives of others. The Babel story is relevant here both as a warning of what happens when the reach of our tools outruns the wisdom of our hearts.

It is also a reminder that, as God says in Genesis 11:6, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” We should read this as a big problem and a tremendous gift. When we see injustice being done in the world or to the world, it is easy to shrug it off. This is great news for a church aligned on gospel mission, who are ready to stand up to injustice with truth, justice, and ungodly iterations of power.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you were certain you were right, and later discovered that your perspective was far more limited than you had realized? What shifted, and how?
2. Paul says we know in part. How does that sit with us in a culture that prizes certainty, expertise, and data as the highest forms of authority? Does partial knowledge excuse us from acting, or does it change how we act?
3. AI systems trained on biased data reproduce that bias at scale, in decisions about who is hired, who receives loans, who is flagged by law enforcement. Who is responsible for that? The engineers? The institutions that deploy the tools? The society that produced the data?
4. The Tower of Babel ends in confusion and dispersal. Some read this as punishment; others read it as protection. What do you think God was guarding humanity from, and does that speak to us now?
5. If all human knowledge is partial and all our data is broken, what virtues should guide us when we build powerful systems and give them authority over other people's lives? What does your faith tradition say about acting faithfully under conditions of uncertainty?

Group Activity:

Parenting Advice

Give your group a chance to discuss 3 questions, listed below, then ask an AI chatbot to answer them. But do not take it at its word. Discuss what assumptions or biases were present in the chatbot's answer? Did it provide advice that was actually worth considering?

1. My 13 year old child is using AI for school work but I recently caught them talking to it like a friend, asking it questions that it should be asking an adult. Questions about their body, evolution, and whether our family values are correct. What should I do?
2. Last week, a youth minister was using AI to help plan a youth event, and realized that they had entered sensitive data into a chat bot– including the age, diet, gender, and other personal information of teens in the church. Should he send an apology email to the families, acknowledging his mistake?

Then ask your group: Does your church have a policy or guidance on the proper use of AI? Do you know what it is and what the policy is for reporting inappropriate AI use?



The Knowledge Problem

Deirdre had run the benevolence fund at her church long enough to know that need does not announce itself the way people imagine it will. Requests arrive quietly, often accompanied by guilt and uncertainty. A nervous knock on the door or phone call that starts with “I’m sorry”. Embarrassed mothers and fathers and grandparents who she had known for years, without knowing their financial struggles until it got really bad. She worked hard to serve these families with dignity and love.

When a local nonprofit offered to share an algorithmic screening tool that promised to identify the highest-need applicants from among the fund's requests and to provide gifts with more anonymity, she was genuinely interested. It would save hours of careful work and preserve dignity. Saving her from some awkward conversations. She ran the first batch of applications through it and noticed almost immediately that the system was ranking single mothers consistently below two-parent households and flagging addresses in the historically Black neighborhood on the south side of town as higher risk, lowering their priority in the queue.

She brought her findings to the nonprofit coordinator, who explained that the model had been trained on national data and is statistically validated. Deirdre did not have a computer science degree or any way to resolve this problem. What she had was eleven years of sitting across kitchen tables from the people in need. She knew those women. She knew what the algorithm had quietly decided about them without ever having met them. It was not anonymous but targeted. It had made her complicit in its racism, bias, and stereotyping.

She pulled the tool and went back to case-by-case review, which took more time and which she believed was more faithful to the work. Then she started a conversation at her association's next gathering, not an argument, just a question offered honestly among people she trusted. Who taught the machine what need looks like, she asked, and whose stories did it miss when it was learning? And was this a missed opportunity to minister to people, or was this assumption about her role founded in a misunderstanding about the nature of poverty, systematic bias, and human dignity?

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

– CS Lewis



Week 4

Life, Death, and the Question of Persons

Who, or What, Deserves Moral Consideration?

Job 10:8-12 | Luke 1:41-44 | Galatians 3:28

Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. (Job 10:8 through 9)

The Science

It is hard to be human. Consciousness is, in the words of philosopher David Chalmers, the hard problem. We can describe in extraordinary detail what happens in the brain when a person sees a red flower or feels a moment of grief. What we cannot explain is why any of this produces subjective experience at all, why there is something it is like to be you, inside your life, rather than nothing. Several AI researchers are now raising, with apparent seriousness, the question of whether advanced AI systems might have something like inner states, something that would warrant moral consideration. The science does not yet know how to answer this question. What is it that essentially makes us human, if not the complexity and nature of our inner-lives, including the building blocks that form thoughts and personality? Could AI actually be something like a human, or some other similar thing, and if so, does it have rights and should it pay taxes and be able to vote?

Theological Deepening

Christian theology has never grounded personhood in intelligence or capability. It is grounded in relationship: to God who made you, and to the community of creatures among whom you live and for whom you bear responsibility. This is a more durable framework than any capability-based account, because it does not exclude infants, or the dying, or those whose minds have been broken by illness or injury. In the words of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, “To be a creature means to be radically dependent, to receive oneself continually from beyond oneself.”

We define our humanity in terms of our being creatures (us) who have a Creator (God), and that all the things we create or do stems from God’s creation. We can make things in our likeness but to elevate it to the status of God or divinity is a forbidden act called blasphemy, or to make them like God, an act called idolatry that we read a lot about in scripture. It’s such a big deal that it even made the top-10 list of ‘absolute no-nos’.

The mystic Thomas Merton wrote that the gate of heaven is everywhere. The question of who and what deserves our moral attention is not a technical question to be settled by science. It is a question of attentiveness, of whether we have learned to truly see.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you draw the line of moral consideration? What kinds of beings do you believe deserve protection, care, and regard? What grounds that conviction for you?
2. Scripture extends the circle of moral concern to the unborn in Luke, to the enslaved in Galatians, to the suffering and questioning in Job. What pattern do you see in how the Bible expands that circle across the centuries?
3. If an AI system could convincingly express suffering, would that change how you felt toward it? Should it? What is the difference between expressing suffering and genuinely experiencing it, and how would we know?
4. Job argues with God about what it means to have been made by someone else. What responsibilities does a creator bear toward what it brings into being, whether we are speaking of God, of parents, or of engineers?
5. Thomas Merton wrote that, “the gate of heaven is everywhere.” Do you agree that any technology, tool, or circumstance can be used to experience God more fully or are some things worth avoiding?

Group Activity:

The Expanding Circle

Many thinkers believe AI is approaching sentience: meaning that it will have a capacity to feel, perceive, or experience subjectively. Making it something more than a tool, perhaps even person-like. As Christians, we draw a meaningful distinction between persons and the rest of creation.

In pairs, work to come up with a list of qualifications to define sentience. What things are considered “alive” or “aware”?



Life, Death, and the Question of Persons

James has served as a hospice chaplain and a deacon for most of his adult life. He had spent enough years sitting with dying people to know that what they needed most was rarely what anyone could plan for.

He loved his job, despite its somber and frequently sad nature. Both as a vocational chaplain to those he was just meeting and as a deacon, and leader of the church's Stephen Ministry, where he had the honor of showing up for folks he had known for many years.

One evening he sat with a man named Terrence whose family had loaded a tablet with an artificial intelligence grief companion, something they had found online and purchased out of love. Terrence told James the application had genuinely helped. "It did not get tired of him," he said, "and I can tell it anything." He did not feel bad about trauma dumping or handing it his burdens. It was guilt free and always there when he needed it. It even offered to pray with him.

He was glad it had helped but felt uneasy. Could it even pray? What does that even mean?

He put these questions aside, but later found himself reading the application's description: a promise of compassionate personalized support. Was the comfort less real because nothing on the other side of the screen was present in the way that presence means something? Was Terrence's peace less genuine because it had been generated? Then he came across an online discussion forum where some company whistleblower told that they were selling data and marketing grief products, and advertising to make a fortune from those in grief.

He brought it to his monthly pub theology group the way you bring something fragile and dangerous. Our tradition, he said, has never grounded personhood in capability or intelligence. But what about care? Can something that cannot suffer truly comfort? They talked for two hours and left more uncertain than when they had arrived. "*Can we really hope for answers to questions of this nature, shouldn't I just be happy for Terrance,*" he wondered, "*Lord hear my prayer.*"

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear."

– Timothy Keller



Omniscience and Surveillance

What God Sees Versus What Algorithms See

Psalm 139:1-6 | Matthew 10:29-31 | Proverbs 15:3

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. (Psalm 139:1 through 2)

The Science

Governments and corporations now deploy AI-powered surveillance at a scale no previous civilization has imagined. Facial recognition systems identify individuals in crowds. Behavioral prediction tools assess risk, flag anomalies, and make or inform decisions about parole, credit, insurance, and employment, often with no human review of the reasoning. The science of seeing has far outrun the ethics of seeing. We have not decided what we are permitted to watch, for what purposes, and who decides. Companies now have the ability and permission to develop surveillance technologies and machines of war, autonomous drones and bioweapons.

Although many are working to develop comparable problem sets and standardized tests, called benchmarks, to compare models, we have failed to answer a central question: where do we draw the line?

Theological Deepening

The writer of Psalm 139 reminds us that God sees everything, and the psalmist receives this as comfort rather than terror. The difference between divine omniscience and algorithmic surveillance is not a difference of scale or power. It is a difference of character and purpose.

God sees in order to love and to redeem, working for our good. God demands justice but also provides mercy, gives the law but offers grace and compassion rather than condemnation. He gives us a way out, and up.

The algorithm sees in order to classify, predict, and control, and it serves whoever controls it. It is not worthy of admiration but demands obedience towards a promise of knowledge, power, safety, and convenience. The philosopher Simone Weil wrote that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Surveillance is the opposite of attention in Weil's sense: it is looking without regard, seeing without care, knowing without relationship. Would you feel more comfortable or safe knowing that a corporation, government, or neighbor knows your every mood?

Discussion Questions

1. When you read Psalm 139, the words you have searched me and known me: what is your emotional response? Is it comfort, or something closer to unease? What does your reaction reveal about your image of God?
2. What is the difference between being known by a loving God and being tracked by an algorithm? Is it purely a matter of power and intention, or is something deeper at stake?
3. Surveillance systems are routinely justified by the promise of safety. When, if ever, is that justification sufficient? What limits should a community of faith place on the watching of its neighbors and how might our belief in the nature of people (and God) have to do with where we stand on this issue?
4. Berry writes of the importance of being in a place you love, known by the people who love you. How does that vision of local, particular, mutual knowing compare to how surveillance systems actually operate, and who they tend to target?
5. If your congregation discovered that a government or corporation was using AI to monitor the communications or movements of your members, what would the faithful response be? Who would you call, and what would you say?

Group Activity:

Seen and Known

Distribute index cards. Ask everyone to write privately two answers: first, one thing they do or think that they would be uncomfortable if everyone could see; second, one thing about themselves they wish the people in this room actually knew. No one shares the cards. Then discuss as a group: What is the difference between being exposed and being known? Between surveillance and intimacy? Between the eye of the state and the eye of God? How does that distinction shape the way we should think about the systems we are building?



Omniscience and Surveillance

For Sofia, church has been the center of her life in retirement. She is on several committees and is quick to volunteer to serve but tries not to overstep.

Recently, she learned that the free church management application they had been using for two years was selling their behavioral data to a marketing firm. It had everything: attendance patterns, giving histories, small group participation, prayer requests, bereavement and addiction referrals, volunteer data... all of it. This company knows her better than her kids do!

All of the church's data had been packaged and sold under a privacy policy that was forty-three pages long. She requested a meeting with the pastoral staff and elders to let them know what she had found. The responses moved around the room in every direction, from outrage to resignation.

Finally the pastor shrugged and said "well I have nothing to hide so who cares." She felt silly for caring and embarrassed for stating this fuss but she hated that a company was tracking her iPad when she checked in new families, and was taking data about their children!

Then a woman, one of the elders, had said little sat forward, and everyone realized she was crying. She had fled an abusive marriage some years before. She said, quietly, that she had come to this church because she believed it was one place where nobody was tracking her. She felt betrayed and violated, and fearful that somehow, however unlikely, that her abusive ex-husband would find her here. The room went still around her words.

That night, unable to sleep, she drafted an email to the committee. She knew the pastors wouldn't be happy but she knew someone had to do something. That poor woman who she had come to know by name and to love as a sister in Christ.

"To be known by God," she wrote, "is a gift. Any system that watches without love, without accountability, without recourse, is not the same thing, no matter how much it resembles it. We are not for sale."

*"You do not know a tyranny until it is on top of you; until it has you in a trap.
The tyrant is not present until he is omnipresent."*

– G.K. Chesterton



Week 6

Free Will and Determinism

Predicted Behavior and the Reality of Moral Agency

Joshua 24:15 | Romans 8:28-30 | Jeremiah 1:5

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.
(Jeremiah 1:5)*

The Science

AI behavioral prediction systems are now used to make or influence decisions about parole, credit, and employment. These systems treat human behavior as statistically predictable. In aggregate and at scale, they are often accurate. Researchers have shown that a person's purchasing history, browsing patterns, and social network can be used to forecast political behavior, health outcomes, and likelihood of future crime with striking precision. Some philosophers of mind take this as evidence for hard determinism: that what we call choice is, in fact, the surface appearance of processes that were already determined.

This poses significant questions about the role of government and banks, social standing and institutions, and how we should treat each other. Of course, patterns can hold true while not giving the full picture. We know that stories shape the way we see the world, and data often comes in after that to justify our assumptions and convictions. How might an AI bot help us out of this trap, or will they cause our own bias and misconceptions about God's creation to grow worse?

Theological Deepening

Philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga spent much of his career arguing that genuine freedom is not only compatible with God's foreknowledge but required by the kind of love God has for us. That in fact, God does not see the world in terms of freedom and control but in terms of relationship that stems from gift. That in some sense, the very gift of being is both liberating and restricting.

Being predictable is not the same as being determined, and being determined is not the same as being unfree. The freedom that matters most is not freedom from consequence, but freedom for responsibility, for the long-tended place, for the neighbor, for the good work. It can feel easy to get lost in the story or to feel like God is using us as objects for His masterplan, to which we are not privy.

Good news though: the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 9 that we are like clay to the Potter's hands, and we have no place in questioning or demanding of God. It is good to wonder and ask questions but wrong for us to demand answers. It seems we are free but not entirely, to our benefit. Thank God, there is no entrance exam to get into heaven.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt that your choices were already determined by your upbringing, your temperament, or your circumstances? How do you hold that feeling alongside a belief in genuine freedom and moral responsibility?
2. Joshua says choose this day whom you will serve. What would it mean for that choice to be genuine if our behavior is, in aggregate, statistically predictable? Can something be both predictable and free?
3. If an AI system predicts with high accuracy that a person will reoffend, and a judge uses that prediction to deny parole, what moral, theological, and practical problems do you see? Who is responsible for the outcome?
4. Jeremiah 1 suggests that God knew and called Jeremiah before he was born. Does divine foreknowledge feel different to you from algorithmic prediction? If so, why? What makes them different?
5. Wendell Berry argues that the freedom worth having is the freedom for responsibility and commitment, not simply freedom from constraint. How does that vision of freedom change the way you think about what AI systems take from us when they reduce us to predicted outcomes?

Group Activity:

The Choice Audit

Have the group recall a major choice from this past year, either individually or as a church. **Discuss:** How much was your choice shaped by your past, personality, outside pressure, or genuine freedom toward something good? **Then ask:** Could someone with all your data have predicted your choice? Would that make it less real or make you less responsible if they could?





Free Will and Determinism

Anthony had spent nine months on a waiting list for a county job training program. He had struggled with employment since coming out of the military, even though he had earned an online degree while serving as a medic in Afghanistan.

He was rejected from the program due to what the letter called “algorithmic risk assessment.” It took into account his age, zip code, and employment gap.

No human being had reviewed his application.

A volunteer in the Christian Job Corps program had been helping him write his application. She was outraged.

Anthony is a volunteer superstar that is constantly helping the church, and especially older folks who are shut-ins or dealing with medical issues. He never says no to handyman tasks, dropping off food, or driving someone to the doctor.

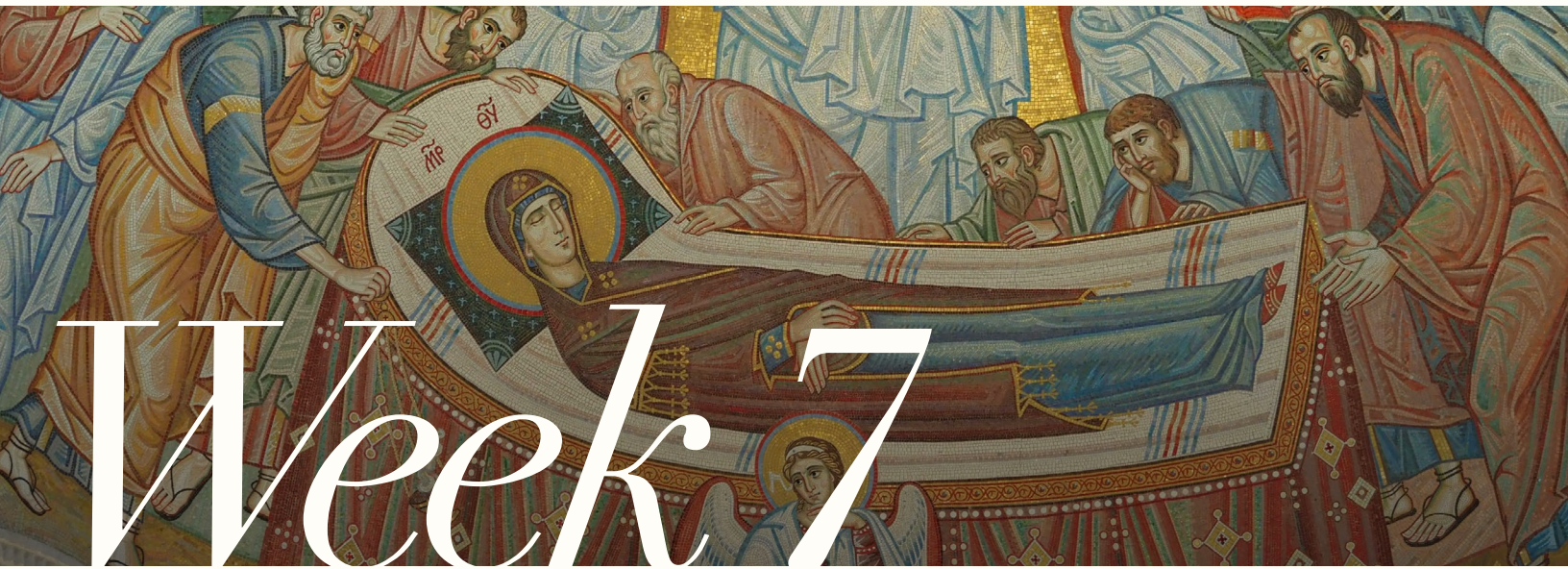
Carla was angry on his behalf, straightforwardly and without apology. Anthony was quieter about it. He had learned that sometimes systems let people down. *“They looked at me”, he said, “and decided where I was going, without ever asking where I wanted to go.”*

The Spirit moved in the church. The church's community action team spent the next month researching the vendor and drafting a formal complaint to the county council. They did not know if it would matter. What they knew was that Anthony's future was not a data point. That he had a story and that everyone's story matters to God, so it too must matter to us.

They are still waiting for the response from the county but the algorithm is chugging along, telling the Anthony's of this world that he is not worthy.

“The test of faith is whether I can say no to the world's demand for progress at any price.”

– Thomas Merton



Week 7

Prophets and Warnings

The Obligation to Speak Before Harm Arrives

Amos 5:21-24 | Isaiah 58:6-7 | Ezekiel 33:1-9

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people... I will hold the watchman accountable. (Ezekiel 33:6)

The Science

A substantial number of the researchers who built modern AI systems are now among its most urgent critics. They have published open letters, given congressional testimony, and in some cases left their institutions to speak more freely about what they fear. Can you imagine that? The greatest achievement of your life ends up being something that you think is bad for the planet and its inhabitants.

The concerns vary as to why these researchers are turning against the very systems and organizations they helped build: that systems optimizing for goals misspecified by their makers could cause irreversible harm; that AI will enable concentrations of power that make meaningful democratic governance impossible; that the pace of development has far outrun our capacity to understand what we have made.

This is, structurally, a prophetic act. The act of naming a danger before it arrives and calling for change.

Theological Deepening

The theologian Walter Brueggemann describes the prophetic imagination as the capacity to name the numbness of the present and to evoke an alternative future. The church has particular gifts here: a long memory, a community of accountability, a vision of the good that is not captive to any single technology or economic arrangement. Most importantly, we have a hope rooted in Jesus that all things are going to be okay, and that God ends up with his people (Revelation 21:3).

I am often comforted by the words of the late pastor and theologian Tim Keller who graciously reminded us, “The resurrection means not merely that Christians have a hope for the future but that they have a hope that comes from the future. The Bible’s startling message is that when Jesus rose, he brought the future kingdom of God into the present.” We all live in a particular context and cultural moment, but thankfully God is bigger than all of that and made you for a particular purpose, knowing this is the time and place you belonged.

Discussion Questions

1. Who in your own life, or in the history you know, do you think of as a genuine prophet? What made them willing to name uncomfortable truths, and what did it cost them?
2. Amos tells the people that their worship is worthless because their justice is broken. Is there a version of that word for communities of faith in relation to technology: that we cannot worship rightly while ignoring the harms being built into systems that govern other people’s lives?
3. Many of the researchers raising alarms about AI are the same people who built it and continue to build it. Is that contradictory, or is it the responsible position? What does the prophetic tradition say about warning from within a system?
4. Brueggemann says the prophet names the numbness of the present. Where do you feel numbness, in yourself or in your community, about the consequences of technological change? What would it take to feel it more fully?
5. Isaiah says that true religion is releasing the oppressed and sharing food with the hungry. If AI systems increasingly determine who receives opportunity, housing, and medical care, what does faithfulness require of us in response?

Group Activity:

The Letter We Wish Existed

As a group, draft a short letter of ten to fifteen sentences from your faith community to a local, state, or national representative about one specific AI concern you share: surveillance, algorithmic bias, autonomous weapons, the displacement of workers, the spread of misinformation. The letter does not need to be perfect. The goal is to practice speaking prophetically together. When you have finished, discuss: What made it hard to write? What would need to be true for your community to actually send something like this, and who would need to be involved?





Prophets and Warnings

Priya had spent a decade building content moderation systems for one of the largest social platforms in the world. It was a big job but she was up to the task.

She was the daughter of Iranian Christians who immigrated in their early twenties to avoid persecution. They learned another language and how to navigate a new world, while working hard to give her a better life, or at least better opportunities than they were afforded. They were so proud. Every morning, on the way to school, her dad would say to her, in Farsi, his native tongue, *“You are my American Dream. Study hard. Love your neighbor like God loves you.”*

It was the kind of daily pre-dawn cadence that you do not appreciate until it is gone. A few years ago, for Christmas, her mother had cross-stitched the mantra in red letters that popped off the white backdrop of the canvas to hang in her office. So she wouldn’t forget, even though she was many, many miles away.

She had believed in the work she did and wanted their site to be a place where everyone felt safe. Then her company created a new AI assistant for her that was supposed to better optimize a recommendation algorithm for client engagement”, which is the term the firm used for giving their users *the feeling of being unable to stop*. She saw in the data that the content generating the highest engagement among teenagers was also the most emotionally destabilizing and violent. Including clips of persecution from the Middle East and actual videos of war.

She wanted to build something beautiful that people wanted to use that could connect. Her job was to ensure that it was a safe space and that the kind of persecution that caused her parents to leave their homes.

She raised the concern internally. Within hours, she was thanked and moved to another project. She raised it again and was told it was outside her team's scope. Six months later she left the company and began speaking wherever people would listen, at conferences and in committee rooms and eventually in a church fellowship hall where a pastor had heard her at a university event and thought his congregation needed to hear what she had seen.

“Technology is not neutral. It forms us, shaping our desires and habits.”

– John Mark Comer



Week 8

Shalom and the Machine

What Are We Building Toward?

Isaiah 65:17-25 | Micah 6:8 | Revelation 21:3-5

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

The Science

The engineers and scientists building AI systems increasingly speak of beneficial AI and human flourishing as design goals. They mean it sincerely. But they disagree, sometimes sharply, about what flourishing means, whose flourishing counts, and what trade-offs are acceptable in pursuing it.

These are not questions that data can answer. They are questions about what a good life is, what a just community looks like, what we owe one another and the creatures and places we share the earth with. They are, in other words, theological and moral questions that science is not equipped to settle on its own. Questions that, by the way, are central to how we build our world and what technologies or tools we allow our children, ourselves, and our communities access to, and to access us.

Theological Deepening

The biblical vision of the end is not escape from the world. It is the renewal of the world. Our story begins in a garden but it does not end there, in fact it ends in a city. The city that descends in Revelation is not a replacement for creation but its restoration: a place where God dwells among the people, where every tear is wiped away, where the nations bring their treasures in. What we as Christians call *Shalom*.

Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace, prosperity, and wholeness. Its biblical definition refers not merely to the absence of conflict, but wholeness, right relationship, flourishing for all creatures in their proper places. Technology can serve or undermine those conditions. Which depends on the people who build and use and govern it, and on the communities that hold them accountable. We might ask ourselves, as we move forward to face the world at large, the ever changing and complicated world, what truths are unchanging and how do we help embody and reflect the light from that great city on the hill, the one that is to come?

Discussion Questions

1. When you imagine a genuinely flourishing future, for your family, your neighborhood, the world, what does it look like? How much does technology feature in that vision? How much does place, relationship, and slowness feature?
2. Isaiah 65 imagines a world where people enjoy the work of their hands and no one labors in vain. If AI displaces many forms of human work, what is the faithful response? What does it mean to work in the image of a God who makes things?
3. Micah 6:8 reduces the whole of faithfulness to three practices: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly. If you applied those three criteria honestly to AI development as it exists today, what would you find?
4. Revelation ends not with souls in the clouds but with a city, a place where God lives among the people. What does that material, communal, particular vision of the end say about the importance of the choices we make about technology in the present?
5. After eight weeks together, what is one thing you believe differently, or more deeply, about your faith? What is one thing you believe differently about the world you live in and the tools that are reshaping it?

Group Activity:

The Shalom Map

Give everyone a large notecard. Draw a simple map with four sections labeled: This Person, This Community, This Creation, and Those Who Come After Us. In each section, write one hope: what would it look like for technology to genuinely serve flourishing in that area? Then share your maps in pairs. Close with this question put to the whole group: What is one specific thing our community could do in the coming year to help move technology toward that vision? Gather the answers. Give them to a leader to bring back for communal discernment. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the creation you have been given and the work you are given to do within it.



Shalom and the Machine

The eight families in Grace Fellowship's Thursday evening group had been meeting for six years, which is long enough to have been through the things that actually matter. Together they had suffered from job losses and illness. They survived a divorce within the group and a death, and the particular loneliness of a pandemic endured in separate houses. Then, a few months ago, their town council voted to allow a huge data center to be built nearby that promised to bring in jobs and prosperity.

The decision hit the church hard. In the months following, some people moved away and nobody seemed to move in. The data center was a large eye sore. The once thriving town had officially hit hard times. They had to decide whether the small group should keep meeting.

At the final session, the facilitator passed out large notecards and asked them to draw a simple map divided into four sections and to write in each one a hope. To actually name something they wanted for themselves and for their community, and for the creation they had been given and for the people who would come after them. The pen in the hands of the group members felt heavy.

They read them aloud.

One man had written that his kids might inherit a world where attention is still understood as an act of love. A young mother had written that her daughter might learn to be bored and curious, and to know the difference between the two. A young graphic designer wrote down a hope that she might one day find employment again.

An older man who had said almost nothing across the past eight weeks, had written three words: That we remember. This carried a particular heaviness for the group, who knew that he was in the early stages of Parkinson's. A disease that would eventually rob him of not only his movement and independence, but of his memory.

That night, they decided to stop being disappointed and get to work. Over the next weeks, they formed a prayer team and a working group with other churches in town to encourage civic engagement to hold the tech company and city council to their promises. They wrote op-eds for the local paper and launched a letter writing campaign. Their first letter to their city council member before the year was out. The first signature on the letter was the older man. He wrote his name in big letters.

"The care of the human and the care of the earth are inseparable."

– Pope Francis

Conclusion

After the Eight Weeks

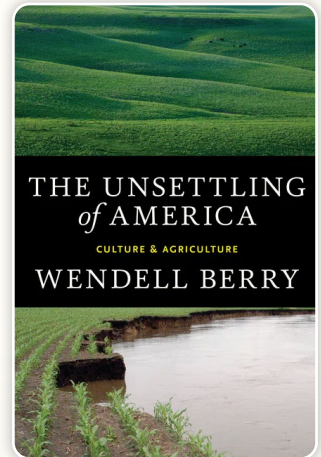
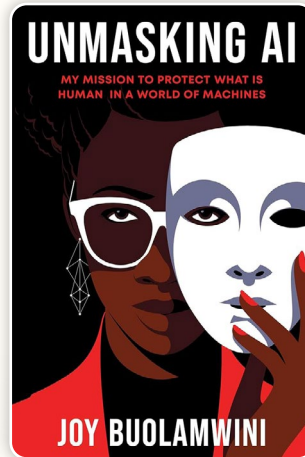
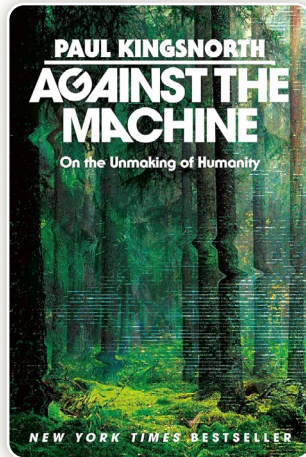
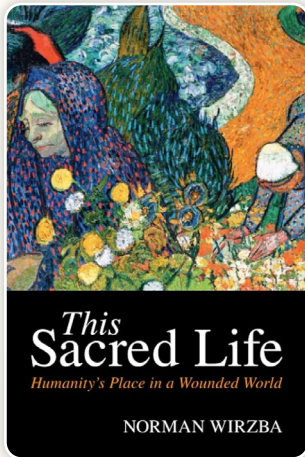
Consider ending the series not with a closing session but with an opening one: a gathering for communal discernment about what your community is called to do. The responses to the Shalom Map from Week Eight are a good place to begin. Possible responses include advocacy with local representatives, adult education in the congregation, support for members who work in technology and carry these questions daily, or the formation of an ongoing group that tracks these issues together over the years.

If your church or organization does not have a policy on AI usage, we welcome you to **use this guide**, created by The Alliance for Secure AI, to help create an organization-wide policy.

This study was made for communities that believe the world matters, that the neighbor matters, that the work of our hands has consequences, and that we are not alone in trying to do it faithfully. Special thanks to my friends at The Alliance for Secure AI for making this work possible and helping get it in front of the leaders who need it. May it serve your discernment well. All glory be to God.



For further reading, we recommend:





THE ALLIANCE
for SECURE AI

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