The Gift and Gap of AI

By

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First Lesson | Isaiah 44:12-17

The blacksmith works it with a tool over the coals, shaping it with hammers and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm by the fire!" The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!"

Second Lesson | Galatians 5:22-26

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Sermon

AI.

Had someone in this region mentioned those two letters ten years ago, the listener would have likely thought the topic was pro basketball star Allen Iverson. There's no confusion today, however, as the headlines and discussion make clear we are referring to Artificial Intelligence.

The topic of AI comes up in all kinds of settings. Schools are navigating what it means to draw from that tool while also equipping students to think, research, and write on their own. Companies are in a time of discerning how AI can strengthen their work and what that means for their employment roles.

Communities across our land debate new data centers and what those facilities will exact in terms of land and water and the demand for electricity. Elected officials and CEOS of the largest tech companies are debating what, if any, safeguards are needed.

The church, of course, is not immune from the issue. Not only is it a daily subject in the news, but we are all affected by AI even if you have never consulted ChatGPT or know what it is. I would like to begin a conversation here, bringing faith to bear upon the topic, but do so with one disclaimer. I have worked for nearly four decades studying and teaching the intersection between Scripture and life and thus feel some confidence in speaking about the nuances of human existence from our faith tradition. Yet when it comes to AI, I have very limited expertise.

I have used the tool in planning vacations and have been happy with the results. I have seen its summary of emails received before opening them and suggested replies, but don't pretend to understand how any of it works. Thus, in anticipation of this morning, I have explored a variety of sources—online articles, podcasts, and books. Even so, there is far more about AI that I don't know and thus ask in advance for your grace and helpful corrections as we begin.

Next Sunday, we will ponder the two paths forward mentioned most often for AI and reflect upon those options from a faith perspective. Today, I'd like to start the conversation about AI by pondering its gifts and its shortcomings. Two sermons will not exhaust the topic, of course, and it's possible that anything I say this morning will be out-of-date by 11 a.m. I expect that in the months to come there will be other opportunities for us to learn and discuss the issue together, too. Yet as one who firmly believes that God's word speaks to the fullness of life, it seems time for us to begin the conversation here.

In August, the General Assembly of our denomination approved a document called "The Algorithm and the Almighty: Navigating Artificial Intelligence Through a Reformed Lens." If you have not seen it, I highly recommend it, as it offers a helpful history, names the theological issues at stake with AI, and provides an ethical framework for moving ahead. In that document, one also finds two

definitions: "Artificial intelligence (AI) is a computational system that behaves in ways that we traditionally associate with human intelligence. Generative AI refers to the use of large language models that employ probabilistic algorithms to generate text, audio, and visual content in forms that are coherent, contextually responsive, and strikingly humanlike. 1091-PLW.ACSWP-Social Witness Policy Design and Distribution-Artificial Intelligence AI.pdf In other words, AI is a tool that mimics human behavior. It is a powerful tool, but one with clear shortcomings. Our OT lesson makes clear that this has always been true of things we humans make.

Just prior to our reading, God reminds his audience that there are no other gods. In a land where the Israelites heard of all kinds of false deities from locals, God says, "I am the first, and I am the last; besides me there is no god," and then tells of how humans often ignore that truth.

As an example, God describes a carpenter with a piece of wood who "stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes and marks it with a compass." What does the carpenter make? Some kind of object in human form that he sets up in a shrine. Such an act alone wasn't problematic. The American landscape is filled with statues and memorials to great leaders from the past. Yet God goes on to talk of when it becomes an issue. "Half of it he burns in the fires and over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah, I am warmed by the fire!' The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Save me, for you are my god!'"

In the context of our discussion, the wood is an analogy for AI, and just as wood has all kinds of wonderful uses, there have been amazing gifts to emerge from this technology. Among other things, AI allows one to research a topic quickly from an incredibly vast number of sources. It has led to the development of new medicines and can read medical test results with accuracy. It is helping the FAA make air travel safer and can be a kind of personal assistant at home. Judges can draw from predictive algorithms in deciding who is safe to release from prison early, while AI can also help us decide what books to read and movies to see based on our own preferences.

BMPC has begun to experience some of its benefits. Any of you who have seen the social media post highlighting the most recent worship service are familiar with a photo of that day's preacher and a four-line synopsis of the sermon. The photo is taken from the livestream, but the summary is generated by AI. Thus, the post in a few days will be an AI summary of a sermon about AI. Should be interesting! There are two new resources in our children's ministry that help little ones anticipate what will happen when they come forward for the children's moment or attend Sunday School. The artwork is AI-generated sketches from photos.

On the Sunday after our nation marked its 250th birthday, I had drawn from AI to help me select the Scripture for the morning. I had struggled to find the right text, so one day in June I typed a question into Microsoft Copilot asking, "What Biblical text speaks about a nation celebrating its past, lamenting its mistakes, and committing to a faithful future?" AI suggested several passages, including the one from Nehemiah that became my primary preaching text.

I was also having trouble finding a Prayer of Confession that seemed appropriate for the day, so I typed "Find me a Presbyterian prayer of confession appropriate for the Fourth of July." It came up with one that I modified for our purpose. Since I typically cite the source for anything in the liturgy, I then asked where the prayer had come from, and it answered, "I wrote it." And the sermon that morning? For good or for ill, it was all me!

AI is a tool; an incredibly powerful one, but it is only a tool. Yet just as God revealed with his fictional carpenter from the past, we humans have always been tempted to make idols of things that are not God. We are quite adept at making gods of career and wealth, looks, youth sports, and more. AI could tempt us in that way, too, if we remain unaware of its gaps.

Shannon Vallor is a professor at the University of Edinburgh whose specialty is the Ethics of Data and Artificial Intelligence. Two years ago, she authored a book called The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking. While one might wonder if a book published in 2024 can speak accurately about a field changing by the minute, I think her critique

remains valid. Her premise is that AI reflects back the data it is given. It's a mirror of the human experience, but just as a bathroom mirror does not fully capture the nature of the one whose image is reflected in it, so AI does not fully demonstrate humanity. "An AI mirror is not a mind," she wrote, "It is a mathematical tool for extracting statistical patterns from past human-generated data and projecting those patterns forward into optimized predictions, selections, classifications, and compositions." (Vallor, Shannon, The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking. London: Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 38) It's a machine, yet at times AI can feel quite human.

Elon University just released poll results showing that 27% of Americans regularly use AI chatbots. A chatbot is a software application like OpenAI's ChatGPT that simulates human conversation. It interacts with us via text or voice, answering questions and offering responses that can feel quite human. Perhaps you have encountered a chatbot when calling customer service. A recent article in The Washington Post provided more details.

It cited "Alex Suarez, a 74-year old retired psychologist, [who]had long been skeptical of artificial intelligence. But when she heard an owl call late at night a couple of years ago, she asked a chatbot [some question]. Its answer was rich and complete. "I was completely floored," said Suarez. Now she discusses art and literature with chatbots and records her dreams with AI, sometimes asking for help analyzing them. "I can speak like I'm speaking to you," she told a journalist. Almost 40 percent of adults under the age of 50 reported using AI in that way, making them more than twice as likely as their elders to be what Elon researchers call "AI companion users." Nearly a third said they consider the chatbot to be a friend.

Scott Criqui, a 45-year-old human resources executive in Kansas City, uses AI for something he calls a "thought partner" to work through challenges at work and make career decisions. By uploading a statement of his values and results from personality assessments, he has created a kind of personal coach. Yet Criqui wonders if he sometimes relies on AI too much, rather than reaching out to human friends and workers. "Am I isolating myself unintentionally?" he

wondered. "I can go and talk to other humans. I had to remind myself to do that." (De Vynck, Gerrit and Jeremy B. Merrill "27% of Americans Turn to chatbots for personal, social, emotional queries," The Washington Post, September 2, 2026)

AI is a human-made tool. One with amazing possibilities, but clear gaps.

Professor Vallor helpfully names that distinction: "Through the lens of recorded data, the AI mirror can know ever finer-grained details of our behaviors, but nothing of our motives. It can know the thoughts we speak, but not those we hold to ourselves, or those we quietly pass to one another in silent glances. It can detect our smiles and grimaces, but not the true sentiments that animate them. It can find in a nanosecond the song that speaks to me, but nothing of what it says. AI mirrors primarily tell humans stories of movement, speech, transaction, and consumption. These are important stories to tell, and we can learn much from studying them in the AI mirror. But humans are far more than speakers, travelers, and consumers." (Vallor, p. 58)

The Apostle Paul put it this way. "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Human beings in their best moments embody such traits. AI for all its power does not and likely never will.