Connectivity Issues

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NRSVUE)
Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. **10** For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. **11** Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? **12** And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Plastic plants. Knock-off brands. Imitation bacon. Artificial flavors or colors. When it comes to the things we use every day, we much prefer what is real over what is fake. But when it comes to information and ideas, the lines are becoming more blurred. We've titled this worship series "Get Real – Faith in an AI World." But in our world, how good are we at differentiating between what is real and what is not?

Here are two short poems. One of them was written by William Blake around the turn of the 19th century in England, the other written by AI mimicking the style of William Blake.

> Cruelty has a Human Heart
> And Jealousy a Human Face
> Terror the Human Form Divine
> And Secrecy, the Human Dress
>
> The Human Dress, is forged Iron
> The Human Form, a fiery Forge.
> The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd
> The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge.
>
> *Man kindles stars within his breast,*
> *Yet walks beneath a darkened sky;*
> *He builds a cage, then calls it rest,*
> *And asks the wild heart why.*
>
> *Yet through the smoke a vision gleams—*
> *One flame in every soul:*
> *When love unites our broken dreams,*
> *The human heart is whole.*

Perhaps if you have studied Blake's poetry, you might have recognized the first one, titled "A Divine Image." Or you might have detected something in his style or specific word use that identified it as authentically Blake. But if you just came across either poem online, would you be able to tell which was genuinely written by him and which was written by a machine?

Or an example from the news. The NFL begins its season this week, so here are two stories involving professional football. Can you identify which is real and which is fake?

A 35-year-old man named Daejon Love was arrested after passing himself off as a player for the San Francisco 49ers. He and an accomplice are alleged to have run a multi-state romance and investment scam that stole $1.3 million from 26 women.[1]

A 34-year-old Ohio man named Michael Sanders was arrested in June on multiple charges. Sanders allegedly used customized team merchandise and counterfeit credentials to pass himself off as a reserve defensive back for the Cleveland Browns in order to gain access to charity events and VIP parties.

If you guessed that the first story was real and the second was fake generated by AI, you are correct. But both stories include a specific name and enough details to seem plausible. It's not so simple to determine which is legitimate and which is made up.

Of course, identifying poetry and discerning truth between two bizarre stories involving professional sports aren't especially consequential. But what if what you read had to do with your bank account, or a political candidate, or a controversial event in your community?

AI has gotten quite adept at creating text. But how does it do with more sophisticated media? Here are two images. Can you tell which one is real and which one is AI generated?

https://elearn.eb.com/real-vs-ai-images/ (Brittanica Education – art project, space shuttle).

If AI can create the fakes, surely it can identify them, too, right? Not very well. Even AI detectors get it wrong an alarming percentage of the time.[2]

Image generation is becoming much more sophisticated. And the race to create more lifelike, realistic images is heating up. In July, Meta, the parent company of social media giants Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, launched Muse Image, its AI image generating tool. Muse Image promises to allow users to create AI photos similar to those they would normally post, including vacation selfies from a beach or a reel from a photo booth.[3] Don't think your vacation picture is social media-worthy? Just let AI enhance it. Or stay at home and have AI create an image of you in an exotic location and post it from your sofa. Almost like being there, right?

Of course, AI has been generating images on other platforms for years, and those photos can be used innocuously for fun, as a shortcut for business presentations, or as a deception to make people believe something that isn't true. Likewise, AI-generated video is gaining ground. As with photos, early AI videos were clumsy and rudimentary, with awkward shapes, misplaced shadows and sounds that didn't match the visual. But as tools have become more complex and data is processed at a faster rate, video generation is becoming more sophisticated and believable – so believable, in fact, that Open-AI banned the use of ChatGPT by lobbyists and politicians during campaign season. Unfortunately, that ban has been as difficult to enforce as it sounds. And even if Open-AI's efforts were successful, users could simply switch to a different AI model to accomplish the same thing. This campaign season has seen a number of AI generated videos used online and in television ads, notably in campaigns for governor of New York and mayor of Los Angeles. Representative Thomas Massie insisted that fake AI videos depicting him with Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilyan Omar contributed to his loss in the GOP primary this spring.

The same technology used to deceive voters is being used to commit cyberfraud. It only takes three seconds of a recorded voice for AI agents to replicate that voice and use it to make phone calls and carry on conversations.[4] Our cybersecurity team at Church of the Saviour has trained us to do what many of you at major corporations or institutions do, as well – verify either by calling back the person who is calling you or, better yet, go to them in person to make sure it's actually them. "Seeing is believing" is no longer true; neither is hearing.

Among the more disturbing ways AI technology is being used is deepfake pornography. AI tools can be used to transform existing images of people into pornographic images and video. And those videos overwhelmingly target young women and girls without their consent.

As we discussed last week, the Bible doesn't address artificial intelligence directly. But that doesn't mean that the Bible is silent about the issues AI raises. Psalm 115 reads:

4 Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of men's hands.
5 They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
6 They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
7 They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
8 Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.

The very same things apply to AI, though in this case, we would reverse the pairings: *they speak, but do not have mouths; they see, but do not have eyes; they hear, but do not have ears.* The thing about idols is that they do not, in themselves, have power. Their power comes from the trust we place in them.

You likely have encountered chatbots when contacting customer service online or over the phone. While chatbots can be infuriating and limited in their capacity, they are becoming more responsive and reliable. That's because they are programmed to learn from other AI agents and previous conversations. They're taught to interact politely and engender trust. And they constantly adapt, drawing from direct interactions and near limitless available data. It's the same technology used in virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa, or by saying, "Hey, Google."

But beyond giving you the weather forecast, answering your sports trivia question, or even telling you a joke, online chatbots can be highly interactive. You can carry on lengthy and detailed conversations with an AI agent that feels and sounds completely human. And, in fact, a number of people are turning to chatbots for companionship, especially adolescents. Many even turn there for romantic relationships.[5] There are some discernable advantages to an AI companion: they don't make us wait, they never judge us, they ask nothing in return, and they never break our hearts. But those may be the very experiences we need to help us learn and grow in our capacity to form trusting and lasting relationships.

What people seek from AI conversations can be more than just companionship. A study published this summer by the Rand Corporation found that one in five adolescents and young adults use AI chatbots for mental health advice.[6] Again, there are some advantages to this: the conversation can be anonymous, there is none of the stigma associated with seeing a therapist, and in most cases, it is free. But without careful regulation, it is also highly dangerous. AI agents cannot respond in the way a trained psychologist can. Without regulation and careful monitoring, AI interactions can worsen mental health conditions. There have even been several reported and documented incidents of young people taking their own lives after receiving poor counsel from AI chatbots. In some cases, the bots encouraged them to do so.[7] [8]

Former Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy identified loneliness as an epidemic. One in two adults in the United States reported feeling isolated, invisible, or insignificant.[9] Turning to an AI companion or just a conversation partner could be helpful – someone, or rather, some*thing* – that will listen and help us process our feelings. On the surface, they may even seem initially more reliable than a human friend – they don't come with emotional baggage, they don't betray or abandon, they always listen. But given the information we have just considered, how much can AI be trusted? What happens to the information shared with a chatbot? Who has access to it? Who benefits from it? And whose interests do they represent?

I mentioned last week that Open-AI just released the newest version of their AI platform, GPT6-Astra. Jensen Huang, the CEO of Nvidia, said this week that Astra signals the arrival of AGI, General Artificial Intelligence, which is defined as "a system that can match human intelligence to perform essentially any intellectual task a human can." Nevertheless, general AI is *not* human. As AI becomes more powerful and more lifelike, we need to remember that it is a tool and it should be treated as such. I should no more seek love and acceptance from an AI agent than I would from a hammer, even if that hammer could speak to me and tell me things that it thinks I want to hear.

Carey Nieuwhof, pastor and author, notes that for centuries, content was scarce and community was plentiful. Today, that equation has been flipped. In the digital information age, content is everywhere – the internet, social media, blogs, viral videos, podcasts, you name it. But community, genuine community, is scarce. Part of the role of congregations like ours is to create opportunities for community, spaces where real human interaction takes place, where we can relate to one another and wrestle with life's issues – including AI and its challenges and opportunities – so that we can be stronger and healthier together. Of all the relationships we form, the most important is the relationship we have with God. Our purpose is to grow deeper in faith and pursue God's hope for every life. Not artificial hope. *Real hope.*

The writer of Ecclesiastes urges us to consider how essential human relationships are. If one falls, the other is there to help. If one is cold, the other is there to keep them warm. Alone, we are vulnerable; together, we are safe. But then he adds, "a threefold cord is not easily broken." After identifying the benefits of pairs, he introduces a third strand.

Perhaps the writer is only saying, "the more, the merrier," that if two are good, three are better. But I think the message is deeper than that. The third strand isn't just another person. We have an innate need for God. AI relationships are private, or they seem to be. Human relationships bring us into community. And when human relationships are formed by and held in communion with God, the result is far stronger.

We are living in an extraordinary time. With advancements in AI, we have greater capacities than we have ever had before. But let us use those capacities not to become further detached from reality or one another, but to help us grow and advance in pursuit of God's hope. Pursue what is real and lasting. Don't settle for an imitation. Amen.