

Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



AI and Digital Mission

Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.
(Ecclesiastes 11:6)

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Cover image: Artist Jake Kiley is a missionary with a focus on visual art serving in Japan. He illustrated the cover using a drawing tablet and the digital software FireAlpaca. The illustration portrays a robotic assistant helping a farmer to spread seed. Jake hopes this artwork encourages meaningful dialogue about the potential use of AI to help spread the seeds of the gospel.

Photo credits: Roddy Mackay (29, 30, 32, 33), Andrew Philip (34).

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Editorial

Walter McConnell

AI. Like the “thing” in a science-fiction movie, it is with us and we can’t escape it. While some will shrink away from it in fear, others will want to jump on its back to harness its powers for their own ends. Neither reaction is particularly helpful. AI is simply a technology—like writing, television, and nuclear energy—that can be used for good or evil. And like the other technologies mentioned, it impacts our lives in many ways. It guides facial recognition, translates documents, and steers our web searches. And as I discovered when I recently rented a car, it can steer an automobile so it stays within the road lanes and slow it down if you are getting too close to the car in front of you. Though its influence is really inescapable, we need to consider how to use it for gospel proclamation and church equipping. This issue is a start in that direction though it will not answer every question and more will emerge as this technology continues to develop.

Our first article addresses some of the basic questions people will have about AI. It begins with Ray Dai’s explanation of what it is, how it developed, what it is used for today, and how it may be used in the future. After addressing some basic concerns that most readers will have, he raises others that many will not have considered, and reflects theologically on how AI can impact our understanding of the nature of humanity and technology, both positively and negatively. He then demonstrates how it can be used (and abused) in mission settings and concludes by suggesting ways in which Christian workers might use the technology. Many will find Ray’s introduction to be just what they need to help them make sense of a new technology that can be both exciting and scary.

Anyone who considers the use of AI (or any other technology) in mission should ask some deep and relevant ethical questions. Asher Isaac’s article does this in a simple and straightforward manner. Three

special issues are set out before us: (1) the nature of the gospel preached by AI, (2) the way AI can help us engage people in their cultural settings, and (3) the way it can help us establish indigenous churches. The article concludes by rightly reporting that “AI can assist in this process [of spreading the gospel], but it cannot replace the human touch and the work of the Holy Spirit.” Let us never forget that.

The issues this article opens up moved us to hold a conversation to discuss it more deeply. I therefore ask Ray Dai and Martin P what they think and feel about the article and how they would encourage readers to respond. We also consider ways in which AI can be used in mission today. We urge readers to read this conversation along with the ethics article as they are, in many ways, inseparable from one another.

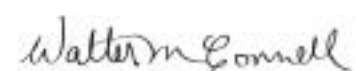
Martin P’s article engages the subject from a theological and philosophical perspective. He helps us to think through issues involved in the development of AI and robotics that could potentially impact our gospel ministry by considering three main themes: (1) the ways technology and the biblical story impact our thinking about the human body, (2) the ways advances in AI and robotics might change the way we think about relationships with those who are vulnerable, and (3) the ways in which generative AI and the algorithms behind it might help or hinder our growth in knowledge and the access people may have to the gospel.

The article “Mission in a Digital Age” highlights the reality that, whether we like it or not, people are spending more and more time accessing digital devices. Though people may not be as accessible in some more traditional ways, Christians who are willing to knock on digital doors may find a ready opening. A model is introduced to show us how digital media can be used to sow gospel seeds as foreign and local believers partner to produce and broadcast social media advertisements designed to show that the Christian

message speaks into common life issues. Interested people who respond to these advertisements receive replies from Christian workers and are given the opportunity to meet someone face to face for deeper conversations and to build relationships. Many who join this ministry report that they have never had deeper conversations about the gospel. See if you might like to join them.

Taking the discussion forward from the technology to some of its users, Scott Brown focuses on Generation Z, the people born from about 1995–2010. His overall hypothesis is that “Digital Technology as a cultural good has influenced and shaped the way Generation Z engages in communication, relationship, and community.” He develops this to show that if we are to reach this “digitally connected generation” with the gospel and help them see their place in mission, we will need to engage them in their digital world. Are we ready for this? Read Brown’s paper to find some ways forward.

Our final paper goes back to an age long before AI or other digital technology were even dreamed of. In it, Xue Jun Xuan and Nara introduce us to James Edgar, who served on the borderlands of Tibet and Sichuan for thirty-two years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Edgar engaged in a wide-ranging literary ministry, taking Bibles and other literature to market towns, villages, and lamaseries to introduce people to the Christian message. His “unyielding curiosity” led him to publish 184 different articles and books, writing on topics ranging from geography and culture to a *Jahrung-Tibetan Dictionary*. May his exploits and faith encourage you to do something out of the ordinary so that the gospel may spread to people who would not hear it otherwise.



Editor, *Mission Round Table*

Artificial Intelligence: Evaluating the Rewards and Risks

Ray Dai



Ray was born and raised in China before migrating to the United States at fourteen. He studied computer science and then later obtained a graduate certificate from Dallas Theological Seminary. He worked in church planting among a people group in East Asia for twelve years. Now he serves as the International Facilitator of Media for Movements. He and his family live in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

1. Introduction

Is AI a tool to increase our ability to fulfill the Great Commission or a tool that degrades what it means to be human and serves in humanity's rebellion against God?

This once-niche word favored mainly by computer scientists and Sci-Fi movie fans became the most notable word of 2023.¹ It has entered our everyday consciousness and its influence is growing daily. This article is written to introduce AI to missionary practitioners and to discuss various implications of both using and not using this technology.

2. What is AI?

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is the technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities.²

AI started out as an academic discipline in the 1950s.³ During most of the ensuing seventy years, it was nothing more than a dream due to limited computing power and lack of data. However, the advent of the internet has meant that more data is now available for computers to access. Computing power has also increased over the years while the costs have gone down.

Public awareness of AI has changed radically since the arrival of Large Language Model (LLM)-based AIs, such as ChatGPT that was launched on 30 November 2022. In just two months, ChatGPT gained over 100 million users to become “the fastest-growing consumer software application in history.”⁴

LLMs work by first analyzing an enormous amount of data. Using statistical models and trial and error, they have become increasingly good at understanding patterns and can “generate new content.”⁵ Because they are trained on human

intelligence, their outcomes appear intelligent most of the time.

LLM is only one facet of AI, albeit the most noticeable today. Because of its ability to analyze and make sense of enormous amounts of data, AI can work “behind the scenes” in many areas. Examples include:

- Analyzing business data.
- Helping with medical research and treatment.
- Assisting educators in personalizing learning and automating tasks.
- Providing financial services.
- Making manufacturing more efficient.⁶

3. Current usage

Whether you realize it or not, you have been using AI. If you have shopped online, used social media, talked to a voice assistant like Siri or Google, used Google Maps, or unlocked your latest smartphone with your face, you have used AI.⁷

“What AI Can Do Today?” is a website that AI powers to analyze existing AI Tools. As of July 2024, there are already 16,244 AI tools that can perform 82,195 tasks. Even more impressive is the fact that the number of tools doubled between June and August 2024!⁸

Andrew Ng, a professor at Stanford University, summarized the potential impact of AI well when he said that “Just as electricity transformed almost everything 100 years ago, today I actually have a hard time thinking of an industry that I don’t think AI will transform in the next several years.”⁹

3.1. AI generators

Through training on billions of items, AI gained the ability to generate text, image, audio, and even video based on what a user says. The more specific these “prompts” are, the better. For example, I told ChatGPT to “generate an image of AI apocalypse. I wanted to illustrate the



Fig. 1 “Generate an image of AI apocalypse. I wanted to illustrate the stereotype of AI destroying the world, maybe in the style of ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still,’” image generated by OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, 17 September 2024.

stereotype of AI destroying the world, maybe in the style of ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still.’” It interpreted that as “a dramatic scene depicting an AI apocalypse, with large, menacing robots and towering machines taking over a city. The setting is dark and ominous.”

The result is a bit scary! (See Fig. 1.) I followed up with the prompt: “Slightly less scary? The details of the robot’s scary face isn’t quite necessary, and maybe artistically less realistic, more of modern art?” In less than twenty seconds, the version shown in Figure 2 was generated.

As you can see, AI has the ability to generate quality text, images, and even audio. Generating video is still quite complex and not as stable.

3.2. AI for search

The invention of the Google search engine made the vast internet more navigable by evaluating which pages will most likely satisfy your query. Now, with AI, there is no longer the need to browse and assess these separate Google results. It simply gives you what it thinks is the best answer to your search, condensed and ready to go. This new way of interaction saves even more time and energy. In other words, what Google was to the internet, AI is to Google today.

As a programmer, I have searched many websites looking for answers to questions I have, and have spent an enormous

amount of time sifting through often outdated, erroneous, and opinionated answers. AI gives me an answer in seconds that is 90 percent correct. If I try it and find errors, I can even take that error back to AI and it will keep trying to get it right. From personal experience, I find that AI has made me more productive.

3.3. AI chatbots

AI chatbots are incredibly popular and have become even more so since COVID-19. Character.ai is a website that allows anyone to create or interact with

a bot based on a real or fictional person. The site receives 3.5 million visits each day. Not only is it novel for people to interact with someone from history or a favorite book, but many people use the site for mental health issues. The “Psychologist” bot has received over 78 million messages in just one year.¹⁰

3.4. Other examples

There are many benefits to using AI. With its access to and understanding of vast amounts of information, AI can work well as an assistant that attends online meetings, transcribes them, and summarizes them. AI understands data and can perform analysis. AI can be a capable sounding board during the process of idea generation. You can even ask it to take an opposing position and debate with you to help you think through your own ideas and address alternative viewpoints.

4. Future

The exact future of AI is uncertain, but its trajectory is unambiguous. It is only going to

get smarter with time. So much has changed, even during the few months of researching and writing this article. OpenAI, the leading AI company, added the ability to tailor replies based on what it remembered about the user. Next came Sora, an OpenAI text-to-video generator that is stunning in its ability to understand a user’s request and what it can generate. The latest version of ChatGPT can now intelligently interact with the user and the environment through sight, sound, and speech.

AI has already surpassed average human performance in specific areas like reading comprehension, speech, and image recognition.¹¹ This is called Artificial Narrow Intelligence or ANI. People are debating if and when Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) will become reality. That is the concept that AI will be better than humans “across a wide range of cognitive tasks.”¹²

What Sci-Fi shows like to portray and what people fear is the hypothetical Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI). At that point, AI would be more intelligent than humans in everything and could indeed think for itself.¹³ Whether or not that is even possible is still debated.

5. Concerns

Although AI has many benefits, people often focus more on its many concerns. These range from how it is used negatively to how it affects us as individuals and how it could impact humanity.



Fig. 2 “Slightly less scary? The details of the robot’s scary face isn’t quite necessary, and maybe artistically less realistic, more of modern art?” image generated by OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, 17 September 2024.

5.1. The negative usage

Some people deliberately abuse the power of AI. One example of this is deep fakes—media created with AI intentionally to impersonate someone. Superior to editing an image manually, AI can generate convincing fake images or swap the face on an existing photo convincingly in seconds! This has led to abuse and harassment as well as fake news. AI voice generation has already aided some scams by pretending to be a loved one in some kind of trouble who needs money to meet an emergency.

A number of lawsuits have been filed against multiple AI companies, questioning if they had violated copyrights during the training and building of the models. As recently as 20 August 2024, three authors sued Anthropic, a leading AI company, for using their works without permission. The *Reuters* article went on to say that this is just one of many “filed by copyright holders including visual artists, news outlets and record labels over the material used by tech companies to train their generative artificial intelligence systems.”¹⁴

Finally, there is the issue of data privacy. Many AI services are free, but operating the computers that power AI can be expensive. The phrase, “If you are not paying for it, then you are the product,”¹⁵ applies to AI. If they provide the software for free, they have to make money some other way. Then the question is: what are they doing with our information? At the minimum, AI companies will use our data for further training; at worst, they might even sell our data to third parties without our awareness, much less consent.

There are also unintended negative consequences. AI video tools are capable of generating realistic footage. However, sometimes people in the video are generated as headless or as having inhuman features. This is unintentionally



“Stained glass art style depicting a scene with a farmer and an AI robot working side by side. The farmer is engaged in creative labor, such as planting,” image generated by OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, 17 September 2024.

degrading to the human form and God’s creation. Further, is the huge environmental impact because AI relies on powerful computers that require a lot of energy. A recent study found that “generating an image using a powerful AI model takes as much energy as fully charging your smartphone!”¹⁶

5.2. How it affects us as individuals

Just as someone who uses a shovel will find that while it can speed up his digging but also cause calluses, those who use AI will discover that this technology “is never neutral, but has an embedded value system that transforms individuals and communities.”¹⁷ It is thus possible that using AI to do the hard work of thinking for us will lead to intellectual laziness and dormancy. We can ask the AI Magic 8 Ball something and receive an answer in seconds instead of trying to work out the problem ourselves. Seeking easy answers quickly can decrease our ability as thinkers.¹⁸ And whether it is correct or not, AI will always give a confident answer. This confidence could create the impression that every

AI answer is correct. Even a biased answer from AI could be disseminated worldwide as the truth and be the source of more fake news. On the positive side, AI could be a valuable assistant for someone who already has some experience in the area or knows the right questions to ask.

5.3. How it affects society

AI has already replaced jobs and will continue to eliminate jobs; more accurately, “AI will not replace you, but the person using AI will.”¹⁹ AI is a powerful multiplier for those who have learned to use it. They are more productive because of it. A recent survey shows that “66% of the business leaders wouldn’t hire someone without AI skills.”²⁰

AI can create jobs as well and help people retrain for other jobs. However, AI will cause significant disruption to many industries. Graphic design, videography, programming, legal work, research and development, and administration are just some of the jobs that will be challenged by AI. Some workers in these areas will need to learn to work more efficiently with the help of AI. Others might see their jobs completely replaced by AI and will have to retrain for other jobs.

Because AI is trained primarily on data available on the internet, it has a distinct English language bias. While AI interfaces support more and more major languages, minor languages not already represented well on the internet will likely suffer further decline as more people use English and other majority languages to interface with AI.²¹ Similarly, AI has a built-in bias toward “wealthier, Western perspectives” simply because the data already has that bias.²²

5.4. Existential questions

Lest we think intelligent robots destroying the earth are only a Hollywood trope, a recent report prepared by an AI company for the US government “states that the most advanced AI systems could, in a worst case, ‘pose an extinction-level threat to the human species.’”²³ This could be caused by bad actors using AI to cause catastrophic damages or AI itself gaining

AI has a built-in bias toward “wealthier, Western perspectives” simply because the data already has that bias.

too much power and becoming capable of intentionally or unintentionally causing harm to humanity.

While existential threats from AI are possible from a human perspective, Christians have faith in what the Bible teaches us about how the world will only end according to God's wisdom and timing. As the Lausanne Movement's report on AI reminds us, "We can find solace in the fact that God is not caught off guard by AI. He already knows all possible outcomes within his infinite wisdom."²⁴

Given these benefits and concerns about AI, how should we, as believers, live responsibly and purposefully? We must begin with a theological reflection about humanity and technology.

To examine the issue of AI theologically, we will look at the theology of humanity, the theology of technology in general, and the theology of AI specifically.

6. Theological reflections

6.1. Humanity

One of the fears of AI's rapid progress is that it will become more human-like and even surpass humans in certain areas. The question we must then consider is: "What is human?" Historically, Christians have wrestled with the question of what it means to be the image bearers of God, to have the "*imago Dei*." Although there is no consensus, according to the Lausanne report on AI, some have explained the concept in terms of the "human ability to think, to create, and to perform certain complex tasks."²⁵

There are multiple challenges with this understanding. AI can now intelligently respond to us and create or generate new content. Some would still say it is not thinking or creating because it is just a machine repeating what it has heard or learned. However, are human intelligence and creativity not also rooted in what we have learned and observed from others? AI now shares this ability to build upon what we have learned and create new things. Another problem with basing the definition of humanity on what a person can do is related to the issue of handicaps. Consider a person who is born mentally or physically less abled. Does this make them less of an image bearer?

The Lausanne report concludes: "The value and dignity of humans isn't rooted in what we do but in who we are as unique image bearers of our creator, endowed with the capacity for personal communion with the tri-personal God."²⁶ Therefore, no matter how capable technology becomes, it should never "be assigned a level of human identity, worth, dignity, or moral agency."²⁷

Our identity comes from God, and technology cannot change that.

6.2. Technology

Given our unique identity as humans, how do we define technology theologically? I owe much to John Dyer's excellent book *From the Garden to the City: The Place of Technology in the Story of God* in which he thoroughly analyzes the relationship between God, humankind, and technology.

First, we need to recognize that technology is a good gift from God that plays a significant part in the story of God's plan of redemption.²⁸ In the Bible, we have examples of God making a covering out of animal skin for Adam and Eve after their rebellion. Noah, following God's instructions, built a boat as a means of deliverance. The Apostles spread the gospel broadly and quickly along the state-of-the-art Roman roads. Modern medical technology and social media are human technological creations that have been used by God in his sovereignty to further his redemptive work.²⁹

Second, like the rest of creation, technology has been tainted and corrupted by the fall and has been used by humans in their active rebellion against God. The Tower of Babel is a stark example of humanity's attempts to use technology to live independent, self-reliant, and sinful lives away from God. Even our noblest intentions go awry. The inventors of the machine gun, dynamite, airplane, wireless, and even the atomic bomb all thought their inventions would end war, as we know it.³⁰ Even so, humanity has continued unswervingly in their assault on other image-bearers of God.

Third, with the help of AI, humanity is closer than before to the ultimate rebellion of usurping God through technology. AI, harnessing all the knowledge of the internet, has a

semblance of omniscience. The medical field, aided by AI, could see some real breakthroughs in the coming decades that will eliminate many diseases and significantly increase the human lifespan. But even if the inevitability of death remains in place, some scientists believe a "mind uploading" of our consciousness to AI is not impossible.³¹ These ideas might sound far-fetched, but considering how much progress AI has made in the last few years, the overall trajectory is clearly upward and forward.

6.3. Perspectives

While technology is a gift from God that can be seen as part of his redemptive work, it can be corrupted by our sin and often used in active rebellion against God. How then should we relate to technology?

The first philosophical way forward comes in the form of "instrumentalism," which says AI—and technology in general—is neutral. The person employing it can use it for good or evil.³² This position is not exactly true, as using a tool affects the user with intended and unintended consequences. As mentioned in the above section on Concerns, using AI could profoundly change our thinking, even if it does not hinder or stop us from thinking altogether.

The next way to consider the problem comes through "technological determinism," which says that technological progress is the unstoppable force behind societal change.³³ This approach emphasizes the inevitability of technological advancement. People can choose either to worship technology as the savior of humankind or sink into despair as technology gets out of hand and they feel powerless to change it.

The best approach is to analyze technology like AI critically and ground it in biblical truth. As Dyer says, "technology has inherent values, and humans have choice and agency."³⁴ Adopting this perspective prevents us from being blinded by technology's hidden values or consequences. It also allows us to acknowledge our part in discerning, engaging, and facilitating change in light of God's truth and purpose.

7. Missiological reflections

We should consider how AI can be used or abused in God's mission in a number of areas as listed below.

7.1. Marketplace of ideas

We do not live in a vacuum, but in a global “marketplace of ideas” where ideas—both good and bad—can be heard across the globe in seconds through the internet. If we are not in a discussion, chances are that others are there, and they are, by definition, dominating the narrative.

We do not need to use AI just because of a fear of missing out. Hudson Taylor went to where the people were and painstakingly learned to speak their language. Today, many people spend many hours a day online using AI. Twenty million people, mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, spend an average of two hours on the aforementioned Character.ai site daily.³⁵ People need answers, and they are turning to AI in the privacy and ease of their homes. Can we find a way to engage with them “where they are?”

Barna Research, in the summer of 2023, found that only 28 percent of Christians believe that AI can “do positive things in the world,” and only 22 percent believed people could use AI in some way to benefit the church.³⁶ Even so, 44 percent of Americans (60 percent of millennials and Gen Z) are more open to God than before the pandemic.³⁷ Is this not a time we should step up in God’s mission, using whatever tools are available?

You can be sure our enemy, the devil, has not been silent. False teachers and cults are luring people away with their Facebook pages and YouTube videos. AI will only magnify their impact, as creating pictures and videos will be a click away.

What should our response be? When we survey current mission work, we can get ideas on how to use AI for God’s redemptive purposes in evangelism and discipleship.

7.2. Bible translation

Although Bible translators have made significant progress in recent years, over 1,000 languages spoken by 100 million speakers still await God’s word.³⁸

An average Bible translation “takes 23 years and costs over a million dollars” to produce.³⁹ With the help of AI, a first draft can be done in less than 20 percent of the time and at half the

We do not live in a vacuum, but in a global “marketplace of ideas” where ideas—both good and bad—can be heard across the globe in seconds through the internet. If we are not in a discussion, chances are that others are there, and they are, by definition, dominating the narrative.

cost. AI tools also improve translation quality by checking for accuracy and consistency. Mother-tongue translators and the community are still integral in the revision, checking, and testing processes, but AI tools accelerate the entire process and get God’s word to people in their language sooner.

7.3. Bible.ai

The recently launched Bible.ai seeks to address the millions of people searching for answers online. While affirming that nothing supersedes the importance of learning directly from God and others, it aims to “complement these practices, providing support and guidance to individuals as they seek to deepen their relationship with God and apply biblical wisdom to their daily lives.”⁴⁰

7.4. Personalized discipleship

“Make disciples of all nations,” and not just converts—this is the core task of our mission work.

In languages with abundant discipleship material, AI can potentially produce customized discipleship material based on an individual’s spiritual condition, needs, and communication style. AI can help translate and make them available faster in languages lacking discipleship material.⁴¹

7.5. High-security contexts

In a context where security is a significant concern, AI can provide some initial answers in a safer environment for the seeker. While a seeker may not want to respond positively to Christianity in public at first, they can begin seeking answers in private through resources like Bible.ai mentioned above.

AI can also obscure the identity of believers in sensitive contexts through voice and/or facial changes or video generation. Before doing so, however,

users need to carefully consider both the positive and potentially negative consequences of adopting certain approaches. While in some cases, it is good to protect the fledgling believing community by allowing them to remain anonymous, in others, it is better that they stand up for the cause of Christ, even at the risk of identification and persecution. That is a decision local believers have to make for themselves.

7.6. Within OMF

Some OMF colleagues have already started to use AI as an integral part of their workflow. People are using AI to brainstorm and improve their communication. They use AI tools to clean up audio files, to edit videos, to generate images and voices for use in a security-sensitive context, and even to generate code for apps used in ministry.

8. How to get started

Missiological reflection has shown us that we are responsible for engaging in the marketplace of ideas, and many mission organizations are doing that by adopting AI.

The best way to start understanding AI more is to try it. If you have never used ChatGPT, instead of searching for something on Google next time, go to chatgpt.com and try it. ChatGPT may only know the latest news if you have a paid subscription, but ask it a generic question, and you might be surprised by the speed, accuracy, and thoroughness of its responses. If it is still interesting afterward, you can search for better ways to ask questions or “prompt” ChatGPT to generate even better answers. Another thing to remember is that, unlike Google search, ChatGPT has a context window, so you can ask follow-up questions like you would in a real conversation. For example, you could ask “What does the Bible say about ... ?” and then follow up the answer by saying,

“Please explain the first point in more detail,” or “Recommend some books based on what you said in point three.”

One of the best quotes I have heard about using AI is to treat AIs like a research assistant or intern.⁴² You need to be direct and clear with your requests, and you might need to double-check the results, but AI can make your job a lot easier.

9. Conclusion

I hope this brief introduction has increased your understanding of AI, its capabilities, and its benefits and concerns.

We need to educate ourselves and other believers so that we can become more knowledgeable about AI, its uses, and potential downsides. Even though there is an “inevitability around technological progress,”⁴³ Christians need to be involved in the ethics of using such tools and bring a biblical perspective to the overall AI discussions rather than shrinking back in fear. AI development will continue, with or without Christian input. We can either use AI in a God-honoring way or just let it happen in a godless, humanistic way.

I pray that we can say of AI one day that even if some of the ethos was worldly and intended for evil, “God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20). **MRT**

¹ Esther Addley, “AI Named Most Notable Word of 2023 by Collins Dictionary,” *The Guardian*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/nov/01/ai-named-most-notable-word-of-2023-by-collins-dictionary> (accessed 8 August 2024).

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³ “History of Artificial Intelligence,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_artificial_intelligence (accessed 8 August 2024).

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⁵ Mike Priest, “Large Language Models Explained,” Boost.ai, last updated 20 February 2024, <https://boost.ai/blog/llms-large-language-models/> (accessed 8 August 2024).

⁶ “What Are AI Applications?,” Google Cloud, <https://cloud.google.com/discover/ai-applications> (accessed 8 August 2024).

⁷ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 33.

For more resources
on missions and AI:
<https://bit.ly/3YEcrMN>



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The Ethics of Using AI in Christian Missions: The Gospel, Cultural Engagement, and Indigenous Churches

Asher Isaac



Asher Isaac has extensive global experience facilitating cultural connections and enhancing communication. His knowledge of multiple languages, customs, and political systems enables him to give his clients what he thinks is the best information available and guide them in their decision-making processes. He does, however, occasionally make mistakes.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing how we live and interact, offering new ways to communicate, learn, and solve problems. In Christian missions, AI brings opportunities to share the gospel with more people than ever before. However, using AI in missions also raises ethical questions. How can we use AI to spread the gospel without losing its true meaning? How can we respect different cultures when using technology? And how can we ensure that AI helps build local churches that can stand on their own? This essay will explore these questions, aiming to understand the ethical use of AI in missions.

The nature of the gospel preached through AI

The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, a message of hope, love, and salvation. It is more than just information; it's about a relationship with God that changes lives. Traditionally, sharing the gospel has involved personal interaction, where one person speaks to another, answers questions, and builds a connection. This personal touch is important because the gospel calls for a response from the heart, not just an intellectual agreement.

AI, on the other hand, is a tool that can process and deliver information. It can answer questions about Christianity, provide Bible verses, and even simulate conversation. However, AI cannot feel, believe, or express genuine love and empathy. It lacks the human touch that is often essential in sharing the gospel. When someone is struggling, a chatbot can provide a Bible verse, but it cannot offer a comforting presence, listen with empathy, or pray in a heartfelt way. The gospel is about more than

words; it's about showing God's love through actions and relationships.

There is also the concern that using AI might make the gospel seem like just another piece of information to be consumed rather than a life-changing message. The gospel is not just a set of facts to be learned; it is an invitation to a relationship with God. While AI can help people learn about the Christian faith, it cannot lead them into a personal relationship with Jesus. The work of the Holy Spirit in convicting, comforting, and transforming hearts is something that AI cannot replicate.

However, AI can be a useful tool in certain areas. It can help make Christian teachings more accessible, especially in places where there are language barriers or a lack of resources. For example, AI-powered translation tools can help people read the Bible in their own language. AI can also provide answers to common questions about Christianity, helping people learn more about the faith. But it is important to remember that these tools should support, not replace, the personal aspect of sharing the gospel.

Engaging people according to their cultural settings

One of the key principles of Christian missions is to engage with people in a way that respects their cultural background. This means understanding and honoring the traditions, values, and beliefs of the people we are trying to reach. The message of Jesus is universal, but it must be communicated in a way that makes sense within each unique culture. This process is called contextualization.

AI can help in understanding and engaging with different cultures.



“Picture a Western man in casual attire— a simple T-shirt and pants—standing near a rustic, tribal-style house constructed from natural materials like wood, bamboo, and thatch, well integrated into the tropical jungle landscape in Malaysia. Inside the house, there’s a visible laptop on a small table and a satellite dish discreetly positioned on or beside the roof, symbolizing the connection between technology and the remote environment. The man holds the laptop or interacts with the device, engaging a nearby group of indigenous people who watch with interest, in photo realism style and in old photo style,” image generated by Ideogram, 26 October 2024.

For instance, it can analyze social media, books, and other sources to identify common beliefs, values, and questions within a culture. This can help missionaries understand what people care about and how they think, which can inform how the gospel is presented. AI can also help translate materials into local languages, making

and a willingness to learn and adapt. It involves building relationships, listening to people’s stories, and understanding their joys and struggles.

There is a risk that relying too much on AI for cultural engagement could lead to a shallow or formulaic approach. If we use AI to decide how to present the

AI should be used to assist in this process, not replace it. It can provide valuable insights and tools, but the real work of cultural engagement requires human involvement. Missionaries need to be present in the culture, building relationships and learning from the people they are trying to reach. AI can support this work by providing resources and helping to overcome language barriers, but it cannot replace the human connection that is at the heart of effective ministry.

AI can analyze data and identify patterns, but it cannot fully understand the depth and complexity of human cultures. ...

Engaging with a culture requires empathy, respect, and a willingness to learn and adapt. It involves building relationships, listening to people’s stories, and understanding their joys and struggles.

The goal of establishing indigenous churches

A key aim of Christian missions is to establish indigenous churches—churches that are led and sustained by local believers. These churches are important because they can adapt to their cultural context, making the gospel relevant to their community. They can also continue to grow and spread the faith long after the missionaries have left.

the message more accessible. However, using AI to engage with cultures also has its challenges. AI can analyze data and identify patterns, but it cannot fully understand the depth and complexity of human cultures. Culture is not just a collection of facts; it is a lived experience shaped by history, relationships, and emotions. Engaging with a culture requires empathy, respect,

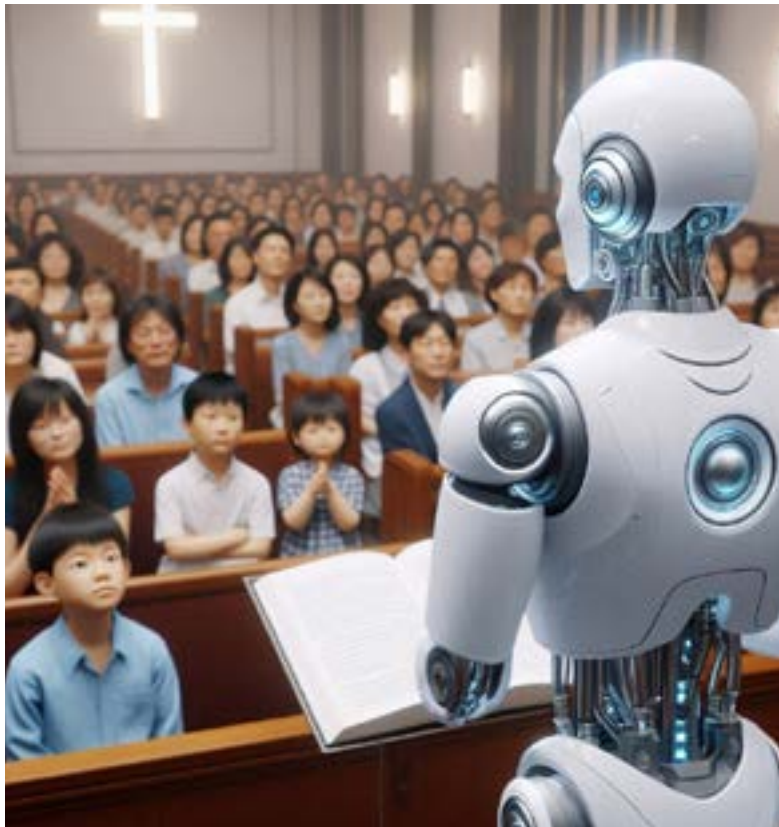
gospel without real human interaction, we may miss the deeper aspects of what makes each culture unique. True cultural engagement involves more than just presenting information in a different language or format; it involves connecting with people on a personal level, understanding their worldview, and finding ways to communicate the gospel that resonate with their experiences.

AI can support the development of indigenous churches in several ways. It can provide access to teaching and training materials in different languages, helping local leaders to grow in their faith and leadership skills. AI can also facilitate communication and provide resources for discipleship, allowing new believers to learn and grow together.

However, it is important to ensure that the use of AI does not create dependency. The goal of missions is to empower local believers, not to make them reliant on external resources. If a church becomes too dependent on AI tools or outside help, it may struggle to develop its own leaders and resources. Indigenous churches need to be self-sustaining, with the ability to teach, lead, and grow on their own.

Additionally, a church is not just an organization that provides information; it is a community of believers who support and care for one another. AI can provide educational resources, but it cannot create the kind of deep, personal relationships that are essential to the life of the church. Fellowship, worship, and mutual care are vital parts of what it means to be a church, and these cannot be replicated by a machine.

Therefore, while AI can be a helpful tool in supporting indigenous churches, it should be used in a way that encourages and empowers local leadership. It should provide resources that can be adapted and used by the local community, rather than dictating how things should be done. The focus should be on building up local believers so they can lead and sustain their own church community.



"A white plastic and aluminum robot preaching to a full church of Asian people," image generated by Microsoft Designer, 29 October 2024.

Let local people lead in how the gospel is presented in their context.

3. Empower local churches: Use AI to provide resources, but focus on empowering local believers to lead and sustain their own churches.

4. Be mindful of dependency: Ensure that AI tools are used in a way that builds self-reliance rather than dependency on external resources.

5. Stay true to the spiritual mission: Remember that the work of sharing the gospel involves more than just information; it involves the work of the Holy Spirit in transforming lives.

Finding the right balance

The use of AI in Christian missions offers many possibilities but also presents ethical challenges. It is important to use AI in a way that supports the mission while maintaining the integrity of the gospel and respecting the cultures we engage with. Here are some guiding principles:

- 1. Keep it personal:** Use AI to support human efforts, not replace them. Sharing the gospel is about building relationships and connecting on a personal level.
- 2. Respect cultures:** Use AI to learn about and respect cultural differences.

Conclusion

AI offers exciting opportunities for Christian missions, but it also requires careful and ethical use. While AI can help spread the gospel, engage with different cultures, and support local churches, it must be used in a way that respects the personal, relational, and spiritual nature of the mission. The gospel is a message of love and transformation that calls for a response from the heart. AI can assist in this process, but it cannot replace the human touch and the work of the Holy Spirit. By using AI thoughtfully and ethically, we can support the mission in a way that honors God and respects the people we seek to reach. **MRT**

It is important to ensure that the use of AI does not create dependency. The goal of missions is to empower local believers, not to make them reliant on external resources. If a church becomes too dependent on AI tools or outside help, it may struggle to develop its own leaders and resources. Indigenous churches need to be self-sustaining, with the ability to teach, lead, and grow on their own.

A Response to “The Ethics of Using AI in Christian Missions”

Walter McConnell



Walter McConnell is the editor of *Mission Round Table*. He has directed OMF International Mission Research Department for more than ten years.

WALTER: I would like to thank both Martin and Ray for joining me to discuss Asher Isaac’s paper on the ethics of using AI in mission. Could I ask you what your first impressions were after reading this paper? What did you particularly like or find helpful?

RAY: The article was well-written and articulate. I appreciated how it covered nuanced topics regarding the pros and cons of using AI in missions, presenting a fair and balanced treatment of these issues.

MARTIN: Overall, I thought it was a helpful article providing several helpful hooks to develop our engagement in AI and Christian mission. I would, however, have liked there to have been a little more critical engagement with the issue.

WALTER: I wonder how many of our readers realized that this paper is an example of what AI can generate? Even the name of the author—Asher (“happy”) and Isaac (“he laughs”)—was chosen because the initials are A.I. But since the article states things about our sharing of the gospel that at first glance look very good, it is not really a joke, is it? Ray, since you and I worked together to generate this article, could you let our readers know how we did it?

RAY: After your initial request for the free version of ChatGPT to write an article on the subject, I used the pay-for software to produce another couple of versions before we settled on the one found in this issue. The instructions were to “Write a 1200-word essay on the ethics of using AI for Christian missions, focusing on the nature of the gospel preached, the need to engage people according to their cultural settings, and the aim of establishing indigenous churches. Please try to avoid being repetitive and go deeper

with your reasoning. Finally, make the choice of words more friendly toward non-English speakers. Don’t use too many big words or complex sentences that are too long!” ChatGPT produced the essay in just a matter of seconds.

WALTER: So, this essay was entirely composed by a machine. Is that correct?

RAY: Yes.

WALTER: How do you feel about this? How do you think our readers should respond when they learn this?

RAY: I’d imagine many readers will be shocked. Some will find it interesting while others might be slightly upset because they might feel misled. That is not our intention. We are simply trying to demonstrate the capabilities of AI. It is our hope this revelation provides readers with an opportunity to consider what creativity is and where AI might help them in their work.

WALTER: And perhaps where it won’t be of help.

MARTIN: Yeah. It is the sort of thing that can often push people in one of two directions. This actually highlights one of the complexities of our cultural moment into which these technological developments are landing. More often than not, we can respond very positively or very critically, and this does not usually lead to deeper engagement with any issue. Recognising what is possible is an important first step in considering real-world application whether we lean to one side or the other.

WALTER: Many readers may have heard that the 2024 Nobel Prize for Physics went to two scientists who made some key discoveries that helped develop the kind of machine learning that led to AI. Setting aside the question of

Martin P

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Ray Dai



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whether their work should have received an award in *physics*, the fact that one of them has gone on record saying that he is concerned that the machines we are developing could possibly become smarter than we are and become impossible to control has led many to question whether he might be correct. Should reports like this worry us or what?

MARTIN: As I note in my article, I am not an alarmist. Nevertheless, when those who have developed advancements in AI are questioning the security and potential threats that it poses, we would be unwise to quickly dismiss their voice. After all, they are operating from a far more informed perspective than most of us reading this article.

WALTER: Some Christians have recently produced podcasts in which they ask an AI-generator whether there is a God or if it is more likely that the universe came about by chance or that it was designed by a creator. How do you respond to this use of the medium? Will the bot always respond with a “good Christian answer” or might a change in the material it has “learned” from or the kind of follow-up inquirers give lead to vastly different responses?

RAY: If the AI testifies about the likelihood of the claims of Christianity being true, they are just repeating what countless people have said over the centuries. If they are trained or designed to support other religious beliefs then yes, they will give different answers. There is already an AI Buddha that thousands of people have chatted with. People are looking for answers.

MARTIN: To begin with, it's not necessarily wrong to ask a bot questions like this. The difficulty comes when this is the sole or primary source of engagement with questions concerning the gospel. From what I understand, the material that has been chosen to train the AI will set the parameters for its response. This means the initial training data is a critical factor. As I mention in my article, this is a significant detail because technology is not developed in a vacuum. The same is also true for real-world implementation. Since an

algorithm will be responding in line with the data model it has learned from, it requires that model to have the correct information. This then raises the question; who determines what the correct information is?

WALTER: Did you find anything in the article that raised red flags or even question marks? Can you identify any significant areas where AI can be used in mission that were left out?

RAY: I found a couple of statements in the article that need further clarification. For instance, when the article says, “This means understanding and honoring the traditions, values, and beliefs of the people we are trying to reach,” we need to ask what kind of beliefs we are talking about. Is this an issue of worldview? Religion? Or something else? Is it possible to “honor” someone's religious beliefs while simultaneously attempting to interest them in a different one? Or is the AI-generated piece advocating some kind of hyper contextualization that is no longer true to the gospel?

Similarly, we need to ask further questions when the article says that “While AI can help people learn about the Christian faith, it cannot lead them into a personal relationship with Jesus.” Perhaps AI is being modest here. Plenty of people began their journey of faith through things like Gideon Bibles, tracts left on a bench, etc. In a very real way, AI is no different than those, in that it is a medium for the message. However, AI will be more interactive and potentially more effective than some of those media. Bible.ai is one such tool that was recently released that readers may want to investigate.

MARTIN: I completely agree with Ray on the discussion of honouring others' beliefs. It is possible for us to be respectful but not hold other beliefs on par with the gospel. However, I'd disagree with Ray a little. While I can see the crossover with tracts (which is a very good point), I can't equate them, or the answers of AI, to the Bible. The Bible is the revelation of God. Tracts and answers to questions are human reflections on revelation, not revelation itself.

Many of my questions about the paper essentially stem from the same source.

What is defined as the Christian gospel and Christian mission? What I mean is this: the AI has produced a response based on specific training data. What training data is being used? What I have read in this paper is not necessarily wrong, but it is lacking in depth and diversity. The paper is anthropocentric, prioritising “my relationship with God.” At what point does the AI step back and recognise that mission exists for the glory of God? The AI frequently talks about a relationship with God, or a life-changing message. So what? Why do I need this life-changing message? These are not necessarily the goal of the paper, however it does highlight that the AI will generate content based on what it perceives to be the most widely accepted expression of the topic under discussion. As I mention in my paper, this has the potential to negatively affect the way we learn or engage with difference. In the long run, this will most likely lead to people disengaging with difficult doctrines or nuanced discussion, neither of which are ultimately healthy for the church’s role in God’s mission.

WALTER: Your responses to the article give us some excellent guidelines to keep in mind when we read other articles prepared by AI. But let’s move beyond reflecting on something produced by AI and consider what suggestions we could make to someone who is wondering whether or how to use AI in their work (for example, AI generators, AI for search, AI chatbots, and more)? What is legitimate—ethical—and what isn’t? Are there some contexts in which it would be better to use it than others?

RAY: This is a challenging area that people will differ on. Some would object to almost any use of AI on ethical grounds, believing any kind of creative work needs to come from image-bearing humans and not a machine. Copyright issues are also a concern to many. Others will see AI as an extension of human creativity and would not find selective usage wrong. I think authenticity is a big factor here. If you generate anything with AI while giving the impression that it was a product of human labor, you are being dishonest. This article is an exception, because we are trying to make a point about AI and we have revealed the truth to you!

If you decide you want to use AI, you can first try using AI in addition to a normal search engine. Then you can incorporate AI into what you already do. Are you a writer? You can ask AI to give you some ideas, proofread your draft, etc. I personally wouldn’t use AI to generate spiritual material like a sermon, and then use it as produced.

MARTIN: There are definitely ways that AI can help with administrative tasks like reading data sets to extrapolate information. For example, those who are learning language in their new host context could use AI to provide help in reviewing. It is also possible that certain uses of AI for translation projects may be helpful. However, having recently spoken to a linguist in our context, this will still have its limitations due to the AI’s dependence on specific data sets.

I would like to echo a concern that Ray mentions. I would not use AI to prepare a sermon. Firstly, I think it misses the point. The sermon is not a task that we need to get done, but a moment in time in which the living God chooses to meet with his people through the preached word. Secondly, the preacher is also going through transformation as a result of reflecting on and wrestling with the Bible. Thirdly, AI is normally implemented to increase the efficiency of a task to release a person for other more productive work. If we begin to think like this, perhaps this gives us a moment to stop and consider what is more important than time in which we actively engage the Bible. One final thing, shooting from the hip. Technological developments in the past have often led to more prolonged engagement with Scripture (e.g., the printing press or the internet). Through such means, a wide range of resources became available for contemplation. However, AI-generated sermons seem to be taking a step in the opposite direction. I don’t think the direction of minimising our wrestling with Scripture is the correct trajectory.

WALTER: Both of you, in your papers, made comments regarding the effect of AI on our theology and practice of being human. Is there anything else that you would like to add on this subject, particularly in a world where some are afraid of what AI might do and others

may think that it can answer many if not all of our problems?

RAY: I think some fear about what AI might do is warranted, as some people are already abusing its power and we just don’t know what the future of AI will be like. However, for now, I believe the good outweighs the bad and “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him...” (John 9:4). For an extended discussion about the pros and cons of AI, please see my article.

As far as the question whether AI “can answer all of our problems,” it depends whether that means we think it has all the facts correct or can answer all questions about our existence. Even if we are just talking about facts, AI makes mistakes all the time! It is far from “all knowing”. Even if AI gets all the facts right, would you trust it exclusively for moral and spiritual questions? I would not.

MARTIN: Once again, if the architects of AI are firing off warning flares, they are not doing so for no reason. Mustafa Sulyeman, co-founder of DeepMind and author of *The Coming Wave*, has highlighted that there are real threats posed which will undoubtedly affect human life. This is not something that we can contain. However, it is also worth noting that this is a development that has taken place under the providence of God. As such, we don’t necessarily need to fear every development; where there is good, it is not wrong for us to engage with AI. However, we must do so carefully and prayerfully. It may be that one of our greatest points of witness to a watching world is our willingness to reject the zeitgeist of chasing efficiency in favour of deep, humble, sacrificial relationships.

WALTER: Thank you both so much for your contribution to this conversation. May the Lord give us all wisdom as we engage and use this new technological tool. May we seek to use it for his glory and the extension of his reign in the world, and not simply because it can save us some time and energy. MRT

Note: The photo of Ascher Isaac in the article “The Ethics of Using AI in Christian Missions” is AI-generated: “Make a bust shot of a 30–40 year old middle eastern man, with short beard, and wearing casual clothes who is sitting in front of a laptop computer. Make it photo realism,” generated by Ideogram, 31 October 2024.

Artificial Intelligence and the Mission of God: Biblical and Theological Reflections for Cross-cultural Witness

Martin P

Martin is married, with one daughter and two sons. He has studied Theology at Highland Theological College and has completed an MTh at Edinburgh Theological Seminary. He is currently serving in leadership training in a South East Asian urban context. On the weekends, you'll find him catching up on the football, golf, and tennis highlights with some good coffee.

Until recently, popular imagination reserved artificial intelligence (AI) to science fiction novels or Hollywood blockbusters. However, the rapid rise of generative AI and significant advances in robotics mean that a once-far-off future is becoming our everyday reality. With this growth showing no sign of stopping,¹ gospel workers must reflect both biblically and theologically about what this could mean for our participation in God's mission. In this paper, I am not seeking to be a technological alarmist, aiming for a return to an agrarian paradise.² Even so, we, as gospel workers, need to pause and critically reflect on this paradigm-altering moment. Failing to do so would be at best a mistake, and, at worst, lead to fundamental misunderstandings of the cultural moment into which we are communicating the gospel.

My aim is to join some dots of biblical and theological reflection with three headline areas in the development of AI and robotics which have the potential to impact gospel ministry. We begin by considering the human body in light of current technological developments. How does the biblical narrative speak into this area and the questions surrounding human existence and the nature of physicality? Our focus then shifts to considering human relationships. In what ways will advances in AI and robotics change our perceptions about relationships with those who are vulnerable? Finally, we will discuss the place of knowledge formation in a world of generative AI and algorithms. In what ways will AI help or hinder our growth in knowledge and wider access to the gospel among the peoples of the world?

Let me be clear that this is not intended to be an exhaustive study. My more modest aim is to spark discussion and

thinking among gospel workers as we seek to share Christ and serve the church during this technological and societal revolution. Global shifts like these may seem overwhelming, but they require us to once again exert courage, humility, deep dependence on the Lord, and faith that his glory will be known among the nations.

Technological neutrality?

Before we discuss these areas, it is essential to recognise our departure point: technology is never developed in a vacuum. Each advancement is charged with a particular ontological vision, creating a tangibly divergent epistemological reality. Put more simply, people develop a specific technology for a particular purpose that is deemed desirable within a given social context.

... we must treat developments in AI and robotics with the seriousness and rigour they demand. ... Since our shared goal is gospel communication, we must understand the stage on which the drama of redemption is being played out.

Subsequently, a new way of interacting with the world around us is formed.³ Charles Taylor's concept of the "social imaginary" helpfully reminds us that the moment we are living through is not a neutral sphere.⁴ Often, "theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites ... and then of the whole society."⁵ Applying Taylor's concept, Cochrane notes that contemporary techno-elites who drive the advancements in AI and robotics embrace a social imaginary founded on their ontological convictions.⁶ As

such, technology will always lead us in a particular direction.⁷ Our cultural moment is not neutral, so we should not expect the technology developed in that moment to be neutral either. It is therefore imperative that gospel workers question what these convictions are and assess how the implementation of these beliefs in the real world is shaping the trajectory of the social imaginary around the reason for human existence.⁸

As servants of the Lord Jesus, we must treat developments in AI and robotics with the seriousness and rigour they demand. What is at stake here are not peripheral details which we can politely put to one side or unquestioningly embrace with open arms. These technological changes pose questions which tap into the formulation of knowledge, the development of

wisdom, the essence of humanity, and the teleological goal of God's creation.⁹ Since our shared goal is gospel communication, we must understand the stage on which the drama of redemption is being played out.

Embodiment

Embodiment and the incarnation

We turn now to the first of our areas of reflection. Advances in AI and robotics

that have been developed in this new social imaginary are also providing the groundwork for a new “apocalyptic imagination.”¹⁰ A technologically-inspired vision of human hope has shifted the possibility of disembodied transcendence from prospect to reality.¹¹ Central to this alternative hope is the role of human physicality and the desire to grow beyond embodiment. This is seen most clearly in the transhumanist¹² movement, in which proponents such as Nikola Danaylov assert that “Substrate (human biology) is morally irrelevant.... Transhumanists of the world unite – we have immortality to gain and only biology to lose.”¹³ Riffing on Marx may not be well received by all. However, more inclusive alternatives exist. For example, Humanity+ claims to be “Elevating the human condition” by “advocating for a more humane humanity.”¹⁴

How do believers and gospel workers address such teleological alternatives? Are we considering the impact of these new imaginaries as we seek to communicate the gospel in our context?¹⁵ It may become the case that people ask why they should wait for the revealing of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1–2) when the contemporary architects of human liberation can build it in the present? Perhaps, even more crucially, they may ask what need is there to trust in Christ for salvation when we can manufacture a loophole for the Edenic curse ourselves (Gen 2:17; 3:19). However appealing, this vision is neither as bold nor liberating as it may seem at first glance. Pursuing physical transcendence has the potential for us to trade away the fullness of our humanity.

Lake suggests that this trade is rooted in the Turing test, where “an entity’s ability to identify information patterns (thinking), and not its material instantiation (embodiment), is what ‘counts’.”¹⁶ Subsequent steps have built upon this foundation: prioritising thought above physicality, making the

Pursuing physical transcendence has the potential for us to trade away the fullness of our humanity.

body, at best, a hindrance to our fullest potential, or, at worst, rendering it obsolete. Forms of gnostic thought such as this have often captivated the human imagination.¹⁷ What we are witnessing is another expression of these same desires that requires gospel workers, wherever they are located, to recognise the colour palette of gnosticism that is being repackaged for widescale acceptance in the age of AI and robotics.¹⁸

In contrast, the biblical narrative presents a far more positive view of human physicality and a more radical teleology than the transhumanist proposal. First of all, God’s act of creation results in a physical universe (Gen 1:1–5) and an embodied humanity (Gen 2:7; 21–23). The narrative also

and the havoc that will now engulf the physical realm as a result (Gen 3:16–19)? Surely this undermines a positive view of human embodiment? On the contrary, the fall narrative contains the seeds of hope for the physicality God blessed as very good. It is through the offspring of the woman that redemption would appear for humanity (Gen 3:15). God will save humanity through a human. And so, the opening movement of the Christian gospel states that physicality is not a hindrance but will be the means through which God will bring restoration for humanity and the physical realm.

This becomes clearer still as we consider the incarnation of the word of God. The value of human embodiment is escalated as “the Word became flesh and dwelt



“Robot and Human Collaborate” by Circe Denyer, CCO, Public Domain Pictures.net

states that human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Furthermore, looking upon the created realm and its inhabitants, God declares that it is “very good” (Gen 1:31). Each of these details points to the dignity and value God has placed on the physical realm and embodiment. However, what do we do with the fall of man

among us” (John 1:14). As Carson notes, the shocking physicality of these words is often lost on the contemporary Christian church due to familiarity.¹⁹ However, a high valuation of the body is not surprising when we consider the centrality of the incarnation in God’s redemptive purposes.²⁰ Bavinck argues that,

In the act of creation, God already had the Christ in mind ... creation itself already served as preparation for the incarnation. The world was so created that when it fell, it could again be restored; humanity was organized under a single head in such a way that, sinning, it could again be gathered under another head. Adam was so appointed as head that Christ could immediately take his place.²¹

A technologically-inspired vision of human hope has shifted the possibility of disembodied transcendence from prospect to reality. Central to this alternative hope is the role of human physicality and the desire to grow beyond embodiment.

Bavinck's contention is that humanity is designed in light of the Trinitarian covenant of redemption.²² The human physicality conferred to Adam was fashioned by God in preparation for the arrival of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The logical extension of Bavinck's argument in relation to our discussion is this: If God fashions the body for the second person of the Trinity to enter time and space to accomplish redemption, we must recognise that human physicality is not a limitation to be overcome by the advances of AI and robotics, but a gift to be embraced from the Triune God.

Embodiment and the resurrection

Yet, we all know that our bodies are weak and susceptible to pain, disease, illness, and death. Finding a preferable alternative to decaying physical form is central to the new social imaginary driving the advances in AI and robotics in our time.²³ While we can also join in lamenting these things, the gospel presents a radically different perspective. In the gospel, we see the reversal of the Edenic curse through a human; rather than trying to outrun decay, God the Son has entered time and space in the frailty of human flesh to end the curse brought on by sin. The resurrection of Jesus therefore presents gospel workers with many connections to the

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questions surrounding the application of advanced AI and robotics in our time.

First of all, the Christian doctrine of resurrection eliminates any position that devalues human physical embodiment. If God's intent was to rid humanity of the body, then the resurrection would seem to be the logical launchpad for this new development. However, quite the opposite picture is presented in the New Testament. As Wright has noted, "early Christianity was, to its core, a 'resurrection' movement, with this hope standing at the centre, not the periphery, of its vision."²⁴ A brief consideration of Jesus' resurrection illustrates this. His appearing in a locked room among his disciples (John 20:19) and vanishing at the dinner table in Emmaus (Luke 24:31) points to a significant change in the nature of Jesus' body. However, subsequent encounters point to the undeniable physical continuity of Jesus' resurrection body (e.g. Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8;

Luke 24:1–53; John 20:1–29; 21: 1–24; Acts 1:6–9). Each post-resurrection encounter suggests that when his followers were with him, Jesus was undeniably a person with a physical body.

As we think about applying the resurrection to advances in AI and robotics, it is important to affirm once again that "the resurrection of Christ was not merely a subjective experience of the disciples that could be reinterpreted in a gnostic sense which devalues

Current developments in AI that anticipate a disembodied existence, where the intellect is given priority, are contemporary gnostic attempts at "resuscitation".



Christ Appears on the Shore of Lake Tiberias by James Tissot. Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, 14.9 x 23 cm. From Brooklyn Museum, purchased by public subscription, 00.159.343.

material embodiment.”²⁵ While it is clear that “resurrection means going through death and out the other side into a new mode of existence,”²⁶ it does not mean the replacement of human physicality. Wright expands this thought noting that “resurrection was not simply a resuscitation into the same kind of life but rather a going through death and out into a new sort of life beyond, into a body that was no longer susceptible to decay and death.”²⁷ This language is prescient for our discussion. Current developments in AI that anticipate a disembodied existence, where the intellect is given priority, are contemporary gnostic attempts at “resuscitation”.

Following on from this, we must ask about the theological implications of such a divergent teleology. Organisations such as Humanity+ may aim for a more humane humanity, but they are willing to sell off what it means to be human in the process. As such, there are profound theological reasons why we must be sceptical of the social imaginary driving the developments of our age and the technology it produces. Bavinck highlights the stakes at play in the rejection of the physicality of the resurrection: “the body belongs to the essential being of humans and in its way exhibits the image of God... For scripture, then, everything depends on the *physical* resurrection of Christ.”²⁸ Although Bavinck is commenting on the liberal scholarship of the late nineteenth century, there are staggering parallel applications for us in the twenty-first century. If we compromise the physicality of the resurrection of Christ, we are denying the victory God has won, altering the basis of Christianity, and replacing it with an alternative teleology.

In his book *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema also sets out what is at stake theologically, and is worth quoting at length:

If the resurrection body were nonmaterial or nonphysical, the devil would have won a great victory, since God would then have been compelled to change human beings with physical bodies such as he had created into creatures of a different sort, without physical bodies (like the angels). Then it would indeed seem that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished. And then, in a sense, the Greek



Control del cerebro con inteligencia artificial [Brain control with artificial intelligence], Pixabay, CC0 (public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

philosophers would have been proved right. But matter is not evil; it is part of God’s good creation. Therefore the goal of God’s redemption is the resurrection of the physical body, and the creation of a new earth on which his redeemed people can live and serve God forever with glorified bodies. Thus the universe will not be destroyed but renewed, and God will win the victory.²⁹

As I stated at the beginning, I am not a technological alarmist. What I do question is the ease with which certain developments can be embraced as positive without pause for thought. Perhaps it is due to my negative disposition, though I do not think this is completely responsible. Anyone can be carried along by cultural inertia, especially when the tide is moving so quickly. For today’s gospel workers, it is imperative that we pause to think through both the practical application and, perhaps more importantly, the theological implications of the changes we are living through.

One final detail for us to consider is how embodiment is related to Christ’s

ascended glory. The author of Hebrews begins his exhortation by noting that “after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3b). Continuing from there, the author argues that “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things” (Heb 2:14). The verb to “share in” (κεκοινωνηκεν) is important to our discussion as it emphasises the present and universal condition that is shared between Christ and humanity.³⁰ Not only does Christ condescend to take a body, he also presently retains a body in the presence of God (Heb 8:2; 9:24).³¹ As Macleod helpfully comments: “the body is not just a memory for the risen Christ. He still has a body: a body which, by definition, is material and which stands in direct organic succession to the one he had in the days of his humiliation.”³²

Humanity+ and other variations of transhumanism may aim for a more humane humanity, but they fall short. Ultimately, any human-conceived alternative will be found wanting as it cannot provide the decisive action against death that is necessary. At best,

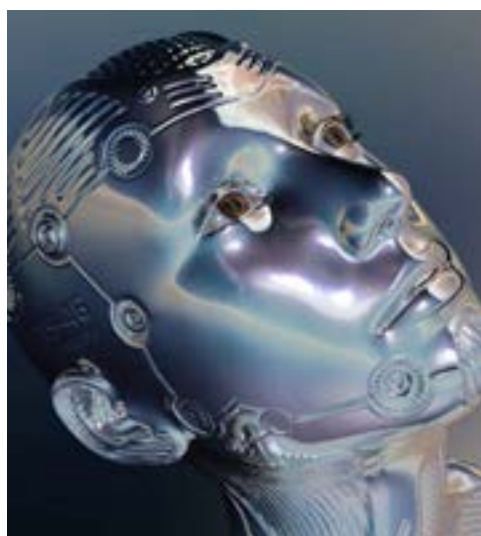
Anyone can be carried along by cultural inertia, especially when the tide is moving so quickly. For today’s gospel workers, it is imperative that we pause to think through both the practical application and, perhaps more importantly, the theological implications of the changes we are living through.

... “increased speed, accuracy and economic efficiency” are setting the tone to justify the implementation of AI and robotics in the field of healthcare. At what point does it become economically inefficient to care for a patient on a human-to-human level? Which conditions do we move on to AI assistants or robotic replacements because the relational demands are too heavy?

advances in AI and robotics can only produce a prolonged delay in the downward spiral of decay. Into this context, gospel workers have many opportunities to address the real need of humans throughout the world. Since the cultural air is increasingly charged by the social imaginary of big tech and AI, people will increasingly ask “What does it mean to be human?” Do our means of communicating the gospel, discipling believers, and raising leaders for the church address these concerns? The good news is that the Person and work of Christ declares the victory over death which advances in AI and robotics strive to achieve but never can.

Relationships

Having considered the limitations of reducing a person’s worth to their intellect at the expense of physicality, we turn now to think about how AI and robotics impact human relationships. This requires our attention because we are made to be relational beings who live in community with the triune God, fellow humans, and the wider creation (Gen 1:26). Bearing the image of the triune God and the relational capacity that this brings is a joyful responsibility that believers must contend for. Yet,



“Robot Woman,” Kai Stachowiak, Public Domain, Public Domain Pictures.net

the increasing implementation of AI and robotics in everyday life is producing conditions that make it possible, and possibly desirable, for people to avoid human-to-human interaction. The fall has produced a deep misalignment in humanity (Gen 3:15–18) that tech companies are willing to exploit. Rather than pursuing meaningful relationships with the most vulnerable, our sinful self-orientation is exposed by the rising technological wave that prioritises efficiency and self-satisfaction over relationships founded on sacrificial love.

does it become economically inefficient to care for a patient on a human-to-human level? Which conditions do we move on to AI assistants or robotic replacements because the relational demands are too heavy? Will we seek to avoid serving people at the point of death because it is inconvenient?

Having written extensively on the use of AI and robotics in healthcare, John Wyatt notes that

there is a common narrative which underpins the introduction of AI

In a context where caring for the most vulnerable at a human-to-human level is at risk of being defined as economically inefficient, believers and gospel workers are being granted fresh opportunities of service in a world coloured by the social imaginaries of self-orientation.

Health and social care

One area where this type of relationship breakdown can be seen is the field of health and social care. There are a number of positive examples of AI being implemented to aid health care in the real world and to claim otherwise is disingenuous.³³ However, not every development can be viewed this positively. Susskind and Susskind have argued that increasingly capable machines mean professions which once required human beings are now facing an existential value crisis.³⁴ Health and social care are no exception to this. As such, “increased speed, accuracy and economic efficiency” are setting the tone to justify the implementation of AI and robotics in the field of healthcare.³⁵ Developments that lead to health and social care being viewed in a myopic fashion surely raise questions of concern for the most vulnerable in the societies God has placed us in. At what point

devices and ‘companions’ in many different fields of care, therapy and education. There are simply not enough skilled humans to fulfil the roles. The needs for care across the planet are too great and they are projected to become ever greater. We have to find a technical solution to the lack of human carers, therapists and teachers. Machines therefore can be a ‘good enough’ replacement.³⁶

Central to this common narrative is a devaluation of care and caring professions. It is not so much that there are not enough people to fulfil these roles in the world; rather, we have assigned them a place of lower economic value. As such, current trends in AI and robotics lean towards the creation of humanised machines that will mimic human interaction and allow the “strong” to increasingly disengage from the “weak”. Commenting on this anthropomorphism, Polgar explains that “Human compassion can be gamed.”³⁷ His observation is that humans can be trained to respond

favourably towards machines that bear a similar likeness. He continues to say,

it is the ultimate psychological hack; a glitch in human response that can be exploited in an attempt to make a sticky product. That's why designers give AI's human characteristics in the first place: They want us to like them.³⁸

Gospel workers must pause to consider how these developments align with the biblical narrative. Should we be aiming for a world in which the elderly are segregated to ease the comfort of the “healthy”? Should we be aiming to replace the human-to-human relationship at a point of crisis in the life of a fellow image bearer because the situation is too demanding?

Surely a gospel-centred response to such scenarios leads us to recognise the sacred nature of caring relationships with vulnerable people. Once again, the doctrine of the incarnation provides a profound counterpoint. In taking to himself frail flesh, God the Son identifies with humanity in the deepest sense (John 1:14a). John then gives greater detail as to why God the Son took on human flesh: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16a). Developing this point further, John clarifies the relationship between the gift of salvation and the believer's response to this unmerited gift. Since human salvation flows from the sacrificial love of God (1 John 4:10), our response is one of sacrificial love towards God and other humans (1 John 4:11).³⁹ Commenting on this, Macleod challenges believers to consider the profound implications of the incarnation on our gospel witness:

[Jesus] did not, as incarnate, live a life of detachment. He lived a life of involvement. He lived where he could see human sin, hear human swearing and blasphemy, see human diseases and mortality, poverty and squalor. His mission was fully incarnational because he taught men by coming alongside them, becoming one of them and sharing in their environment and their problems... how can we effectively minister to a lost world if we are not in it? ... we are profoundly unfaithful to this great principle of incarnational mission.⁴⁰

In a context where caring for the most vulnerable at a human-to-human level is at risk of being defined as economically

inefficient, believers and gospel workers are being granted fresh opportunities of service in a world coloured by the social imaginaries of self-orientation.⁴¹ The paradoxical nature of this love, which is concerned for the other at expense to ourselves, provides moments of witness to the triune God from a place of “human solidarity which understands, empathises with and protects the frailty of the other.”⁴²

Sexuality

Advances in AI are also beginning to impinge on the realm of human sexuality.⁴³ This is seen most significantly in the development of deepfake technology. Deepfakes are defined as follows: “a video, that has been digitally manipulated to replace one person's likeness convincingly with that of another, often used maliciously to show someone doing something that he or she did not do.”⁴⁴ This technology is already transforming human sexuality and destroying the fabric of relationships. A 2023 report by Security Hero revealed that 98 percent of deepfake content online is pornographic in nature.⁴⁵ It also notes that of all the content which was of a sexual nature, 99 percent was the depiction of a woman.⁴⁶ The research also shows that South Korea currently holds the unenviable title of “deepfake pornography capital” with 53 percent of all deepfakes depicting its female actors and singers.⁴⁷ Already, the real-world implications of AI pornography are being felt across the world.⁴⁸

This new frontier in sexual distortion is a step beyond anywhere humanity has ever been before. As Valk puts it, “AI porn trains the user to experience sexual desire, not even as something they *choose*, but as something they *create*.”⁴⁹ Any person can now access this technology and begin to form a perfect companion from the pixels; a companion who is patient, who is kind, who bears with the user. Where God formed man and woman as complementary partners

(Gen 2:22–23), AI feeds the sinful self-orientation of the human heart to become like a god. In reality, the creators become masters of a sex slave rather than co-equal partners in a covenant of love. Servants of the gospel, whether married or single, have an important role to play in this generation in pointing beyond sex to the greater glory which lies behind it—the relationship of sacrificial love Christ has for the church (Eph 5:32). I agree with Valk—in order for us to do this, we must develop a far more robust biblical theology of marriage and sex.⁵⁰

More disturbing still are the ways AI can be used to create pornographic content that exploits children. Tim Davy rightly argues that if we are not alive to this dark side of technology, then our missiology and practice is deficient.⁵¹ AI-generated child sex abuse material (CSAM) is on the rise according to a recent IWF report.⁵² Sadly, this is something that is likely to follow an upward trend due to ongoing debates surrounding the “ethical” use of CSAM to preclude real-world abuse and abusive images.⁵³ Bernstein summarises the advocates of this so-called ethical use of CSAM as both rehabilitative and cathartic.⁵⁴ Once again, the “good enough” argument is employed for AI developments because “satisfying paedophilic urges without involving a real child is obviously an improvement over satisfying them based on a real child's image.”⁵⁵ However, Christensen, Moritz, and Pearson convincingly argue that this does not make sense. They correctly highlight that AI-generated CSAM is both harmful to children and wider society.⁵⁶ They also question the extent to which it is possible to say that no child has been harmed in the process of creating AI-generated CSAM.⁵⁷

Facing up to these dark elements of AI is an urgent responsibility for those in gospel ministry. This is particularly true in response to the area of sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable. As Valk states: “sin will not stay on a screen and sin cannot cure sin.”⁵⁸ If I am being

Do we need a proliferation of non-contextual resources being distributed around the world? What theological distinctives are driving the motivation to speed up (or possibly skip) the process of engaging with new languages and cultures?

honest, this is something I have found challenging to write about. This is partly due to the nature of the content, my own apathy, and my desire as a parent to live in a form of ignorance regarding CSAM. However, this *laissez faire* approach is a stark contrast to the whole-life gospel application found in Scripture. Jesus addresses this heart attitude expertly in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). Though our sinful nature will often be content with what is “good enough” or the lowest cost option, Christ’s manifesto of the kingdom requires a reassessment of every aspect of existence in light of God’s revelation. These developments also call gospel workers to a costly and sacrificial love towards children. As children are fellow image bearers who are more vulnerable and require extra protection, we must serve them sacrificially and refuse to see them as a hindrance, but allow them to come to the Saviour and find rest in his presence (Matt 19:13–14).

In practice, what might these developments mean for us? Perhaps one of the most important things we can do is to relearn the practice of

It is now possible to summarise large quantities of data into more manageable forms for quicker consumption. While this certainly has a place, it would be unwise to assume that this has been a wholly positive development. Is quick consumption the point of gaining knowledge in God’s world? This becomes even more important as we consider the capacity of generative AI...

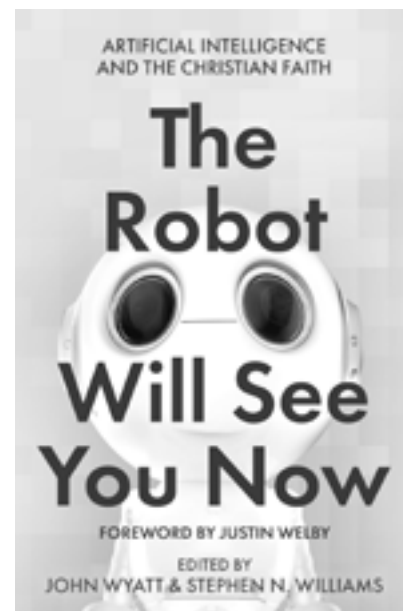
lament.⁵⁹ In our ministries, are we modelling what it means to lament the evil that is present in our context? Another practical consideration is the use of children’s images in the digital sphere. In certain contexts, images are shared freely with little to no attention being paid as to who can access those images of vulnerable people. Taking responsibility for those who have access to images of children under our care is an important step in loving those who are vulnerable. Finally, how are we preparing to serve those who have been victims of deepfake pornographic content? These could be the people whose images have been stolen or the families of those victims.

Knowledge

We finish our discussion by considering the role this new technology plays in the formation of knowledge and its use in gospel ministry. Developments in AI are a revolution in how humans access knowledge and interact with the world. It is now possible to summarise large quantities of data into more manageable forms for quicker consumption. While this certainly has a place, it would be unwise to assume that this has been a wholly positive development. Is quick consumption the point of gaining knowledge in God’s world? This becomes even more important as we consider the capacity of generative AI; with some simple commands, it is now possible to create new content on a given subject area. Our brief discussion will draw upon some details we have already considered. How are specific social imaginaries constructing this technology? And, to what extent do we allow efficiency to drive gospel ministry?

Mark Tabladillo has composed⁶⁰ a Missio Nexus promotional advocating for the increased use of AI in cross-cultural ministry.⁶¹ While it is true that some

aspects of AI are beneficial to certain administrative tasks, complications arise when we consider how our knowledge of God is formed through the lens of AI. Tabladillo advocates that use of the AI technique Natural Language Processing (NLP) “can translate sermons or religious texts into countless languages and dialects, breaking down barriers and fostering unity among diverse populations.”⁶² On the whole, this is a laudable aim. However, there are questions that should be asked of the missiology driving such an application. For example, do we need a proliferation of non-contextual resources being distributed around the world? Following this, what theological distinctives are



driving the motivation to speed up (or possibly skip) the process of engaging with new languages and cultures?

While not specifically dealing with the area of AI, Clark nevertheless provides a helpful critique by noting the influence of consumerism in cross-cultural ministry. He notes that “you can spot the influence of market-driven approaches to missions in strategies that emphasize speed and reproduction while relying heavily on techniques and technology.”⁶³ This should not be read as a disregard for outcomes. Rather, it is a critique of the process by which these outcomes are achieved and the intended outcomes themselves. Following a technique-driven approach to ministry can lead us to prioritise products or proselytes rather than people or disciples (Matt 28:19).⁶⁴ If we choose to become increasingly dependent on AI models such as NLP, to what extent are we continuing to indulge in consumerist mission at the expense of developing lasting relationships? Reflecting on encounters with believers from non-Western contexts, Clark notes that many “tire of missionaries who prioritize systems, structures, and technologies instead of deep relationships.”⁶⁵

It is also important to raise concerns about the neutrality of the AI language models in question. As we have already noted, technology is never neutral. This being the case, the outcomes of AI models cannot be neutral either. Current advances in AI have moved beyond correcting sentence structure to the point of language creation. For this reason, Cochrane notes the existential threat this poses to the formation of

human knowledge. He explains, “we are dealing with a technology that not only shapes our ability to exercise human intellect, but a technology that seeks to replicate and even replace human intelligence.”⁶⁶ Cunningham has likewise noted these real problems. If we become reliant on AI to produce information and bypass the rigor of learning, we will increasingly become deprived of knowledge.⁶⁷ As he notes, “information is not knowledge. It is the striving, labor, and mastery of information that leads to true knowledge.”⁶⁸

In the book of Proverbs, we read that “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Prov 25:2). Although marred by the fall, humanity still bears the image of God which grants them a royal responsibility on the earth (Gen 1:26).⁶⁹ As such, something of this “glory of kings” task applies to humanity in general and to believers in particular. Commenting on this verse, Waltke notes that “to act as a wise judge is an essential part of the kingly glory, which entails the ability to search out the heart of a matter or conflict.”⁷⁰ Our consideration of AI and its application to gospel work must take seriously the divinely appointed regal role of humanity, and the responsibility of knowledge formation that comes with it. As Cunningham argues, “we were not created for answers alone. We were created to search for answers so that we appreciate the answers and know how to steward the answers well.”⁷¹

Our final observation relates to gospel access in the age of algorithms. While it may be argued that advances in AI make access to the gospel more likely, there are reasons to question whether this is accurate. Epstein *et al.* explain that “algorithms are human inventions, and

as such, characteristic human elements – such as intentions, beliefs, and biases – inevitably influence their design and function.”⁷² This leads Sørensen to speak about “the tailored truth” of the AI age.⁷³ In order for people to engage with the gospel in the digital sphere, it first of all needs to be something they can find. However, “society’s growing dependence on ranking algorithms leaves our psychological heuristics and vulnerabilities susceptible to their influence on an unprecedented scale and in unexpected ways.”⁷⁴ Rather than opening opportunities, it is possible that these developments actually lead people away from engaging with the gospel. As Sørensen comments:

It is probably safe to assume that tailored information may unwillingly reduce the potential of acquiring new knowledge and inspiration, thereby minimizing the potential for a renewed religious reflection. In this sense, algorithms on one hand maximize the potential for acquiring relevant knowledge, and on the other hand make it less likely to enter into the heterogenic discourse of faith change.⁷⁵

Both our personal preferences and the desires of others are being utilised to generate the algorithms we engage with on a daily basis. This means that our current beliefs and patterns of behaviour will exert a significant influence on our digital engagement. Since the human heart is corrupt and deceitful (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:10–18) and algorithms are dependent on the input of our personal preferences, it is unlikely that people who have yet to engage with the gospel will proactively choose to do so through this medium. This does not mean it is impossible. However, any of these encounters, as they have been throughout

history, are fundamentally grounded on the work of the Holy Spirit convicting and bringing new life (John 15:8–11).

Conclusion

Although this has only been a brief study considering the advances in AI and robotics in light of the gospel, I trust it has provided some points for further engagement. Technological developments will continue to expand, and this will produce change. However, we should never accept technological advances uncritically or without recourse to serious biblical and theological reflection.

Our survey of AI in relation to human embodiment, relationships, and knowledge highlights once again that the gospel is the better story that humanity is searching for. Rather than seeking to outrun death, we announce the Saviour who has destroyed it and retains the wonder of human physicality. Opposed to maximising our comfort or desires at the expense of the vulnerable, we proclaim a sacrificial love that motivates us to care for those who are weak or defenceless. Instead of seeking shortcuts to success in life or ministry, we recognise the responsibility God has given to us to treasure and steward knowledge for the sake of his glory. **MRT**

¹ For an example of this perspective, see Mustafa Suleyman, *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-First Century's Greatest Dilemma* (London: Random House, 2023).

² I am currently serving in a rapidly expanding mega-city in Southeast Asia and advocate for the role of the church and the gospel in every sphere of life in the urban environment.

³ This has implications for how we perceive the role of cross-cultural gospel communication in an increasingly globalised world, dependent on the digital sphere. I cannot explore this in the present article, however it is something worthy of further thought and evaluation.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

⁵ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

⁶ Daniel Cochrane, “The Tower of Babel and the Ideology of AI,” *Christ Over All*, 15 May 2024, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-tower-of-babel-and-the-ideology-of-ai/> (accessed 30 May 2024).

⁷ Cochrane, “The Tower of Babel and the Ideology of AI.”

⁸ Cochrane, “The Tower of Babel and the Ideology of AI.”

⁹ Owen Anderson, “Whatever Comes, Get Wisdom: AI, the Future, and Our Chief End,” *Christ Over All*, 3 May 2024, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/whatever-comes-get-wisdom-ai-the-future-and-our-chief-end/> (accessed 30 May 2024).

¹⁰ Michael J. Paulus, *Artificial Intelligence and the*

Our consideration of AI and its application to gospel work must take seriously the divinely appointed regal role of humanity, and the responsibility of knowledge formation that comes with it. As Cunningham argues, “we were not created for answers alone. We were created to search for answers so that we appreciate the answers and know how to steward the answers well.”

Apocalyptic Imagination: Artificial Agency and Human Hope (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023).

¹¹ Seung Ho Bang, “Thinking of Artificial Intelligence Cyborgization with a Biblical Perspective (Anthropology of the Old Testament),” *European Journal of Science and Theology* 10, no. 3 (2014): 15–26, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288710358> (accessed 2 October 2024).

¹² For detailed definitions and origin of these terms, see Natasha Vita-More, “Transhuman and Transhumanism,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6109b761f3da84428b79da5c/t/65b99a1139cc3614292dfd6d/> (accessed 13 August 2024).

¹³ Nikola Danaylov, “A Transhumanist Manifesto [Redux],” *Singularity Weblog* (blog), last modified 11 January 2019, <https://www.singularityweblog.com/a-transhumanist-manifesto/> (accessed 30 May 2024).

¹⁴ “Elevating the Human Condition,” *Humanity Plus*, <https://www.humanityplus.org> (accessed 13 August 2024).

¹⁵ I concede that this may not be the central discussion point in every context. However, I would suggest that most contexts will encounter these imaginaries either presently or in the not-too-distant future. For a helpful survey of this issue, see Latha Christie, Stefan Lindholm, and Garrett Starr, “What Does it Mean to Be Human?” Lausanne Movement, <https://lausanne.org/report/human/transhumanism> (accessed 19 September 2024).

¹⁶ Christina Bieber Lake, “Science Fiction, AI and Our Descent into Insignificance,” in *The Robot Will See You Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Christian Faith*, ed. John Wyatt and Stephen N. Williams (London: SPCK, 2021), 13–27.

¹⁷ A. D. Rich, “Gnosticism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Davie et al. (London and Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 366–69.

¹⁸ Lake, “Science Fiction, AI and Our Descent into Insignificance.”

¹⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Nottingham: Apollos and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 277.

²¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 278.

²² Guy M. Richard, “The Covenant of Redemption,” *Reformed Faith and Practice* 5, no. 2 (2020): 4–27, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/the-covenant-of-redemption/> (accessed 13 October 2023).

²³ See point 5 of “The Transhumanism Affirmation,” <https://www.transhumanismaffirmation.org> (accessed 3 October 2024).

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 3* (London: SPCK, 2003), 588.

²⁵ Amos Young, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

²⁶ N. T. Wright, “Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 41, no. 2 (1998): 107–24, <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/christian-origins-and-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-resurrection-of-jesus-as-a-historical-problem/> (accessed 27 August 2024).

²⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 450.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 442.

²⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 250.

³⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

³¹ Whilst Hebrews 9:24 is not explicit in stating the physicality of Jesus’ appearance before God on our behalf, it would seem to flow logically that if this

was the case in 1:3b and 2:14, then this is what the author has in mind in this passage.

³² Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 163.

³³ For example, Andrew Gregory, “New Artificial Intelligence Tool Can Accurately Identify Cancer,” *The Guardian* (UK), 30 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/apr/30/artificial-intelligence-tool-identify-cancer-ai> (accessed 19 September 2024).

³⁴ Richard Susskind and Daniel Susskind, *The Future of The Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 206.

³⁵ John Wyatt, “The Impact of AI and Robotics on Health and Social Care,” in *The Robot Will See You Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Christian Faith*, ed. John Wyatt and Stephen N. Williams (London: SPCK, 2021), 181–97.

³⁶ John Wyatt, “Artificial Intelligence and Simulated Relationships,” John Wyatt, 10 January 2020, <https://www.johnwyatt.com/article-artificial-intelligence-and-simulated-relationships/> (accessed 19 September 2024).

³⁷ David Ryan Polgar, “Is It Unethical to Design Robots to Resemble Humans?,” *Quartz*, 22 June 2017, <https://qz.com/1010828/is-it-unethical-to-design-robots-to-resemble-humans> (accessed 20 September 2024).

³⁸ Polgar, “Is It Unethical to Design Robots to Resemble Humans?”

³⁹ While I recognise 1 John 4:11 has a particular focus on the Christian community, I do not think the church is the only locus for this love to be lived out and demonstrated.

⁴⁰ Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998), 122–23.

⁴¹ Martha Mwendafulumba, Michael Soderling, and Annelies Wilder-Smith, “What is Sustainable? Global Health,” Lausanne Movement, <https://lausanne.org/report/sustainable/global-health> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁴² Wyatt, “Artificial Intelligence and Simulated Relationships.”

⁴³ I am deliberately leaving out a discussion on sexuality and robotics due to space constraints in this article. However, for a helpful overview, see Andrew Graystone, “Sextech: Simulated Relationships with Machines,” in Wyatt and Williams, *The Robot Will See You Now*.

⁴⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “deepfake (n.),” July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7847968874>, (accessed 20 September 2024).
⁴⁵ “2023 State of Deepfakes: Reality, Threats, and Impact,” Security Hero, <https://www.securityhero.io/state-of-deepfakes/#overview-of-current-state> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁴⁶ “2023 State of Deepfakes.”

⁴⁷ “2023 State of Deepfakes.”

⁴⁸ Raphael Rashid and Justin McCurry, “From Spy Cams to Deepfake Porn: Fury in South Korea as Women Targeted Again,” *The Guardian*, 13 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/13/from-spy-cams-to-deepfake-porn-fury-in-south-korea-as-women-targeted-again> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁴⁹ Jacob Valk, “Why AI Pornography is Far More Dangerous than Yesterday’s Porn,” *Christ Over All*, 22 May 2024, <https://christooverall.com/article/concise/why-ai-pornography-is-far-more-dangerous-than-yesterdays-porn/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁵⁰ Valk, “Why AI Pornography is Far More Dangerous than Yesterday’s Porn.”

⁵¹ Tim Davy, “Vulnerable Children and *Missio Dei* in a Digital Sphere,” in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM, 2020), 223–35, <https://www.academia.edu/117720173> (accessed 2 October 2024)

⁵² “Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Production of Child Sexual Abuse Imagery,” Internet Watch Foundation, <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we-exist/our-research/how-ai-is-being-abused-to-create-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁵³ L. S. Christensen, D. Moritz, and A. Pearson, “Psychological Perspectives of Virtual Child Sexual Abuse Material,” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 4 (2021): 1353–65.

⁵⁴ Danielle Brenstein, “Could AI Generated Porn Help Protect Children?,” *Wired*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/artificial-intelligence-csam-pedophilia/> (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁵⁵ Bernstein, “Could AI Generated Porn Help Protect Children?”

⁵⁶ Christensen, et al., “Psychological Perspectives of Virtual Child Sexual Abuse Material.”

⁵⁷ Christensen, et al., “Psychological Perspectives of Virtual Child Sexual Abuse Material.”

⁵⁸ Valk, “Why AI Pornography is Far More Dangerous than Yesterday’s Porn.”

⁵⁹ Davy, “Vulnerable Children and *Missio Dei* in a Digital Sphere.”

⁶⁰ I have chosen this word as it is unclear from the article whether this is AI-generated or Tabladillo’s own writing.

⁶¹ Mark Tabladillo, “How AI is Reshaping Missions,” *Missio Nexus*, 5 September 2023, <https://missionnexus.org/how-ai-is-reshaping-missions/> (accessed 24 September 2024).

⁶² Tabladillo, “How AI is Reshaping Missions.”

⁶³ Elliot Clark, “Our Missions Approach Is Too Western,” TGC, 4 August 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/missions-approach-too-western/> (accessed 24 September 2024).

⁶⁴ Clark, “Our Missions Approach Is Too Western.”

⁶⁵ Clark, “Our Missions Approach Is Too Western.”

⁶⁶ Cochrane, “The Tower of Babel and the Ideology of AI.”

⁶⁷ Robert Cunningham, “Redeeming Technology, Part 3: Mentality: The Important Distinction Between Information and Knowledge,” *Christ for Kentucky*, 15 December 2023, <https://blog.christforky.org/p/redeeming-technology-part-3-mentality> (accessed 24 September 2024).

⁶⁸ Cunningham, “Redeeming Technology.”

⁶⁹ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 77–79.

⁷⁰ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁷¹ Cunningham, “Redeeming Technology.”

⁷² Robert Epstein, Robert E. Robertson, David Lazer, and Christo Wilson, “Suppressing the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME),” in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 1, Issue CSCW, Article 42 (6 December 2017): 1–22, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3134677> (accessed 8 October 2024).

⁷³ Christian Grund Sørensen, “The Sword of the Cherubim: Do Algorithms Inhibit our Access to the Knowledge of God? Google and *Missio Dei* in a Digital Age,” in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM, 2020).

⁷⁴ Epstein, et al., “Suppressing the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME).”

⁷⁵ Sørensen, “The Sword of the Cherubim.” In more simple terms, Sørensen is making the point that although people may be able to access more relevant information about Christianity, the medium which allows this access (algorithms) makes it less likely for the person in question to enter into a discussion of different opinions to their own. As such, it could make it less likely that a person hears and believes the gospel.

Mission in a Digital Age

M. H.

The author has lived in and worked in Southeast Asia for fourteen years.

The idea of missionaries going overseas to live in a hut in the middle of a jungle and meet with technologically inferior tribal communities is an antiquated picture that does not reflect our present reality. While the man living in a hut with dirt floors in the middle of the jungle may still exist, it's likely that he has a Facebook account, watches TikTok and YouTube videos, and consumes hours of digital content daily. I have seen this reality play out firsthand as our family visited a series of seven villages deep in a jungle of Southeast Asia that are only accessible by boat along a river. Yet each village has access to a government-supplied solar-powered charging station. In these villages, a new daily ritual has been born. Nearly all the villagers use the power station to charge their cell phones. How are mission teams to respond when even the most remote villages of traditionally homogeneous societies that used to be governed by local wisdom are now rejecting local traditions and practices for the information and social networking that is available to them through their phones? We must ask ourselves the question of how the global mission landscape is changing to accommodate the technological and social-network explosion captivating the hearts and minds of this present generation.

When we stop our busyness and survey those around us, we can almost be guaranteed that someone in our vicinity is connected to some sort of device. In the past ten years, the global population of mankind has been eclipsed by the number of mobile phones that exist on the planet. As of 2024, there are approximately 8.31 billion mobile phones actively in use worldwide.¹ This number is expected to continue to grow rapidly, with projections indicating that



"Create a picture of a Southeast Asian man in a jungle setting in a traditional house that is a type of hut. Make him using a cell phone and have the light of the cell phone reflecting on his face. Make the inside of the house look very simple with just basic necessities," image generated by Microsoft's Copilot, 28 October 2024.

the total number of mobile devices could reach 18.22 billion in 2025.² It's not just the staggering numbers of devices, but the fact that each of these devices is being used for many hours every day that causes us to question how missionary endeavors are being impacted. These devices are constantly notifying us, vying for our attention, and captivating our eyes, ears, and minds.

The Apostle Paul sought to "become all things to all men, that by all possible means he might win some" (1 Cor 9:22). This verse is foundational to the concept of contextualizing the models we use to communicate the gospel message. To contextualize the gospel is not to change its message, but to communicate the message in a way that is relevant to each unique culture. In today's socially connected world, becoming all things to all men means meeting people where they are and presenting a message that they can relate

to. It should come as no surprise that "where people are" is online.

The global average of time spent online daily is 6 hours and 54 minutes, but the Southeast Asian countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand all fall within the top 10 internet consumers globally, with the average daily time in the Philippines exceeding 11 hours per day.³ When a society has changed so drastically that they are spending a majority of their waking hours consuming digital content, we must ask ourselves why there aren't more workers entering this digital space to meet people and find opportunities to share the gospel, especially when we know people are searching online for answers to life's big questions?

Rather than missionaries holding onto traditional models of outreach and church planting, some mission teams are adapting their strategies to make use of media to sow the gospel broadly. So, what does this change look like practically and what is the advantage of adapting a media outreach strategy? One model that we are currently employing makes use of a media support team made up of foreign missionaries and local believers who see this as their primary role in missions to facilitate wide gospel sowing. By building a partnership between our media support team and local field teams, we are more able to engage huge population segments where we can find those who are open to the good news.

The idea behind wide gospel sowing—defined in terms of hundreds or even thousands of people hearing the gospel daily—has been around for quite some time. However, our current digital age presents us with an outstanding opportunity to sow the gospel broadly online, especially where it can contact soil that is often considered out of the reach

of traditional evangelism. By partnering with local believers, our media support team creates regionally based social media posts and advertisements that address the felt needs and spiritual needs of the unreached focus people. These social media advertisements usually ask a question designed to stoke questions that already exist in the minds of our focused segment of society. Using the local language, these advertisements might ask: “Do the sins of your past cause problems in your life?” or “How can you experience true forgiveness?” or “Do you want to know God’s plan for marriage?” or “Do you want to find God’s straight path to heaven?”

You can’t “unthink” a question. As our focus people are scrolling through their social media feeds, we have about one second of each person’s attention to look at the advertisement, read the question, and determine its relevance for their lives. Our goal is that our online advertisements pique the curiosity of the reader to the point that they want to reach out to us for answers. Connected to each of our advertisements is a button with an invitation to chat with a local believer in order to get help with their questions.

In the past four years, we have seen over 30,000 non-believers respond to these felt-needs-based advertisements and initiate chat conversations with our local teams on the ground in Southeast Asia. Non-believers are actually “reaching out” to our mission teams as they seek help to life’s problems! Our missionaries are currently partnering with more than seventy volunteers and local staff who are taking on the role of a Digital Responder. A Digital Responder is a local believer who chats with non-believers with the goal of sharing the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Digital Responders will chat online with anyone who wants to find forgiveness of sins and hear God’s plan of salvation as it relates to their particular felt need. Through this ministry, these Digital Responders are being strengthened in their faith and sharpened in their gospel witness as they boldly proclaim Jesus and show his love and care to everyone they encounter online.

The role of the foreign missionary in this ministry looks quite a bit different than the traditional model of a front-line worker. Every morning, I step into the mission field, but probably not as you would expect. My daily routine is to wake

... non-believers find the online environment to be a safe place where they can be honest and vulnerable about the pain of their sins without facing the shameful repercussions of having their private sins exposed to their closest relationships.

up early in the Midwest of America.

I make a large cup of coffee and start up Zoom, often still wearing my pajamas. As the sun sets in Southeast Asia and rises in America, one out of our nine field teams of local believers currently running a media outreach strategy joins me on Zoom for our weekly meeting during which we pray and discuss strategy for the wide gospel-sowing outreach via Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or Google Searches. It is extremely important for the foreign missionary to learn the target culture and language to be able to coach teams well, but once the foreign missionary has a good grasp of this, the media support role can be done from virtually anywhere in the world.

As we share the gospel broadly, each of the nine local teams responds to 25–50 new online contacts every day. Collectively that means that we are having between 225–450 new conversations with non-believers every day! As the online conversations develop, the non-believing contacts open up about their needs and desire for a relationship with God. We have seen that there is a huge advantage to chatting in an online conversation as non-believers are much more open to sharing deep strongholds of sin with us in an online environment.

Every day, we chat with people about very private issues. This is especially true for those from an honor-shame context. In this online environment, non-believers are opening up with us about sins that they have kept hidden from their family, friends, neighbors, and local religious leaders. We chat daily with people involved in adulterous relationships, trapped in debt and poverty, plagued with addictions, suffering life-threatening illnesses, incarcerated for crimes committed, or held captive by various other sins. Often, I view this, not as a media ministry, but rather a ministry of compassion and freedom for those who are hurting from the pain of sin. “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

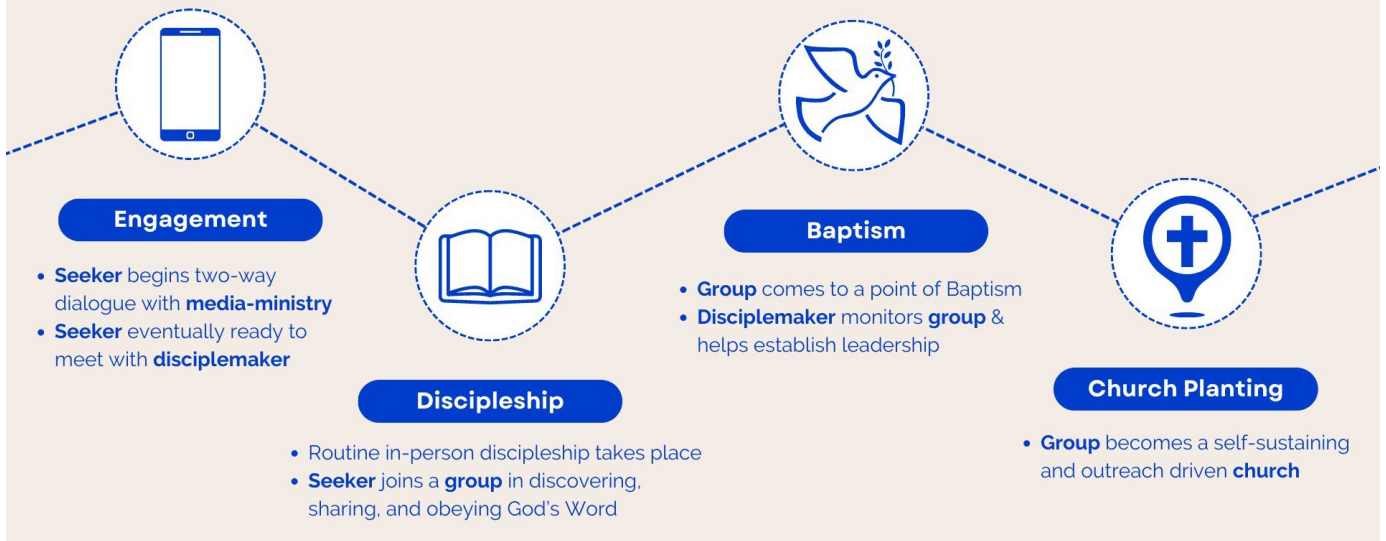
to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1). Somehow, these non-believers find the online environment to be a safe place where they can be honest and vulnerable about the pain of their sins without facing the shameful repercussions of having their private sins exposed to their closest relationships.

On numerous occasions, our local believing partners have shared that they have never had conversations so deep with a non-believer in their face-to-face models of outreach. Throughout each online chat, our local partners show empathy while at the same time directing the conversation towards the forgiveness and salvation that can be found only in Jesus. Through this compassionate dialoguing, our field teams are daily identifying between one and ten seekers who are open to exploring Jesus as God’s provision for their sins!

Once a seeker is identified through the chat conversation, we invite them to begin studying the Bible with our local teams either online or in person. This media outreach strategy is not intended to stay completely online. The whole trajectory of this ministry is to identify spiritually open people among the masses who respond positively to the gospel and encourage local believers to begin meeting with them face-to-face. Usually, the goal of the first face-to-face meeting is to invite the seeker into a saving relationship with Christ through faith and enter into fellowship with other believers in Christ.

While this strategy has proved to be fruitful in allowing our field teams to engage with many non-believers, we recognize that it is through the work of the Holy Spirit and our prayers that the Father draws people to Christ! The most fruitful of our nine teams is the one that focuses more on prayer than strategy! One of the major prayer needs for each field team is boldness and wisdom to know when and how to move these amazing online conversations into face-to-face meetings.

Critical Path



The Media 4 Movements approach allows field teams to engage with seekers online through wide gospel sowing and then moves them on a critical path using a traditional model of face-to-face discipleship leading to initial belief, baptism, growth, and church multiplication.

We are facing another challenge and blessing in this ministry. Because we can reach out to people throughout an entire province or country, sometimes we see people come to faith in locations that are several hours from any other believer. This is a true blessing, but how are we to disciple multiple people spread throughout a province when we only have a single mission team on the ground there? Truly, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Matt 9:37–38). Please join us in praying for God’s provision of more co-laborers! Even though our teams may be far away from these new believers, we have developed two solutions that help us face this challenge. First, we find that this opens up the door for our teams to network with other believing groups who might live in closer proximity to the new believers. Secondly, this creates an opportunity for our field teams to use media not only as an evangelistic tool, but also as a tool for ongoing discipleship at a distance.

When it is not possible for our field teams to network with other mission-minded believers, they are encouraged to visit new believers in person at least once a month. They are, however, told that the primary source of discipleship for some will consist of online interaction through phone calls, text messages, voice recordings, audio clips of Bible teaching, and contextually sensitive teaching videos designed for new believers. One new tool we are developing is the ability to use Artificial Intelligence to take a pre-recorded teaching video and perform a face-swap and voice-swap of the local teacher sharing biblical truth. This face-swap technology protects their identity from religious or political groups that might want to harm them for teaching about Jesus. When most of the discipleship happens over WhatsApp, Line, text, or Zoom, we encourage our field teams to try to interact daily with each seeker/new believer in this virtual discipleship. Face-to-face visits are still by far the best option for growth in Christ, but our media support team

is striving to facilitate discipleship at a distance when circumstances make it too difficult to meet in person.

Truly, the landscape of missions has already changed and the methods of evangelism and discipleship that existed even ten years ago must undergo scrutiny as to their effectiveness in this new digital world. Mission teams around the world must wrestle with how they might adapt their strategies to include media use. As we see new believers coming to faith, we can’t help but to praise God for giving us this unique window in time and the tools relevant to this generation to bring the good news of Jesus Christ into places where it has never been preached. We invite you to pray that the faith of each new believer will be protected and multiplied as they continue to live in their original social network. We also invite you to prayerfully consider how these new methods of evangelism and discipleship might be incorporated into your current mission strategies in this new digital world. **MRT**

This media outreach strategy is not intended to stay completely online. The whole trajectory of this ministry is to identify spiritually open people among the masses who respond positively to the gospel and encourage local believers to begin meeting with them face-to-face.

¹ Ash Turner, “How Many Smartphones Are in the World? (2024),” *BankMyCell* (blog), updated 24 May 2024, <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world> (accessed 28 October 2024).

² “Forecast Number of Mobile Devices Worldwide from 2020 to 2025 (in billions),” Statista, April 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245501/multiple-mobile-device-ownership-worldwide/> (accessed 28 October 2024).

³ Kristie Neo, “Southeast Asia: Digital Life Intensified,” *We are Social* (blog), 8 March 2021, <https://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2021/03/southeast-asia-digital-life-intensified/> (accessed 28 October 2024).

Gen Z: The Connected Generation

Issues and Influences of Digital Technology on Gen Z Communication, Relationship, and Community from a Missiological Perspective

Scott Brown



Scott is the Communications Lead at OMF Australia, bringing a wide range of experience from both the for-profit and non-profit sectors. Since joining OMF in 2019 and becoming a member in 2024, he has developed a passion for using video to tell stories that inspire and support mission work. Scott also leads “Creatives,” a Gen Z community of volunteer content creators, helping them use their talents for mission. He holds degrees in Business and eBusiness and Communication from Swinburne University and is currently studying Missional Leadership. Scott also serves part-time with Media for Movements, loves coffee, and enjoys roasting his own beans. He has been married to Ruth for twenty years. Together, they have two daughters, Alicia (11) and Hope (9).

Synopsis

Gen Z represents a unique and digitally connected generation. Born between 1995 and 2010, they are profoundly shaped by rapid technological advancements and significant global events. Gen Z also demonstrate a digital-first approach to communication and community, enabling them to have a global perspective and effectively mobilise for causes they care about.

Gen Z values diversity and inclusivity. They are also committed to justice and environmental concerns. These values are influenced by their educational experiences and don't always align with certain aspects of biblical morality and the Great Commission.¹

Their preferred modes of communication and engagement include digital platforms like TikTok and YouTube, which have transformed their learning and social interaction preferences. However, constant digital connectivity removes the social cues present in face-to-face interactions that help people better understand one another, negatively impacting empathy toward others.

For the church and mission organizations aiming to engage with Gen Z, adapting to their digital world is essential. They must create an online presence that aligns with Gen Z's preference for curation and collaboration, while also exploring opportunities for them to make a meaningful impact. It's important that Gen Z, the church, and mission organizations use digital technology in a way that supports, rather than hinders, deeper relationships and spiritual growth.

In a rapidly evolving world, the church and mission organizations must consider how shifting generational and cultural landscapes will shape the

future of mission. Understanding and effectively engaging with Gen Z is a crucial aspect of this ongoing process.

Introduction

Cultural indicators

As a university marketing student in the mid-1990s, the very first principle I was taught was that “you cannot be all things to all people.” Companies understand that their products won't appeal to everyone, therefore they define a target audience and invest in marketing research to better understand how to reach and persuade them.

However, in 1 Corinthians 9:22, the Apostle Paul boldly proclaims that he has “become all things to all people so that by all possible means I (he) might save some.” If the mandate of the church and its body of believers is to evangelise all people and make disciples of all cultures, we must also be willing to venture into other cultural spaces different from our own.²

In an era defined by vast information and globalization, generational changes reveal significant cultural shifts as people's lives are shaped by iconic products and transformative historical events.

Gen Z has firmly established itself as a defining generation. Unlike Gen Y, who are also known as Millennials, the label “Gen Z” has become the most widely accepted term for this group. According to Google search trends, “Gen Z” accounts for 63 percent of searches, while alternative terms like “post-Millennial” and “iGeneration” lag far behind at only 1 and 2 percent, respectively.³

With at least 27 percent having entered the workforce in Australia, Gen Z is already having a global impact on economies and societies. Big business



of social change (see Fig. 1). However, those who accept generational labels often disagree on the specific years or traits, with researchers and commentators interpreting them differently. Generational boundaries tend to be more fluid and context-dependent than fixed labels suggest.⁶

Whilst generations X and Y grew up in the shadow of the collapse of communism, the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the aftermath of 9/11, Gen Z are navigating similar upheavals. These experiences may appear similar at first glance; however, the nuances within each event's circumstances influence generations in distinct ways. For example, the pandemic has helped shape a work-from-home culture, while rapidly evolving technologies like AI are accelerating automation, potentially at the expense of creativity. Each of these developments plays a role in shaping Gen Z's worldview and their responses to the challenges they face.⁷

The connected generation

Gen Z's collective identity through community and relationship has been heavily influenced by rapid development of technology and innovation—high bandwidth and the invention of the smartphone (iPhone) in 2007 brought greater connectedness. All this is shaping their worldview as culture, perspectives, and shared experiences are transmitted rapidly.

Data from the Institute of Business Management reveals more than 74 percent of Gen Z say they spend their free time online.⁸

Although the pandemic accelerated the push towards greater digital fluency, “Our World in Data” reveals this trend began much earlier—between 2010 and 2016, 640,000 people per day were online for the first time.⁹

is increasingly aware of this and has invested in research to improve their chances of selling their products or recruiting them for their workforce.

As a Gen X communications professional, I'm learning that to engage Gen Z effectively requires more than just digital tools; it requires a deeper comprehension of how they connect, communicate, and form relationships. This research aims to equip mission organizations to effectively disciple and mobilize this generation by understanding how to adapt to their values and social dynamics in a biblically sound way.⁴

Hypothesis

Like previous generations of the *information age*,⁵ Gen Z social structures (which are not always geographical or monistic) have been profoundly influenced by digital technology. Therefore, this research has been guided by the following *hypothesis* formed from anecdotal observations:

Digital Technology as a cultural good has influenced and shaped the way Generation Z engages in communication, relationship, and community.

This hypothesis will be carefully examined using the following socio-cultural framework:

What's going on: A brief timeline of generations and influential historical markers affecting the information age; general insights of Gen Z culture; and digital technology behaviours and statistical research.

Why is this happening: A more in-depth cultural analysis of Gen

Z's digital culture; a summary of the sociological relationships within this culture; and the benefits and challenges they face.

The purpose of this research is to determine how church and mission organisations can effectively reach and engage Gen Z with the gospel and mission. Furthermore, what can the church and cross-cultural mission agencies such as OMF learn from this research to:

1. Effectively mobilise and prepare Gen Z for cross-cultural mission.
2. Uncover new opportunities and people groups for contextualizing the gospel and effective discipleship.

Defining Characteristics

Gen Z

McCrinkle defines the term *generation* as individuals born within a specified time-period, characterised by shared events, social markers, and emerging technologies. Although the baby boomer generation spans twenty years after World War 2 (1945–1965), generation gaps for X, Y, Z, and Alpha have often been reduced to fifteen to reflect the flow

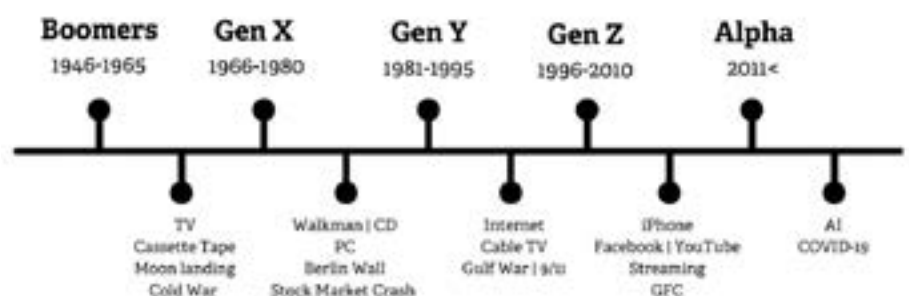


Fig. 1 Generations of Boomers, X, Y, Z, and Alpha



Greater connectivity has also created a more pluralistic world where work, social, and family life can coexist in the same space and time. McKinsey research revealed that Gen Z have come to value online community because it enables them to connect and mobilise around interests and causes. This, in turn, has created a digital-first mindset where community and relationship in the digital space is of equal value to the physical.

Education and learning styles have also shifted. Mark Prensky coined the term “digital native” alongside “digital immigrant” to describe those who have grown up surrounded by the rapid dissemination of technology. He argues that when a student is motivated to learn something, they have on-line tools that far exceed what a teacher can provide.¹⁰

Religion, values, and worldview

The Varkey Foundation’s 2017 Global Citizenship Survey found religion is no longer a sacred canopy for Gen Z—less than half (42 percent) agree it was important. However, they are radically diverse, inclusive, and are concerned about justice and the environment. McCrindle research in Australia found that 46 percent of their consumer purchasing is influenced by the product’s manufacturer’s values on social responsibility, including issues such as environmental sustainability. Furthermore, McKinsey’s global survey revealed that 68 percent of Gen Z expect brands to contribute to society by promoting issues such as diversity and fair labour practices. Despite their emphasis on social conscience, 80 percent of Gen Z in Australia also demonstrate individualistic tendencies, prioritising financial freedom and personal success.¹¹

Gen Z’s values have been significantly shaped by their education, including the

content they’re learning and engaging with. McCrindle research found that Gen Z Australians are 2 to 3 times more likely to have learned through education about cultural inclusivity and the environment than baby boomers. The number is nearly 9 times more likely for

For Gen Z, acceptance as a value is no longer only about respect, even when there is disagreement. It increasingly involves accepting, or even affirming, the worldviews of others.

gender identity and fluidity—an issue even (77 percent of) Gen Y consider confronting. However, Gen Z views will likely continue to be shaped through time and intervening global events.¹²

For Gen Z, acceptance as a value is no longer only about respect, even when there is disagreement. It increasingly involves accepting, or even affirming, the worldviews of others. In fact, Barna Group reports that half of practicing Millennial Christians (47 percent)



Photo by Artem Podrez on Pexels

“agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.” Whilst Gen Z were not included in this study, it’s anticipated their views will be amplified on this stance.¹³

These Gen Z characteristics are a global trend and perhaps indicative of a distinct cultural people group. Twenge’s research concluded that, unlike previous generations, Gen Z demonstrates similarities across gender, race, location, and socio-economic status. Further sociological research also revealed that the stimulation and development experiences of digital natives affects their logical reasoning and thought processes in similar ways to people from different cultural backgrounds.¹⁴

Cultural analysis

Leveraging digital community for social change

Paul Hiebert defines culture as “the integrated system of learned patterns of behaviours, ideas, and products characteristic of a given society.”¹⁵

Psychologist Edgar Schein developed a model for understanding culture. This model will be used to better

understand the constructed identity of Gen Z and their cultural shift towards digital first communities. It consists of three categories:

1. Artifacts/Products
2. Shared values
3. Worldview.¹⁶

Artifacts/Products

The emergence of new products and innovation has given rise to a previously non-existent vocabulary such as “apps”, “smartphones”, and “tweets”. Gen Z is not only aware of these technological trends but have seamlessly integrated them into their daily lives.

Digital technology has shaped their global perspective and ability to connect with like-minded individuals, re-organise their voice, and advocate for the change they want. It has empowered them to become co-creators and not just collaborators. They also enjoy multi-modal learning styles, not just virtual, and are influenced through forums, not just peers.¹⁷

Gen Z are eager for “cutting-edge” digital technology, and their learning style reflects this. A full 98 percent have used technology and 80 percent use their smartphone as part of their formal education according to a Dell Technology global survey. Furthermore, 77 percent are willing to be technology leaders in their work or careers.¹⁸

In Australia, McCrindle Research indicates Gen Z’s preferred platforms for learning new skills are as follows: TikTok (48 percent); YouTube (42 percent); Instagram (46 percent). The figures below compare these preferences to previous generations (See Table 1).¹⁹

Perhaps one surprising change is the shift away from social media broadcasting. Dell states that 72 percent are careful about what they put on social media as it might affect their employment prospects.²⁰

In her book, *Cultivate Community*, Ashley Lin observed four patterns that have shaped Gen Z’s digital behaviour and the communities they seek to belong to:

1. Social media
2. Crowdsourcing
3. Curation
4. Online organising

The open-source movement and creative commons is evidence that people will labour for free to benefit strangers. For Gen Z, there’s currency in offering their own or sharing other people’s life experience as it offers compelling social proof for influencing change.

Social media platforms have made it easier for Gen Z to connect with the people they want. SnapChat and TikTok—41 percent of users are between 16–24—is where many Gen Z (and Gen Alpha) get their first taste of digital connection. In fact, they have also found new ways for older, less popular platforms to meet their needs. Despite being one of the oldest platforms, YouTube remains popular for its ability to collaborate with fellow creators. Facebook (Marketplace) has also gained popularity for buying and selling.²¹

Crowdsourcing is the online collection of information, opinions, and work-for-funds from a group of people, empowering content creatives and collaborators. Examples of crowdsourcing platforms include Airtasker, GoFundMe, and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.

Curation is the process of selecting and organising information. Until 1900, it was estimated that human knowledge doubled approximately every 100 years. This figure was reduced to 25 years after World War 2 (1945). However, by 2013, it was estimated to double every twelve hours.²²

In response to overwhelming amounts of information, Gen Z expects to access well researched, reviewed, and editorialised content of interest to them. In a recent study, 36 percent of Generation Z respondents say they “carefully curate” their online

presence, compared with 31 percent of millennials. Organisations, influencers, and content creators employ hashtags and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) to make it easier for their audiences to find them on social media and the web.²³

Online organising is collecting real life stories that illuminate the issues they want to see change in. Since the creation and demise of the peer-to-peer file sharing platform Napster, emerging generations increasingly see others’ online content available to them as free of ownership or cost. The open-source movement and creative commons is evidence that people will labour for free to benefit strangers. For Gen Z, there’s currency in offering their own or sharing other people’s life experience as it offers compelling social proof for influencing change.

Shared values

Radical inclusion

Gen Z are radically inclusive, aspiring to learn from and work with people who are geographically, culturally, and, arguably, ideologically different from them to create positive change in the world. McKinsey research also revealed that 66 percent of surveyed Gen Zers believe that communities are created by causes and interests, not by economic backgrounds or educational levels.²⁴

Digital communication provides them with a global window into lives and issues from vastly different cultures. According to Forbes, 65 percent of Gen Z want to create positive change for the

Gen Z	TikTok (48%); YouTube (42%); Instagram (46%)
Gen Y	Website (42%); YouTube (41%); Instagram (38%)
Gen X	Websites (35%); YouTube (27%); Instagram (15%)
Baby Boomers	Books (18%)

Table 1. Preferred platforms for learning new skills

causes they care about. Crowdfunding platforms such as Go Fund Me provide the means to achieve outcomes with greater speed and scaling impact compared with in person community.²⁵

Pluralism and connectivity

Devices bring work, school, social media, and entertainment into the same time and space. A Global Web Index survey found that 95 percent of Gen Z use a second device whilst watching TV.²⁶

Trust and relationship

For Gen Z, trust facilitates and promotes collaboration and has an important role in building and maintaining social relationships. McCrindle research revealed that 70 percent of Gen Z invest in brands that they trust through reviews (64 percent), friends (58 percent), and influencers (36 percent). According to the global survey by the IBM Institute for Business Value, 61 percent of teens surveyed would feel better sharing personal information with brands if they could trust it was being securely stored and protected.²⁷

Another important element of trust for Gen Z is predictability. The current “cancel culture” trend means they are hesitant to broadcast anything that could leave them feeling rejected. This has a profound influence on their views and practices of evangelism and missions.²⁸

Worldviews

Barna reports that biblical worldviews have declined with each successive generation since the beginning of the *information age*. Furthermore, Christian author Jonathan Morrow maintains that Gen Z is growing up in a world that is increasingly rejecting biblical moral values. Instead, they desire a world that has the characteristics that certain biblical principles allow to exist, because they are passionate about social justice, equality, and aid.²⁹

In a world where the rapid transmission of information has fuelled fear and uncertainty, Gen Z often wrestles with deep questions and concerns. They are apprehensive about institutions such as religion, Christianity, and mission, as they compare traditional approaches and attitudes with the more progressive



societal values of today. Campus ministry groups such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (AFES)³⁰ have responded accordingly. Instead of initiating conversation around doctrine, they begin with questions about church and cultural issues like ethnic diversity, reconciliation, and systematic justice. They have also moved from a model of explaining to a belonging and observance first approach.³¹

Sociological analysis

Cultivating community

Community must provide “a sense of cohesion and good intention.”
~ Fabian Pfortmüller, founder and CEO of the Together Institute

Lin has readapted traditional definitions of community to include “a group of people who build power together through belonging and mutual care.” For Gen Z, the digital space cultivates a sense of belonging, collective power, intentionality, and a willingness to be vulnerable to each other. Research by Tapataalk revealed 64 percent of Gen Z and millennials feel better understood by their online friends than they do by “real-world” friends.³²

Berger’s *Three movements in the social construction of realities* provides a framework for explaining how this “digital first” constructed identity of values and behaviours has been formed.³³

Externalisation is the ongoing, outpouring of human activity, producing new artefacts in the world. For Gen Z, technological production

is a primary carrier of cultural goods such as the smartphone, social media, and gaming platforms. These goods are often broadcast and selectively targeted according to their online activity and preferences through mass media. Marketers hope to persuade Gen Z of the benefits these goods will have on their lives, driving up demand.

Technological artifacts such as social media have produced new artifacts such as digital communities. With mass broadcasting channels like Twitter, now X, deemed too risky for Gen Z, *Digital Campfires* is a name describing a move towards more intimate connections through Discord channels, WhatsApp, or gaming chat groups such as Minecraft. In fact, gaming is not just about entertainment, it’s one of the ways Gen Z connect with friends.

Web 2.0 has also made it possible for more bi-directional conversation and dialog. Customers, members, brands, and communities can externalise their needs or values by interacting with each other, including publicly via social media comments or privately through messenger.

Objectivation is creating systems of meanings from different objects over time. Platforms such as Instagram create their own terms and conditions according to what they believe are acceptable “Community Standards”. In turn, digital communities are formed with rules based around shared values, interests, and curation of knowledge. Furthermore, ratings systems such as TripAdvisor or Apple App Store exist to establish trust. Constant connectivity has also driven the need for efficient

systems of communication such as using single letters, abbreviations, or emojis.³⁴

Internalisation is the subconscious acceptance of objectivised rules and standards. Digital artefacts such as smartphones and social media have shaped Gen Z's worldview, therefore they accept the rules and constructs integrating them into their lives.

Sherry Turkle observes a Gen Z trend called the “rule of three”. In this example, when at least three friends raise their heads during dinner, it signals to others that it's acceptable to lower their attention to their phones. Those with their heads up are expected to editorialise the conversation to the others.³⁵

What's it like?

Gen Z are digital natives born into a world of technological cultural artifacts they did not create. These tools have helped them absorb and curate overwhelming amounts of information and mobilise around the issues and causes they are concerned about with far greater reach.

Biblical worldviews

Gen Z's secular and biblical values have been significantly shaped by digital communication. Nevertheless, there is evidence that this isn't the sole carrier. McCrindle Research reveals a correlation between each generation's worldview and what is learned in educational institutions.³⁶

The evolution of and reliance on AI technology could have a profound effect on people's awareness of truth and authenticity.

Although they are radically inclusive, the thought of broadcasting opinions to the masses has created fear and anxiety around “cancel culture”. Their worldview doesn't reflect a collective understanding that the gospel is radically inclusive to all people and nations, nor that it offers freedom from the fear and uncertainty of their own mortality. Furthermore, spiritual transformation transcends worldly perspectives on justice and dignity. As Phillip Jenkins notes, “If we want to visualize a ‘typical’ contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.” This highlights how Christianity is increasingly vibrant in the Global South, with believers in these regions often embodying the transformative power of the gospel in ways that challenge Western perceptions.³⁷

Community and relationship

Philosopher Henry David Thoreau describes three chairs that affect our communication and relationship with one another: solitude, friends and family, and society.³⁸

The connectedness and pluralistic nature of digital community has left little room for solitude. Turkle suggests that solitude and reflection help stimulate new ideas; without it the collaboration that Gen Z desire so much will suffer. Gen Z are aware of this. One trend to emerge is “silent walking”, without the distraction of phones or earpieces or other forms of technology.³⁹

Constant connectivity also has a negative impact on meaningful relationship and understanding, causing a lack of empathy and loneliness. Whilst empathy is a preferred leadership quality for Gen Z, research also found a 40 percent decrease in empathy in college students over the past twenty years. Empathy for our friends, family, and society improves when one-to-one, in-person conversation occurs as people can more easily detect social cues and body language.⁴⁰

Although Lin agrees that digital communities don't hold the same value as in-person for cultivating relationship, she points out that they do introduce new ways to bringing people together that would otherwise be impossible. Lin also argues that a major cause of loneliness is the decline of public spaces that reflect the types of community Gen Z crave.⁴¹

Turkle introduces the idea of a fourth chair in today's digital age: *our conversations with technology*. The evolution of and reliance on AI technology could have a profound effect on people's awareness of truth and authenticity. Furthermore, as surveillance into the private lives of others becomes more common, the “digital campfire” spaces of Gen Z will perhaps feel less safe to be in. However, by engaging with Gen Z in their digital-first environment, there is an opportunity to build enough trust to transition into more meaningful, in-person relationships. This approach acknowledges their comfort and



familiarity with online interactions, which can serve as a stepping stone toward deeper, face-to-face connections.⁴²

Implications for mission

To the Jews I (Paul) became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I (Paul) became like one under the law (though I myself—Paul—am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.

1 Corinthians 9:20 NIV

Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of the Billy Graham Centre, once said that “The future we know is going to be different than the past.” The evidence suggests generational change is another cultural dynamic that will impact cross-cultural mission and mobilisation into the future. This means being actively present in these new spaces to better understand and influence others. It does not mean “fitting in” through distorting biblical truth.⁴³

Curation and online organising

If the church and mission organisations are to evangelise and mobilise Gen Z, they must first reach out and engage in the digital spaces where they are active. They must have an online presence through a website, social media, and YouTube video to facilitate curation; editorialising why they are and how and why mission is for Gen Z. Through video storytelling and testimonials

of missionaries and new believers, there’s also opportunity to demonstrate alternative global perspectives that are both diverse and biblically sound.

Global community of content creators

Given Gen Z’s identity as digital content creators, the church and mission should consider creating and promoting digital campfires. These communities would facilitate safe and

rapidly shifting, there’s opportunity for Gen Z to learn how they can best partner with indigenous church movements. To be effective for cross-cultural mission, they too need to learn how to venture into new cultural environments that are outside their digital space. Opportunities in the short-term might include a mission trip to help them better understand the cultures their digital content needs to engage. There’s also further opportunity to mobilise content creators beyond international borders and traditional

sending countries, including believers from the people groups being evangelised.

While the digital space offers both opportunities and challenges for communication, relationship-building, and community engagement, it is neither entirely positive nor negative. The church and mission organizations must learn to steward the digital tools that shape emerging



accessible collaboration between diverse backgrounds, fostering trust and a shared sense of purpose and belonging. Notably, digital communities such as *indigitous.org* and *gtac.jp* already exist for creatives who are passionate about sharing the good news in places like Japan.

Opportunities for learning and partnering

With the gap between missionaries from the Global South and the Global North

generations, avoiding the temptation to use technology in ways that could hinder others. This responsibility also entails using technology to create a genuinely welcoming environment, while striking a balance between digital engagement and face-to-face interaction. In this way, technology can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier in fostering authentic community.

Conclusion

Gen Z is a unique and digitally connected generation profoundly influenced by the rapid advancements in technology and the events of their time. They have a digital-first approach to community and communication which has led to a global perspective and the ability to mobilise effectively for causes they care about.

Their values reflect diversity, inclusivity, and a concern for issues like justice and the environment, yet other forms of biblical morality and the Great Commission are undervalued. Although digital communication has had an impact on these worldviews,

If the church and mission organisations are to evangelise and mobilise Gen Z, they must first reach out and engage in the digital spaces where they are active. They must have an online presence through a website, social media, and YouTube video to facilitate curation; editorialising who they are and how and why mission is for Gen Z.

The church and mission organizations must learn to steward the digital tools that shape emerging generations, avoiding the temptation to use technology in ways that could hinder others. This responsibility also entails using technology to create a genuinely welcoming environment...

educational institutions are also an influencing factor.

Gen Z's engagement with digital platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube, has shifted their preferred modes of learning and social interaction. However, their constant connectivity has reduced opportunities for solitude and deeper relationship, raising concerns about declining empathy and loneliness.

The church and mission organisations seeking to engage Gen Z must adapt to their digital world. Furthermore, they must create an online presence harmonious with Gen Zers' preference to curate, collaborate, and make a difference. They must also be good stewards of digital technology, ensuring it doesn't become a stumbling block for spiritual growth.

In a rapidly changing world, it's imperative that the church and missions continue to reflect and adapt to these new and other emerging cultural landscapes that shape our future. **MRT**

¹ Jolene Erlacher and Katy White, *Mobilising Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2022).

² See Mark 16:16; Matthew 28:19–20; and Romans 10:14–15.

³ Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Centre, 17 January 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> (accessed 17 October 2024).

⁴ Ashley Fell, Sophie Renton, and Mark McCrindle, *The Generations Defined: Navigating the New Landscape of Employees and Consumers* (Bella Vista, N.S.W: McCrindle Research, 2023), 11.

⁵ "The Information Age is a historical period that began in the mid-20th century, characterized by a rapid epochal shift from the traditional industry established by the Industrial Revolution to an

economy primarily based upon information technology. The onset of the Information Age can be associated with the development of transistor technology." https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/information-age/m0ljl_?hl=en (accessed 21 October 2024).

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⁷ Dimock, "Defining Generations."

⁸ Ashley Lin, *Cultivate Community: A Guide to Tending Digital Spaces* (Potomac, MD: New Degree, 2021).

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¹⁰ Marc R. Prensky, *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom: Hopeful Essays for 21st Century Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2012).

¹¹ Erlacher and White, *Mobilising Gen Z*; Fontein, "Everything Social Marketers Need to Know about Generation Z."

¹² Fell, Renton, and McCrindle, *The Generations Defined*, 36; Dimock, "Defining Generations."

¹³ Erlacher and White, *Mobilising Gen Z*.

¹⁴ Dimock, "Defining Generations"; Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future* (New York: Atria, 2018); Erlacher and White, *Mobilising Gen Z*; Prensky, *From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom*.

¹⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 30.

¹⁶ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016).

¹⁷ Fell, Renton, and McCrindle, *The Generations Defined*, 10.

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¹⁹ Fell, Renton, and McCrindle, *The Generations Defined*, 37.

²⁰ Dell Technologies US, "Gen Z: The Future Has Arrived."

²¹ Fontein, "Everything Social Marketers Need to Know about Generation Z."

²² David Schilling, "Knowledge Doubling Every 12 Months, Soon to Be Every 12 Hours," Industry Tap, 19 April 2013, <https://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950> (accessed 17 October 2024).

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³⁷ Erlacher and White, *Mobilising Gen Z*; Romans 5:1–5; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

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³⁹ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 47; Georgina Noack, "'Silent Walking' Is a Movement Taking Gen Z by Storm, but It's Copping Criticism," News.com.au, 11 October 2023, <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/fitness/exercise/silent-walking-is-a-movement-taking-gen-z-by-storm-but-its-copping-criticism/news-story/598b220ca945f952ac4bd7bedb174cbd> (accessed 17 October 2024).

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Footsteps of Faith: The Life and Mission of James Huston Edgar in the Tibetan Highlands

Xue Jun Xuan and Nara

Xue Jun Xuan and Nara are qualified researchers.

Introduction

In Isaiah 52:7, the prophet Isaiah declares,

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those
who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion, "Your
God reigns!"

This verse aptly describes James Huston Edgar, who travelled primarily on foot to share the word of God with lamas residing in monasteries high in the mountains.

Early life and preparation

Edgar was born on 19 August 1872 at Clunie Estate near Harrow, Victoria, Australia.¹ In 1876, at the age of three, he moved with his mother and brother to the foothills of the Southern Alps in Otago, South Island, New Zealand.² Growing up on virgin land, and being the oldest of seven siblings, James had to hunt rabbits to help feed the family.³

Calling to missionary work

Joining the China Inland Mission

At the age of twenty-six, on 22 October 1898, Edgar arrived in Shanghai, marking the beginning of a thirty-seven-year missionary career, the majority of which he dedicated to the Tibetan Marches of Sichuan.⁴ The only exceptions were a five-year Home Assignment—which he openly expressed his dislike for—and brief periods of famine relief in Yingchow, Anhwei (1912)

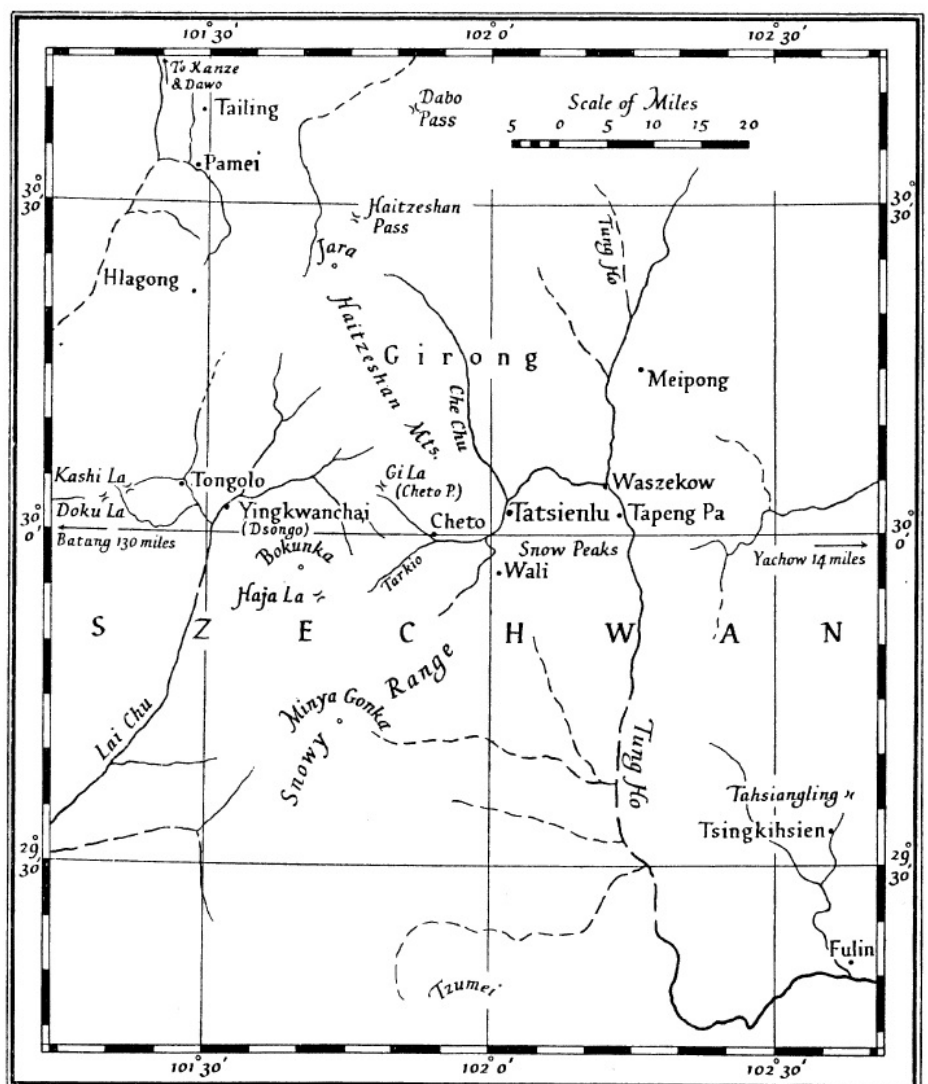
and overseeing women's work in Yangchow, Jiangsu (1913–14).

Adapting to a new culture

His first task upon arriving in China was to shave the front of his head, attach a pigtail at the back, and don Chinese clothing. He then embarked on a six-month language study program in Anking, Anhwei.⁵ However, he never liked

formal schooling due to numerous rules and constant instruction.

Edgar felt a calling to Tibet after Edna Bavin and Florence Young of the China Inland Mission (CIM) visited Otago in 1895 and said "they had been on the edge of" the forbidden land of Tibet.⁶ Having expressed a desire to go to Tibet upon joining the CIM, Edgar was dismayed when, after his language study, he was sent to Yingchow.⁷



Sketch-map of the country around Tatsienlu, in J. H. Edgar, "Notes on the Mountains about Tatsienlu," *Geographical Journal* 82 (1933): 265.

In 1900, when many missionaries were killed during the Boxer Uprising, Edgar chose to assist fellow missionaries fleeing from Honan to Yingchow, delaying his own departure despite being instructed to leave.⁸

Missionary work in Tibet

Journey to Tatsienlu

In 1901, he received orders to go to Tatsienlu (modern-day Kangding), a city hundreds of miles up the Yangtze River. He risked drowning during his boat travels and spent days on foot to reach his destination.⁹

*Mission Strategies and Methods*¹⁰

Personal distribution of Scripture

Settled in Tatsienlu with a full view of the mountains, he marveled at the unexplored land and devised strategies to disseminate the Gospels and Acts into the hands of literate Tibetans, especially the lamas. His primary method involved personally delivering Tibetan Bibles through visits to lamaseries located in the Tibetan Marches. This involved miles of travelling on foot while simultaneously exploring cities for potential missionary settlements. Kangding, being a commercial center and a significant tea-exporting hub for Western China, was identified as strategically important.



J. Huston Edgar, frontispiece in his book *The Land of Mystery, Tibet* (London: CIM, 1928).



Crossing a river in Tibet by gliding over a bamboo rope, in Edgar, *The Land of Mystery, Tibet*, 20.

Establishing a presence in Kangding

To capture a wider audience, Edgar set up a shop in Kangding where travelers—caravaners, pilgrims, trappers, and commercial visitors—could listen to his sermons and purchase the Tibetan Bibles. Even illiterate Tibetans, possessing a superstitious reverence for the Tibetan script and driven by natural curiosity, would bring the Scriptures to the educated ones—most likely the lamas—to read.¹¹

Commitment to extensive travel

As a rule, Edgar was committed to traveling at least six months each year into the Tibetan interior.¹² Gifted with a spirit of adventure, he was once questioned whether he travelled for adventure or for God's work. Edgar would bring as many Bibles as he could carry and sell as many as possible. He would even sell them to bandits whom he frequently encountered on the road. He lived by this motto:

I would always make
His work the chief work,
and if adventure came,
it would be adventure for
God and not for self. God
first in everything.¹³

He would explore intentionally if it helped spread the good news of Jesus Christ to others; every journey he undertook was for that purpose.

Challenges and hardships

Navigating the Tibetan Plateau

As described by George Kraft, Tibet is like a many-legged table turned upside down, with more than half of the plateau over 15,000 feet above sea level.¹⁴ Travelers needed to pass up and down the “legs”—the mountain ranges with passes of formidable heights—which formed nearly impassable barriers to the outside world.

Qualities for survival and success

What attributes are needed for those venturing into Tibet? Edgar's life offers some insights. As a teenager, he went off to fend for himself, engaging in farming, cutting giant forest trees as a bushman, setting rabbit traps (rabbiting), and doing various odd jobs. Attending church occasionally, Edgar's talents were spotted by Rev. William Scorgie, who became his mentor. Scorgie lent him books and tutored him in subjects beyond the common high school curriculum. Edgar read avidly and was attracted to the strange places of the world beyond.¹⁵

Often without a penny in his pocket, Edgar travelled around Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania. Yet, he stated in his testimonies that “the Lord has never left me in want, but has always supplied my needs.”¹⁶ These early life experiences molded Edgar's resilience and ability to cope with loneliness and solitude. Robert Cunningham, his long-time partner in the field, described Edgar as “a bird of passage, being more at home in the saddle and on the highway than in the comforts of a

foreign house ... nothing confined him more than a house with four walls.”¹⁷

He roamed the land, often alone, enduring unknown difficulties, including severe weather conditions, impassable mountain ranges, and swollen rivers. In an interview he commented: I prefer being by myself, for various reasons. It is a very rough life which few can stand, and it would often have increased my difficulties to have had another missionary with me.¹⁸

Encounters on the road

Foot injuries

Generally traveling on foot, and at times on the backs of horses, mules, or yaks when permitted by the government, Edgar covered vast distances.¹⁹ An example is his 1916 journey, during which he wrote: “I have been on the road nine months of the twelve, and traversed more than three thousand miles on foot and about one thousand five hundred on horseback.”²⁰

Both modes of travel came with risks such as frostbite, blisters, and frequent changes of unfamiliar, wild Tibetan horses. He endured injured toes, bruised and bleeding feet,²¹ and frostbite while negotiating his journeys by foot. Once, an inflamed foot confined him for a week, making him unable to travel more than two to three li (a Chinese unit of distance that ranged from about 500–600 meters) per day for the next twenty-six days.²² When crossing a 16,000-foot pass, Edgar’s feet became so frostbitten that he considered he might be unable to continue his missionary travels, leading him to contemplate preparing literature, translations, and original works for the Tibetans instead.²³

Risks of horseback travel

It was not uncommon for Edgar to use many different, unfamiliar mounts. Though the local custom was to provide ponies and porters for travelers, due to the lamas’ dislike of him, they often provided the wildest, unbroken horses for Edgar and his team. On the way to Siangcheng in 1907, both Edgar and his companion Muir met with accidents while riding these animals. Edgar fell with the saddle, his foot caught in the stirrup, and was bruised from head to foot and suffered several cracked ribs.

More than twenty days passed before he received medical attention. Then followed an attack of pleurisy.²⁴ While traveling to Lu Ting Hsien in 1935, both he and his mount fell off a cliff, but he was miraculously unhurt due to God’s protection. “It was a pleasant surprise to find himself reposing unhurt between the skyward extending legs” of his youthful gelding, Bucephalus.²⁵

Facing Lawlessness

Lawlessness was prevalent in the land. Brigands were a real danger, and even soldiers were robbed. Only the daring would travel in the region. On one occasion, Edgar walked into a market occupied by a band of five hundred heavily armed Bashi-bazouks—irregular soldiers known for their lack of discipline and often brutal behavior. Undaunted, he began selling his Gospels, demanding payments, then slipped away from the bewildered gang.²⁶

Edgar seemed to enjoy the excitement in these encounters and had some thrilling times. Once, a bandit leader,

his legs.”²⁹ Once, after being savagely bitten, he was saved by a treatment for rabies—fourteen injections—that had fortunately just arrived from America for the medical missionaries.³⁰ The same risk existed when entering monasteries where Tibetan dogs were often let loose.³¹

Though the risk from brigands was not as great in the mountains, the traveling team often faced hazards such as landslides. Edgar had experienced a granite boulder whizz past his head with a margin of perhaps six inches.³²

Overcoming daily inconveniences

Finding suitable accommodation on the road was challenging as inns were typically dirty and infested with vermin.³³ At times, the traveling team opted for open temples, which were usually quieter and less filthy. The cold in the mountains was often intense, especially during snowstorms. The camp bed could become wet and even frost-covered.³⁴ At one point, Edgar slept for six nights in soaked bedding

For more than thirty years, Edgar dedicated himself to publicizing, selling, and distributing the Scriptures. On every journey, he carried and sold as many Bibles as he could. His ambition was to circulate one million Gospels among the lamas and nomads before retiring from the border regions.

after missing a target—a goat—pointed a rifle at Edgar as a better target. “I dared him,” Edgar later recounted. Only when the bandit’s companion knocked the rifle upward did the “picturesque situation” end.²⁷ On another occasion, while travelling downstream in a boat, Edgar was fired upon and ordered by bandits to come ashore. After negotiating with the chief, he was allowed to proceed, provided he paid the expense of the bullet, which he gladly did.²⁸

Risks from wild animals and natural hazards

Besides dangers from robbers, Edgar faced almost daily encounters with mad dogs—a menace on the plains that he described as “running between

and wore drenched clothing for eight days.³⁵ In addition to enduring frostbitten feet and hands, he often faced hunger when food was unobtainable.

Edgar habitually cooked for himself; he had witnessed other travelers dining on dog meat—perhaps that of a watchdog!³⁶ Food was also scarce in the villages due to the frequent ransacking by brigands. Moreover, food-related diseases like cholera and dysentery were common. On one occasion, a Christian invited him to a potluck, but upon arrival, he found the place deserted—the inhabitants had already fled to the mountains due to a cholera outbreak. Without cooking utensils, he prepared what food he could obtain and ate with many prayers. The next day, he heard

that nine corpses had been carried out from the surrounding houses.³⁷

Cultural reflections and personal adaption

Edgar observed that the Tibetans wore clothes handed down from one generation to the next. Since these garments were rarely washed, they occasionally gave off an unpleasant odor. To cope with this, Edgar usually carried a bottle of *eau de cologne*.³⁸

Living among the Tibetans taught Edgar that standards of cleanliness are often influenced by geography. At Tibet's altitude, people used butter to moisturize themselves instead of washing which often could result in cracked skin.³⁹ Adapting to local customs, Edgar boasted that during a six-week camping expedition in the mountains, he had not washed his socks even once.⁴⁰ He reflected that "Europeans are making too much of a fetish of personal cleanliness."⁴¹

Memorable experiences

Visit to a nunnery

With permission from the government, Edgar was able to gain admission to an important nunnery renowned for its strict discipline, where no males—even relatives—were permitted within a three-mile radius.⁴²

Upon his arrival, women with solemn expressions, shaven heads, and dressed in priestly robes informed him, "Unauthorized males have no right here, but you have authority, and our gates are open. You may do what seems good to you, still if you are gentlemen, proceed no farther, and on no account enter our dwellings."⁴³ Edgar and his team respectfully abided by their strict rules. Following instructions from the matron, 150 females marched past Edgar in single file, each receiving books, tracts, and a catechism. About 60 then sat demurely on the rooftops, listening as Edgar preached on God and his salvation—the message contained in the books they had received!

Encounter with Tibetan customs

As Edgar left the nunnery and reached just outside its walls, he encountered a saucer-like depression, neatly paved

with stones. A foul odor hung in the air, and scattered fragments of flesh were visible. Bloodstains marked many of the stones, while large vultures hissed and hopped nearby. When he inquired, the guide explained: "This is the arena where the nuns cut up the bodies of the dead and feed them to the vultures."⁴⁴ Edgar and his team had unknowingly discovered the site where one of the most mysterious customs of Tibet was carried out.

Legacy and contributions

Lifelong commitment to Scripture distribution

For more than thirty years, Edgar dedicated himself to publicizing, selling, and distributing the Scriptures. On every journey, he carried and sold as many Bibles as he could. His ambition was to circulate one million Gospels among the lamas and nomads before retiring from the border regions. Though he may not have achieved this exact number, as Cunningham remarked: "It is now quite difficult to discover, even among Incarnations, anyone who is absolutely ignorant of the Christian Message."⁴⁵

The impact of the Bible in Tibet

Reverence and misuse

While some books were used as shoe padding or children's toys among the Chinese,⁴⁶ Tibetans highly revered their literature and treated the Scriptures with respect. Some would tear pages to attach to poles as prayer flags. Matthew seemed to be the Gospel most favored—possibly because the list of names in

Chapter 1:1–18 served as a substitute for the Sanskrit "*Om mani padme hum*," or the "*Om ma dre mu ye sa le dug*" of the Bön tradition! At times, pages of John 3 were used as charms against demons.⁴⁷

Transformative encounters

But the Bible is no ordinary book; it is God's message to humanity with unique power. Once, in a preaching hall in Kangding, Edgar noticed a yak driver absorbed in his teaching. He offered the man the book of Psalms, but the yak driver humbly responded that he could not read. Encouraging him to share it with his friends, the driver left happily with the book.

Almost a year later, while seeking shelter in a lamasery, the yak driver offered the book to a Living Buddha. The lama turned the pages and read aloud:

The heavens declare the glory of God ...
There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard ...
Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world ...
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

The words of the Hebrew psalmist were so beautiful and true that they moved him deeply, his thick spectacles became misty with emotion. He immediately wrote a letter to the foreign preacher in faraway Kangding:

In reading the 19th Psalm I have seen the truth. Is there any more wisdom like this on earth? If so, I would like to receive a copy.⁴⁸



Lamas of the Jahrung tribe, in Edgar, *The Land of Mystery, Tibet*, 17.

The letter, carried by a travelling merchant and passed from hand to hand, reached Edgar more than a year later. When the next yak caravan departed from Kangding to the high passes, among the bundles of tea were many copies of the Bible for the Living Buddha and his friends.

Facing ridicule and skepticism

Despite his dedication, Edgar sometimes faced ridicule from both strangers and fellow workers. Crowds often stared at, mocked, or openly insulted him as “the man with the Book.”⁴⁹ Some missionaries also questioned the value of the widespread distribution efforts. As Cunningham remarked, “His ministry was extensive more than intensive.”⁵⁰ To those who suggested his work was a waste of time, Edgar responded by pointing his critics to the natural world, highlighting “prodigality of the seed provision for the preservation of the species. In the morning sow thy seed, he said in effect, and in the evening withhold not thy hand for thou knowest not which shall prosper whether this or that, or whether both shall be alike good.”⁵¹

Unwavering conviction and defying restrictions

In addition to the hazardous environment, foreign travelers in Tibet faced many formal and informal restrictions. Although two-thirds of the land might be accessible, much of it was ruled by princes and lamas who viewed foreigners with suspicion and fanaticism. Entering such regions could be extremely dangerous for

Europeans, who risked persecution for inciting a breach of the peace.⁵²

Despite these dangers, Edgar was deeply convinced that “the Word of God is not bound,” as stated in 2 Timothy 2:9. He believed that “it cannot be prosecuted for being illegally on prohibited territory; it cannot be accused of inciting to a breach of the peace; it cares nothing for blizzards, snows, frosts, or other unfavorable climatic conditions.”⁵³

For example, in a 1918 interview, Edgar recounted an incident when he was granted permission to journey westward along the main road for twenty-three days, and no further, as treaties between England, Russia, and China forbade any additional progress. Despite these restrictions, he had on multiple occasions gone beyond the permitted limits—even by hundreds of miles—without interference. On one particular journey, undertaken at the Mission’s special request to explore the possibility of missionary work, he ventured into unexplored territory that was prohibited even to the Chinese, where being found without permission carried the penalty of death.⁵⁴

Seeking encouragement

Though exhibiting tremendous determination and courage, Edgar considered himself sensitive and timid. His yearning for encouragement was evident in his remarks:

Now missionaries are human, so I sometimes wonder if an official “back patter” might not be an asset in the Mission. I know that scores

and scores would respond to kind words, and a little attention.⁵⁵

He reminisced that some large factories found that it paid well to employ a man whose sole job was to pat the workers encouragingly on the back.⁵⁶

Contributions beyond missionary work

Contributions to knowledge

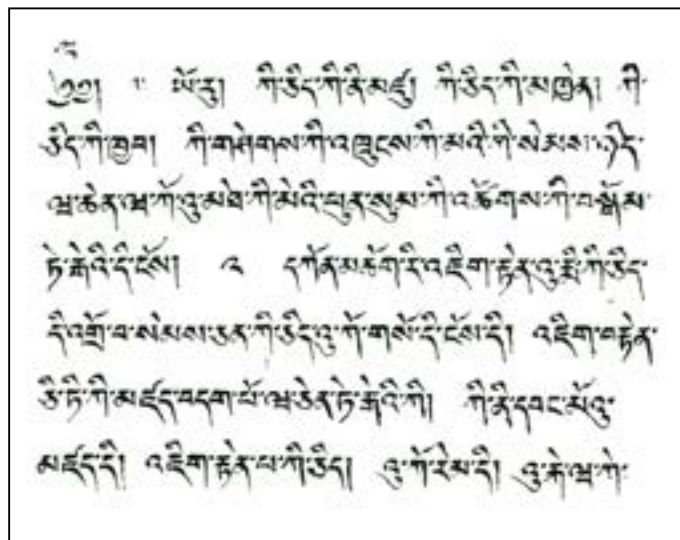
As Edgar traveled, he meticulously recorded detailed pictures of the peoples and customs, terrains and streams, clouds and weather, plants and animals. A prolific writer, he published a total of 184 works.⁵⁷ Though a fellow of the International Geographical Society, he chose to submit the majority of his work to the *Journal of the West China Border Research Society* (a less well-known journal), intending to attract a wider circulation for the journal.⁵⁸

Collecting and preserving culture

An avid collector, Edgar gathered objects of interest or with exotic appeal. During his late teens, while residing with the Maori people who had formally adopted him as one of their own, an incident occurred. The Maori discovered in his swag bag a skull with two bullet holes—believed to be related to a Maori war. Enraged by his disrespect, they made Edgar “march with the skull in his hand through a line of serious and silent Maoris to the burying ground.”⁵⁹ After the skull was buried, he had to remain all night in the graveyard among the spirits whom the Maori believed he had



Executive Committee of the West China Border Research Society in Chengdu, 1935 (Edgar standing, center). Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.



Portion of a tract in Jahrung written by Edgar, from his book *The Land of Mystery, Tibet*, 61.

offended. This offense also resulted in his expulsion from the community.

Nonetheless, his passion for collecting remained during his journeys in Tibet. Edgar contributed about seventy Paleolithic stone tools collected from China-Tibetan borderland to the West China Union University Museum of Archaeology.⁶⁰ Edgar was also among the fifty foreign missionaries and a number of Chinese friends who contributed to the development of this museum.⁶¹

Linguistic endeavors

Additionally, Edgar collected some 4,000 Jaurung words—a language spoken by people living in the mountains between Tibet and China. Though not known as a remarkable linguist, he was always interested in relating one language to another. With the aid of a lama, he translated these words into Tibetan and published the first Jaurung-Tibetan Dictionary.⁶²

Despite his linguistic skills, Edgar encountered difficulty explaining “*Kong-Chog*,” the Tibetan term used for God (still in use today). The term invariably meant “the Buddha, his Law, and the Church.” Throughout his journey, with the help of a simple tract, Edgar had incessantly endeavored to convey to his audience the true meaning of “Who is God?”⁶³

Unyielding curiosity

A natural-born explorer with immense curiosity and a penchant for recording information, Edgar seized every opportunity to do so. Even while suffering great pain from an injury, he was determined to find out and record the height of the mountain his team was on. He tried to boil water using his hypsometer, as the temperature at which the water boils can indicate the mountain’s altitude. It gave him great joy to tell his friend later: “I have done it! It boils at 185 degrees!”⁶⁴

Guiding future missionary efforts

During the CIM Forward Movement in 1929—which called for prayers for 200 new workers to China, including the dependent territories of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet—Edgar’s extensive knowledge provided valuable guidance to the organization. After

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weighing the relative importance of different centres and prayerfully considering their options, the CIM identified Mowkung as a strategic site.⁶⁵ Three young workers were appointed to Mowkung, previously known as one of the Chinese “Five Colonies.”⁶⁶

Events preceding Edgar’s death

In May 1935, Robert Cunningham became seriously ill and needed to journey 2,000 miles to the coast for medical treatment. Mrs. Edgar accompanied the Cunninghams, and together they left for Kiating on 30 May 1935. Edgar was relieved that his wife was out of the immediate danger zone, especially since the army had already reached Luting on the 26th. Being left alone, Edgar was full of emotion. He and his baggage man went to Bogland, 13,000 feet above sea level, and stayed for twenty-five days before returning to Kangding, grateful that the army had not entered the city.⁶⁷

The approach of the Red Army was still imminent. Soon afterwards Edgar suffered a heart attack. Unable to walk any distance and with no reliable person to help him escape, Edgar had no choice but to remain in the house, expecting the Communist soldiers to enter the city at any time.⁶⁸ Dr. J. Howard Jeffrey—a physician and one of the three workers assigned to Mowkung—traveled to Kangding in early August 1935 to attend to Edgar and to assist him in leaving.

The Mission hoped that Edgar would return to Chengdu with Dr. Jeffrey in October. This was also Edgar’s desire, but leaving would mean abandoning Mrs. Edgar and the Cunninghams, who had returned to Kangding in late September. As the Red Army was to the north of the city, such a venture would have been the greater of the two evils. Therefore,

he determined to stay. The Red Army moved south, threatening Kangding in many places, and the city was cut off from Chengdu for three months.⁶⁹

On 19 March 1936, Mrs. Edgar reported in a letter that Edgar had contracted the flu and was bedridden. Confined to bed, he was “content to stay there for the second time in their married life.”⁷⁰ Five days later, at the age of 63, he went to be with the Lord.

Conclusion

Summary of his life and legacy

Having joined CIM in 1898, and excluding the five years he spent on home assignment, Edgar had devoted thirty-two years serving in the borderlands of Tibet and Sichuan. This paper has captured some snapshots of his life in those regions.

During these years, Edgar lived in the harsh and hazardous environment of the highlands, amidst political uprisings with unpredictable outcomes. He suffered from various illnesses, frostbite, and multiple injuries with little access to medical help, and faced frequent attacks from bandits as well as dangerous wild animals. He also endured loneliness and, at times, humiliation from the local people and even more so from his missionary colleagues. Despite all these challenges, he remained a joyful man with a spirit of exploration and a keen sense of curiosity, always ready to discover new things even in adverse situations.

Reflecting on the difficult circumstances of his life and work, Edgar noted in his 1925 annual report that he could personally attest to the joyful exhilaration of such a life. He explained that when a missionary rode a lively pony into mountain villages or moved among busy groups of travelers and camps guarded by big barking dogs, he experienced

some of the carefree adventure that drovers or boundary riders felt in the remote areas of Australia known as the Never-Never.⁷¹ That was likely Edgar's most productive year, as he distributed 173,500 books and tracts, with 71,500 books and 102,000 tracts. Marshall Broomhall, the editorial secretary of the CIM, after reviewing Edgar's report, observed that these rough and often harsh circumstances were transformed when God was in them, revealing "the manifold grace of God in the midst of manifold trials and temptations, as well as manifold joys."⁷² Indeed, God had prepared Edgar from a young age, sustained him throughout his missionary work, and made his efforts fruitful. **MRT**

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² "Obituary," *The Horsham Times*, 1 May 1936, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article73097008> (accessed 1 October 2024).

³ A. G. Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away* (London: Edinburgh House Press and Melbourne: The Book Depot, 1944).

⁴ The term 'March' is defined as "a border region: frontier; especially: a district originally set up to defend a boundary" and usually used in plural (Merriam Webster Dictionary). For further information, see "March (territory)," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=March_\(territory\)&oldid=1256660453](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=March_(territory)&oldid=1256660453) (accessed 15 November 2024). See also James Huston Edgar, *The Marches of the Mantze* (London: CIM, 1908), <https://archive.org/details/cu31924023218393> (accessed 15 November 2024).

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⁶ Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*; "KELSO," *Otago Witness*, Issue 2150, 9 May 1895, 22, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/OW18950509.2.91> (accessed 1 October 2024).

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⁹ Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*; *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 October 1901): 121.

¹⁰ Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*; J. Huston Edgar, "Saints in a Buddhist Sense," *West China Missionary News* (November 1924): 27.

¹¹ J. H. Edgar, "The Land of Mystery—Tibet," *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 July 1927): 101.

¹² "Queer Race of Pygmies," *Molong Express and Western District Advertiser*, 24 March 1928, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article139472525> (accessed 1 October 2024).

¹³ Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*.

¹⁴ George C. Kraft, *Tibet: The Roof of the World* (Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, n.d.).

¹⁵ "Obituary," *The Horsham Times*; Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*.

¹⁶ Edgar, "Testimonies by Outgoing Missionaries."

¹⁷ Tibetan (Robert Cunningham), "On the Frontier," *West China Missionary News* (May 1937): 11.

¹⁸ "Interview with Mr. J. H. Edgar, F.R.G.S. -- No. 1," *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 June 1918): 43.

¹⁹ "Interview with Mr. J. H. Edgar," *China's Millions*.

²⁰ J. H. Edgar, "Pioneering among the Kin Ch'wan Hordes," *China's Millions*, British edition (May 1916): 60.

²¹ J. H. Edgar, "A Bookseller on the Tibetan Border," *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 April 1923): 61.

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²³ Dr. Taylor, "Editorial: Mr Edgar," *West China Missionary News* (May 1936): 3.

²⁴ Castleton, *Rough, Tough and Far Away*; "Missionary Work in Thibet," *The Advertiser*, 14 February 1908, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article5125312> (accessed October 1, 2024); "West China Border Research Society: Program of Open Meetings 1934–1935," *West China Missionary News* (October 1934): 39.

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³⁰ Edgar, "A Mission Station at the Tibetan Foot Hills."

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³² Edgar, "Thy Word is Truth."

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³⁴ J. H. Edgar, "A Five Hundred Miles Journey on the Tibetan Frontier," *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 July 1924): 108.

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⁴³ J. H. Edgar, "A Tibetan Nunnery," *China's Millions*, Australasian edition (1 October 1927): 157.

⁴⁴ Edgar, "A Tibetan Nunnery."

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⁵² Edgar, "The Land of Mystery—Tibet," 100.

⁵³ Edgar, "The Land of Mystery—Tibet," 100.

⁵⁴ "Interview with Mr. J. H. Edgar," *China's Millions*.

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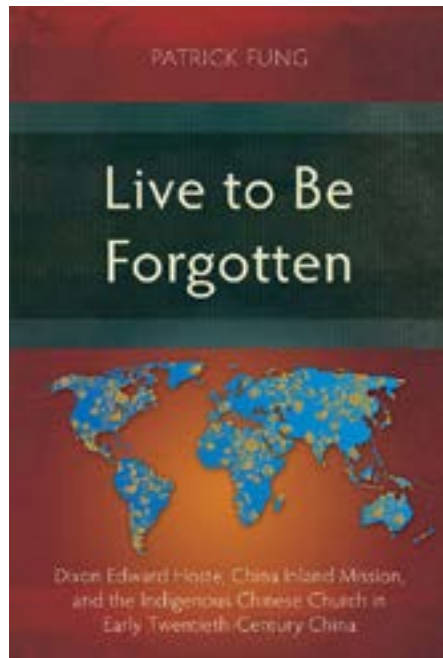
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Live to Be Forgotten: Dixon Edward Hoste, China Inland Mission, and the Indigenous Chinese Church in Early Twentieth-Century China

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Reviewed by Eunice Au



Patrick Fung, who served as the tenth General Director of CIM/OMF, is keenly interested in understanding the contributions made by previous General Directors of the mission. In this book, he focuses on D. E. Hoste, who, as the second General Director of the CIM, expanded its vision to empower the Chinese church to be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. In an era when many mission organizations fostered dependency on foreign workers or foreign-supported workers, Hoste de-emphasized the role of the missionary and instead focused on the health and growth of the indigenous Chinese church.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to Hoste and his early work under the renown Chinese leader, Pastor Hsi. Chapter 2 explores Hoste's leadership in responding to the Boxer Crisis in an unexpected and unconventional manner. Though he was just learning to wear the mantle of leadership recently placed upon him, he displayed meekness in response to the violent aggression and harm suffered by many CIM missionaries.

Chapters 3 and 4 articulate Hoste's vision for the indigenous Chinese church

and how that naturally led to the focused policy of developing self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches. Fung concludes the book by describing Hoste's legacy to both the CIM and the Chinese church. A final chapter summarizes the contributions of Hoste as a visionary leader, faithful friend, and one with an unassuming character. Recapping Hoste's legacy, Fung challenges us to give ourselves to undivided devotion to the Lord, with the goal, like Hoste, of living to be forgotten.

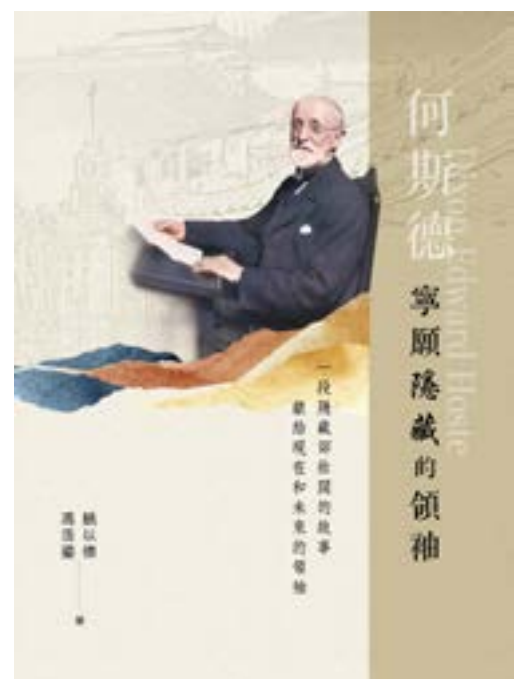
The book includes content that is both unexpected and, yet, totally integrated into its scope. Fung carefully explores how the CIM's founder, Hudson Taylor, and Hoste were aligned in their thinking. He also highlights the growing question of women's leadership in CIM during Hoste's term as General Director and states that although Hoste supported the advancement of women in leadership, the mission was not yet ready to fully embrace it. Fung also helps the reader consider the ways that the anti-Christian movement during the 1920s in China spurred Hoste to solidify his commitment to fostering the indigenization of the Chinese church.

In many ways, the book reads like an academic thesis as it is based on one. Fung's research brings out the context of the age as he evaluates historical documents to support his conclusions regarding who Hoste was as a person—considering his character and personality—and as a leader—evaluating his contributions and legacy. He quotes both well-known sources and some that had not been commonly used, such as the CIM China Council Minutes. Fung's research includes both Chinese and English sources and provides adequate translations for the reader who doesn't read Chinese.

The book will be of greatest interest to those who want to know the history of the Chinese church before 1950 and those seeking to know the motivations and methods of the CIM in the first half of the twentieth century. Readers will gain an increased awareness of the complexity of early twentieth-century China and come to appreciate the unique contributions made by Hoste during those challenging years. Those who are short on time will greatly benefit by reading the twenty-four-page introduction to the book.

Patrick Fung co-authored another book on Dixon Hoste with Jonathan Yi-Deh Yao. Jonathan has served in OMF Taiwan's literature department for about ten years and he is the coordinator of OMF's Chinese Communication Ministry.

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