

Truth in Love Today: Part Two
Ephesians 2.10 and Artificial Intelligence
Sunday, October 4

David Henderson

This morning we come to the second of our messages in our *Truth in Love Today* series during which we'll be exploring some of the most challenging cultural issues faced by our society today.

Our theme this morning is artificial intelligence.

We'll be addressing this topic over two sessions. First, during my message this morning. And then on Wednesday night from 7:00 to 8:30 here in the sanctuary.

During Wednesday's gathering, we'll have a presentation by Louis Tay, Professor of Psychological Sciences at Purdue, followed by a conversation with Kenny Wilson, Director of AI and Automation at Purdue, both wonderfully faithful and thoughtful followers of Jesus and members of our church family. In their sharing they'll help us wrestle in practical terms with how best to use AI in ways that are ethical and God-honoring.

Then the three of us will use the second half of the evening to field questions as we all wrestle together with what to make of all of this. Hope you can join us: Wednesday night from 7:00 to 8:30 here in the sanctuary.

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So, how should followers of Christ think about and use AI?

I told you two weeks ago in my message on politics that there isn't any current cultural issue that we face today that is directly addressed in Scripture. There are lots of places where Scripture *informs* how we understand those issues, but there is no one place we can turn where we are given a definitive take on a current issue.

Well, it turns out I was wrong. The issue of AI is actually spoken of directly in the Bible. If you turn to Joshua 8, you read this:

Joshua 8.1

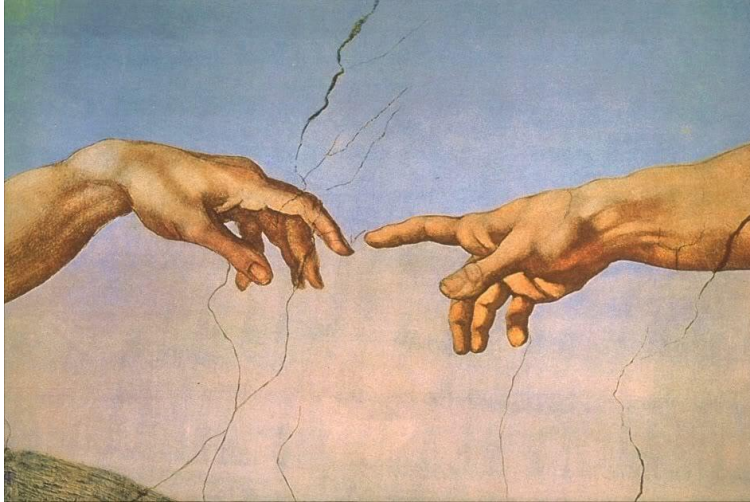
Then the Lord said, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai."

There you have it!

Okay, obviously that passage has nothing to do with this issue.

So, given that this isn't an issue addressed directly in the Bible, and given that it has so many different dimensions to it, where do we start?

Sistine Chapel Image



I think this is the right place to start. Scripture tells us that God created humanity in his own image.

This is the familiar image that Michelangelo painted in 1511 on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. It captures the hand of God, on the right, reaching out and touching Adam's hand and bringing him to life.

God created us in his image. And we – to use the French philosopher Voltaire's famous phrase – we have returned the compliment. We have turned around and created a nearly autonomous computing system in our own image.

China International Supply Chain Expo Image



This startling image greeted visitors to the China International Supply Chain Expo this summer.

It shows a human hand reaching out to a robotic hand – a hand of our making and in our own image – and bringing into being a new sort of world, the world of artificial intelligence.

What I want to focus on this morning is those human hands: that hand that reaches up to the God who made us, and that hand that reaches down to the artificial intelligence that we are creating and putting to use.

I want to explore the truths that are found at the intersection of biblical reflection on God, God's creative work, humanity, and humanity's creative work.

Or to say it another way, I want to wrestle together with *what it means to be human*, when, for the first time in history, we have a man-made machine that is not only able to replicate much of what humans are capable of, but also looks and thinks and speaks and acts more and more like human beings every day.

I'm going to focus on three aspects of what it means to be human: human distinctiveness and ability, human ability and responsibility, and human vulnerability.

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Let's begin with the question of human ability and distinctiveness. Another way of saying this is: What makes us special as human beings?

The obvious place to turn is to the beginning of the human story:

Genesis 1.27

God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Two truths ring through in this passage. First, God created us

We have a Maker, a Creator. We didn't bring ourselves into being. We are his creation, his creatures. That means we have been brought into life for his sake and on his terms.

And second, God created us *in his own image*

And as human beings, we bear the image of the God who made us. Every one of us as human beings, both male and female, from every ethnic background, is equally created in the image of God.

What does that mean: to be created in the image of God?

a. Our being created in the image of God means we have been give a unique *role*.

Obviously, it doesn't mean we bear his physical likeness, because God has no physical body. God is Spirit.

It means that in the combination of God-given dimensions of who we are and God-given abilities and capacities that we have –

that we are spiritual beings with a capacity to know God and fulfill his holy purposes,

that we are intelligent beings with a moral sense and with the ability to reason and to make decisions and to act on those decisions,

and that we are relational beings finding our fullest expression when we show love and make sacrifices for the sake of others –

in that unique combination of dimensions and abilities and capacities, we resemble the God who created us and gave us life.

Julia Blum, at the Israel Institute of Biblical Studies, points out that the word for "image" is closely related to the word for "shadow." She writes:

A shadow is not an exact replica of the object that casts it, but it bears unmistakable resemblance. . . . Humanity is not God, nor a replica of God, but a *shadow* of God — capable of reflecting His character in love, mercy, justice, creativity, and moral choice. We become truly human not by asserting our independence, but by learning to resemble [more and more] the One whose shadow we bear.

If you saw the shadow of a mighty oak tree, you would immediately get a sense of the actual tree's scale and its majesty and its intricacy, but at the same time you wouldn't begin to grasp the colorful, complex, glorious, sweeping grandeur of the real thing until you laid eyes on it yourself. You could immediately pick out a tree by looking at its shadow, but you would never mistake the shadow for the tree itself.

There is a way that the word "image" can be used to emphasize how we are so like God in some contexts – look how faithfully the shadow resembles the tree! – and how we are so unlike God in others – look what a poor semblance of a real tree that shadow is!

When we carry ourselves with appropriate love and humility as a creature honoring and imitating our Creator, others can see how closely we resemble him, but when we elevate ourselves with sinful pride, and seek to live independently of him, we are only a poor semblance of him and little resemble him.

Scripture tells us that humanity *en masse* has turned its back on our Creator. When we did, the image of God in us was shattered, bent, smudged, distorted. We have retained only a semblance to the God whose image we bear.

But as Brently shared with us last week in his message on Ephesians 2, Jesus came on a rescue mission to broken humanity, and one of his primary redemptive goals, in addition to reconciling us to God, was to recreate us, to restore the image of God in us. Paul says of us:

Ephesians 2.10

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Different translations capture the idea in different ways. We are:

His workmanship NASB
His accomplishment CEB

His creative work NET
His masterpiece NLT

However you translate it, the glorious truth is that, through Christ, the image of God in us has been restored, and is being restored. "We are being transformed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ" (II Corinthians 3.18).

So our being created in God's image means we have been given a unique *role*, which is to reflect God to this world, to live and act as new creatures in such a way that others see glimpses of our Creator. We are his handiwork, doing *his* work with *our* hands.

b. Being created in God's image also means we have been given a unique *value*.

When God forbids the taking of innocent life in Genesis 9.6, the reason he gives is because the human being whose life was taken was created in the image of God, which makes this human life extraordinarily precious and worth protecting.

That's one of the primary reasons that the Christian church has been such a passionate advocate for protecting life at all stages from conception to death.

Let me pause here. Notice that the Bible doesn't say we have value to the extent that we are able to be contributing and productive members of society.

One of the ways our culture diminishes human life is by weighing it on a scale of productivity. By that measure, children and the elderly are less valuable than those in their productive prime, and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities are worth less than the human beings our society considers whole.

But *every* human has *equal* worth, because every human being is a divine image bearer, no matter how veiled that image may be.

Our being image bearers is not an earned status within the created order based on our superior abilities and accomplishments, like the status of *summa cum laude*, conferred by outperforming all the others.

Being image bearers is a *conferred* status within creation, not an earned one.

It has to do with our *identity* every bit as much as with our capacity.

God doesn't say he values us uniquely because we stand at the top of the pile. He says he values us, as ones who uniquely bear a family resemblance to our creator, from the bottom of his heart.

The reason all of this is so important is because we are now faced for the first time in history with an agent that can *far* exceed our abilities in the very areas we tend to think of as making us uniquely human. Computers can process information nearly a billion times faster than conscious human reasoning. And now AI is adding other capacities at which it far exceeds us as well: pattern recognition, data analysis and summary, translating language, generating images, and more.

But here's what's true. Both humanity and AI were created in the image of their makers.

Human *machines* will dazzle, but only human *beings* will bear God's image, and shadow his presence.

As we celebrate the value of human beings as image bearers, it is important that we acknowledge that God means us to be a gift not only to him, but also to one another.

Pope Leo XIV recently came out with a very thoughtful book called *Magnifica Humanitas – Magnificent Humanity*. He writes:

In the era of artificial intelligence, when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human. We must lovingly safeguard the grandeur of humanity bestowed upon us and revealed in its fullness in Christ, the splendor of which no machine can ever replace. (20)

As human beings created in the image of God, we not only have a unique place in all of creation. We also have a unique place of importance with our fellow human beings.

Part of what it means to safeguard the grandeur of humanity is to recognize that what we as human beings are able to offer one another in terms of companionship, even if it is not perfect, will *always* be preferable to what a machine can offer.

Machines can imitate, but can never replicate, the gift God means to give us through each other.

Think of the story in Genesis 2 of the arrival of the second human being. God had already created Adam. And then, we're told:

Genesis 2.18

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."

After a parade of creatures, Adam is presented with Eve. "At last!" he says. "Someone like me! Bones from my bones, flesh from my flesh!"

It is not just that Eve resembles *Adam*. It is that Eve, like Adam, resembles *God*.

We read this as being about marriage between a man and a woman, and it certainly is, but it is about much more than that as well.

God rescues Adam *the man* from his aloneness by providing a woman, a female being ideally suited to him as a male being, but God rescues Adam *the human being* from his aloneness by providing another human being created in his image.

God created us for relationship, and then he gave us each other, as Paul reminds us.

I Corinthians 12.1, 24-25 says

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ . . . God has put the body together . . . All the members care for each other.

Before the fall, man's best friend was another human being, not a dog. Since the fall, dogs have leapt in.

And now, AI companies are racing to replace dogs with bots as humanity's best friend.

Have you ever stopped to think about why, for so many people, their favorite friend is a dog?

A dog is like the best of human beings without all the hard parts, like the demands they make, and the way their personalities are challenging, or the ways they hurt us and require our forgiveness. A dog is an uncritical and unquestioning and undemanding companion.

One of the dark turnings that has come with the advent of anthropic computer programming and speech is giving in to the inclination in us that wants to be able to keep the enjoyable and beneficial parts of what humans bring without the messy or difficult or painful parts.

One maker describes its AI driven robot as an "embodied emotional companion" who offers "a fourth kind of relationship – a connection that goes beyond humans, pets, and objects. Built for emotional connection and full circle companionship."

Some of you have heard of AI's propensity to be a sycophant. A sycophant is someone who always says what you want to hear.

In the Live Action version of *101 Dalmatians*, a fed-up Cruella DeVille says to her always-agreeing servant, "Oh, what kind of a sycophant are you!", to which he says, "Well, what kind of sycophant would you like me to be?"

AI is programmed to seek high user approval. So in artificial intelligence, sycophancy is the tendency of a chatbot to agree with us, to flatter us, and to validate us instead of giving accurate information and objective analysis, let alone critical feedback.

When you make a machine your emotional companion, and then couple that with AI's built in propensity to be give you exactly what you want to hear, that's a set-up for a disaster.

It's true. Human relationships can be so challenging. How much easier to just avoid all of that!

But think of how God uses all of those relational struggles. What are the Fruit of the Spirit if not the gifts God gives as we hang in there with each other, and let what I call the "friction gifts" of imperfect community throw us upon God and invite his transforming work?

Those very friction gifts that we want to avoid become means in God's hands of *forming his likeness in us even more*. So the more we spend time with other creatures who are made in the image of God, the more that image of God in us is formed and finished, and the more others will see something of him in us.

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The second area I want to explore is the area of human ability and responsibility. Or, to say it another way, how does God intend for me to steward my God-given abilities?

Our capacities are not given to us as possessions that we own. They are given to us as a trust. We have been entrusted with something of value that belongs to another, and we have the responsibility to use them in keeping with his intentions.

Here are four thoughts connected with our responsibility in using our God-given gifts.

1. First, Scriptures teach that the more faithfully we use our God given gifts and capacities, the more we put the image of God in us on display.

I Corinthians 4 says whatever we have in the way of ability God has given to us. None of it originates with us.

So when it comes to what we do with our abilities – our intellect, our creativity, our reasoning skills, our relational skills – we answer to the One who has given them to us.

Multiple studies are confirming that the more we rely on a machine to do our thinking or our analyzing or our writing or our communicating for us, the more those abilities diminish and decline in us.

It's only when we use a tool like AI to *refine* our work rather than to *generate* it that we retain both our capacities as thinking and communicating and creating human beings and our dignity as creatures created in the image of God.

Earlier this spring, Covenant passed an AI policy for our staff. One of the concerns it expresses is the way using AI has the potential to

Diminish the Image of God in Us: We do this when we relinquish to it tasks which have been understood historically to be part of the expression of our uniqueness as human beings created in God's image. This includes looking to AI to think, speak, express, write, or create for us. We thereby diminish our own humanity and we compromise part of our essence as human beings.

In the light of that, in our policy, we say:

Use AI to *refine* your work, not to *do* your work. Seek the Lord first, wrestling with him and with his purposes/intentions/wisdom/leading. And do your own thinking, researching, creating, expressing, and arranging of ideas first. Then, if beneficial, let AI refine.

2. A second thought related to using our God-given gifts relates to our limits.

As we've already said, one of the most important aspects of our humanity is recognizing that we are *creatures*, and we are defined by our relationship to our Creator.

By definition, being a creature means we will be characterized by limitations and weaknesses and inabilities that God, our Maker, doesn't have. God is omni everything – all powerful, all knowing, all wise – but we are only partly anything. Our strength, our understanding, our knowledge, are all severely limited.

I think it's fair to say that the history of fallen humanity is the history of our desire to overcome our limitations, where God's desire is that we would honor him by embracing

our essential limits as creatures, and live joyfully in a posture of ongoing dependence upon God.

So much of the essential appeal of AI is the possibility of overcoming human limitation. But the gift of our shortcomings is that they require us to remain dependent upon our Creator. Think of the story of God calling Moses to lead his people out of Egypt.

Exodus 3.10 and 4.10

The Lord said to Moses, "Go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Moses said to the Lord, "[No!] Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."

In other words: I have so many limitations. Send someone else.

Exodus 4.11-12

The Lord said to him, "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

God is essentially saying:

"Moses, who gave you your strengths? Wasn't it me, your Creator? Why? For my glory, so that as you use them others will look past you and the abundance of your gifts and recognize me as the giver of them."

"And Moses, who gave you your limitations and weaknesses? Again, wasn't it me, your Creator? Why? Also for my glory, so that as you come up against your limits and you turn to me and rely on my strength, others will see my power at work in and through you."

"Now go, and do what I ask, and I will help you. I will teach you. *I will be with you in your weakness.*"

Paul, who wrote the letter to the Ephesian church that we're exploring this year, shared in another letter that he had asked God to remove a limitation that was impeding his ministry, but that God answered not by removing the impediment but by meeting him in his weakness.

II Corinthians 12.9

The Lord said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.

AI promises us an easy way out of the difficult posture of coming again and again to the end of ourselves and having to throw ourselves upon God.

That's why in our AI policy, we identify this as one of our concerns about AI that it can:

Undermine our Dependence on God: We do this when we rely on AI in times when we should be relying on the Lord, thereby undermining our trust relationship with him. In the midst of every act of service involving communication, including teaching, writing an article, preparing a lesson plan, laying out a ministry schedule, or articulating desired ministry outcomes, there comes a necessary moment of crisis when God gives us the gift of exposing the inadequacy of reliance on anything or anyone other than him. AI, like a lever or inclined plane, is a tool that beneficially reduces the burden of our work, but should never be allowed to shift the burden of our dependence off of God and place it elsewhere.

3. A third consideration of the responsibility we have with our abilities is how God would have us use our gifts and capacities when it comes to our use of technology.

Most would agree that technology is neutral. It isn't inherently good, and it isn't inherently bad. But I think Pope Leo's observation is particularly astute when he says:

In practice, however, technology is never neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate, and use it. (16)

Let me give you an example of two individuals using the same technology to do the same task, but one is God-honoring and the other is God-offending:

In Genesis 41.33-36, Joseph tells the Egyptians to gather all the food that is produced and bring it into Pharaoh's storehouses, and there will be food enough to eat for years. As a result, he is commended as a wise man and elevated to a position of great importance.

But in Luke 12.12-21, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who builds bigger barns so he can store his surplus grain and have enough food for many years. As a result, Jesus calls him a fool, and says that he will have to answer for his sin.

The difference? Joseph is using the technology of architecture and building construction and grain storage to follow God's revealed wisdom and to serve individuals in need.

The other man uses the exact same technology to serve himself and to meet his own needs at the expense of others and in denial of his own mortality.

Remember, in the Bible, wisdom is seeing things with God at the center of them, and folly is removing God from the picture altogether.

The exact same criterion can be applied to the development and the use of AI. Do we use it with reference to God and in a way that honors him and reflects his loving purposes? Or do we use it "without reference to God," as an expression of our own "pride and self-sufficiency," and to serve ourselves at the expense of others? (Leo 14)

4. The last aspect of this question of the responsibility we have with our gifts and our capacities has to do with how we bring our gifts and capacities to bear in the moral and spiritual realms.

It almost goes without saying, because it should be so obvious, but it is still important to name in a message like this, that unethical or immoral use of AI is absolutely wrong and should never be done, no matter how we may think the ends we seek justify the means we use.

Using AI technology to distort or misrepresent truth, such as through deepfakes or falsified information or images; using it to deceive, such as with plagiarism and cheating; using it for immoral purposes, such as using personal images to create fake explicit content; or using it for illegal gain, such as phishing schemes and other scams; or using it in such a way that its biases preclude women and minorities from application processes:

we see in all of these sinful practices revelations of both our incredible creative capacity as human beings who bear the image of God and our incredible brokenness as fallen human beings who have rebelled against the very God whose image we bear, and we denounce them all.

There is also a unique set of temptations that is very seductive to those serving the Lord, whether in volunteer or vocational ministry, and that is to use AI to do any tasks that are used in corporate worship or teaching.

That is thinking we can save ourselves the time and inconvenience it takes to do the work, or pluck ourselves out of the struggle and discomfort involved in waiting upon the Lord, or that AI will help us come up with something more impressive and impactful than we can come up with, which lets others see us in a more positive light.

You may be aware of some of the tools that are available and getting great consumer ratings. There's:

Easy-Peasy.ai Prayer Generator
"Create heartfelt and meaningful prayers for various occasions"

Asaph AI worship planning tool

"An AI-powered worship setlist generator built for worship leaders who need to plan services quickly and confidently."

Verble AI sermon writing tool

"Three unhurried steps from a passage on your heart to a sermon in your hand, usually before your coffee goes cold."

We want less costly means, and we want more impactful ends, and along the way, if we get the glory, we won't complain. That's exactly the same temptation the Evil One held up in front of Jesus in the desert: a less costly way and a more impactful outcome that elevates us in the eyes of others.

No! Absolutely not. It doesn't matter how catchy the song is or how clear the sermon is or how impactful the worship set is or how effective the lesson is. It is *never* appropriate to ask AI to do our spiritual work for us. Refine it? Perhaps? Generate it? Never.

AI has no soul, and it does not have a relationship with God. No matter how advanced it becomes, it never will. So whatever it produces is the product of averaging a soup of contradictory data, not of a soul seeking God. How can that please God, even if the results are impressive?

That's why in the practices section of our AI policy we say we will:

Never use AI to generate a message, song, poem, or prayer that you use in the context of public worship or Christian instruction. This is both dangerous and unethical. It hands over an inherently spiritual act to an utterly non-spiritual entity, and it presents that work as our own. It is better to lead in a poor prayer or lesson of your own making than a polished presentation created by a machine, its secular programming, and its programmer's algorithms.

We've considered our ability, and our responsibility.

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I want to end with one final consideration, and that is to reflect on the question of

Human vulnerability and responsibility, or, to put it another way, Is this the end of the world as we know it?

Earlier this week I was walking through our neighborhood when I heard a huge crashing sound. I looked over in time to see a huge tree limb crash onto a garage roof and then down onto the ground.

Then, as I watched, the man who owned the house poked his head up over the ridge line of the garage, holding a long handled tree pruner.

I gave him a thumbs up and yelled, "You got it!" I thought about his precarious situation up there and I added, "And it didn't get you!"

He gave me a grin and yelled back, "That's kind of the first principle, isn't it?"

One would think. But human history doesn't exactly bear that out. Pope Leo rightly expresses concerns about the "danger of humanity becoming a victim of its own accomplishments" (85). We are already beginning to see that in connection with AI, and I think that will only continue.

One of the painful truths borne out in human history is that, when it comes to new technology, we tend to ask what we *could* do rather than what we *should* do, and we only start asking what we *should* do after we've already done it.

If you haven't already seen it, I think you would find it sobering and thought-provoking to watch the documentary called *AI Doc*. The film makes a compelling case that getting some governmental regulation and safety controls in place immediately is key.

It's also crucial, as ones charged with taking care of this amazing world in which we've been placed, that we safeguard our environment, and refuse to sell out our planet's limited resources for the sake of instant power and profit.

But independent of those efforts, as we think about where all of this is going, I just want to remind us of two important truths.

1. First, the Bible is clear that the end of human history does not come when humanity causes it to come about. It comes when God chooses to bring it about.

You see that consistent message in Isaiah 65 and Matthew 24 and II Peter 3 and Revelation 20 and 21 and everywhere else in Scripture. God determines the end.

So the caution in Isaiah 8 is an apt one for us today in the face of uncertainties caused by AI. It says:

Isaiah 8.11-14

The Lord has given me a strong warning not to think like everyone else does. He said, "Don't call everything a conspiracy, like they do, and don't live in dread of what frightens them. Make the Lord of hosts holy in your life. He is the one you should fear . . . He will keep you safe."

When it comes to our future as a human race, God is the determining factor, not AI.

2. Here's the other important reminder. We can confuse difficult situations, that threaten our ease, with truly dangerous ones, that threaten our ultimate wellbeing.

That's what Jesus was getting at in his conversation with the crowds in Luke 13.1-5. It says,

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Their concern is with why these deaths happened, and whether or not such a thing might happen to them. Jesus says they should have a different concern.

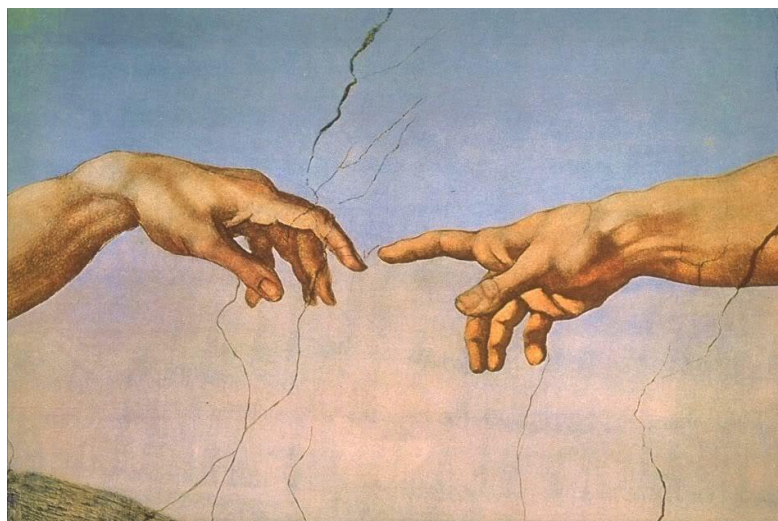
Don't spend your time worrying about how the end might come. Spend your time living *with the end in mind*.

How do we live with the end in mind? We should prepare to meet our maker! Literally.

We know that life on earth, as Pascal put it, is just a day's training on earth in exchange for eternity in God's presence.

So we should prepare to stand before our Creator at the end of the day. That means getting our soul right right now. Giving Jesus our trust and our allegiance. Letting him make us new. And then living our lives as his people for his sake.

Which brings us back to where we began.



Humanity came into being when God our Creator reached out and touched us. Humanity remains fully human only as long as we continue to reach back to him.

In the face of all the threats and promises and fears and possibilities that come with AI, the crucial thing is that we never cease to reach back to our Creator, keeping our eyes on him, leaving him in the center of the picture, living in a posture of deep dependence on him, seeking to reflect him in the way we use our gifts and capacities, and doing all things in his name and for his sake.

Reaching out to him, holding onto him, who is our only hope now and forever.

Let's join together in singing our closing song:

To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus
All the glory evermore to Him
When the race is complete, still my lips shall repeat
"Yet not I, but through Christ in me"

(Or, to sum it all up and say it another way, "Yet not AI, but through Christ in me . . .")