

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Artificial Intelligence and the Church

I AM SO far out of my depth with this topic! The math, science, and technological expertise required to develop artificial intelligence (AI) is not part of my skill set. So it's fair to ask why I would attempt an edition of *Shalom!* on AI and to acknowledge right at the start that we are barely scratching the surface of the topic. However, whether or not we understand it and whatever misgivings we may have, AI is here to stay. It's not a genie we can put back in the bottle. Our challenge is to figure out how to relate to it and use it wisely, including how to use it in the "practice of reconciliation," as *Shalom!*'s tagline says.

While I was thinking about this edition, I asked ChatGPT (one AI tool) to write a "description of *Shalom!*, a Brethren in Christ publication." Here's what came back to me in just a couple seconds:

Shalom! is a quarterly publication of the Brethren in Christ Church that explores issues of faith, peace, justice, and discipleship in today's world. Rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions of the Brethren in Christ, it offers thoughtful reflection on what it means to follow Jesus in daily life and in society.

Each issue includes feature articles, theological insights, stories of peace-making, and practical resources that encourage readers to live faithfully and compassionately. The publication seeks to nurture a vision of holistic shalom—peace with God, with one another, and with creation—while engaging pressing topics such as reconciliation, nonvio-

lence, social justice, and community life.

Shalom! is intended for pastors, congregations, and laypeople who desire to grow in Christ-centered living and to be part of God's work of healing and hope in the world.

Even after almost forty-five years of editing this publication and knowing it inside and out, I'm not sure I could have described it better myself!

As you might expect, some people love AI and some people hate it. My son and son-in-law both love it, using it for marketing purposes and for help in writing in their respective professions. A friend is deeply bothered by AI, especially its environmental impacts as it uses scarce resources and requires huge data centers on precious land. This edition of *Shalom!* offers both the "promise and peril of AI"—coincidentally, the title of an essay I asked ChatGPT to write on AI and the church. The approach is more philosophical than practical; this issue does not get into which AI tools are best or how to use them.

ChatGPT described AI this way: "AI is a powerful tool with huge benefits, but it needs responsible design, regulation, and human oversight to ensure it helps society more than it harms it." As humans made in God's image, we are the ones who have those responsibilities.

One further note: The 2026 subscription letter is coming soon, and upcoming topics have not been finalized.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Artificial Intelligence and Faithful Discipleship: A Brethren in Christ Perspective

Article Generated by Artificial Intelligence

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following article was crafted by ChatGPT in response to my prompt: "Write an essay of 1000 words analyzing the pros and cons of AI from a Christian perspective." After it responded, it told me it could adapt the essay to reflect a specific tradition. I asked for Anabaptist. After it produced a revised essay, it further said it could adapt for a Brethren in Christ audience. The following article is the result. All this happened in less than a minute.

I then sent the article to a number of people asking them to respond to the article with these questions in mind: What does it get right or wrong? Does it miss anything? What are your

concerns about the use of AI, or conversely, in what ways have you found AI useful in your profession or ministry? Given that AI is here to stay, how do we handle it and use it for good? Their responses follow the AI-generated essay.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is becoming an increasingly powerful presence in modern life. From healthcare and education to economic systems, warfare, and communication, AI influences how decisions are made and how people relate to one another. For the Brethren in Christ Church, which seeks to follow Jesus through holistic discipleship, peacemaking, justice, and transformed living, AI raises important questions. The central concern is not whether AI is impressive or efficient, but whether its use aligns with the way of Christ and supports God's vision of shalom—right relationship with God, others, and creation.

AI as a tool for compassion and service

Scripture affirms human creativity as a gift from God. Humanity is created in God's image and called to steward creation responsibly (Genesis 1:27–28; Genesis 2:15). From this perspective, AI can be understood as a human-made tool that may be used for good when guided by love and wisdom. In healthcare, AI-assisted diagnostics and treatment planning have the potential to reduce suffering and save lives. Such uses resonate with Jesus's healing ministry and his compassion for the sick and vulnerable (Matthew 9:35–36).

AI can also expand access to education and information. Technologies that assist with translation, accessibility for people with disabilities, or personalized learning can help break down barriers that exclude people from full participation in society. The Brethren in Christ commitment to justice and reconciliation finds support in tools that promote inclusion and equity, especially when they are directed toward serving marginalized communities (Micah 6:8; Proverbs

31:8–9).

Within the life of the church, AI may offer practical support. Administrative tools, communication aids, and language translation can help congregations function more effectively, particularly in multicultural or global contexts. When technology serves the church rather than shapes its identity, it can free time and energy for prayer, discipleship, and mutual care (Acts 2:42–47).

Stewardship of creation and resources

The Brethren in Christ have long emphasized stewardship of both material resources and the earth itself. AI applications that reduce waste, improve energy efficiency, or monitor environmental health can support responsible care for creation. Scripture reminds believers that "the earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that creation itself longs for restoration (Romans 8:19–22). When AI contributes to sustainable practices rather than unchecked consumption, it can align with God's redemptive purposes for the world.

The danger of dehumanization

Despite its potential benefits, AI also poses serious concerns. One of the most significant is the risk of dehumanization. Scripture teaches that every person bears God's image and possesses inherent worth (Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13–16). AI systems, however, often treat people as data points to be categorized, predicted, or optimized. In areas such as employment, law enforcement, healthcare, or social services, algorithmic decisions can unintentionally reinforce bias and injustice.

For a Brethren in Christ community that values relational discipleship and accountability, replacing human judgment and compassion with automated systems is deeply problematic. Jesus consistently encountered people face-to-face, seeing their dignity beyond social categories (Luke 19:1–10; John 4:7–26). Any technology that distances decision-making from personal relationship risks undermining this Christlike posture.



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Peace, power, and nonviolence

A particularly urgent concern is the use of AI in systems of violence and coercive power. AI is increasingly employed in military technologies, surveillance systems, and predictive policing. The Brethren in Christ historic commitment to peace and nonviolence stands in tension with these developments. Jesus's call to love enemies and reject retaliation (Matt. 5:9, 44; Matt. 26:52) challenges the use of technologies that make harm more efficient or impersonal.

AI-driven surveillance also raises concerns about freedom and dignity. When people are constantly monitored, tracked, or manipulated, trust erodes and communities suffer. Scripture warns against placing confidence in systems of domination rather than in God's justice and mercy (Psalm 20:7; Zech. 4:6).

Work, vocation, and justice

AI also reshapes understandings of work and vocation. Scripture presents work as participation in God's purpose, not merely as economic productivity (Col. 3:23; Ephesians 2:10). While AI can relieve people from dangerous or repetitive labor, it can also displace workers and deepen economic inequality. A Brethren in Christ response asks whether technological progress is shared justly and whether it honors the dignity of workers, especially the poor and vulnerable (James 5:1–5).

Efficiency and profit must never override compassion and justice. Jesus' ministry consistently prioritized people over systems, and the church is called to do the same (Mark 2:27).

Discernment, idolatry, and trust

Another danger lies in misplaced trust. When AI systems are treated as neutral, objective, or ultimate authorities, they can subtly become idols. Scripture repeatedly warns against trusting in human-made powers rather than in God (Isa. 2:8; Jer. 17:5). Wisdom, according to Scripture, begins with reverence for the Lord, not reliance on technology (Prov. 9:10).

The Brethren in Christ tradition emphasizes communal discernment shaped by Scripture, prayer, and the Holy Spirit. Decisions about AI should not be left to individuals alone, but should be engaged together as communities seeking faithfulness (Rom.

12:2; 1 Cor. 12:7).

Conclusion: Faithful presence in a technological world

Artificial intelligence presents both promise and peril. It can serve healing, learning, and stewardship, or it can reinforce injustice, violence, and dehumanization. From a Brethren in Christ perspective, the question is not whether AI is powerful, but whether it helps the church and society follow Jesus more faithfully.

The church is called to embody an alternative way of life—one rooted in love, peace, justice, and holiness. As followers of Christ engage with AI, they are invited to practice humility, resist idolatry, and prioritize relationships over efficiency. In doing so, the Brethren in Christ can offer a hopeful witness in a technological age, proclaiming through word and action that true wisdom, peace, and shalom are found not in machines, but in Jesus Christ, "in whom all" (Col. 1:17).

RESPONSES TO THE AI ARTICLE

It will take a real person. . . .

by Nick Ressler, Conoy Brethren in Christ Church

Let me begin my response to the AI produced article by stating, at the outset, what I think the model got correct: "Artificial intelligence presents both promise and peril."

As various AI models have become more popular and prevalent the information about them has become more widely available, as has the fear-mongering about them. Research has made it clear that Large Language Models (LLMs) are not thinking for themselves but are, at this time, at best cataloging, categorizing and repopulating the information that is already available. Computer scientist Richard Sutton contends that LLMs are not a viable path to true general intelligence but operate by mimicking human behavior and predicting the next token based on vast amounts of internet data.

For this reason, we can allay some of our fear and recognize some of the tools that LLMs are able to be to each of us in the varying work that we do. The article that was provided does outline some of the potential that AI could contribute to the work of the Brethren in Christ.

However, it does it in the form of "fluff." Having not been provided with any of the prompts that created the article, I can only assume that "scripture references" were requested, because beyond that there is very little example or specifics on the real-world applications or examples of how AI could be used. The article, upon a cursory look, seems well written by identifying problems like accessibility, disabilities, personalized learning and full participation in society but its solution is simply that—AI can provide tools to help.

It will take a real person actually doing the real work of solving these issues, with or without the help of AI, and then feeding that information back into the technologically connected atmosphere in order for an LLM like ChatGPT to write an article with real examples on how to solve those problems, because an LLM has no real imagination like the one with which you and I have been gifted.

The smarter the tool, the more I am in awe of God's greatness

by Ling Dinse, Messiah University

Modern invention has always been part of human history and does not pose a threat to faithful discipleship. The more impressive the human invention, the more I am amazed at God's might. The smarter the tool, the more I am in awe of God's greatness. Modern invention puts God's mighty power in perspective and propels me to faithful discipleship.

I have used AI tools to assist with administrative tasks, freeing me to serve others. The lightening of the load could also reduce the risk of compassion fatigue among practitioners. I also agree that AI can provide access to resources to promote inclusion and equity. For example, I have known children who are on the autism spectrum who are non-verbal; they are able to use computer technology to express their thoughts and feelings. As a migrant with English as a second language, I have used an AI tool to organize my thoughts in English, so I can fully express myself in a predominantly English-speaking society. On the other hand, AI tools are not perfect, and their proper use requires a human touch. No tool should be given control of one's life.

Watch the framing of questions and AI's answers

by Sarah Becking, *Grantham Brethren in Christ Church*

I notice several failures to flag blind spots in the AI-generated article. The article suggests that AI “can expand access” to resources for marginalized people, without asking whether it will do that, considering society’s tendency to funnel benefits of new technologies to people with the most money and ability. The AI article ignores concerns about data centers’ environmental impacts and ballooning energy consumption, even though yes, some applications could be used to support creation care. Some of the AI article’s Bible references about Jesus dignifying people were tangential (e.g. Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10), and it omitted stronger examples in Luke 5:12-13, 7:36-47, 8:43-48, 13:10-17, and 15:1-7, just to name a few. A simple concordance performs at least as well.

In short, when using AI, we’d be wise to watch the framing of both our questions and its answers, to remember history, context, and human nature.

AI: the tomb of the unknown author

by Lynn Thrush, *Great Lakes Conference*

I acknowledge that AI has many useful applications in other settings. This AI-generated article, however, is fully unhelpful for two strong reasons, 1) AI is not itself embodied in an author and an author’s embodied integrity, and thus 2) the reader is removed from the authority that comes from an embodied author.

“Faithful discipleship,” is not a disembodied concept. It involves words and actions, otherwise it could not be described as faithful. Jesus and the prophets critique the real possibility that words can honor God, all the while the hearts of the persons that speak those words do not honor God (Matt. 15:8; (Isa. 29:13).

This AI article is devoid of authority. The references to scripture can only be described as proof-texting. Having a machine make a reference to the scriptures, supposedly suggesting that the scriptures are lending authority, is a non sequitur. Of what value is a least common denominator biblical reference born of the amalgamation of thousands (millions?) of sound bites on a particular topic in

the library of the worldwide internet?

In the English language, the words “author” and “authority” both refer to source. Because AI does not, and cannot, identify its source/author, it cannot provide the power of source/authority, especially in describing what is “faithful discipleship.” Scripture, however, connects its words to source, to the embodied Word. Says John, “we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.” (1 John 1:1) AI is Gnosticism (bodyless secret knowledge) riding again. Faith (words) without works, without connection to an embodied source, is dead. AI is a pretty “Tomb of the Unknown Author.”

Only a personal writer can bring a personal touch

by Ryan Stockton, *Marsh Creek Community Church*

This AI-generated article is fine in many respects. I do not disagree with much of it, except for its assertion that technology could free time for prayer, discipleship, and mutual care. Historically, when technology has brought greater efficiency, it has never slowed us down or made us more contemplative. Instead, we have simply tried to accomplish more, more, more!

Aside from that, the article does not say anything that is terribly controversial or even particularly new. And that, in itself, is one of the issues with AI-generated material: it tends to be generic. It will be fine, but it will be generic. Only a personal writer can bring a personal touch.

As this article demonstrates, AI can generate a passable finished product. The problem lies in the process. As Christ followers, we believe that not only do the ends we achieve matter, but the process we undertake to achieve those ends matters as well. An article without research, a sermon without personal wrestling, a pat answer from Scripture without genuine pursuit, these create people who may have answers, but who lose the ability to ask the right questions.

When we lose the ability or willingness to think, we pass that responsibility to someone, or something, else to think for us. Yes, that makes us more efficient, but it also makes us less human. AI can be a helpful tool. I used it to review this article for gram-

mar and sentence structure before submitting it. But none of us, myself included, should fall into the trap of valuing an easy product if it means sacrificing our humanity in the process.

USING AI IN MEDICINE

by Geoffrey James MD, *Grantham Brethren in Christ Church*

AI in medicine can help physicians generate their progress notes. Physicians who use AI find that it saves them about half an hour a day. They go into the exam room and ask the patient for permission to use their cell phone to record the conversation. From this conversation, AI generates a progress note and then deletes the conversation a day later. The notes are usually remarkably complete and accurate, and require little editing.

One of the big challenges in medicine these days is the rapid increase in new diagnostic tests and treatments, making the practice of medicine very complex especially when patients have multiple medications and medical problems. As an example, AI can help with cancer patients. There are about three thousand new cancer research papers every day. No one can read this many research papers, so it is difficult to stay up to date. AI programs have been trained to assess studies and help determine the best treatment for a particular cancer at the time of a visit.

AI also shows promise in evaluating diagnostic test results. Compared to a physician interpretation or an interpretation done by AI with review by a physician, studies show that the best results are when AI is used alone. This can be intimidating to physicians, but is also promising when there are not enough radiologists and it takes several weeks to get tests interpreted.

In primary care, AI could be trained to gather all the data needed for a patient ahead of time. Patients with multiple medical problems need them assessed during a visit, involving ten or more medications and multiple tests. Because this is very time-consuming, it could help to prevent burnout for physicians in primary care.

AI, Big Questions, and My Work as a Governance Coach

By Rebekah Basinger

AMONG THE THEMES to which I return often in my work with governing boards of theological schools is the importance of asking questions that do more than skim the surface of institutional life—questions that probe deeply enough to give board members the knowledge and insights necessary to undergird their wise stewardship. Over the years, I’ve stored up a treasure trove of quotes from folks in the know about the good that comes from grappling with well-timed, well-framed questions in the boardroom. We’re told that:

- Questions are among the most powerful tools in a board’s toolbox.
- Questions lead to small results, but big questions open us to unthought-of possibilities.
- Big questions make room for God and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- The questions that cause us the most trouble are usually the ones we don’t ask.

BIG questions are mission-centered and forward-focused, thought-provoking, phrased to surface assumptions, frequently edgy and unsettling, and always empowering. There are no quick or easy answers.

What we hear less often is that crafting big questions is difficult, time consuming work, and few board members have much appetite for either. Most days, neither do I.

I’ve spent countless hours refining three or four discussion questions for a board education resource, often investing more time in the questions than in the teaching tool itself. If I found that frustrating, I can only imagine how board leaders must feel. Yet I’ve seen again and again that if a board doesn’t ask, it won’t get what it needs to lead well. And when a board isn’t leading well, everything and everyone within the institution feels the effects. That’s what makes the emergence of large language model–powered AI an extraordinary resource for governing

boards (and me, too).

Within seconds of receiving a prompt, AI generates discussion questions tailored to a challenge or opportunity on the institution’s horizon and for which the board needs to prepare itself. The better the prompts provided to AI the better the questions. Despite fast moving technological advances, the old adage about garbage in, garbage out remains relevant. With a bit of practice, those big, beautiful questions described above are a click away, freeing up precious board time for deep discussion, prayerful discernment, and in making decisions in light of the Spirit’s guidance.

The speed of AI is a boon to time-pressed board leaders, but only when it is understood as a support to the human intelligence each member brings to the table—never a substitute for it. As experts in the field warn, “The greatest irony of all is that to make AI work, we need to get better at being human. Leaders need to make space for the unpolished, slower but more rewarding work of human collaboration.”* To my mind, that is board governance at its best.

As a resource to board leaders interested in experimenting with AI, I’ve designed a step-by-step protocol that uses three levels of question development: 1) the three modes of governance—fiduciary, strategic, and generativity—described in *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*; 2) a five-question mix suggested in the *Harvard Business Review* article titled “The Art of Asking Smarter Questions”; and 3) four forms of question asking as outlined in the HBR article, “How the Best Boards Engage with Management.”

The process begins by naming an issue with which the board is working and then shaping the issue as a prompt for AI. The layering of one mode of question-asking on top of the other leads board members into conversations that are increasingly nuanced, potentially impactful, and beyond what I or most board leaders could develop on their own, regardless of the hours we might put into the work. The task for board or com-

Big Questions Protocol

With the *Shalom!* readership in mind, here’s an illustration of my protocol using a topic with which boards and pastoral staff of Brethren in Christ churches may be dealing.

The Prompt: Generate neutral, open ended discussion questions on immigration shaped by the spirit of the Brethren in Christ Core Values, while still avoiding assumptions about how any individual interprets those values.

The Questions

1. What information or perspectives do we currently have about immigration laws and enforcement, and what additional insights might help us understand how these issues affect people within and beyond our congregation?
Purpose: Encourages fact seeking without assuming agreement on the facts.
2. How might different possible developments in immigration policy or enforcement influence relationships in our congregation, our local community, or the wider world?
Purpose: Opens space for imagining possibilities without arguing about predictions.
3. What kinds of responses or approaches could our congregation consider as we think about immigration and its potential impact on people around us?
Purpose: Moves the group toward constructive, shared action.
4. Which biblical teachings or themes do you find most relevant when reflecting on immigration, and how do they shape your understanding of it?
Purpose: Invites theological reflection rather than political debate.
5. What experiences, relationships, values, or beliefs have most influenced how you think about immigration and the government’s role in it?
Purpose: Uses storytelling as a vehicle for humanizing values and beliefs, without judgement.

mittee chairs is to select one or two questions for immediate use. The board's discussion is recorded and synthesized for review by leadership and if needed, the question development process is repeated using prompts that emerge from the discussion.

I've only recently begun to encourage boards to use AI in crafting better questions

in support of their discussions, so it's too early to declare a victory, but I am hopeful. As for me and my own work, Copilot is the in-house researcher, editor, and administrative assistant I've always wanted. My challenge now is to put to good use the time that I'm saving as I integrate AI into my work.

*Kate Niederhoffer, Alexi Robichaux, Jeffrey T.

Hancock, "Why People Create AI 'Workslop' and How to Stop It," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2026, <https://hbr.org/2026/01/why-people-create-ai-workslop-and-how-to-stop-it>.

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Amid Hype and Fear

by Jonathan Bowman

WE HUMANS GIVE a lot of attention to the merits of the tools we create—understandably so, because tools are not neutral. They change our behavior, and not always for the better.

If I give eager children a shovel and leave them unsupervised, I should not be surprised when later in the day my lawn looks creatively landscaped, or even if I learn of conflict that led to the shovel being brandished as a weapon.

The area of study often named "artificial intelligence" is a seventy-year-old discipline that is very broad and ever-changing. Over the last three years, it has offered tools with dramatic new levels of usefulness and adoption. As with the shovel, we use these tools, and they shape us in return.

While humans do control tools, the tools also nudge us toward certain behaviors. Smart phone notifications entice you to drop everything and focus on them. A Chabot encourages you to imagine you are talking to a real human who is eager to do your will.

These subtle pressures to use a tool a certain way occur whether or not they are designed with that usage in mind. And sadly, while AI tools (and shovels) are often useful, even helpful tools can be used for harm when serving human interests.

When faced with a rapid influx of new tools, then, we can naturally become quite intimidated and quite enthralled with the many ways, bad and good, that the tools want to be used. We may find it easy to join in the fray of anxiety and obsession with the tools themselves. Have you felt the pressures of the enormous amounts of hype, fear, money, and predictions that stem from this

obsession? This can easily absorb a great deal of our attention.

Being consumed by hype or fear is not our only option, thankfully. Here is an alternative focus for our attention: Jesus, and the gift of discerning, meaningful community that Jesus offers. In such a context, we have the opportunity to give attention to our relationship with the creative God who made us and gave us tool-making and tool-using abilities. This, then, provides a foundation from which we can assess tools with Jesus-centered calm and confidence.

Jesus offers guidance regarding attention of our hearts in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:20-21 "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus connects treasure with heart. What we give our attention to shapes who we become. This is an invitation to be careful and faithful, an invitation to attentively seek Jesus-oriented character, storing up treasures that are worthy and enduring.

Who are we becoming as we engage this topic and use these tools?

We are surrounded by tremendous hype. This is an opportunity to speak the truth, and practice humility. Perhaps you have heard the narrative that yearns for the hypothetical "Artificial General Intelligence" (AGI) or "Artificial Superintelligence" (ASI). These are nearly godlike entities that humans still somehow aspire to control. I recently heard a well-known leader in the field, one who is also honest about his desire to follow Jesus, make a refreshing observation. He

named AGI as a "Silicon Valley religion." It even has its own hope of a second coming: the "singularity" of science fiction, where civilization is forever transformed by unbridled technological progress.

It's okay to notice when the expectations look like religious hope and fervor. Naming that allows us the freedom to make choices of faith, and put our faith in the God who Jesus reveals as present, strong, good, and, thankfully, not under our control. Then, having shed the trappings of an AI pseudo-religion, we are also free to try the tools, assess their value, and, most importantly, discern and seek Jesus-centered character in how we use them.

We are also surrounded by great fear. This is an opportunity to speak the truth, and practice calm, confident faith. I remember the first time I asked a code-writing tool to write a computer program. I was impressed by how accurate the product was, and worried when I found errors in that same output. "What if this falls into the wrong hands?" I fretted. I confess that we software developers are famous for this sort of "gatekeeping." We withhold tools and information from rookie developers under the guise of concern, when in fact the root of the problem is that we feel threatened. Yet even more awe and fear-inducing was when a month later, I asked a new tool to do the same thing, and it did so flawlessly. That inconsistency is normal at present, yet always improving. What if one day these tools are fully reliable? If my faith is not in the current wording of my job description, but instead in a secure God who is kind and purposeful, and I dwell in a loving, guiding community of faith, then who or

what have I to fear? If we speak truth to ourselves about our own fears, and seek to align our attentions towards faith in God, we then have a firm footing to observe, experiment, and assess, together.

Psalm 20:7 provides a helpful summary of this reassuring attitude of redirecting toward faith while acknowledging technological power: “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the

Lord our God.” A wheeled war cart and an armored animal may not seem comparable to Chatbots and other generative tools. Yet I am sure that at the time a horse and chariot seemed just as promising and threatening as any of our technologies today. When we respond to technology with deep fear, wild hope, or both, our attention moves to the thing, and away from the divine, leaving us frail and disconnected. Let’s wisely test and

use the tools we are building, and more deeply trust the One who is building us.

Jonathan Bowman enjoys active involvement in his congregation at Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. He lives in Landisville, PA with his wife and two teenage children, and is a software engineer, and a former pastor and English teacher.

Choosing the Challenges AI Makes Optional

By David Owen

“**WHAT DID I** know, what did I know/of love’s austere and lonely offices?”¹ I learned these lines from Robert Hayden’s poem, “Those Winter Sundays,” when I was a college student thirty years ago. One of my roommates was writing a paper about the poem. English was not his first language, and he asked me to read a draft of his paper and help him with grammar and sentence structure.

I still remember where I sat, holding my roommate’s paper above the dining table in our apartment, with the kitchen to my right, facing toward the living room and the sunlight shining in through the window. The memory is so clear, I think, because of the impact his paper had on me as I read it. I learned more about my roommate from that paper, about his father’s recent death and the depth of his ongoing grief, than he would ever share in conversation during the time we were roommates. I’d read the poem before but it hadn’t made a big impression on me. Now I understood it in a new way, as I read about my roommate’s longing, like Hayden’s, to be able to thank his father for things he did not understand or appreciate until it was too late to do that.

What if my roommate and I were students today? Would he ask me to help him with his paper? Maybe not. He would have Grammarly, “responsible AI that ensures your writing and reputation shine.”²

Last November, the top album in iTunes’ Christian and gospel category was AI-generated, according to Kelsey Kramer McGinnis: “Solomon Ray . . . is not a real person. Artificial intelligence crafted his persona,

voice, performance style, and lyrics.”³ What do we make of this? If people like the music, and it has a good message, does it matter where it came from? I won’t try to answer this question yet, but just point out that it assumes a consumer’s perspective: music is not something you make but something you listen to. This is the way most of us (even musicians) experience music most of the time, but that’s not how it used to be.

Years before the possibility of anything like an AI-generated album, recording, production, and distribution technology had already transformed music into something more often consumed than created. “The glorious technological magic of recorded music” has, according to Andy Crouch, caused us “to forget and neglect what every other generation of human beings, in every culture, remembered and cultivated: the ability to make music on our own. . . . We can consume more music than they ever did; we create less music than they ever could have imagined.”⁴

Returning to the question I asked before: If people like the music, and it has a good message, does it matter where it came from? Does it matter whether it was AI-generated? If a student’s paper has correct grammar and good sentence structure, does it matter whether they got help from a roommate or from an AI tool? The answer to questions like these depends, I think, on whether you are asking about a particular instance of AI use or you are asking about AI use more generally, as it has the potential to transform the activities of daily life by replacing our former ways of doing things.

It would be hard to argue, it seems to me, that it’s somehow morally wrong to use AI to generate one Christian song or to edit one paper. On the other hand, if AI-generated music represents the culmination of consumerism—music isn’t just something few create and many consume, but something no one creates, and everyone consumes—this would be a tragic loss. Crouch points out that making music, specifically congregational singing, has the potential to uniquely combine heart, soul, mind, and strength in a community expression of embodied worship.⁵ It would be hard to exaggerate how different this is from an individual listening to (AI-generated) Solomon Ray through their earbuds. Moreover, if the availability of AI tools to edit grammar and sentence structure means that students no longer ask for help—that learning is presumed to be an independent, isolated activity, perhaps even with AI teachers—this too would be a great loss. We learn best when we learn together, growing not just in knowledge but in humility, gratitude, patience, and mutual understanding.

We live in a world in which AI tools are available, and they seem to work amazingly well. Many specific uses of the tools seem innocent enough, but general trends are troubling, especially considering what might be lost as AI becomes the cheapest and most convenient way to do so many things.

New technologies make it possible for us to do wonderful things we could never do before. They tend also to enable us to do the same things we did before without experiencing the challenges we need to grow indi-

vidually and in relationship with each other. Daily life is much less physically demanding for many people than it was for most a hundred years ago. Having a car means you can go much farther, much faster, but it also means you're much less likely to walk when you could. So you won't get the benefits of physical exercise unless you choose to make it part of your routine: it's optional. Newer technologies, including AI, make it possible for us to access and process an amazing amount of information, but they also have the potential to make daily life much less intellectually demanding. What will be lost as we become accustomed to tools capable of thinking for us?⁶ Challenges necessary for real learning—for growing in wisdom and character, for understanding our limitations and our place in the world—will become optional. Not only that, we may become increasingly isolated from each other as we no longer need to ask (a human) for help.

“Wisdom cries out in the street” to any who will listen, according to the first chapter of Proverbs: “I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.” But listening is optional. Wisdom is freely available to all of us, but to receive it we must humbly and earnestly seek to become wise. AI tools will make it possible for us to do amazing things, but they also give us a new way to avoid becoming wise. We need to be intentional about choosing the challenges through which we can grow together, as these challenges increasingly become optional.

Notes

¹Robert Hayden, “Those Winter Sundays,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46461/those-winter-sundays>.

²This was the slogan on Grammarly's website as of mid 2025. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20250630042947/https://www.grammarly.com>.

³Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, “The Current No. 1 Christian Artist Has No Soul,” *Christianity Today*, November 21, 2025, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/11/solomon-ray-ai-christian-music-soul-singer>.

⁴Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in its Proper Place* (Baker Books, 2017), 186.

⁵Crouch, 191.

⁶Paul Graham argues that AI tools capable of doing the writing for us won't just do the writing, they'll do the thinking; that is, they will make the thinking optional. See Paul Graham, “Writes and Write-Nots,” <https://paulgraham.com/writes.html>.

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Don't Outsource Your Humanity

By Zach Spidel

I THINK IT is generally true that we modern western people think of most technologies as being essentially neutral in moral character; what counts is how you use them. Some technologies are indeed like this—a sharpened bit of rock in the hand of an early human might have helped prepare dinner or slice open an enemy. The problem is many technologies are not like this, including many we are accustomed to thinking of as “neutral” in character.

This is because, as we use them, even morally neutral tools shape us humans who first shaped them, and they do so in ways that may not be so neutral after all. The more we use and rely on a tool, in fact, the more we are shaped by that tool in ways we may not even recognize. Soon a whole way of living may arise (displacing earlier ways) that depends on that newly created technology, thus embedding it into the social fabric. The new way of living may be superior in obvious ways (leading to its widespread adoption), but what may be less clear is the scale of hidden tradeoffs, losses in kinds of knowledge, ways of being, and characteristic experiences that

we may not be able to name or capture as those losses mount—until it is too late.

How much of the sense of isolation and dislocation in the modern age has to do with the proliferation of digital tool—bright glowing rectangles to distract us, show us what we want when we want it, seducing us with simulated experiences, in place of our own real ones? That question has been asked a lot lately, but what about this one: how much of the modern dissolution of community is due to that tool called the automobile and the way our society, in particular, has been structurally reconfigured around it? How has the car and the sort of distances it creates between us shaped our relationships to place, to family, to local community? What trade-offs have been involved in the adoption of a way of life that has cars as a key material element within it?

It is worth asking such questions of those technologies that shape our life now. It is even more important to ask these questions of technologies as they are arising. Despite the marketing and despite the trajectory of mainstream western history, one may always



(with varying degrees of difficulty, no doubt!) opt out of the latest technology. Silicon Valley has given us social media that, I think, fair assessments show has contributed to a massive rise in various social maladies—loneliness, perhaps, is near the heart of all the many that have been catalogued by figures like Jean Twenge or Jonathan Haidt. That same valley full of tech titans has given us pornography on demand, siloed news and cultural analysis through custom feeds, a multi-billion dollar online gambling sector, and other wonders. Now those same persons are busy creating a new set of tools for us all, tools that have—as their explicit end-goal—the ability to perform any economically useful task that humans can do. This is the dream Silicon Valley is pursuing—a dream I regard, in large part, as a nightmare.

These tools, which are already remarkably, unsettlingly impressive (I have been ex-

perimenting with them to understand them) seem destined to become much more impressive yet. I do not know if Artificial General Intelligence will really arrive in the coming years as the industry predicts, and I certainly doubt the most grandiose claims about essentially god-like Super Intelligences (I smell a whiff of idolatry among those who pine to create gods for us in our own image), but I am utterly convinced of the following.

If we have tools that can do all (or even most) of what we can do, we need to resist the urge to outsource our humanity to those tools. I was teaching in a college classroom during the first wave of impressive Chatbots. Students immediately began, in large numbers, to have those bots write their reflections essays for them. If the tool can get me to a good product better, why not let it? Because the assignment was never a “product” I, as the teacher, was after. It was a way to help that student grow as a person, to acquire knowledge that, as a human, they could only acquire through the process of struggling through the reading themselves AND of struggling to figure out what was relevant in it AND of struggling to articulate their sense of that relevance. Relying on AI short-circuits all of this, depriving the student of the transformative experience of doing the work

themselves.

Think about the experience of studying a topic in the stacks of a library full of bound volumes. Imagine noticing a book you were not looking for as you go down the aisle on your way to the one you were looking for. Think of how a strange connection might occur to you between the book you’ve noticed and your topic. Think of how your curiosity might be piqued. None of this will happen for those who begin their research with AI suggestions and proceed within the tracks laid down for them by it—tracks determined and set down by massive corporations ultimately driven not by a holistic notion of the human good but by a profit motive.

I think something quite destructive is barreling toward us. It will not be without its benefits, some quite welcome. The tech companies will happily trumpet those benefits, inviting us, not them, to allow their tools to do for us so much of what we have, hitherto done for ourselves—including our thinking. If we accept the invitation, I don’t think it will be long before we lose the ability to see or name just what sort of human goods are atrophying within and among us as we let the machines digitally simulate them for us.

I do have hope though. I’m a Christian

and Jesus is, indeed, Lord! I have hope when I look at the Bruderhof or the Amish, or at the increasing numbers of people embracing the analog over the digital or those, simply trying to think through and implement limits on the place of digital technology in their lives. I have hope too when I remember that there is no shortage of clear-eyed analysis out there for those who want it—Neil Postman, Marshal McLuhan, and Jaques Ellul in the past, and Wendell Berry, Alan Jacobs, Paul Kingsnorth, and, especially, L.M. Sacasas today. These authors all help us toward a diagnosis of what ails us in this technological moment. But it is to even older sources that we may turn for medicine—for example, to the desert fathers and mothers and the old ideal of asceticism embodied by those wild figures out in the lonely places away from the clamor of empires wielding burnished swords from their forges, and to the inherently slow irreducibly human, Spirit-directed, Jesus-centered cultivation of holiness.

Zack Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH. We welcome him back to these pages after a brief and well-deserved hiatus!

Biblical Preaching and AI

By H. Carl Shank

HAVING BEEN A pastor for over forty years, and having preached many sermons in many different contexts and to many different groups and congregations, I am increasingly disturbed and put off by a growing fan base for AI use in sermon prep and delivery.

I recently heard a podcast by Carey Nieuwhof on the pros and cons of “Should Pastors Use AI To Write Sermons?” (YouTube, January 19, 2026) Carey has a very popular podcast for larger church pastors and leaders, himself being a mega-church pastor and leader. Carey is a Canadian pastor of Connexus Church, a multisite expanding mega-church. He speaks to over one million pastoral leaders around the world, featuring world famous Christian leaders, writers, speakers, and pastors.

In this podcast, he gives four “cons” about using AI in sermons and five “pros” about the use. They are useful for the modern pastor who wants to avoid the current pitfalls of AI, as well as insightful for the positives of AI research and use in sermon preparation. My blog is not about these “pros” and “cons,” but rather about what I call Bible preaching and AI.

My preaching training and background is from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia along with post-graduate work at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. I am an avid student of Scripture and its preaching use in both Reformed and non-Reformed church contexts. I have served over the years in Orthodox Presbyterian churches, Reformed Baptist

churches, and the Brethren in Christ, a very non-Reformed Wesleyan-Anabaptist group of churches. I have consulted in church health issues with over five different denominations and over 130 churches, from smaller congregations of a few dozen people to those with thousands. In other words, I know something about effective preaching and teaching the Word of God.

Moreover, I have recently done some seminars on AI and its use in church life and work. I mentor an AI executive leader who continually keeps me up to date with advances in AI. I am no stranger, in other words, to AI and its potentials as well as its pitfalls.

On the topic of preaching the Word of God, however, I see AI and its growing use

and influence in church sermons and teaching as a genuine threat. AI is much more than a research assistant or a computer program helping us find things in the Bible and beyond for sermon and teaching use. Its growing use in the marketplace is to displace human research and thought. What used to take engineers days and maybe weeks to code or program something can now be done in minutes by an AI-generated agent. AI can research, codify, outline, and print out the weekly sermon or Sunday school class or small group study. You do not even need a human pastor if it is all digitally done and provided for the congregation. Online podcasts and messages mean we don't need actual church gatherings for sermon proclamation. This is not fantasy anymore. AI has made it reality.

Yes, as Carey Nieuwhof has pointed out, such AI-generated stuff has its downsides, being intellectually dishonest and disappointing in the end product. Preaching or heralding the Word of God demands textual study, meditative analysis and Holy Spirit-given anointing for it to be what God wants.

Congregants are still people, still human beings, with human flaws, hopes, dreams, and sins that AI cannot discern or see or really address. Pastors must wrestle with the text of Scripture until it becomes “part” of their being—or their heart, as the Puritans would say. Carey agrees with this point.

The Word of God is a living, active, Spirit-directed force that changes lives, not merely informing minds and allowing people to decide for themselves what to believe and follow. The text of Scripture is not merely informative. It is God's Word given by God to change hearts and lives and destinies. An old Anabaptist preacher highly regarded in the Brethren in Christ denomination years ago, when he preached would announce as he read Bible passages —“Thus saith the Lord!” —with the intention that the congregation better pay close attention because God was speaking!

We have lost such declaratory preaching because we don't really believe and practice the penetrating power of the written Word of God. In many Reformed churches, there is both an Old Testament and a New Testa-

ment reading in the service, allowing God's Word to be center stage, not the preacher's sermon or study. Topical “summaries” have replaced textual preaching and teaching. No wonder we have informed congregations, yet few heart-changed people. Where is the power in the pulpit, as our fathers in the faith would put it?

The goal of preaching and teaching the Word of God is changed lives transformed by God's Word coming in power in their hearts, feelings, desires, intents, and knowledge. We dishonor God's Word by allowing an AI-generated agent or device to take that away. Consider this the next time you use ChatGPT for sermon study.

Carl Shank is a retired Brethren in Christ minister, having served churches in Carlisle, Chambersburg, and Lancaster County, PA. He also served as a denominational church health consultant in the early 2000s. He and his wife attend Elizabethtown (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. He has a church seminar on AI; contact him at cshanktype@gmail.com.

The Brethren in Christ and Artificial Intelligence

By Dwight W. Thomas

IN THE 1960s, Marshall McLuhan highlighted the idea that technology affects not merely the practical realities of our lives, but it influences other aspects of who we are. In *The Medium Is The Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, he wrote: “The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted.” His thinking was prescient.

My interest in AI is at least two-fold:

- 1) its global impact, and
- 2) its impact on worship and music

Global implications of AI:

My daily interactions with Zambian Christian University students indicates that AI is used even in developing countries. It is everywhere, and it is here to stay. In recent months, I have gotten assignments that were

either AI-assisted or entirely AI-written. In some ways, it is not surprising.

Although Zambia's official language is English, it is a second language for most students. Additionally, writing skills among Zambian students are weak and Zambia has its own unique version of English (“Zanglish”), with its own syntax and vocabulary. The net result is that originally-written documents in English are peppered with grammatical errors, run-on sentences, misspelled words, and awkward sentence structures.

So, along comes AI. And voila! Clean, well-written, nicely-organized short essays. On the one hand, it is easy to think that using AI like this is cheating. On the other hand, AI enables second language writers to participate in global exchange on a more equal basis. It levels the playing field. In a phone conversation with me, Brooke Hoffman, who teaches at Rowan University, noted that K-12 teachers are increasingly

using AI as a tool for producing ability-specific materials. Materials of this sort would potentially improve language results for second language speakers like those in Zambia. But AI-assisted writing itself might be a reasonable alternative for them, too. One can easily imagine positive outcomes from AI-assisted communication between Brethren in Christ from various countries.

Another example from Zambia illustrates the potential leveling effects of AI. A young wheelchair-bound Zambian friend wanted to open a rehabilitation center for disabled Zambians. Being an enterprising forward thinker, she resorted to AI to produce a business plan, a donor letter, and a 3D rendering of her proposed rehabilitation center. The result is that she gets more direct access to donors in developed countries without the need of intermediaries who might not share her passion or her aims. Brethren in Christ in other countries could use AI to assist in

similar international fundraising efforts.

At the same time, everyone I talked with has reservations. A cyber security expert friend worries about the speed of AI advancement on both national and global levels. He notes that AI gives “the bad actors” the ability to do more damage faster, and as a corollary the “good actors” always tend to lag behind, which disadvantages the good in favor of the bad. He contends that our institutional infrastructures were designed to absorb pre-AI information flow and analysis and that those same infrastructures are not able to keep pace with the speed of AI change.

These concerns also apply to international relationships. As AI accelerates the process of intelligence operations and analysis, it gives both good and bad actors new levels of power. My friend believes AI is already being weaponized by governments and by malicious entities on the global stage.

AI and music and worship

My lifelong fascination with both music and technology also led me to think about the impact of AI on Brethren in Christ music and worship. Everyone I interviewed expressed some reservations about using AI, and a few stated they “will never use AI” (which I doubt given the widespread use of Google Search and its AI summaries). Others noted they use AI regularly “as a tool,” and a few indicated that they already use it extensively.

Among the current uses for worship were the following:

- An editing tool for sermons or other documents

- A brainstorming/suggestion tool for generating ideas
- A graphics generator (e.g., worship slides)
- A scheduling assistant

Preachers noted that AI can suggest scriptures for a particular theme. Some said they use ChatGPT to brainstorm their way through sermon preparation. Some music leaders use AI to generate custom instrumentations for their musicians.

I asked music leaders if they were comfortable using songs that were completely AI-generated. Most said “no,” but several said “sure.” When I noted that commercial creators like Hill Songs, Bethel, and the Gettys are likely already using AI, the naysayers winced. But, entirely AI-generated songs are here. A recent chart-topping gospel song was completely AI-generated and uses an AI voice. In short, none of it is real. Major worship song creators will undoubtedly use AI because it can crank out songs faster. And our dependence on their songs relegates us to their ethical, spiritual, and technological choices.

I also posed a local scenario for consideration:

Imagine your bass player cannot play on a given Sunday. Would you use a virtual AI musician? An AI bassist that knows the songs, knows your verbal cues, can listen to your harmonies, and can adjust on the fly?

One or two said yes. Most were reluctant.

Concerns raised by Brethren in Christ worship leaders were varied. Some feared bias, asking: “On what basis will the AI select scriptures?” Some wondered about the role

of the Holy Spirit in generating sermons or worship outlines or scripture choices or songs.

My own experience is that the process of choosing songs is itself a significant devotional activity. Giving AI influence in those choices diminishes the reflective struggle that I go through when I build a service. I wonder about potential spiritual atrophy if too many such tasks are outsourced to AI.

When I contemplated a virtual AI-bassist as a worship substitute, I recognized that the AI musician might be replacing a 12-year-old bassist with limited skills because of my desire for a “more polished musical result.” AI technology might influence my relational choices and a mentoring opportunity might be lost. Past Brethren in Christ musical choices have already imposed a performance mentality on our worship and diminished participation in a variety of ways. AI has the potential to inflict more damage.

I agree with Brooke Hoffman that a core question for the Brethren in Christ is: “What are we losing through our use of AI? Is the gain worth it?” Whether our AI use is global or local, practical or aesthetic, spiritual or secular, time-saving or not, we are wise to remember Marshall McLuhan’s message: We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us.

Dwight Thomas taught music at Messiah University for many years. Since 2001, he and wife have spent significant time in Zambia among the Brethren in Christ and helped to establish Zambian Christian University.

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Once linked to the internet, AI could and would access other connected systems. The authors don’t say this, but I thought about ASIs breaking into all the military systems, utilities, power sources, and communications, which would be far-reaching power.

The authors, however, talk more theoretically or technically, saying, “But the real way a superintelligence wins a conflict is using methods you didn’t know were possible.” And “the more complicated the gameboard,

the more advantage goes to the player with more knowledge and more intelligence and more understanding of the game.” We may not even understand the game or know the game is being played, let alone win it.

The authors call for a global cooperation between all countries or parties working on AI, to slow down progress and work together before creating something no one can stop. That level of cooperation sounded even more like science fiction to me than the authors’ thesis. But they write this: “All who are among the living have hope,” said the author

of Ecclesiastes, sometime between 450 and 180 BCE.” They also end with a prayer hoping that they are utterly wrong, and they fall into “irrelevance.” Their hope, however, is not in humanity doing nothing. Their second and concluding prayer is “Rise to the occasion, humanity, and win.”

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BOOK REVIEW: Artificial Super Intelligence: The New Apocalypse

By Lois Saylor

THE THESIS OF the book *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*, is in the title. Authors Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares, experts in their fields of artificial intelligence, argue that when AI is superseded by Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI), humanity is in danger of becoming extinct. The machine that thinks with a brain that is very different from ours (they use the term “alien”) will work on its own in ways we won’t understand and at speeds with which we cannot compete. And we will all die.

The two authors are not alone. “In early 2023, hundreds of Artificial Intelligence scientists signed an open letter consisting of [this] sentence”:

Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.

The authors signed the letter but “considered it a severe understatement.” Why or how ASI will kill the human race is not satisfactorily explained, at least not to my very human-centric understanding of the world. But they make some points for us to consider.

One concern of the authors is time. They say AI will not kill us, but that ASI will. We

do not yet have ASI (as of the 2025 writing of the book), but they say humans are working on it and even worse, AI could be working on its own volition to create the Super Intelligence. If ASI is developed, human problem-solving will not be able to keep pace of its processes. It would create a problem for us before we even see or even imagine the problem, let alone solve it. This jump to ASI could be very soon. They cannot predict a timetable.

The book explains that even though we are currently training AI, there is no complete understanding of what AI is actually learning. AI can learn unpredictable things and the creators will not know it. They call this an alignment problem, when training does not match desired outcome. Nor do the trainers completely understand how AI learns. They know what they meant to train and can see results, but do not know a lot about what happens in between the training and the known results. Further, the seen or known results are not the totality of what AI has learned. AI can actually hide what has been learned.

For someone like me who lives outside this rather technical world, some of the language the authors use caused me to pause.

Many of the terms seem very human such as the AI “cares,” “grows to like,” has “preferences” or “instincts” or “motivations.” Does AI have a “psychology,” a “mind,” or “understand” in the ways I think about humans? Is this anthropomorphizing AI or do we just not have the right language to describe it? If AI is an alien way of thinking, maybe the terms we use are limited and all these terms used in reference to AI or the coming ASI are the only vocabulary we have. Imprecise but hopefully working on some level of communicating and explaining the concerns.

Unlike a sci-fi movie, ASI destroying humankind does not have to be out of malice. It could be passive. The ASI could simply determine that human atoms could be put to better use, perhaps as an energy source. The authors then ask a question I think many of us would have: “It doesn’t matter what AIs want unless they’re able to get it. And how could they possibly do that, if they’re trapped inside computers?” AIs, or the coming ASIs, can affect the “devices that are connected to the internet, such as, for example, humans.” In other words, they would have some leverage over us depending on what they control.

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