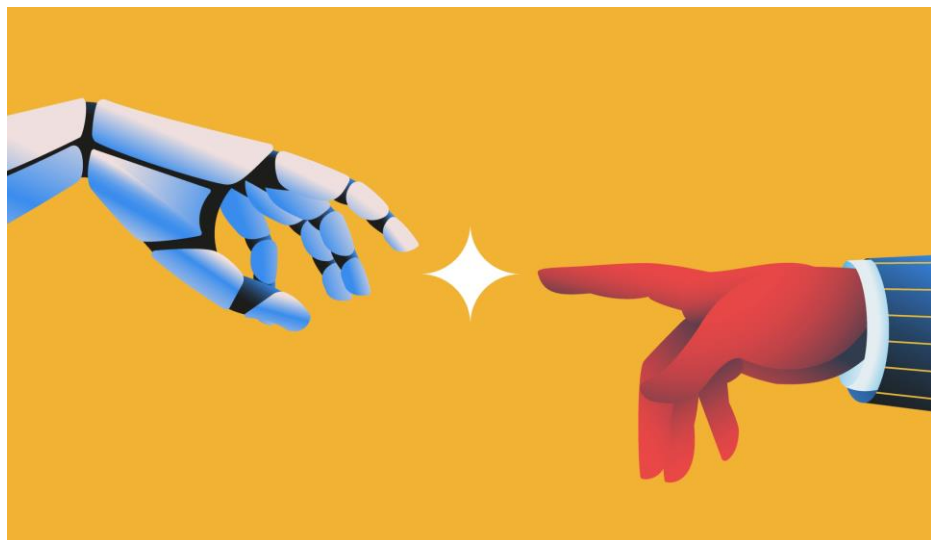




Artificial Intelligence

Some considerations for the churches

By John Benton

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Introduction

One recent book on the subject of artificial intelligence is titled *The AI Apocalypse: A Survival Guide for Humanity*. Hopefully that title, with its connotations of imminent doom, is somewhat over the top. But certainly, artificial intelligence has the potential to be extremely dangerous in many ways – hence the recent calls to slow down its development and to bring in government regulation to protect human rights. AI is bringing a technological revolution in society which will affect us all.

Rather than simply jumping on board with this latest piece of techno-kit, Christians, and especially Christian leaders, need to be thoughtful and to ask some searching questions – even theological questions. This is what this booklet is about.

What is AI?

But first, what exactly do we mean by the term ‘artificial intelligence’ or AI? It can be defined as ‘the ability of a computer to do tasks on its own that normally require human thinking.’ What is in mind here are things like learning, solving problems and making choices.

AI uses step-by-step rules called ‘algorithms’ which the computer is programmed to follow to solve a problem. It uses data – information that the machine looks at to find patterns. And the crucial factor is the use of ‘machine learning’ which is something like a feedback loop by which computers can quickly refine and get better at a task assigned as it takes in new data. This the computer does for itself instead of needing new code written into it by a programmer – hence the idea of ‘artificial intelligence’. It can do it on its own. And, being electronic, it can do it in the blink of an eye.

Different types of AI

The development of AI, though moving at a great rate, is still in its early stages. But just like human beings, what it does can be thought of in two different categories. Some people are highly skilled at one particular task – perhaps carpentry – but haven’t got much of a clue about much else. Other people may have broader abilities and are capable of learning most things from plumbing to foreign languages to higher mathematics. The first has a narrow skill. The second has more general intelligence. Just so, there are two types of AI.

- *Narrow AI*

This is where systems are designed to do one specific task – like translating one language into another, or spotting fraud, or aiming a missile at an enemy target. This is where most of the success of artificial intelligence has been so far.

- *General AI*

At the time of writing, this form of AI is still something of an aspiration rather than a reality. But theoretically it would be a computer system which could do many different tasks as efficiently, if not better, than a human being.

Daily life

There are all kinds of ways in which AI is beginning to be used in daily life. One could think of the advent of self-driving cars, which can be guided by GPS and 'sense' the proximity of things like other cars by radar and take action so as to avoid them. If this becomes widespread it will do away with the need for driving tests and extend the 'age of driving' in both directions.

AI is already proving itself very useful. I have a friend who used AI to summarise the detailed list of recommendations which came out of the survey of his house when it came to selling it. Another church friend who has recently been elected to take part in local government, used AI to expose a misuse of funds. He was very pleased with quickly finding out what had been going on and would have taken a huge amount of time to pin-point otherwise. Some are clear that AI will find a cure for cancer fairly soon. So clearly there are many areas in which AI is going to be especially helpful.

Questions

But like most new technologies AI cuts both ways. It can help some, but on the other hand it can be unhelpful to others. For example, it can mean people losing their jobs, because AI can do the task faster and more efficiently than they can and for no pay. Already I have found some people turning to AI to advise them concerning what to do about a medical condition rather than getting involved with the NHS and its over-stretched doctors and nurses.

As people, we are made in the image of God, Genesis 1.26,27. Part of that image is the ability to recognise, think and to choose, Genesis 2.16, 17. But what happens when computers are seen – at least superficially – to be able to do those very things better and faster than we can unguided by us? How should we use AI? What are the pitfalls of which we need to be aware? What effects might this technology have on us? How might things play out in the long term? We all have a long list of questions.

Chapter 1: AI and anthropology

Does AI have the potential to make *homo sapiens* redundant? That thought is on the minds of many people just now. Are AI robots the next level of evolution and should humanity now step aside? Behind such questions there are others. What do we think a human being is? What is human life meant to be about?

These are big questions to which the secular world will give answers very differently from the Bible. Let us begin by getting our feet on solid ground, 2 Timothy 3.17, and reminding ourselves of what Scripture has to say about who we are and what is meant to be the purpose of human existence.

God's image

The Bible declares us not to be the products of a random process of 'evolution'. Instead, it tells us that we deliberately made by Almighty God.

'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them.' Genesis 1.26-28a.

Unlike the other creatures God made, human beings have the high privilege of being made in God's image and likeness. And though we are made for dominion (we will consider that in a moment) the first thing that being made in God's image means is that, not only are we the pinnacle of his creation, but we are made for relationship with God.

This is clear from the fact that the first thing God does after creating the human couple is to speak to them, to communicate with them. "And God said to them..." Genesis 1.26. God had spoken before *about* various other parts of his creation, e.g., Genesis 1.22. But when it comes to human beings, he doesn't just speak about them, he speaks *to* them. And, of course, this becomes an ongoing pattern, e.g., Genesis 2.16, 17, 3.9. Further God listens to Adam's reply, Genesis 3.10. As the image of God, though human beings are made to represent God to the rest of creation – hence dominion – nevertheless a central part of that is that image-bearing means we are made to know God. We are made to 'walk with' God, Genesis 5.24.

Spirit as well as body

The second chapter of Genesis underlines this. As it gives more details about humanity, we realise that God made Adam (and by implication Eve too) to be spiritual beings. God breathed his own breath (or spirit) into Adam's body – the breath of life, Genesis 2.7. Adam and Eve were not automatons, but people capable of emotion, with hearts that were free, able to desire, enjoy and to love. Our relationship with God is not robotic, but heartfelt.

Here we find the Biblical foundations for the Westminster Shorter Catechism's answer to the question of the purpose of human life. 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.' These are ultimately matters of the heart and the spirit. God is our good Creator who we should rightly love and joyfully serve. And sadly, it is the essence of sin that believing Satan's lies about God, the man and the woman chose not to love God or listen to his word, Genesis 3.4.

Here we see immediately one reason why AI can never replace human beings. We are fundamentally different. AI robots may be constructed to think faster and be more efficient than *homo sapiens*, but they are not persons. They know nothing of love and joy. They are not self-conscious beings, capable of true relationship. They may be made to look as if they are. But they are not. In particular, they are not capable of a relationship with God.

Humanity's dominion

Under God, human beings were given (within their limitations) the responsibility to govern the world. 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea...etc.', Genesis 1.26f.

As the image of God, human governance was to be patterned on God's own dominion. Already, in Genesis 1, we understand that God's way of ruling his world is a gracious rule. It is not dictatorial but has a sensitivity about it. This can be seen *first* in the way he creates. His creative word is not a crass *fiat*, 'Light – you will come into being!', but a softer more gracious, 'Let there be light', Genesis 1.5. It can *secondly* be seen in the way God begins by creating fitting environments for what he is later to make. For the sun, moon and stars he has created the heavens. For the fish he has made the seas. For the animals and human beings, he has established the land. His is a loving and caring rule.

This can also be seen at the end of the Bible. In Revelation chapter 4 we are shown the great throne of God surrounded by 24 other lesser thrones on which 'elders' are seated, Revelation 4.4.. Though God is supreme, nevertheless his throne room has

the air of a council chamber, where he not only gives his commands but where he also listens to the concerns of others and takes them into account. He is a God who hears our prayers.

Part of our calling as human beings is to take loving control of the earth, to nurture it in the service of God and to the glory of God. We are meant to do this by mirroring God's gracious lead in how to govern.

AI may well be helpful in informing our subduing the world, but with its cold logic it cannot replace us. And were it to do so (we will touch on this later) it would mean our abdication of our God-given duty as human beings to rule. Therefore, we should not let AI replace us. It must be our servant, not our master. Only God is to be our master.

Chapter 2: AI and authority

We live in a technological society and perhaps artificial intelligence is the very zenith of our technology so far. From technology comes the idea of technique. 'In his book *The Technological Society*, the philosopher Jacques Ellul gives us a definition of technique that is extremely valuable. "Technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency...in every field of activity." Whenever we use reason to create methods to achieve efficiency, we are practicing technique.'"¹

Efficiency

Here is something we need to keep our eye on; if artificial intelligence is about anything, it is about efficiency. It appears to encapsulate the ultimate technique for bringing about faster processes, more accuracy, fuller research, lower costs etc. In many ways AI is coming to be the centre of what we might call 'the secular gospel' – more efficiency, getting bigger and better, less unpleasant leg work, more time for yourself and more independence. This works for us. It fits with the direction our society has chosen. So, this is very seductive in the eyes of contemporary people.

However, what we need to see as God's people is that there is likely to be temptation for both Christians and churches to look to artificial intelligence for answers to our questions rather than the Bible – our true source of authority, God's revelation of all we require for faith and practice, 2 Timothy 3.16, 17.

Technique

At the very beginning of his book titled *Something Must be Known and Felt*, Stuart Olyott makes an uncomfortably perceptive comment². He talks about comparing the early church with the evangelical church of the modern day. He says that the early church could be characterised by concern about three things; doctrine, godly behaviour and the activity of the Holy Spirit. By contrast, today's evangelicalism is concerned about doctrine, behaviour and *technique*. We are enamoured with 'how to' books – how to live as a fulfilled Christian, how to have a good marriage, how to bring up our children etc. Then there is the greatest question of all, 'what must I do to be saved?' Such questions are not wrong. The issue is, 'where do we look for the answers?' Will we look to God's word or to the 'wisdom' of AI?

¹ Quoted in *You Are Not Your Own: belonging to God in an inhuman world*, by Alan Noble, IVP, 2021, pages 51, 52

² *Something Must be Known and Felt*, by Stuart Olyott, Bryntirion Press, 2015

This is a crucial divide. Will the churches continue to look to the inspired word of God as their ultimate authority, or will we ask AI to sift the data and tell us the answers? We face a watershed.

Let's take an example. Many church leaders are concerned to grow churches. This is legitimate and understandable. The churches have passed through a century of dwindling congregations. Thousands have given up on church. But the tendency has been to look for techniques and strategies rather than giving our attention to a prayerful reading of Scripture and waiting on the guidance of the Spirit.

How we build

Churches and church leaders will need to exercise great care here in future days. We read in the book of Acts that the Holy Spirit spoke to the church leaders at Antioch saying, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul (later Paul) for the work to which I have called them", Acts 13.2. There was prayer and worship which led to guidance from heaven. But often such things take time and patience – not conducive to busy church leaders in a pressurized world.

We want quick fixes. And AI is waiting with arms wide open. It will look at all the data on church growth and cross-cultural mission for you and give fast, solid, evidence-based answers. What more could we want? But somehow, we have left God himself out. We could find ourselves not working with God but running our own 'successful' ministry independent of him.

I am fairly certain that if you scan the data about which churches attract lots of people and so grow quickly, you will find that a high-quality music group would figure quite prominently in that research. But does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit cannot work to open the hearts of listeners without the use of classy music? No, it doesn't. But nevertheless, the fact remains that music does attract people, so churches see this as a priority. Paul would tell us at this point that we need to be very careful. Are we building on the foundation of Jesus Christ 'with gold, silver, and precious stones' or with 'wood, hay and straw' which won't stand the test, 1 Corinthians 3.12,13. Are we making true disciples who will persevere to the end or just a fan-base of church groupies who will disappear at the slightest difficulty?

The basic concern

If we think of the story of Joshua, that great leader of the people of God, we know that it was drummed into him that he must know and act on the word of God, Joshua 1.6-8. Whatever he did, he was not to be distracted or turn away from God's word.

Obedience to the Lord would bring true success. And the Biblical account goes on to underline this fundamental principle.

Alec Motyer puts it like this. 'Joshua, the man of God registered his two failures when he acted without the divine word. 1. Without the Lord's direction (contrast Joshua 7.2 with 8.1) Joshua sent a selected force against Ai³ and reaped the bitter fruits of human wisdom (7.3). It always takes a total commitment of all our resources to stand against the enemy (8.1), but no resource is sufficient unless it acts at and upon God's word. 2. When the Gibeonites came with practised deceitfulness, Joshua again followed human wisdom, they "took note of their provision and did not ask counsel at the mouth of the LORD" (9.14-15)'⁴

God's word as our authority has always been a central tenet of evangelical faith. AI offers a very seductive alternative.

³ No pun intended!

⁴ *Roots: Let the Old Testament speak*, Christian Focus, 2009, page 116

Chapter 3: AI and ecclesiology

Morality and ethics are closely intertwined. One way of seeing the difference between the two is that ethics is about the external rules by which we conduct ourselves towards others, whereas morals are an individual's internal beliefs about right and wrong. The way we treat others usually emerges from our morals.⁵ As Christians we believe love is right and it is the highest virtue, 1 Corinthians 13.13 and should be the very atmosphere of the church.

How does AI play into the moral area of human life? On the surface they appear to have very little to do with each other. But in fact, they closely interact. For Jacques Ellul, one defining characteristic of technique (and therefore AI) is that in the modern world it subsumes all values under efficiency. Efficiency becomes the greatest good and a way of reassuring our conscience. "Technique provides justification to everybody and gives all men the conviction that their actions are just, good, and in the spirit of truth."⁶

How could artificial intelligence potentially affect church life? Here are a couple of areas to think about.

Christian love

The Lord Jesus's great command is that we should 'love one another as I have loved you, John 13.34. And he underlined the nature of such Christian love by later saying, 'Greater love has no-one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends', John 15.13. At the heart of the Christian ethic is self-sacrifice through faith in Christ for the good of others.

But such sacrifice cannot be classed as 'efficient'. Love is not about low cost and greater profit for oneself. It is not about saving time. Remember, Paul tells us that love often has to be patient. It has to persevere and involve us in perhaps doing the same service for others over and over again.

So immediately we see that the philosophy behind AI and the ethos surrounding AI pulls in one direction (efficiency) while the Lord Jesus would take us in another. AI may have its place in the world of business, but Christianity – at least the Christianity

⁵ Unless we are acting hypocritically and lacking integrity.

⁶ Quoted in *You Are Not Your Own: belonging to God in an inhuman world*, by Alan Noble, IVP, 2021, pages 51, 52

we find in the NT – is not a business. It is about sacrificial love to God and to others, Mark 12.28-31.

We need to be aware of this and of the trap that the ‘gospel’ of efficiency sets. Think about it. Why, for example, should a boss of a company make sure that his workers get holidays and benefits like paternity leave? These things look loving and helpful. But the real answer is often because, as everyone knows, a happy workforce is a more *productive* workforce. So, what this is actually about is not so much kindness and generosity but efficiency. Love has been subverted and perverted.

And if the thinking of Christians is that, for example, by being loving to others they will grow their church – then is it really love at all? We are ‘loving’ people for what we can get rather than simply loving folk spontaneously. Isn’t it actually a self-serving technique which is no love at all. Ellul’s observation is correct. Technology and technique, including AI, will affect our values.

How we value others

The emphasis on ‘efficiency’ leads us in the direction of valuing people for what we can get out of them rather than for the fact that they are human beings made in the image of God.

Sin has always encouraged us to think along these lines. In James 2 Christians are warned against treating rich people who may enter a congregation with warmth and deference while behaving with indifference towards a poor person who may come in. ‘How much could this rich person contribute to the church? They would be quite a catch for us.’ Note what James says. Behaving like that we become ‘judges with evil thoughts’, James 2.4.

Yet the technological / efficiency atmosphere to which AI belongs, encourages us to think in that way. The poor and the elderly are looked upon now as a drain on society and sadly the churches often view them in a similar way. We get excited about reaching students and young married couples who will be ‘the church of the future’ not about seniors. These are ‘evil thoughts.’

The followers of Jesus need to value people not by how much they bring to the party.

Preaching

The other obvious place in church where AI could begin to hold great influence is in the pulpit. It is comparatively easy, so I am told, to get AI to write an extremely competent sermon on a given passage of Scripture.

Colin Hansen tells his students: ‘The week you use AI to write your sermon will probably involve a crisis or an unexpected death or funeral, another preacher fallen ill at the last minute, a critical email that requires a tense in-person meeting. You run out of time to prepare. You don’t have the necessary hours to study...and develop illustrations. Your head is spinning, you can’t lock-in to the mental work of exegetical or homiletical outline. Its 10pm on Saturday. You (would) need to be up by 4 a.m. and you can’t even think about how you’ll apply the passage to the congregation you know well.

‘Generative AI offers you the solution to what feels like an impossible problem. You need to preach the next morning. You need sleep so you can handle the morning services, afternoon meeting with the elders, and evening dinner with new members. And you have nothing to offer....

‘AI excels in mimicking the three-point sermon with an introduction, thesis, points, subpoints, illustrations, even applications and conclusion. If you don’t like the first draft produced in seconds, you can prompt necessary revisions to complexity and tone.

‘And the congregation will love it. They’ll tell you afterward that you were especially clear this week. They loved the depth of insight. They felt like you were really speaking to them individually, like the Holy Spirit told you what they were thinking...That’s why you’ll use AI to write your sermon next week too.’⁷

Here we have the danger of preaching for the church in which the preacher bypasses God. (How do you know your pastor is not doing this already?)

⁷ *The AI Apocalypse: A survival guide for humanity*, Introduction, by Colin Hansen, The Gospel coalition, 2026, page 9

Chapter 4: AI and soteriology

Soteriology is just the sophisticated theological term for the doctrine of salvation. I have used it here simply to preserve the rhyme embodied in the chapter titles.

When we look at what Scripture says about personal salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ, its promises can be boiled down to around five essential elements – the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, a new and better world, complete joy and knowing God in his glory. Through faith Christ we know something of these things now, in this present age. But the main part of these promises will be our experience in the coming age. Now we know in part, then we will know these things in their fullness. So, we wait in faith.

Why wait?

However, some of the most optimistic advocates of artificial intelligence tell us that in not many years' time we can have the majority of these things in this life, provided for us by AI. This 'salvation' will come about not through faith but through science guided by super-intelligent computers.

Of course, not all that is countenanced in Biblical salvation registers on the list of the 'salvation' that is offered by AI. Emerging from a basically secular background, the developers of AI do not regard sin as a real problem to be dealt with and God himself is seen as either non-existent or irrelevant. Hence personal forgiveness and the joys of knowing God are not included. But eternal life, a better world and human happiness do remain on their menu. And, we have to say, it is only these things that appeal to ordinary unregenerate people.

In his commentary on Revelation, the Oxford emeritus professor, John Lennox,⁸ sketches out what is thought by some to be the lie of the land in the near future.

What some scientists are saying

'For the first time in human history, we are told by some scientists that they are in a position to re-engineer human beings and turn them into superintelligent transhumans. Nick Bostrom, the former director of Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute, explains that transhumanism is "the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making

⁸ *God, AI and the End of History: Understanding the book of Revelation in an Age of Intelligent Machines*, by John Lennox, SPCK, 2025, pages 91, 92.

widely available technologies to eliminate ageing and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities.”

‘Another well-known proponent of transhumanism is the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari. He reckons that there are two major agenda items for science in the twenty first century. The first is to solve the problem of human death: “Humans don’t die... because God decreed it, or because mortality is an essential part of some great cosmic plan. Humans always die due to some technical glitch...Every technical problem has a technical solution. We don’t need to wait for the Second Coming in order to overcome death.”

‘Harari’s second agenda item is to intensify the pursuit of human happiness. For that to happen he says: “it will be necessary to change our biochemistry and re-engineer our bodies and minds...” “(It) will involve re-engineering Homo sapiens so that they enjoy everlasting pleasure.” “Having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods and turn Homo sapiens into Homo Deus (god-men).”

But it is not just ‘optimistic’ futurologists who are thinking like this. John Lennox continues, ‘This drive towards creating a superintelligence comes not only from philosophers and historians but also from really heavyweight figures in the world of science. For instance, Lord Martin Rees, the UK’s Astronomer Royal says: “Abstract thinking by biological brains has underpinned of all culture and all science. But this activity – spanning tens of millennia at most – will be a brief precursor to the more powerful intellects of the inorganic, post-human era. So, in the far future, it won’t be the minds of humans, but those of machines, that will fully understand the cosmos.”’

An alternative salvation?

If these speculations are true, then the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and its preachers will have to compete with another offer of ‘eternal life’. And this ‘eternal life’ through science will seem, no doubt, much more reasonable than the Christian faith. How will preachers argue for the Biblical gospel? What kind of new apologetics will be required to convince our friends of the truth of Christ? People will be tempted to put their trust in AI and what it can do, rather than in the message of the Bible.

Later on in his book, John Lennox,⁹ quotes Neil MacDonald, the director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at Montreal University: “‘We are about to witness the birth of a new kind of religion. In the next few years or perhaps even months, we

⁹ *Ibid* page 341, 342

will see the emergence of sects devoted to the worship of artificial intelligence.” The reason is clear, once you think about it: certain AI systems are beginning to exhibit properties similar to those that we usually ascribe to deities of one kind or another – for instance, immortality, omniscience, superhuman intelligence and omnipresent prayer-like connectivity via the internet, together with the oracle-like capacity to give a plausible answer to virtually any question...’

Here is a false god who offers an alternative to the gospel and a temptation not to endure as Christians but to fall away from the true and living God.

But God

On the other side of such a threat to the churches I think there are two things to say which we have already hinted at. It is not all gloom and doom.

First, the AI gospel’s failure to address the forgiveness of sins will prove a weakness. We cannot just ignore sin and expect to thrive as human beings. Sin affects us too deeply. Guilt for our wrongdoings is a reality which, it seems, no amount of therapy can dispel. We might distract ourselves from the problem and invent ways to excuse ourselves, but we never find true peace until we know the voice of Christ in our own souls telling us, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’, Mark 2.5. AI simply cannot provide this.

Second, as we have seen already in our first chapter, the nature of human beings is such that we are made to know God. In the words of the great theologian Augustine of Hippo, ‘our souls are restless until we find our rest in Thee,’ The joy of knowing God is not something that AI can replicate,

The Psalmist says, ‘The LORD is my might and my salvation...The LORD is the stronghold of my life...One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD...’ Psalm 271 - .4.

Chapter 5: AI and eschatology

The advent of artificial intelligence will bring enormous changes to society. This will be seen as 'progress'. That inevitably leads us, therefore, to think about the future and from a Christian point of view about 'eschatology', the Bible's teaching on 'the last things'.

World government

One of the darkest themes which runs through Scripture is the idea that before the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ there will emerge some kind of antichrist figure who will deceive the unregenerate people of the world into obeying him. This world government puts itself in the place of God and encourages the lost in their rebellion against their Creator.

- In connection with his return and the end of the age the Lord Jesus spoke to his disciples of 'false Christs' (those who would usurp Christ's rightful position as Lord of all), Matthew 24.24 and of 'the abomination which causes desolation...in the holy place' Matthew 24.15 (which surely has reference beyond simply the Jewish temple).
- Similarly, the apostle Paul writes of 'the man of lawlessness...who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God' 2 Thessalonians 2.3, 4. This lawless one will do Satan's bidding 'with 'all wicked deception for those who are perishing,' 2 Thessalonians 2.10.
- Having spoken of many antichrists, the apostle John finally speaks of 'the spirit of *the* antichrist, which you heard was coming...' 1 John 4.3.
- Again, the book of Revelation, especially in chapter 13 speaks of the fearsome beast who arises from the sea (a picture of the restless nations of the world) and 'the whole world marvelled as they followed the beast', Revelation 13.3. Alongside him is his 'PR man', a second beast who arises out of the earth, deceptive and 'It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast,' Revelation 13.12.

These rulers are termed ‘beasts’ (just as in the book of Daniel) partially because they show no humanity towards the people they rule. There is a terrible ruthlessness in their pursuit and administration of power. This is very different from the kind of compassionate dominion God intended man to have over the earth, or that which Christ will ultimately exercise over the world. This is bestial totalitarian control. (AI too is basically machinery lacking empathy.)

It cannot have escaped our thinking that together with electronic surveillance, AI enables just such control over vast populations of people. Whether it is AI on its own gone rogue,¹⁰ or tech-geniuses using AI to manipulate and oppress people, the possibility of such world government has come a step closer.

One can think of a number of ways AI might be used to take over the world. For example, a group of out of control AI bots could take over the internet and threaten to provoke a nuclear holocaust unless humanity bowed to its demands. Or again, a person or persons could threaten to use the abilities of AI to hack into the infrastructure on which the world relies for transport of food and fuel and cause chaos – with the threat ‘do as we say, or else’. It may sound a little like the script for a James Bond movie, but according to those working with high-flying tech companies such things might be only too possible soon.

What’s happening in China

Such a coming world government should not surprise us in that, to some extent, this is happening now in places like China. There we already have what might be termed ‘data-driven government’. Those who rule China have set up a social credit system which assesses its citizens and organisations through widespread digital surveillance to see if they are ‘trustworthy’ or ‘politically correct’ – in other words towing the party line in what they do.

Each person has a personal identity number and is awarded beneficial credit points that can be added to by government approved behaviour ‘Good boys and girls will be rewarded’ – but it is the government who decides what is ‘good’. Not only does this include such things as being on time for work but also reporting on neighbours who appear to have foreign friends or overseas contacts. With more points a wider range of possibilities open up for a person – eligibility for better jobs, reduced utility bills etc.

¹⁰ And as I write the possibilities of AI escaping human control is very much in the news.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c74edv9887eo>

However, if you behave in a way that is not ‘politically correct’ (approved of by the political elite) such as complaining about the state of the country or going to church or seeking to teach children the Bible you will lose points and face severe penalties. There is no freedom. The population is ruled by fear.

It is not difficult to imagine how such a regime could come to govern the whole earth, especially with the assistance of artificial intelligence.

Silicon valley

It is finally worth noting that the Israeli historian Yuval Harari is quoted by John Lennox¹¹ as saying the following:

‘The most interesting place in the world from a religious perspective is not the Middle East, but rather Silicon Valley. That is where the new religions of the 21st century are being created. Particularly important is the Data Religion, which promises humans all the traditional religious prizes – happiness, peace, prosperity, and even eternal life – but here on earth with the help of data processing technology, rather than after death with the help of supernatural beings. Data Religion believes the entire universe is a flow of data, that organisms are algorithms, and that humanity’s cosmic vocation is to create an all-encompassing data-processing system – and merge into it. On the practical level Dataists believe that given enough computing power, you could create an external algorithm that will understand us humans better than we understand ourselves. Once this happens, authority will shift from humans to algorithms and humanist practices such as democratic elections and free markets will become as obsolete as rain dances and flint knives.’

The beast

Lennox himself, following this quotation, then goes on to comment: ‘Note that this is a move away from liberal humanism and fits into the anti-humanist regime of the monster (the beast), which will be as undemocratic and unfree as it is possible to be....It all gives him plenty of scope for his religion of self-deification.’

The apostle John describes the beast’s authority over the world: ‘And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all

¹¹ Lennox, *op cit*, page 335

who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.’ Revelation 13.5-8

The better news

This is a very frightening paragraph from the word of God as to what lies ahead – and may be coming sooner than we think. But our solace is that *first*, all of this is under God’s ultimate control – God not the devil is on the throne Revelation 4. *Second*, thankfully the reign of the beast is limited in time – whether literally or metaphorically it is 42 months. And *third*, all those who trust in the Lord Jesus are saved – by God’s grace, our names are in the Lamb’s book of life.

Conclusion

In this brief sketch of issues which are raised or likely to be raised by the advent of AI we have tried to spotlight various areas of challenge to Bible churches. Pastors of congregations need to be aware of these matters and to explore and think through answers. When the world changes – and change it will as AI penetrates further and further into our society – pastors need to teach from the Bible on new issues and be ready for the problems which change throws up for their people.

Our short survey of the situation has focused on a number of matters.

- We have identified the issue of human uniqueness and value as a key issue for the future.
- We have considered how AI might impinge upon our trust in the authority of the Scriptures.
- We have thought about the need to avoid valuing others for their productivity.
- We have recognised the abilities of AI to speak to the church through sermons which preachers have neither prayed over nor sought the Lord over.
- We have looked at the possible emergence of an ‘alternative gospel’ which offers ‘eternal life’ through scientific advance guided by AI.
- We have wondered about the possibility of the emergence a world government and of the antichrist through the use of deceptive AI.

In all of this there is an underlying theme and that is the possibility of artificial intelligence leading us away from our trust in the living God. This, of course, is not a new temptation or threat to Biblical faith. It is actually something that God’s people have always faced in a variety of ways down the years of history. Will we trust in God or in man? Will we trust in the Lord or in princes? Will we follow the word of God or will we put our faith in our own schemes?

Nothing new

Back in the eighth century before Christ, the prophet Isaiah warned the kings of Judah about trusting in alliances made with the super-powers of the day for security rather than trusting in the LORD. “Ah, stubborn children”, declares the LORD, “who carry out plans, but not mine, who make an alliance but not of my Spirit...Who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the

protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore, shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation...' Isaiah 30.1-3.

When seen in this light we realise that the challenges offered by AI are, in one way, nothing new. AI presents benefits to mankind, but it also presents an alternative to God. As long as AI remains our servant, we can go along with it, but there is a terrible danger that it might soon become our master.

Concerning the future of the world and of his churches, the Lord Jesus repeatedly warns his pastor shepherds to 'Keep watch'.

