



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

Guidelines and Guardrails for Christian Leaders Seeking to use Artificial Intelligence Ethically: Seeing Technology through the Eyes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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With history as our guide, tools used in the business world often find their way into being used in the Church, from printing presses to computers. Many expect artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to be no different. Whereas companies are currently wrestling with questions about the ethical use of AI-focused around topics such as appropriate source attribution, creative and intellectual license, and plagiarism, the Church will naturally be pressed to answer questions about how AI can be used in a biblically informed ethical way. Given the nature of AI, the church will also be asked how this new technology might fit, implicitly or explicitly, into God's redemptive plan. This paper explores how church leaders might use AI and what guidelines and guardrails must be in place to maximize healthy use, minimize implicit and explicit misuse, and reduce or eliminate abuse. To guide our discussion, we draw motivation from the writings of theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who warned us that “we do not rule; instead are ruled [by technology]”. We seek to extend Bonhoeffer's insights regarding technology to the ethical leadership challenges regarding AI that the Church faces today.

Key Words: Leadership Model, Artificial Intelligence, Technology in Church

The world in general, and the Church in particular, has been adapting to technological advancements since the dawn of recorded history. One might argue that “recording history” is an example of one such innovation in a long string of advancements! The business world partitions consumers into five categories based upon their behavioral patterns and values: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. They often then use these categories to design, for instance, marketing strategies with the goal of eventual “mass” adoption. In the end, most people (or their children) eventually avail themselves of technological advances. The Church is no different. From the codex onward through printed media, to the airwaves with radio and television, and now at the speed of light through the internet, the Church has tried to engage technology to fulfill its mission: “Go therefore and make

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Today is in some ways no different and in some ways is very different. The difference is not the need to adapt to technology, but instead the rate at which society (and consequently the Church) is being forced to confront and adapt to technological advancement. Futurist Ray Kurzweil, well-known for his commentaries on the exponential growth of technology in our age, has predicted that “the Singularity is near.” Kurzweil (2006) defines “the Singularity” as “a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed.” Although we as Christians would argue that *true transformation* only comes through the work of grace through faith, we might acknowledge that we are reaching another possible paradigm shift in the way we “do business” and “do church.” The technological advancement driving this paradigm shift is, broadly speaking, the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. Christian leaders are faced with a technology that, in many ways, is a tool to be used like any other tool God has provided. However, at the same time, AI is in some ways very different from any other tool that the Church has encountered – more like a “trainee” that not only accomplishes our bidding but also seems empowered to make decisions on our behalf. If AI were “yet another tool” in our toolbox to be used to increase our productivity by amplifying and extending what we as humans can do, then many of the ethical frameworks already in place would allow us to reason about its “responsible” or “ethical” use. Furthermore, many people do not feel constrained by the initial intended *telos* (ultimate aim) of a tool, but instead view tools as having characteristics that can be disassembled and reassembled to many possible ends. Viewed in this light, the ethical and societal issues surrounding AI find good company in those discussed about many 20th-century creations, from nuclear power to the internet. However, AI has, in some cases, moved beyond being a tool we wield to being an agent with whom we interact. AI now and in the future reflects, mimics, and even impersonates us as humans. When we say that our pets are like us and our children are like us, we are often being equivocal based upon category differences, but what in turn do we mean when we say that an AI

Agent is “like us”? Advances in computer science areas such as computer vision and natural language processing have now equipped AI to see, hear, and speak, but have we in turn also embedded into AI constraints encapsulating the Japanese maxim of the three wise monkeys: “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”? How should the Church respond? Given the nature of AI, the Church will also be asked how this new technology might fit, implicitly or explicitly, into God's redemptive plan. In this paper, we explore how church leaders might use AI and what guidelines and guardrails must be in place to maximize healthy use, minimize implicit and explicit misuse, and reduce or eliminate abuse. Our thesis is that the principal feature of ethical and moral leadership in the age of AI is *discernment*, and that Christian leaders are charged with not only considering if and when a tool should be used but also the impact its use might have on the sanctification process of one's followers. Following Kyle Fedler's (2006) outlook stated in his book *Exploring Christian Ethics*, we agree that “To be a truly good person, it is not enough that one simply does the right things; one must also feel the right way

and do the right things with the right motives and intentions. In other words, one must possess a certain kind of character". To guide our discussion, we draw motivation from the writings of theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who warned us that "we do not rule; instead, are ruled [by technology]" (Bonhoeffer, 2004). We seek to extend Bonhoeffer's insights regarding technology to the ethical leadership challenges regarding AI that the Church faces today.

Our paper is organized as follows: we will first briefly provide some of our theological presuppositions concerning Scripture and technology. We then will give a brief tutorial on the history and terminology associated with artificial intelligence. We highlight how AI is similar to previous technologies, as a tool, and how it is different, as a trainee. We then transition to exploring the goals of Christian leadership in light of technology, focusing on how servant and transformational leadership concern themselves with not only one's actions but also one's character development as we strive towards Christlikeness. We then examine technology through the eyes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and those who followed after him, summarizing and amplifying Bonhoeffer's warnings about over-reliance on technology. We then seek to provide guidelines and guardrails for the Christian leader seeking to ethically use AI. We subsequently call out anticipated pitfalls and warnings to Christian leaders with the hope of sharpening their eye towards biblical discernment regarding AI. We then conclude with a summary of our work, conclusions that can be drawn, and our thoughts on future areas of exploration on this topic.

Presuppositions

Regarding the Bible, we hold to the 1987 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI): "Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises." When biblical analysis is required, we will employ the exegetical framework laid out and followed by Sailhamer (1995) in which we view the Bible through the decision-tree labels of *text*, *canon*, and a *confessional approach*. As relates to all the normative ethical statements made to believers, such as "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Rom. 12:14), we hold that Paul is not encouraging human-generated action, but instead God-empowered action. We ground this in Paul's statements such as "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16) and "'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me," (2 Cor. 12:9) in which Paul grounds his power to act in God. To Paul, even 'self-control' is a "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:23). The necessity of this point will be made clear when we outline, following Kyle Fedler's book *Exploring Christian Ethics*, the outworking of a Christian ethical framework when applied to leadership.

There is a long history of studying the ethics of technology: from life-giving uses of technology (e.g., reproductive technologies) to life-ending technologies (e.g., technologies used in war) (Davis, 2004). The starting point of all these studies is an

acknowledgment that God is the source of innovation and providentially oversees its development and use: “Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose (Reinke, 2022). I have also created the ravager to destroy.” (Isa. 54:16). We agree with Thacker that “Technology is amoral but acts as a catalyst that expands the opportunities for humanity to pursue. It is not good or evil in itself but can be designed and used for good and evil purposes” (Thacker, 2020). However, counter to the secular humanists who hold that “technology can solve almost any problem,” we know that our fallen condition is a problem that humanity cannot resolve. Only God can atone for sins, only God can raise the dead, and only God can make a new creation. As David Ehrenfeld has said, “deep within ourselves we know that our omnipotence is a sham” and “our knowledge and control of the future is weak and limited” (Geisler, 2010). For the purposes of this study, it is important to appreciate that technologies amplify and channel animated power (Reinke, 2022). Lord Acton is credited with the saying, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” However, a recent study shows that power does not indeed corrupt; it “heightens pre-existing ethical tendencies” (DeCelles et al., 2012). Thus, as we will see, the role of AI in particular and technological change in general raises deeper questions. Following the Christian ethicist Oliver O’Donovan, we hold that “If a moral ‘issue’ has arisen about a new technique, it has arisen not because of questions the technique has put to us, but of questions which we have put to the technique” (Reinke, 2022). The question we are putting to the “technique” of AI is: What are the liberties and boundaries God has set on us when leading through rapid technological change? To start to address this question, we must first turn to discussing technological change.

Artificial Intelligence as a Technology

In this section, we begin by providing a brief history and summary of the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Following the framework by, and borrowing text from, Emadi and Kirby (2024), we then present two facets of AI: AI as a tool and AI as a trainee. In the former, AI is similar to many previous technologies wielded by the business world and the church. However, as a trainee, AI is different from tools that have come before – taking on characteristics that are much more akin to a (human) mentee or assistant than previously encountered.

Brief Background of AI

The challenge with any background section is deciding how far back to start the story. For AI, that challenge is no different. Should we start just within the last 100 years, with the advent of computing and post-WWII advances, or do we go further back into history and examine the history of algorithms and how we as humans attempted to encode tasks that we do? Regardless of its particular starting point or starting event, certain characteristics throughout history help guide us to where we are now.

One such origin story is to ground the history of AI and computing in general in the ‘analytical engine’ of Charles Babbage in 1837. Babbage’s ‘machine’ was a form of calculator that incorporated the idea of arithmetic logic units and flow control – the basic

building blocks in early computing. Fast forward 100 years, and we see in the decades prior to WWII, a “computer” was a person who computed. After WWII, a large plethora of research areas emerged, for example: nuclear physics, numerical weather prediction, and digital computing. During this time period, as (digital) computers were able to take on more and more “computing” tasks, the nascent computer science discipline started to ask at what point a computer might “appear” human. Many computer scientists point to Alan Turing’s 1950 paper entitled “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” as the start of AI when he posed the following question: “Can machines think?” The phrase “the Turing test” became known throughout the computer science field as the question of at what point could a human interact with an interface, asking it questions and engaging with it, in which the human could not tell whether he was dealing with a fellow human or a computer.

The field of AI as a subdiscipline arose in this post-WWII era as scientists engaged in an amplifying cycle of computing development, which increased the rate and flexibility of tasks that we could accomplish with computing with developments in our understanding and encoding of how humans think, learn, and interact with the world. In this area, the field of computer science broadly started its partition into specializations: architectures, programming languages, etc., and AI. In terms of computer science, AI is viewed as a technical sub-discipline of the broader computing disciplines. Machine learning is one component of AI but not the only component; in general, artificial intelligence attempts to answer the question of how we can replicate the actions of humans and the intelligence that drives those actions. In this way, we can consider artificial intelligence as a collection of fields within computer science: natural language processing, image processing, computer vision, machine learning, etc. Each of these fields contributes in different ways to the algorithms and techniques that we find under the umbrella of artificial intelligence. In the next two sections, we will discuss concrete examples of AI as a tool and AI as a trainee, and then highlight some of the temptations that arise due to these new technologies.

Reiterating Emadi and Kirby, implicit in the evaluation of many technological advancements of the past has been the view that technology is, at its core, a means of enhancing, extending, augmenting, and/or amplifying the things that we as humans do. The old adage of technology doing a task “better, faster, and cheaper” was in essence a statement measured against how we ourselves might do the task. However, AI is also different. AI also now has the potential to resemble, imitate, and even impersonate the things that we as humans do. There are many tasks that we as humans accomplish that we are willing to delegate to the tools we use. AI, however, has now moved into the realm of doing things that appear more human-like, such as communicating through language (e.g., ChatGPT). In short, the goal has become to “Think humanly, where the aim is to get a machine to think like a human. Think rationally, where the aim is to construct a machine that reasons in the best possible way. Acting rationally, where the aim is to build a machine that performs in the same manner as humans” (Coghill, 2023).

Treating AI as a Technological Tool

The first vantage point from which to consider AI technologies is *as a tool* to be used. This is the category for which the use of AI has become both ubiquitous but yet subterranean. Given AI's ability to sift through data and infer both linear and non-linear patterns, it has found use in personalized medicine (e.g., automatic review and recommendations based on radiology images to find tumors), financial services (e.g., detection of fraudulent credit card activities), driver-assistance (e.g., cars that can now drive and parallel park themselves for you), recommender systems used for music and movies, and virtual assistants that understand and respond to voice commands. This is just a short summary of a long list of places where AI is already being used and benefiting our lives as a tool—something that accomplishes a task on our behalf. Many of these activities fit under the label of ASI: Artificial Specific Intelligence. This is the area of AI research in which we isolate a particular task or set of tasks and create an algorithm to accomplish that task. Over the past 50 years, computer scientists and engineers have made tremendous advances in developing ASI.

Treating AI as a Trainee

The second vantage point from which to consider AI technologies is *as a trainee* to be engaged. These are AI algorithms that start to move beyond tasks that we delegate, but instead start to take on what we might consider attributes of humans, such as communicating. Although we have not reached the pinnacle of success in this area, we are moving towards what is called Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which is AI that can perform well across a wide range of tasks. The general public was first sensitized to these ideas with the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Like with the original Turing test, we now had an interface in which we could ask questions and it would answer "like a human." However, ChatGPT is not the only instance of this type of 'trainee' intelligence. We see it manifesting itself in tools that help you rewrite (or draft) your emails, and for those that are considered progressive, draft your sermons! If you could ask a good (human) assistant to do a cognitive (and possibly creative) task, there is now potential that it can be done by AI. Of course, how we might use AI in the research process is an ethical question that needs careful attention. Using AI as a research assistant is much different than delivering an AI-generated speech or sermon as though it were your own. Nonetheless, these issues highlight some of the more nuanced challenges and ethical questions we now face as AI moves from being an inanimate tool to a personalized trainee.

Furthermore, one of the challenges this mode of AI usage generates is that AI mimics the data on which it was trained. If that 'training data' contains inaccuracies, then the results predicted by the AI will be inaccurate. From the Christian perspective, if that training data contains biases that are a consequence of sin, then AI will also manifest the consequences of sin in a fallen world.

As we have seen, when we use the term AI, we can mean AI as a tool or AI as a trainee/mentee. In light of AI being both, leaders are now asked to address the following questions: 1) Should I use AI at all? If the answer is yes, 2) how or under what conditions should I use AI? and 3) How should I advise my employees or congregants to use AI? The answers to these questions require us to first review the role of the Christian leader and their obligations in that role, a topic to which we now turn.

Christian Leadership through the Lens of Contemporary Theories

Before answering the questions previously stated, we as Christian leaders need to first step back and acknowledge who we are and what we offer to others. This section will cover two widely accepted Christian leadership models, as well as two ethical theories to help us better understand what type of Christian leaders we are. The two leadership theories covered are Servant Leadership (SL) Theory and Transformational Leadership (TL) Theory. These models are described by Northouse (2019) as the two most closely aligned theories to godly traits observed within Scripture. Theory without an application based on Scripture, though, leads to a secular decision-making process (e.g., Enron) which begs the questions – “So what?” and “Why should I care?” Fedler (2006) provides two Christian ethical frameworks that we can use that are complementary to one another: Decisionist ethics (how we act) and Virtue ethics (how we should be).

As part of a Christian’s journey, sanctification is one of the theological cornerstones of our faith and hence is a very distinct concept that both delineates and separates believers from non-believers. Furthermore, a Christian leader is responsible for enacting their godly leadership traits not only to support their own individual sanctification but the sanctification of other believers. Under this premise, we should be asking the following questions: How will I use AI for *my* sanctification? How will I use AI for my *congregation’s* sanctification? For centuries Christians existed harmoniously, yet distinctly, within the progressiveness of science – showcasing technological evolution through their worship services, community involvement, and communication techniques by utilizing the development of TVs, radios, and today’s digital era.

Traits of Servant Leadership (SL) and Transformational Leadership (TL)

Generally accepted within academia, scholars such as Greenleaf (2002) and van Dierendock (2011) for Servant Leadership and Northouse (2019), Bass (1985), and Burns (1978) for Transformational Leadership encourages a strong foundation that promotes ethical, effective, and sustainable Christian leadership practices. Synergy focused on followers’ needs through ethical practices enables inspiration and motivation that can be traced to biblical examples such as Moses (Stone et al., 2005). Within Ex. (chapters 16-17), Moses shepherds the Israelites, intercedes, provides guidance, and frankly keeps them alive by the godly traits of servant and transformational leadership. Christian leadership theory is relevant to the present discussion and must be considered as a culminating practice that shares reciprocity between the future and the present. Influencing the present with empowerment and ethical decision-making

impacts the future's community, culture, and visionary traits. This, in turn, inversely affects the immediate decision-making culture of the future, creating an unbroken cycle of growth and ethical Christian leadership.

As an example of SL and TL in 2020, Chick-fil-A (2020) released its annual report announcing its commitment to this loose model through the investment of its team members. Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A, integrated biblical principles of Servant and Transformational Leadership, which enabled leaders to nurture a leadership culture that is ethical, biblical, and forward-looking. He demonstrated Groysberg & Connolly's (2013) model of investing upfront in leaders which would pay later dividends to their company and its shareholders. Strategic leaders who foster innovative organizations cultivated in opportunity (technology revolution) will stand fast to the predictive current rate of change bolstering success in a rapidly changing business model.

Deploying SL and TL in Decisionist Ethics

Church leaders find themselves in distinct scenarios within their daily lives. Arguably viewed as having a higher level of responsibility and expectations, church leaders must conduct themselves based on firm moral principles and scriptural doctrine. Rom. 12:2 encourages us to avoid conforming to the world but rather to transform our minds so that we might better discern what is the will of God. Moral perplexities faced by Christian leaders generally force two branches of a decision tree: the sinful nature of the world or God's will. Naturally, church leaders must navigate the quandaries of ethics (moral quandaries & dilemmas) that directly influence the sanctification of themselves and their congregation (Burns, 1978). As depicted in the film *The Butterfly Effect*, the influence of one (present) action impacts the entire ethical decision tree of sanctification. Being a leader, simply stated, is difficult: God's placement of those discerning the present should not be considered lightly yet can be accomplished with biblical principles. Mastering decisionist ethics enables God's will to work in growing your and your congregation's sanctification (Smith, 2003).

Deploying SL and TL in Virtue Ethics

Before the clear delineation of church and state around the 1840s, historical figures such as Catholic priests, scholars, and figureheads all shared commonalities in their faith-based leadership methodologies. With this shift, society witnessed a shift from WWJD (what would Jesus do) to "I want to be like Mike" (Michael Jordan) – making the virtuous leadership practices within Christian leadership that much more important. Christian virtues as outlined in Gal. 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) are not simply "good ideas", but instead they are essential manifestations of spiritual growth and discipleship, e.g. what it means to be a Christian and a leader (Wright, 2010). To dig deeper, Christian virtues, fostered by the Holy Spirit, aim to shape us into the likeness of Christ, a goal which remains paramount as sanctification shapes our daily lives (Fry, 2003). Leadership virtues enable Christians to bridge the gap between faith and life by influencing our decisions, actions, and interactions. As leaders grow through their sanctification with

Christ, they gain the tools and experience needed to serve and transform others in their walk with Christ. Then, as leaders, we should be asking ourselves:

1. How will the use of AI affect my sanctification?
2. How will AI influence my congregation's sanctification?
3. Should we assume technology, as a tool, is a gift? If yes, how can we best leverage it to fulfill His will?

By implementing these holistic methods and asking these questions, Christian leaders are inspiring others while utilizing biblically-based virtue ethics. Not only does this support individuals, but also the long-term health of the Christian community. Finally, we should heed Bonhoeffer's warnings that technology should not be used in lieu of studying the Bible for our sanctification but can be used as a tool to support the sanctification process.

Technology Through Bonhoeffer and Those That Followed After Him

In this section, we will provide a theological perspective on technology that we might correspondingly use to build our case for ethical leadership in the age of AI. We start by summarizing Bonhoeffer's views on technology and drawing from it critical warnings about technology's role, either aiding or hindering, in our sanctification. We then step back from Bonhoeffer to show that his views are not 'new' *per se*, but part of a longer tradition within Christendom regarding the use of technology and our God-mandated roles and responsibilities. We then turn back to modern warnings about AI, showing that they align with the longstanding warnings elevated by Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian living in the first half of the 20th century. Bonhoeffer is revered by many for his call away from "cheap grace", his emphasis on Christian community, and his stand against the Nazis which led to his execution on April 9, 1945. Bonhoeffer is relevant to our topic because of his piercing analysis of the state of modernity and its impact on the Church. Bonhoeffer lived, arguably, in the most technologically advanced civilization in the world: Germany. Many hear 'Germany' and the first half of the 20th century and think of the two World Wars; however, a quick inspection of the history of science shows that Germany was leading the way in medicine, physics, chemistry, mathematics, and engineering during that era. Hence we look to Bonhoeffer for insights and warnings concerning technology and the Church.

Although Bonhoeffer did not write any focused work on technology, the topic comes up in various places throughout his writings. In particular, we see Bonhoeffer discussing in his letters from prison the role of technology in modern life and its potential to both aid and hinder human freedom and ethical decision-making. At the core of Bonhoeffer's thinking was that technology can either be an aid or a hindrance to our God-dictated charge: "Bonhoeffer did not view technology as the root cause of man's separation from God, but rather as a facilitator" (Godsey, 1960). In Bonhoeffer's view, our God-mandated charge (Gen. 1:27) was not meant to be God either delegating or

abdicated to humans a role, but rather God providing us a purpose in creation to “tend the garden” (Gen. 2:15) while he walked amidst it (Gen. 3:8). After the Fall, we moved from interaction with God to interaction with technology as our way of fulfilling our role (Treier, 2013). Bonhoeffer accused his generation of “putting its hope in technology” (Marsh, 2014) as a means of controlling the external world, therefore removing our dependence on God to fulfill our dominion mandate (Genesis 1:28). In one of his earlier works, Bonhoeffer gives a stinging rebuke to those who have transferred their hopes to technology:

We do not rule; instead we are ruled. The thing, the world, rules humankind; humankind is a prisoner, a slave, of the world, and its dominion is an illusion. Technology is the power with which the earth seizes hold of humankind and masters it. And because we no longer rule, we lose the ground so that the earth no longer remains our earth, and we become estranged from the earth. The reason why we fail to rule, however, is because we do not know the world as God’s creation and do not accept the dominion we have as God-given but seize hold of it for ourselves...There is no dominion without serving God; in losing the one humankind necessarily loses the other. Without God, without their brothers and sisters, human beings lose the earth (Bonhoeffer, 2004).

Lest we consider Bonhoeffer and his colleagues’ warnings about technology as only being a “modern technology” problem, consider a technology we often consider instrumental to the Church’s reformation: the printing press. Some view the technology of the printing press as a move of the “center of gravity” of Christianity from the heart to the head. Commenting on how technology-enabled this transformation, O’Leary (1996) (reminds us that “...writing made it possible to divorce the production of a communicative act from its reception. This made it possible to address audiences remote in time and space and turned communication from a public act requiring the presence of others into a private, solipsistic activity of writing and reading. ... the religious implications were profound.” This transition from heart to head has not gone unchallenged. In his book *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places and Things in the Digital Age*, Jay Y. Kim highlights three aspects of the return to the “analog church”: human connection, character formation, and worship. Regarding connection, Kim states that “True human connection is fueled by empathy – the God-given ability to step into another’s shoes and open ourselves up to another’s story, not to compare and contrast, but to be overwhelmed by compassion, to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Rom.12:15)” (Kim, 2020). For Kim, this can only be done in physical proximity to others. Secondly, on character formation, Kim quoting Dallas Willard reminds us that “‘character is formed through action, and it is transformed through action, including carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines.’ Carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines. This is intentional, methodical, slow, and steady work. It’s why Jesus uses metaphors like vines and branches to describe the life of discipleship” (Kim, 2020). Character formation, a part of sanctification, is indeed an earthly thing. Lastly, on worship, Kim advocates that “Worship explicitly communicates a whole-body participation in reverent response to God. Worship implies bowing down, falling prostrate, kneeling low with heads to the

ground, drawing near and kissing the hand, etc. – all acts of adoration and allegiance, all acts that required participation with one’s entire body.” James Smith (2009) reiterates this point when, channeling his inner Heidegger, he states:

In contrast, Heidegger argued that primarily, and for the most part, we don’t think about a world of objects; rather, we are involved with the world as traditional actors. The world is the environment in which we swim, not a picture that we look at as distant observers.... With this, Heidegger made a critical move: he shifted the center of gravity of the human person from the cognitive to the noncognitive – from the head to something like the heart, from the cerebral regions of the mind to the more effective region of the body. For Heidegger, we might say that I don’t think my way through the world, I feel my way through the world (Smith, 2009).

To Smith (2013), “... the way to the heart is through the body, and the way into the body is through story.” Hence the issue that Bonhoeffer highlights is much larger than questions of what we do but questions of who we are and are becoming. In our modern age and with the rise of AI, there is a call to appreciate that “we need to understand and affirm what makes us distinctive in the creative order and also understand how freeing us up will allow us to pursue higher goods and purposes or fall to the level of our basal desires (Burdett, 2023). This is where, in part, leadership comes to the forefront. Leaders certainly are influencers, but also leaders are often deciders. However, if part of our role as leaders is to participate not only in what people do but who they are becoming, then we must understand the consequences of people ‘offloading’ their decisions to AI: “If we increasingly rely on AI to make important judgments in our place because the AI can better weigh up the different variables needed to make a judgment in perhaps a more cost-effective way (or perhaps more egregiously because it is a way to obfuscate who is being held accountable), what will become of our moral characters that won’t be exercised as often, if at all?” We will now turn to a collection of guidelines and guardrails that we think are important to a leader’s discerning use of technology.

Effective Discernment of Technology as a Tool

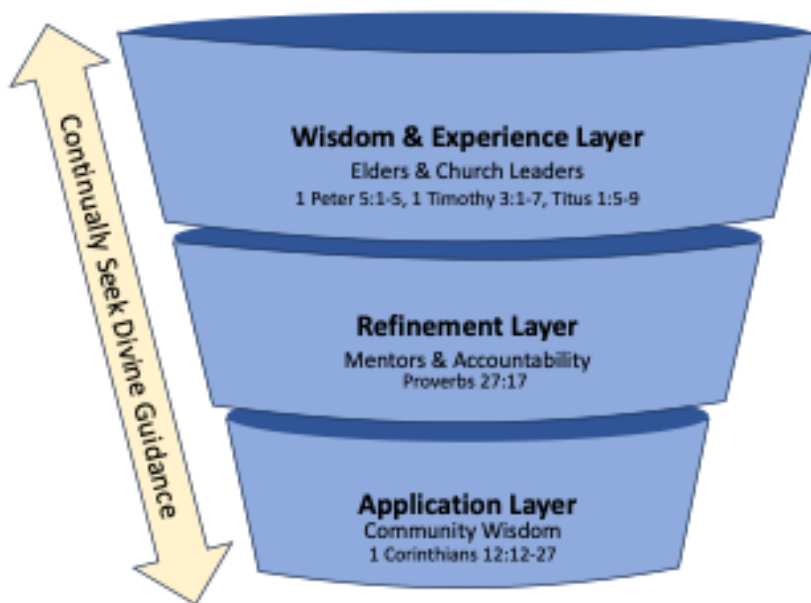
In the early 2000s, the United States Air Force revolutionized their learning and training models to adapt and implement the groundbreaking technological advancements of the GPS (Global Positioning System), thus significantly shifting into the digital era. In doing so, the onset of the technology modifications continued with the adoption of wireless EUDs (End-User Devices), which would seemingly replace the outdated map and compass function of any land-based navigation. However, an outright replacement of the former technology did not happen; the acceleration and adoption of moving map displays and relatively accurate location readings were excellent but were not based on a core capability. Similarly, for modern-day churches, technology as a tool enhances capabilities but should never supplant foundational biblical practices and ethical values. Church leaders, like military strategists, must encompass a core framework of tools (technology) to support the problematic ethical and theological dilemmas based on modernization efforts. *The GPS revolution* gives us insight into the

transformational impacts on benefactors (churches) of technology: showing how unknown use groups might possibly be saddled with unidentified and unintended consequences of their choices. As church leaders, *discernment* is paramount with any change that may affect or influence the sanctification or influence church leaders with new adoption practices. A loose framework supports a level of discernment and flexibility, bolstering essential checks and balances to aid church leaders in supporting their missions without losing sight of their core spiritual and ethical obligations.

Frameworks (guidelines and guardrails) are not a new concept; they are illustrated in many facets of church teachings and operational functions. To build a generally substantiating model, we must first emphasize biblical truth (Jas. 1:5, Phil. 1:9-10, Heb. 5:14) to ensure that church leaders are grounded in core beliefs pointing to a future-proofed concept. Prominent theologian Leonardo Boff was ahead of his time (1985) when he professed a robust framework for integrating AI ethically into a faith-based framework. Boff focused on *empowerment through education* based on a community-oriented faith framework. Similar to Bonhoeffer's logic that technology usage should serve the betterment of the holistic church, support through community involvement provides one potential model church leaders could follow.

As AI development and deployment have radically accelerated within the last 19 years, a refined approach must be considered in adopting best practices from Boff using Bonhoeffer as a guide; a deeper, more holistic approach encompassing elders, mentors, accountability partners, and godly talents from the congregation provides the best future-proof solution for church leader adoption. Using an "if/then" decision tree model, the adoption of best practices should follow the general church organizational makeup, passing through a series of pressure tests to ensure the adoption is (1) practical, (2) biblically founded, (3) ethically sound; and (4) accentuates sanctification.

Figure 1
AI Discernment Model (ADM)



The proposed model (see Figure 1) ensures that a congregation has a robust sounding board with a multi-faceted approach for input and adoption across the entire church organization, starting with the most senior (elders) members refining the concept towards application. Within each layer of discernment, every step should be considered a gating function for the continued refinement and adoption of this methodology while continuously seeking His divine guidance.

Wisdom & Experience Layer

The selection and adoption process with most churches is vetted through the most qualified church body members: *elders*, and *leaders*. 1 Pet. 5:1-5 (Shepherding the Flock), 1 Tim. 3:1-7 (Qualifications for Overseers), and Tit. 1:5-9 (Qualification for Elders) provide guidance and expectations for church leaders to guide and influence the congregation accordingly. In this, the AI Discernment Model (ADM) leverages trust, knowledge, and godly talents at the initiating point of filtration. Mirroring a hierarchical concept, this layer is functional to ensure the overall intent and usage of the tool remain intentional and biblical. This layer provides ethical vigilance to ensure that the potential technology not only serves a purpose but ensures it is not at the expense of core Christian beliefs. This layer is vital to Fedler's Servant and Transformational Leadership practices, emphasizing the role of AI within the church's strategic growth plan.

Refinement Layer

Throughout the intricacies of Paul's life, he lived out his faith, and in doing so two traits surfaced: his commitment to mentoring others and maintaining steadfast

accountability (Epistles) in his ministry. Just like Paul, Christians are told that where two gather in my name, I will be there (Matt.18:20). Stated simply, God is with us when we share time with others. In doing so, we can engage in iron sharpening iron (Prov. 27:17). Nearly all Christians can relate to this as they share in sounding boards, community groups, and those we can rely upon to “shoot straight” with sound biblical advice. This middle layer provides that “sniff test” to filter through the good idea fairies and allow vulnerability and openness to our successes and failures.

Application Layer

Paul's metaphor (1 Cor. 12:12-27) of the church as the body of Christ demonstrates that each member has a unique set of gifts that help and support the overall health of the body. The wisdom of the community is an untapped resource of knowledge and experience that churches may overlook for concepts such as discernment of strategic initiatives. This layer suggests the final gate for church leaders to bounce ideas and practical use cases from where members regularly hold positions of importance outside the church walls. The members' expertise (engineers, scholars, business officials) makes them a unique subset to run through, avoiding pitfalls or anything that may not have been considered previously. Utilizing an “outside” source, leaders can round off a holistic approach in discerning the usage of AI within daily church operations.

The ADM provides a sound, navigable, and faith-based approach to a chaotic and ever-changing technology world. It provides guidelines and guardrails for how church leaders should maintain checks and balances throughout their discernment decision-making process.

Tech Trap: Navigating the Pitfalls of Overreliance in Modern Ministry

In 2018, the Church of England faced immense amounts of backlash for launching a chatbot named “The Church of England Alexa Skill” to provide in-depth church knowledge to embrace digital innovation. The 12th-century William Shakespeare slogan, “All that glitters is not gold,” describes a timeless concept of humanity’s attraction to the next shiny thing. Since the Old Testament golden calves (1 Kgs 5:22-33) to technological revolutions (AI), the attraction of change and simplification has and will always continue to resonate with the progressive nature of society today. As with The Church of England, a tool (provided by God) is leveraged in a capacity not biblically based on impacted areas that were not originally intended. The continued misinformation, lack of sensitivity (pastoral care), privacy concerns, and overdependence on technology exposed the gaps in AI within a faith setting. The downstream effects observed within the church’s efforts created immeasurable fallout between the congregation and church leadership, leading to a loss of trust and faith in shepherding. The overemphasis on technology (AI) usage plagued privacy and security concerns and a lack of transparency with the congregation about what AI can do. The

cause for concern with Christian ethical practices partnered with no oversight of tool (AI) adoption leads us to Paul's suggestion that you can do anything, but not everything is beneficial (1 Cor. 6:12).

To better understand the opportunity, we must first realize the root cause of the potential risks involved with two general assumptions. Technology is a derivative of man (learning biases); it is only the benefactor of man's input and usage, and secondly, technology has no soul. Therefore, it cannot act, think, or create faith-based results from a provided set list of "rules." If both of these hold, we must now address the other side of the input and usage equation: man. Humans have developed a propensity for technology and pursuit beyond God's planned boundaries since the fall of man (Gen. 3) and the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Forwarding ~4,200 years, the same dilemma presents itself, with the onset of AI making its way into faith-based scenarios. AI (features) is perceived as a relatively simple thing that allows you to ask a prompt, and it spits out an answer faster and far beyond what Google may offer. The false sense of reality is a trap for those unknowingly finding themselves at the mercy of what an algorithm *thinks* is the best solution. The concern with this idea is partly due to the person querying and the AI model itself. As AI has no soul, it cannot understand or predict ethical decision-making practices supported by discernment. Fundamentally, AI is a byproduct of the reinforcement and environment to which it is exposed, meaning that a secular-based model embedded with worldview points has a finite understanding of Christian ethics and cannot solve ethically charged dilemmas. Lastly, the belief that AI will make our lives *faster* and more *productive* is untrue. In a sense, there is a place where AI has its upsides (e.g., research, administration, marketing, communications), but it can come at a cost. The overreliance on technology fosters complacency and can lead to abdicating our roles to technology, again opening the opportunity for secular models to shape the church. The level of discernment begins to diminish, giving way to a lax of discernment, which then the model, once reliant on people for modeling, becomes the solution for people to model.

Technology is a godly gift and should be treated as such. Like many other tools, it must be revered for the purpose for which it was created. Core beliefs, pastoral care, sermon writing, privacy and data misuse, and spiritual discernment should never come at the cost of convenience. The ethical dilemmas surrounding AI are real and will continue to grow; however, should Christians choose to adopt a practical faith-based framework, the tool in itself will prove spiritually fruitful, offering new opportunities for growth and understanding.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer is arguably quite prescient in his views on technology; his warnings in the 1930s are even more relevant today. With technological advancement has come "techno-optimism" – the belief that technology will be the solution to all our problems. The rapid change of technology has correspondingly placed Christian leaders in a perplexed position when considering the adoption and usage of AI (tool) within a church setting. Using time as a reference, the rate of change within contemporary leadership theory debatably has gaps that the modern theologian within a position of power simply

cannot fill. Strategic leadership frameworks must continually evolve to support ethical implementations of technology based on Scripture and which provide the best opportunity for ensuring discernment success. The ADM model we propose serves as one example that Christian leaders can quickly adopt which provides a fundamental biblical solution to navigating AI tools that will continuously evolve with the rapid onset of the data era.

The rate of change in technology being faster than the rate of change in leadership theories will continue, requiring leaders to be nimble, agile, and discerning. Extensions of this work in the future should focus on the creation of new adaptive models for leadership which are designed to accommodate the rapid rate of change of technologies.

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