

# The AI invasion: Preparing for a new era



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If you woke up and the headline of BBC News read, 'BREAKING NEWS: A super-intelligent alien race has confirmed they are coming to earth in 2044', what would you do? Aside from hoarding toilet paper and rewatching science fiction films to prepare, I guess your answer wouldn't be much.

The current narrative around Artificial Intelligence (AI) feels similar. While the actual likelihood of a super-human level intelligence is debated among scientific and computing communities, it should not be dismissed. Even if AI isn't here to end the human race, it still has huge potential for harm, as well as driving amazing innovation and efficiency. This is something for which we should prepare.

## Understanding AI: Beyond the apocalypse

The AI we have today, more specifically called artificial narrow intelligence, will not bring about the end of society any time soon, or usher in the end times. But despite this, within the Church at large, we have the habit of seeing technological progress as a sign of the apocalypse.

From the invention of the telephone to the social media revolution of the 2010s, as Christians we tend to look for the problems in technology, hoping to find '666' in the code so that we can count ourselves out. As a result, the Church at large has often been slow to adopt new tools that could aid in our mission of reaching people with the gospel.

So, what are we to make of this new AI technology? First, it's important to understand what it is and, crucially, what it's not. This technology, while having had a huge explosion in the past 18 months since the launch of ChatGPT, has been in development far longer.

## AI: The digital brain revolution

'Large language models' are the underlying technology powering tools like ChatGPT. Think of them as 'digital brains' – large computing clusters trained on huge amounts of public information from the internet. When we ask tools like ChatGPT, Claude by Anthropic, or Google's Bard a question, they respond similarly to your phone's autocomplete function, predicting the next word to produce what appears as an almost human-like answer.

This is incredibly powerful for us in the Church for all sorts of administrative tasks, from transcribing sermons, adapting content for social media or acting as a research assistant when putting together teaching materials.

However, it's important that we approach these models with caution. Just like our own brains they are fallible and can make mistakes – often called 'hallucinations'; much like the autocomplete in your phone's keyboard, they don't always get things right.



## The Church and AI: A balanced approach

For these reasons, we should be cautious in using them to produce creative works, teaching content and certainly when writing prayers or sermons, not only because they can be inaccurate but also because they can reflect some of the dodgy theology often found on the open web.

Many church leaders around the world are already embracing this technology to take much of the burden out of the day-to-day tasks. This should be embraced if it means we can steward our time and resources towards actual ministry rather than administration. However, we need to ensure that we know what we are working with and whom we are serving when we do so.

When we outsource some of our work to an AI, we also outsource the potential for AI to make mistakes on our behalf. But one thing we can never outsource to an AI (or an alien race!) is our humanity. That essential God-breathed-ness that makes us, us. The Imago Dei, which we hold, is unique and no matter how much training data we accumulate, we cannot breathe God's spirit into these models.

These models are powerful because they are based upon the world's knowledge – but they don't have, and never can have the ability to hear God's Spirit or discern his intent. No matter how we use AI, that responsibility ultimately lies with us.

## AI in God's plan: A tool for his purposes

That doesn't mean that God cannot use these tools for his purposes, and God is doing so already, as with other technology. What is unique about our generation, is that we are the last generation to remember what life was like before human-like computing – before human-like companions, teachers, doctors and pastors. So it is therefore incumbent upon us to know how to use, shape, and steward this technology for the next generation – preserving what has come before, so we can continue to show what it means to live for Jesus to who and what comes next.

## If you want to equip your church, ministry or leaders to engage with AI well, here are three ways to get started:

- Try signing up for ChatGPT and prompt it on a daily basis to help you with daily tasks like writing social media content
- Check out the AI for Churches hub from Gloo, including their AI and Church survey [www.gloo.us/ai](http://www.gloo.us/ai)
- Get a copy of Ethical Machines by Reid Blackman to help you understand the issues more deeply.