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# Why we need a statement of principles for artificial intelligence

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In early 2018, Google was under intense pressure from its own employees to drop a contract with the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). Google was working with the DoD on an artificial intelligence (AI) systems called Project Maven, which uses AI to process video data captured by drones for use in identifying potential targets for future engagement. Employees at Google protested<sup>3</sup> their involvement in this program and how it might be used by the military in combat situations. Employees claimed that they did not want to be in the business of war and that the project went against the values of the company. Google relented<sup>4</sup> and canceled the contract. Soon after Google released<sup>5</sup> a set of guiding principles that it described as a filter for the company to use in AI development and research moving forward.

The principles, along with future issues surrounding the development of the company's ethics board<sup>6</sup>, reveal a lack of moral clarity and prevailing ethic that is required to engage the issues surrounding the development and use of AI. AI is an incredibly powerful tool and can lead to great human flourishing, but when used without a guiding ethic, it becomes a very dangerous tool that can quickly undermine basic human rights. Often within corporations and increasingly within government, economic utility is prized over the value that every human being has as an image bearer of God.

It is tempting for all of us to think that

the impact of AI is far-off phenomenon that does not affect your daily life. And that is the problem. AI already drives so many aspects of our lives that we often don't recognize it. But we sure benefit from the technology. AI and algorithms control our smart devices, social media feeds, entertainment choices, financial markets, criminal justice system, health-care, military, policing, and soon to be our cars just to name a few. AI is everywhere in our society and is often working behind the scenes. As Christians, we need to be prepared with a framework to navigate the difficult ethical and moral issues surrounding AI use and development. This framework does not come from corporations or government because they are not the ultimate authority on dignity issues and the church does not take its cues from culture. God has spoken to us in his word and as his followers, we are to seek to love him and our neighbors above all things (Matt. 22:37-39).

To this end, the ERLC assembled a group of experts from various fields of study, such as medicine, law, foreign policy, theology, ethics, business, and technology, to draft a set of Evangelical principles that we believe will help to encourage and equip the local church to engage on these issues proactively. Here are two reasons that Christians must engage these conversations now rather than responding after the effects are felt.

**Human dignity is at stake**

It is no secret that many of the developments and uses of AI are tied to a materialistic worldview. At its core, the worldview states that you and I are nothing more than a highly advanced organic computer. We are just a grouping of matter and there is nothing really special or unique about you. Everything you are can be reduced down to matter. Our concepts of the mind, soul, and even our consciousness mean nothing other than they allow us to live in cooperation with one another as we continue our evolutionary journey. God is not real and was just made up to help us deal with the stresses of life. Through this understanding of our world, your value and worth are essentially tied to your economic utility to society. What you contribute to society is your ultimate value, which inevitably leads to some people worth more and less than others. This is true inequality and is the antithesis to the Christian gospel.

But Christians know the truth of where our dignity and worth lie. Every human being was knit together by an infinite God in their mother's womb. God created each of us in his image and that is the source of our dignity and worth (Gen. 1:26-27). We were made functionally different from the rest of creation, as we alone reflect God (Psalm 8). While we possess certain attributes unique to humans like high-level reason and even relational capacity, our value and worth are tied to the status and role that God gave humanity in creation. You are not a machine. You are not a product of evolution. You are made in God's image to reflect him in this world no matter your perceived value in society.

**The unique contribution of the Church**

For far too long, the church has been

silent when we were called to speak. We did not act when we had the opportunity. The church is often more reactionary rather than proactive in the pressing issues of the day. Rather than engaging in the conversation early and speaking prophetically to a watching world, we sat on the sidelines and let others drive the conversation. We have done this on a number of issues including race, abortion, and sexuality.

For the first time in a long time, I believe that we can speak the words of truth into an issue that can have true and lasting effects on how tools like AI are developed and used in our world. The benefits of this technology are great, but the dangers are real. Just as electricity changed everything about our society, AI is due to change even more in a shorter period of time. We are entering a new age of AI where everything about your life and our communities will be different. The church has the unique opportunity and obligation to speak boldly to a watching world with a word of hope and peace that who you are is not tied to what you do, rather your dignity is tied to the One that created the entire world. No matter how advanced AI might become in the future or how dependent our society already is on the technology, nothing can change who you are as an image bearer of God. This guiding ethic drives everything we do as Christians and has life-altering applications to the issues that AI is presenting to our homes, communities, and world.

Our hope with this evangelical statement of principles on artificial intelligence<sup>7</sup> is to prepare the church to give a reason for the hope within her and to engage this issue with the hope of the gospel. One of the first steps to engage is to understand what is being talked about and how the Scriptures apply to this tech-

nology. The ERLC is committed to providing resources to the church to equip her to engage these tough issues as we proclaim the value of every human life, as created

by God, and a proper way to use this radically powerful technology in a way that honors God and helps us love our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39).

#### Notes

1. [*Editor's note*] Previously published 11th April 2019 at <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-we-need-a-statement-of-principles-for-artificial-intelligence>. Re-published in *Theofilos* by permission from The ERLC Press Room [press@erlc.com].
2. [*Editor's note*] "The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission is an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention. The ERLC is dedicated to engaging the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ and speaking to issues in the public square for the protection of religious liberty and human flourishing. Our vision can be summed up in three words: kingdom, culture and mission." (<https://erlc.com/about>)
3. <https://static01.nyt.com/files/2018/technology/googleletter.pdf>
4. <https://www.wired.com/story/google-wont-renew-controversial-pentagon-ai-project/>
5. <https://blog.google/technology/ai/ai-principles/>
6. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/4/4/18295933/google-cancels-ai-ethics-board>
7. [*Editor's note*] Read the full statement of principles at <https://erlc.com/resource-library/statements/artificial-intelligence-an-evangelical-statement-of-principles> or as the next article in this issue of *Theofilos*.