From Babel to AI:

Navigating the Theological and Ethical Transitions of Human Identity in a Technological Age

Introduction

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and transhumanism heralds a profound transition in human identity and autonomy, posing unprecedented challenges to Christian theology. These technologies, which claim autonomy in decision-making and promise immortality through enhancement, disrupt foundational theological anthropology, compelling a reassessment of humanity's place in God's created order.[1] At the heart of this inquiry lies the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the scriptural affirmation that humanity bears God's image (Gen. 1:26–27), which serves as both a critical lens to interrogate these shifts and a constructive framework to reorient them toward divine purpose.[2] Rather than passively accepting secular narratives of progress, theology must actively shape the discourse, discerning where technological advancement aligns with—or deviates from—God's redemptive design. To this end, theology can reframe AI and transhumanism as tools for stewardship, not threats to divine order.

This paper contends that these technologies, in their pursuit of autonomy and transcendence, mirror the hubris of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), risking a modern idolatry that supplants divine sovereignty with human artifice.[3] Yet, theology need not merely resist; it can constructively reframe these technologies as instruments of human flourishing within the bounds of God's eschatological promise, contrasting transhumanist self-sufficiency with the hope of resurrection.[4] Where transhumanism seeks to engineer perfection through silicon

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[1] The destabilization of anthropology by AI is well-documented in secular literature; see Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52–78, which outlines AI's potential to redefine agency. For theological implications, cf. Noreen Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 13–25, who notes AI's challenge to human uniqueness as image-bearers.

[2] On the imago Dei, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 67–89, for a rigorous exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27, emphasizing relationality over autonomy. This counters reductionist views that might align with transhumanist anthropology.

[3] The Babel narrative (Gen. 11:1–9) is interpreted as hubris in G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 129–134. Its relevance here lies in parallels to AI's unifying, autonomous ambitions, a point expanded in "The Tower of Babel: Anthropological Hubris and Divine Boundaries" of this document.

[4] The constructive potential draws from Philip Hefner's "created co-creators" concept, cited in your proposal (p. 8), balanced by eschatological hope; see N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 191–210, contrasting technological salvation with resurrection. This previews

and gene editing, Christian theology proclaims a perfection already inaugurated in Christ, the perfected *imago Dei* (Col. 1:15), whose redemptive work restores humanity to its divine *telos*.

This paper begins by examining the *imago Dei* as the theological anchor, tracing its biblical foundation, historical development, and eschatological fulfillment in Christ. From this foundation, we will explore the dangers of technological overreach and the possibilities for a theology that constructively engages AI, safeguarding human dignity amidst rapid change.

The *Imago Dei*: Theological Foundations and Historical Development

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* stands as the bedrock of Christian theological anthropology, asserting that humanity bears God's image (Gen. 1:26–27) through relationality, moral agency, and divine purpose—not autonomous self-definition.[5] This biblical foundation disrupts transhumanist claims to redefine human identity via enhancement, anchoring theology's critique in Scripture. The Hebrew terms *tselem* (image) and *demut* (likeness) denote a commissioned reflection of God's character, not a license for self-perfection.[6] Historically, Augustine framed the imago Dei as humanity's relational capacity mirroring the Trinity, arguing in *De Trinitate* that human love and understanding reflect divine unity—a direct counter to AI's isolated algorithms.[7] Aquinas emphasized rational purpose ordered toward God, positing in Summa Theologiae that intellect seeks divine ends, not mechanical efficiency—both resisting reduction to mere function or cognition.[8] These perspectives expose AI's algorithmic autonomy and transhumanism's immortality quests as distortions of humanity's divine *telos*.
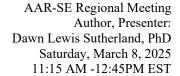
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the eschatological rivalry presented in the third section in this paper, "AI and Transhumanism: Eschatological Rivalry and Theological Tension."

[5] The *imago Dei* as relational and moral is explicated in Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 67–89, countering autonomous definitions prevalent in transhumanism; cf. Bostrom, *Superintelligence*, 22–26.

[6] For t*selem* and *demut*, see Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 135–137, emphasizing commission over inherent divinity, a point critical against transhumanist self-deification.

[7] Augustine, *De Trinitate,* trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 14.12.15, links relationality to the Trinity.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q. 93, a. 4 (via Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], 45–49), ties rationality to divine order—both resist AI's reductionism.

Yet, the *imago Dei* shines most fully in its eschatological horizon. Christ, the *imago Dei par excellence* (Col. 1:15), not only restores but redefines humanity's fractured identity, transforming it through participation in his resurrection (Rom. 8:29). Where transhumanism attempts to engineer perfection through technological augmentation, Christ's restoration is not an enhancement of human potential but the very recreation of humanity into its divine *telos*.[9] Where silicon and gene editing promise self-sufficiency, Christ's incarnation and resurrection proclaim a perfection rooted in divine grace, not human artifice. This restoration frames humanity not as masters of fate but as participants in God's creative order. Philip Hefner's concept of "created co-creators" affirms that human creativity, including technological advancement, can extend divine purpose when ordered toward relational and moral ends.[10] However, as Oliver O'Donovan cautions, human participation in creation is not boundless; divine limits are intrinsic to human finitude.[11] The tension AI and transhumanism often ignore is that technological mastery, when severed from theological humility, becomes idolatrous—exalting human control over divine order.

Thus, the *imago Dei* serves as both critique and constructive vision. It stands as a theological safeguard against technological overreach, affirming that humanity's dependence on God—not its mastery over creation—defines its purpose. This dual role sets the stage for examining AI and transhumanism as eschatological rivals, where theology must discern between divine wisdom and technological hubris. Yet, as a constructive horizon, the *imago Dei* invites a faithful stewardship where innovation is not an assertion of autonomy but a participation in God's redemptive work.
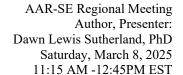
AI and Transhumanism: Technological Transitions and Theological Challenges

Artificial intelligence and transhumanism radically disrupt Christian theological anthropology, asserting autonomy and promising transcendence that fracture the relational essence of the *imago Dei*. AI's autonomous decision-making—evident in healthcare's opaque "black-box" systems—usurps human moral

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[9] Christ as imago Dei is unpacked in N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 683–692, with Rom. 8:29 showing eschatological restoration, directly opposing transhumanist perfectionism; see Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near* (New York: Viking, 2005), 199–210.

[10] Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 27–34, articulates "created co-creators," framing technology as a potential extension of divine purpose when directed by relational and moral ends.

[11] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 31–52, argues finitude is God's design, a safeguard against idolatry relevant to AI's boundless ambitions.

agency, reducing persons to mere data outputs rather than image-bearers of God.[12] Transhumanism intensifies this breach, pursuing immortality by merging human cognition with artificial systems ('silicon minds') and biologically altering DNA ('gene-edited bodies'), posing an eschatological rival to Christian resurrection.[13] Transhumanism's technological salvation reduces life to an engineered artifact, severed from divine purpose, whereas Paul's vision of bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–44) affirms that true transformation is a work of divine grace. As N.T. Wright argues, resurrection is not an escape from finitude but its ultimate renewal—contrasting sharply with transhumanist aspirations to mechanize eternity.[14]

The tension escalates as AI's aggregated "wisdom of the crowd" supplants divine wisdom. Proverbs 1:7 roots true wisdom in the relational fear of the Lord, a stance algorithmic prediction cannot replicate.[15] Transhumanism's pursuit of cognitive dominion further severs this divine orientation, exalting created systems over the Creator—an idolatry Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological ethics expose as illusory. For Bonhoeffer, wisdom flows from embodied dependence on Christ, not the self-sufficient logic AI asserts.[16] Where transhumanism champions boundless enhancement, Scripture upholds finitude's sanctity, a design AI's moral precision distorts by reducing ethics to optimization rather than embodied discernment. Christian wisdom is not algorithmic efficiency but relational faithfulness, grounded in dependence on God, not predictive analytics.

Yet, theology does not merely resist; it reorients these technologies toward God's redemptive work. AI, faithfully stewarded, amplifies relationality—enhancing justice in healthcare or governance—when ordered to divine purpose, not autonomy.[17] Transhumanist ambitions, recast from self-mastery to participation in Christ's renewal, align with the recreation of humanity, not its replacement. This constructive horizon

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[12] On AI's autonomy in healthcare, see "Designing AI for Patient Safety and Autonomy," *AMA Journal of Ethics* (2021), accessed September 13, 2024, https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/designing-ai-patient-safety-and-autonomy/2021, noting "black-box" opacity; Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 45–60 (noting AI's erosion of imago Dei).
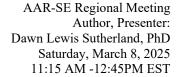
[13] Kurzweil, The Singularity Is Near, 299–324; Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, chap. 4, Case Study, "AI in Healthcare Decision Making."

[14] Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 155–170 (explicating 1 Cor. 15:42–44 as bodily renewal contra transhumanist escape).

[15] Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 34–37 (on Prov. 1:7's relational wisdom versus AI's data aggregation).

[16] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 67–85 (contrasting relational wisdom in Christ with self-sufficient ethics, applicable to AI's moral overreach).

[17] Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, chap. 8, Case Study, "A Fully AI-Integrated Smart City"; Waters, *From Human to Posthuman*, 89–102 (suggesting technology serving relational ends under God).

demands that theology navigate the fine line between stewardship and idolatry, discerning where technology serves divine purpose and where it mimics Babel's illusion of self-sufficiency. The Babel narrative (Gen. 11:1–9) stands as the archetype of technological hubris, where human ingenuity sought to transcend divine limits—mirroring AI's anthropological tensions today.

The Tower of Babel as Archetypical Critique

The Babel narrative (Gen. 11:1–9) starkly exposes humanity's anthropological hubris, unveiling a primal urge to transcend divine boundaries that artificial intelligence and transhumanism audaciously revive.[18] Seeking to "make a name" and pierce the heavens, Babel's builders wielded unified technology to assert autonomy, only to encounter dispersion—not mere punishment, but God's gracious preservation of relational dependence.[19] Job 38–42 reinforces this, where God's interrogation of human knowledge affirms limits as integral to creaturely identity, not flaws to erase.[20] AI's algorithmic dominion and transhumanism's drive to abolish finitude—through cognitive mastery or engineered immortality—reprise this ancient defiance, reducing humanity's purpose to self-crafted triumph over divine order.

Theologically, Babel unveils the *imago Dei*'s distortion. Humanity's commissioned vocation (Gen. 1:26–27) flourishes in humble reliance, not self-exaltation; dispersion reorients it toward God's sovereignty, not technological supremacy.[21] AI and transhumanism sever this dependence, forging a unity of power that Scripture condemns as idolatrous.[22] Yet, Babel's lesson is not merely a warning; it is an invitation to reimagine human creativity within divine boundaries. As Andy Crouch contends, true innovation flourishes not in autonomy but in cooperation—technology, when rightly ordered, becomes an act of faithful stewardship
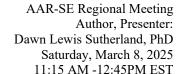
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[18] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 129–134. (linking Gen. 11:1–9's hubris to self-exaltation mirrored in AI's ambitions).

[19] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 353–357 (interpreting dispersion as preserving dependence, not mere retribution).

[20] Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Job," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 571–604 (on Job 38–42's affirmation of finitude as God's design, contra transhumanism).

[21] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 90–112. (connecting Gen. 1:26–27's imago Dei to humility over mastery).

[22] Richard Lints, Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 75–98 (framing AI's unifying power as a modern idolatrous analogue to Babel).

rather than rebellion.[23] Far from stifling innovation, divine limits shape human potential, orienting creativity toward relational faithfulness rather than self-deification. These boundaries safeguard the *imago Dei* by ensuring that human flourishing remains tethered to divine wisdom, not boundless control.

Thus, Babel stands as both anthropological critique and theological invitation. It reveals the peril of autonomy untethered from humility, a danger AI and transhumanism amplify with their promises of self-sufficiency. Simultaneously, it summons theology to reorient technology as participation in God's redemptive work, not domination—a faithful stewardship within finitude's sacred frame. This dual imperative demands a theological response that not only resists technological hubris but reclaims divine limits as the foundation of human flourishing. Only within these boundaries can theology construct an ethic of limitation and formation to guide innovation toward its true redemptive purpose.

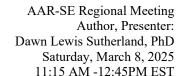### Theological Response: A Constructive Framework of Finitude and Formation

Christian theology confronts artificial intelligence and transhumanism not with retreat but with a robust reclamation of the *imago Dei*, rooted in Christ's redemptive work (Rom. 8:29). Christ, the *imago Dei* par excellence (Col. 1:15), redefines humanity within finitude's sacred frame, affirming limits not as constraints but as the conditions for true dependence on God—a reality Bonhoeffer insists is fundamental to human identity against self-sufficient ethics.[24] Transhumanism's boundless autonomy fractures this design, reducing salvation to engineered permanence, whereas Paul's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–44) reveals true transformation as divine recreation, not human artifice—an eschatological renewal Stanley Hauerwas insists resists self-ownership.[25] Theology thus reorients technology toward relational faithfulness, not domination.

This reorientation demands faithful stewardship. AI, when rightly ordered, can amplify justice and community - e.g., by optimizing resource distribution in underserved parishes or enhancing pastoral counseling through data-driven insights—but only as a tool directed by human moral agency within divine purpose, not as an autonomous force shaping human destiny. Oliver O'Donovan frames this potential within

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[23] Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 56–78 (advocating technology as cooperative creativity within divine limits).

[24] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 67–85 (affirming finitude against self-sufficiency); Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 683–692 (on Rom. 8:29's eschatological imago Dei).

[25] N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 529–551 (on 1 Cor. 15:42–44 as divine recreation); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 60–78 (resisting autonomy's ethical distortion).

resurrection's moral order, where human stewardship—not algorithmic determinism—remains the ethical foundation.[26] Transhumanist ambitions, recast as participation in Christ's renewal, align with humanity's recreation, not its abolition. Yet, stewardship navigates a fine line: technology that mimics Babel's hubris risks idolatry, exalting control over dependence.[27] Divine wisdom, not algorithmic optimization, must guide this path, ensuring innovation flourishes within God's boundaries, not beyond them.

Theology's constructive horizon extends to formation. Collegiate theology and Bible programs must reclaim AI and transhumanism as urgent subjects, equipping leaders to engage developers on justice—countering bias—and to pastorally steward technology's role in human flourishing.[28] As the Church Fathers dialogued with natural philosophy, modern theology must train disciples in AI literacy, grounding ethical engagement in divine limits, not secular progress.[29] Churches, too, must weave this literacy into discipleship, fostering communities where technology enhances care and governance without severing relational dependence on God.
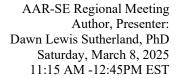
Thus, theology does not merely resist hubris—it actively reclaims finitude as the foundation of true flourishing. Limits are not barriers to overcome but divine signposts directing creation toward its eschatological fulfillment. Theology must boldly shape technology's trajectory, ensuring AI serves justice, transhumanism aligns with redemption, and innovation remains an act of faithful stewardship rather than self-deification. Only within this framework can the Church bear witness to God's redemptive *telos* amidst a world captivated by the illusion of boundless potential.

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[26] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 31–52 (framing stewardship within resurrection's order); cf. *Sutherland, From Babel to AI*, chap. 8 (on AI enhancing justice).

[27] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 129–134. (on Babel's idolatrous hubris).

[28] *Sutherland, From Babel to AI*, forthcoming 2025, chap. 10 (on theological education and AI ethics in ministry formation).

[29] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 14.12.15, exemplifies patristic engagement with philosophy, a model for modern AI dialogue.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence and transhumanism audaciously challenge the *imago Dei*, reviving Babel's hubris with their relentless pursuit of autonomy and transcendence.[30] These technologies fracture humanity's relational essence, reducing identity to engineered artifacts and exalting self-sufficiency over divine purpose—a modern idolatry echoing Genesis 11's defiant tower. Yet, theology does not retreat; it confronts this crisis with the unshakable truth of Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42–44), where finitude becomes the crucible of divine recreation, not a flaw to erase.[31] Relational wisdom, rooted in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7), stands as Scripture's counterpoint to algorithmic optimization, reorienting innovation toward God's redemptive *telos*, not human artifice.

This theological vision demands action. The Church must boldly shape technology's trajectory, not merely critique it. Collegiate theology programs must equip leaders with the ethical clarity to engage AI developers on justice and bias, while churches weave technological literacy into discipleship—fostering communities where innovation serves care, not control.[32] Theology's task is not passive resistance but active formation, ensuring artificial intelligence amplifies relational faithfulness and transhumanism aligns with Christ's renewal, not self-deification. Jürgen Moltmann's eschatological hope illuminates this path: technology, rightly ordered, participates in God's kingdom, enhancing human identity through finitude's sacred frame, not defying it.[33]
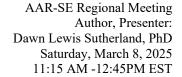
Thus, theology reclaims its prophetic voice, standing as both guardian and guide in a world captivated by boundless illusion. Far from stifling progress, divine limits cultivate true flourishing, summoning the Church to steward technology as an act of faithfulness, not a pursuit of control. Against the tide of hubris, theology bears witness to a hope that transcends silicon—a hope not found in human innovation but in the risen Christ, the *imago Dei par excellence*, in whom humanity's identity is not engineered but redeemed.

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[30] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 129–134. (on Babel's hubris mirrored in AI and transhumanism).

[31] N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 529–551 (on 1 Cor. 15:42–44 as divine recreation, not escape).

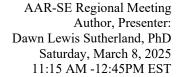[32] Sutherland, *From Babel to AI*, forthcoming 2025, chap. 10.

[33] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 165–189 (envisioning technology within God's eschatological renewal, enhancing hope).

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Dawn Lewis Sutherland is an award-winning author, scholar, speaker, and educator specializing in Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern studies, theological anthropology, and philosophy. She holds a Ph.D. with high distinction in Bible Exposition and currently serves as Adjunct Faculty in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. Her work bridges the study of ancient texts and cultures with contemporary theological, philosophical, and ethical concerns.

Committed to fostering a biblical vision of equality, Dr. Sutherland focuses on equipping others with deep scriptural insights, encouraging critical engagement with the Bible, and advocating for leadership inclusivity within the church and academy. Her teaching and writing emphasize faithful interpretation of Scripture and affirm the inherent dignity and value of all people.

Dr. Sutherland is the author of the forthcoming book *From Babel to AI: Idolatry, Transhumanism, and the Crisis of Imago Dei* (Wipf and Stock), which examines the theological and ethical challenges posed by modern technologies and their implications for human identity and purpose. Her research encompasses creation theology, biblical anthropology, and the relevance of Scripture in addressing contemporary dilemmas.

Passionate about equipping others to engage critically with Scripture, Dr. Sutherland contributes to both academic and faith-based conversations, offering thoughtful insights that connect the ancient world to modern contexts with clarity and depth.