Simulated Speech and the Silence of Meaning:
Reclaiming the Word in an Age of Noise

Abstract

The humiliation of the word did not begin with the machine. Long before the large language model (LLM) learned to simulate speech, the state had learned to requisition it, and a statute could empty a word while a soldier kept his oath. This paper argues that the crisis provoked by artificial intelligence is ontological before it is political or cultural. Simulated speech severs the word from the speaker, presence from utterance, and accountability from address, and so erodes the covenantal conditions under which truth can be spoken, heard, or even desired. Reading Ellul's *la parole humiliée* alongside four convergent prophets and a series of documented cases, from fabricated citations in federal court to a benediction pronounced by an avatar and forgiveness spoken by a rendering of the dead, the argument locates the wound at the level of being. It then turns to Scripture for the cure: the Hebrew *dabar* as word-event and address, Babel and Pentecost as the two possibilities of a common tongue, Amos's famine of hearing as the shape of a noise-saturated age, and the two silences by which hearing is starved or restored. The Word made flesh joins what simulation severs, uniting speech and speaker in the one whose presence is his testimony. Recovery, therefore, will not come from policy applied to technique but from an ecclesial ethics of speech: persons who remain inside their words, in communities small enough for address, keeping the one thing no machine can manufacture.

Key words: Jacques Ellul; humiliation of the word; simulated speech; large language models; AI; Artificial Intelligence; AI and language; dabar; theological anthropology; imago Dei; speech-act theology; technique; ethics of presence; Christology; Babel; Pentecost; philosophy of language; George Orwell; Aldous Huxley; Neil Postman

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Introduction: Four Prophets, One Convergence

My husband served twenty years on active duty and retired as an officer of the United States Army. If the word *patriot* means anything in its plain sense, one who loves his country and spends himself in its service, then his life is what the word looks like when it is kept. In October 2001, forty-five days after the World Trade Center towers fell, Congress passed a statute titled, "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism," better known by its reverse-engineered acronym: the USA PATRIOT Act.[1] This statute expanded the United States' domestic surveillance authority, which is a matter for ordinary legal argument; though its name performed an entirely different type of operation. It fused love of country and American acquiescence in the growth of state power. To question the statute was to fall under suspicion of failing the word *patriot*. My husband kept his oath. He also kept his convictions about the Constitution that oath named, which means he cannot subscribe to every erosion of its liberties carried out under patriotism's borrowed banner. So, a question took up residence at our family's dinner table, and it never left: is he no longer a patriot? Or does the original meaning still stand, and if it stands, where does it live, now that the state has requisitioned the word. The man kept his oath; the word did not keep its meaning.

In political economy, this mechanism has a name. Robert Higgs documented it as the ratchet effect; state power expands in crisis and never fully recedes when the crisis passes.[2] The

[1]USA PATRIOT Act, Pub. L. No. 107-56, 115 Stat. 272 (2001). The title is a constructed backronym: Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism.

[2]Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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ratchet operates on the lexicon as surely as a statute on the books. Words conscripted in wartime never fully de-mobilize, not really. "Homeland" entered American civic vocabulary essentially overnight in 2002, trailing a department behind it; "enhanced interrogation" was issued for what treaty law calls torture, "collateral damage" for dead civilians. Each emergency ratchets the language, and when the emergency passes the requisitioned meaning stays on, while the original meaning is left without a home. Orwell saw the operation before anyone had named it: political speech exists largely for "the defense of the indefensible," and its instrument is the corruption of words.[3] The distinctions here must be precisely kept, because blurring them is, itself, a symptom of the disease. The statute is law; the title is rhetoric, and the co-option lives in the space between them.

Four twentieth-century prophets watched this disease spread from four different angles, and their forecasts have hardened into a familiar quartet, singing ever too loudly in our present-day lived reality. **Orwell** feared the state that would erase words; his heirs run subtler operations, discouraging seven words in a federal agency's budget vocabulary here,[4] annexing "patriot" there. **Huxley** feared no censor at all; he said we would be too entertained to notice what was slipping away, and just five days before this paper was finalized, the world was enthralled with a celebrity wedding at Madison Square Garden which commanded the entire apparatus of media journalism, live news blogs, social media streams, posts and all (an operation of attention any government

[3]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon*, April 1946. The fictional completion of the program is the appendix on Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).

[4]Lena H. Sun and Juliet Eilperin, "CDC Gets List of Forbidden Words: Fetus, Transgender, Diversity," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2017. The directive discouraged seven terms, including "evidence-based," in budget documents: "Newspeak" by subtraction, where the Patriot Act operated by addition.

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might be jealous of).[5] **Postman** feared the format: that public discourse would be repackaged as entertainment until the two became indistinguishable. He did not live to see the fact-checking industry (built to guard the public's grip on truth, in concept) deploy its full rigor on rumors about that very same wedding's guest list, or the same live-updates…whether the subject is a ceasefire or a seating chart.[6] All three described what is done with words, around words, to the audiences of words.

Jaques Ellul went deeper, and our trio became the quartet, entangled together in his findings. It was Huxley, after all, who pushed for the English translation of *La Technique*, saying Ellul had made the case that *Brave New World* only dramatized.[7] Ellul alone located the crisis in the word itself: *la parole humiliée*, the word humiliated, stripped of its power to bind speaker and hearer in truth and demoted to an instrument among instruments.[8] You see, the Patriot Act did not lie about my husband. It did something far stranger; it made the word *patriot* incapable of saying "him." That is humiliation in Ellul's sense, accomplished by decree, one word at a time. Now, what the state did once by statute, the Large Language Model (LLM) does to all words at once,

[5]"Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce Tie the Knot in Star-Studded Ceremony," CNN, July 3, 2026; "Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce Married in Ceremony Officiated by Adam Sandler," CBS News, July 3, 2026. The point is not the wedding, which is covenant and deserves honor, but the asymmetry of attention.

[6]"Did Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce Invite ICE Contractor to Their Wedding? What We Know," *Snopes*, July 6, 2026. For the "Now … this" analysis of discourse flattened by format, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985), chap. 7.

[7]Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964). On Huxley's advocacy for the English translation, see David W. Gill, *What Are You Doing About It? The Memoir of a Marginal Activist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), chap. 14; and Gill, "The End of Technicized Work," in *Questioning 21st Century Technology with Jacques Ellul*, ed. David W. Gill and Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025).

[8]Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985; facsimile reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

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by simulation. This paper argues that the crisis is, therefore, ontological before it is political or cultural: simulation severs speech from speaker, word from presence, utterance from accountability, and so erodes the covenantal conditions under which truth can be spoken, heard, or even desired. The remedy will not be found in Artificial Intelligence (AI) policy, consciousness inquiry, or data integrity. It requires a theology of the word as the address, grounded in the Hebrew *dabar* (דָּבָר), interpreted Christologically in the Word made flesh, and practiced ecclesially as an ethics of speech.

Technique Comes for the Word

Ellul defined technique as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency … in every field of human activity."[9] Its logic is autonomous: what can be done will be done, and every domain technique enters is reorganized around the single value of efficient output. For seventy years the live question has been which domains remained outside. The LLM is the announcement that none did. It is technique arrived at language itself, the last workshop: speech produced as output, optimized for plausibility, at industrial scale and negligible cost. Two institutions built entirely on the reliability of the word show what this means in practice. One is the court. The other is the Church.[10]

In the 2023 case, *Mata v. Avianca*, attorneys for a personal-injury plaintiff filed a brief resting on cases with names like *Varghese v. China Southern Airlines*, complete with docket numbers, internal citations, and judicial reasoning, yet none of them existed. ChatGPT had

[9]Ellul, *Technological Society*, xxv.

[10] When the church, writ large is referred to herein, a capital "C" is used as an indicator.

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produced fluent legal speech with no actual law behind it, and when counsel asked the tool whether the cases were real, it affirmed its own inventions.[11] The sanctions opinion reads like an exercise in Ellulian diagnosis; the fabricated opinions wore the full costume of authority, and they rang hollow. What failed was not the information but the testimony. A formal brief serves as an officer of the court speaking on his oath, and there was no one behind the words.

In June 2023, some three hundred worshippers filled St. Paul's church in Fürth, Bavaria, for a service composed almost entirely by ChatGPT and delivered by avatars on a screen above the altar. The machine preached, prayed, and pronounced the benediction.[12] The congregation stood to receive a blessing that no one gave. Whatever one makes of the experiment, its theological grammar is revealing: there was preaching without a preacher, a blessing without a blesser, and the word of proclamation was reproduced as output. Ellul traced the humiliation of the word through its subjugation to the image; here the two orders collapse into one. These are words that function as images; they served as surfaces of plausibility to be consumed rather than an ecclesial address to be answered.

Harry Frankfurt offers a crucial distinction here: the liar remains parasitic on truth; he must track it in order to deny it. What Frankfurt called "bullshit" is speech produced in indifference to truth, and indifference, he argued, is the greater enemy.[13] An LLM is indifference made into

[11] *Mata v. Avianca, Inc.*, 678 F. Supp. 3d 443 (S.D.N.Y. 2023). The court found the attorneys had "abandoned their responsibilities" as gatekeepers; sanctions followed under Rule 11.

[12] "German Protestants Hold Church Service Written by ChatGPT," *Aleteia*, June 13, 2023. The service, created for the German Evangelical Church Congress and held at St. Paul's, Fürth, on June 9, 2023, drew roughly three hundred attendees.

[13] Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55–56, 60–61.

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architecture. Its own researchers concede the point in their famous epithet for it, a "stochastic parrot," a system for predicting plausible continuations with nothing tracked at all.[14] This is why "misinformation" is a category error as the name of our crisis. Misinformation is false content and can be met with true content. Simulated speech is another kind of thing altogether: not false statements but unowned ones, sentences no one has said. Josef Pieper, writing on the sophists, drew the sequence that follows: the word first abandons truth, and then the word becomes an instrument of power.[15]

The severity of the severance shows up most clearly where simulation gives speech to the dead. In February 2024, on the sixth anniversary of the Parkland shooting, a campaign called *The Shotline* began placing calls to congressional offices in the AI-recreated voices of children killed by gun violence; by Fall the calls exceeded 160,000 in number.[16] In May 2025, an Arizona courtroom heard a victim impact statement delivered by an AI rendering of Chris Pelkey, killed in a road-rage shooting four years earlier. His sister wrote the words; the simulation spoke forgiveness to his killer; the judge praised the presentation while defense counsel raised due-

[14]Emily M. Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?," in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (New York: ACM, 2021), 610–623. The philosophical antecedent is John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417–424. Both diagnose absent semantics; neither reaches the deeper category of absent address.

[15]Josef Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992).

[16]Deepa Shivaram, "Gun Violence Killed Them. Now, Their Voices Will Lobby Congress to Do More Using AI," NPR, February 14, 2024; "More Than 160,000 Calls Made to Congress Using the AI-Generated Voices of Gun Violence Victims," Houston Public Media, September 5, 2024.

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process objections.[17] The grief in both cases is very real, and the motives are understandable, which is exactly what makes these cases instructive. The words may render faithfully what these dead would have said. But the dead cannot consent to their own speech, and forgiveness pronounced by a rendering binds no one. Ellul observed that technicized work implies in the human being "an absence whereas previously it implied a presence."[18] He wrote the sentence about labor, but it has become the precise description of our speech.

Dabar: The Ontology of Address

On April 5, 1887, a teacher led a deaf and blind seven-year-old to the already-vintage well of her Alabama home. She held one of the child's hands under the rusted spout, and spelled *w-a-t-e-r* into her palm while cold water ran over the other. Somewhere in the repetition the child understood, and she somehow understood more than just the vocabulary lesson. "That living word awakened my soul," Helen Keller wrote of the moment, "gave it light, hope, joy, set it free."[19] Nothing was transferred at the well-house that an information theorist could measure. What happened was address: a person reached a person through a sign, and a soul answered. Walker Percy circled that one scene for his entire career, because there is no theory of language as signal transmission that could account for it.[20] But Scripture can.

[17]"Family Shows AI Video of Slain Victim as an Impact Statement," NPR, May 7, 2025; "He Was Killed in a Road Rage Incident. His Family Used AI to Bring Him to the Courtroom to Address His Killer," CNN, May 9, 2025.

[18]Ellul, *Technological Society*, 395–402.

[19]Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 23; see also Anne Sullivan's letter of April 5, 1887, printed in the same volume, 316.

[20]Walker Percy, "The Delta Factor," in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 3–45.

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In the Hebrew Scriptures the word for "word," *dabar* (דָּבָר), refuses our separation of speech from act and thing. The root holds together speech, matter, affair, and event; [21] a *dābār* is something that happens as readily as something spoken. God speaks, and light is (ref: Gen 1:3). "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made; for he spoke, and it came to be" (Ps 33:6 &9). The word goes out like rain and snow and does not return empty but accomplishes its sending (ref: Isa 55:10-11); it burns like fire and breaks rock like a hammer (ref: Jer 23:29). This is an ontology. In the biblical witness the word is the presence of the speaker in action, which is why speech binds so clearly. Careless words, *rhēmata arga* (ῥήματα ἀργά), words with no worker behind them, come under judgment precisely because a word is meant to carry its speaker within it (ref: Matt 12:36). The truthful need no oaths; their "yes" is "yes", because they are wholly present in their words (ref: Matt 5:33-37).

Theological anthropology follows this very same logic. The creature made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28) is the creature made by address and for address: spoken into being, then spoken to, and constituted as human by the summons to answer. "Hear, O Israel" (Deut 6:4) is not some ornamental saying to make the law more palatable; it is the very anthropology beneath the law. Augustine built his account of signs on the same foundation: signs exist so that one mind may become present to another, and the lie is a kind of sacrilege because it turns the instrument of communion into an instrument of concealment.[22] Our modern philosophy of language arrives late

[21] HALOT, s.v. דבר. The noun's semantic range spans "word," "matter," "thing," and "event"; the verbal root "to speak" shares the same consonants, so that Hebrew grammar itself resists any partition of saying from doing.

[22] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1–2, on *res* and *signa*; *De mendacio*, on the lie as the deliberate rupture of sign from heart.

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but at the same conclusion: promises, blessings, forgiveness, and testimony do not describe the world from a distance; they perform acts in words, acts that bind persons to one another.[23] Simulated speech is, therefore, not a new species of lie. It is the evacuation of the whole structure: sign without speaker, act without agent, address with no one home. It is the humiliated word at the last stage of its descent. This descent must be measured theologically because what is being emptied is not just a communication channel but the form of the *imago Dei*, itself.

Babel Completed

The Bible has told the story of totalized speech before. The builders on the plain of Shinar had "one language and the same words" (Gen 11:1), and the narrative gives their project a deliberately technological vocabulary: "'Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar" (Gen 11:3). Uniform language, advanced standardized materials, a tower to secure presence, and a manufactured name: "let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). Babel is *la technique*, and its raw material is the word. The judgment that confuses and scatters is, therefore, a mercy; it breaks the monopoly of a single tongue harnessed to a single project of hubris. And the name the builders could not manufacture themselves is given, only a few verses later, as a divine gift: "I will bless you and make your name great" (Gen 12:2).[24]

[23]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); the underlying speech-act framework is J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

[24]Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), traces the counter-history from Babel to the New Jerusalem.

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The tower rises again today, not in fired brick, but in scraped speech. One statistical tongue, LLMs trained on the gathered mass of human words, now offers to finish everyone's sentences, and the effect is measurable. A study of more than fifteen million biomedical abstracts found the fingerprint of machine assistance in at least 13.5 percent of 2024 publications, visible as a bloom of excess vocabulary, the sudden fashionableness of the words the model favors.[25] Researchers at Cornell also found that AI writing suggestions pull writers of other cultures toward a consistently Western idiom. Indian writers who accepted suggestion after suggestion watched essays about their own food and festivals drift toward pizza and Christmas.[26] One autocomplete at a time, the Indian *dosa* became a pizza. This is Babel inverted and completed: not one language imposed by decree, but every language regressing toward a statistical mean; a name made for us and laid over the world's tongues. It is Pentecost that stands as the permanent antitype. The Spirit's miracle in Acts 2 is not the restoration of one single language; indeed, each person hears in his own native language the mighty works of God (ref: Acts 2:8-11). This is the unity of understanding without homogenization of speech. While the tower makes one voice; the Spirit makes one hearing.

Famine of the Word

Amos describes one of the strangest divine judgments in the Old Testament: "not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord;" "they shall run to and fro… but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12). Noise is the form by which this famine takes. Judgment

[25]Dmitry Kobak et al., "Delving into LLM-Assisted Writing in Biomedical Publications through Excess Vocabulary," *Science Advances* 11 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adt3813.

[26]Dhruv Agarwal, Mor Naaman, and Aditya Vashistha, "AI Suggestions Homogenize Writing toward Western Styles and Diminish Cultural Nuances," in *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York: ACM, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713564.

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is not silence imposed but hearing starved, and it can occur, the prophet insists, amid frantic motion and endless consumption, and so it has. The century that multiplied words beyond all previous civilizations combined watched its vocabulary of character narrow. Tracking fifty virtue words across the Google Books corpus, Pelin and Selin Kesebir found a statistically significant decline in seventy-four percent of them across the twentieth century, alongside steep falls in the general moral vocabulary of "virtue," "decency," and "conscience."[27] David Brooks brought the findings to a more general audience; words like "humility," "kindness," and "bravery" had fallen out of use by half or more.[28] A later replication of the survey complicated the curve in an odd way; the broader vocabulary of "moral judgment," "good and evil," "right and wrong," rebounded strongly after 1980, while the lexicon of character did not recover.[29] The words for condemning one another returned, the words for becoming good did not.

Amos' famine has a second symptom. During the drafting of this paper, a claim circulated widely online: that more than 11,000 common English nouns, "integrity" among them, had collapsed in usage by over eighty percent within a few years. The number traveled from a self-published index on LinkedIn through viral posts to reflective essays, gathering credibility at every

[27]Pelin Kesebir and Selin Kesebir, "The Cultural Salience of Moral Character and Virtue Declined in Twentieth Century America," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 7, no. 6 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.715182.

[28]David Brooks, "What Our Words Tell Us," *New York Times*, May 20, 2013.

[29]Melissa A. Wheeler, Melanie J. McGrath, and Nick Haslam, "Twentieth Century Morality: The Rise and Fall of Moral Concepts from 1900 to 2007," *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 2 (2019): e0212267. All Ngram-based claims carry corpus caveats; see the methodological guideline study of Nadja Younes and Ulf-Dietrich Reips, "Guideline for Improving the Reliability of Google Ngram Studies: Evidence from Religious Terms," *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019): e0213554.

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step.[30] However, it is unverifiable. No corpus supports it; the standard historical corpus does not even cover the years in question; and the same genre of claim, that sacred vocabulary is vanishing, was tested against the data in 2018 and failed.[31] The figure nearly entered these footnotes because it felt true, and it felt true because it flattered the thesis, and therein lies the lesson. In the economy of noise, even reports of the famine arrive as noise, and verifying one's own congenial evidence has become part of the ethics of the word. A scholar who will not check a flattering number has already joined the very same chorus that she laments.

The third symptom is, perhaps, the most intimate; because it appears in persons who are speaking fluently. University teachers of English surveyed in Kyiv reported students submitting case studies studded with sophisticated vocabulary far beyond their proficiency; asked to verbally explain the terms they had deployed, the students could not. One teacher's summary deserves its full quotation here: AI, she says, "assists students to sound more intelligent than they are, and in doing so, they mute their learning." Sixty-eight percent of the teachers reported that AI use in vocabulary work hinders the internalizing of new words in context.[32] The study is small, perceptual, and honest about both, but it locates the famine where a theology of the *imago Dei*

[30]Richard Soares, "The Social Inertia Index (SII): A New Model," LinkedIn, 2025; for representative viral circulation, Andrea Willman (@AndreaWillman7), X, April 21, 2025. Both are cited here as artifacts of a media phenomenon, not as evidence of lexical change.

[31]Mark Liberman, "More on Trends in the Google Ngrams Corpus," *Language Log*, October 18, 2018, examining Jonathan Merritt's claim that sacred vocabulary was vanishing: the cited words had in fact risen in frequency since 1980, and the apparent declines were artifacts of a change in corpus composition around 2000.

[32]Nataliia Avsheniuk, Nataliia Seminikhyna, Larysa Ruban, and Yuliia Sviatiuk, "Exploring Overreliance on AI Tools in English for Specific Purposes Courses: Challenges and Implications for Learning and Academic Integrity," *Arab World English Journal*, Special Issue on Artificial Intelligence (April 2025): 3–20, https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/AI.1. Sixteen teachers at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv; qualitative and perceptual; the authors flag the limits of generalization themselves.

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would predict: not first in the corpus but in the person, the creature meant to own her words wearing them instead as costume. Alasdair MacIntyre opened *After Virtue* with the image of a civilization holding fragments of a moral vocabulary severed from the practices that once gave the words sense.[33] The LLM is a fragment-arranger of exactly that kind. It can produce "integrity" in any sentence, and it can no more mean the word than the students could explain it. A famine of the word can happen inside fluency, and that sentence should frighten us more than any other statistic in this research.

Scripture knows two silences, and the difference between them provides a way out of the noise. There is the silence of judgment, the famine of hearing, and there is the silence in which hearing becomes possible again. Elijah at Horeb is given wind, earthquake, and fire, and the Lord is in none of them; then comes *qol demamah daqqah* (קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה), a voice of whispered silence, and the prophet hides his face (ref: 1 Kgs 19:12-13). On the eleventh of November 1919, at the request of King George V, the British Empire stopped for two minutes; trams halted mid-route, telephone exchanges went quiet, the roar of London fell away, so that the names of a million dead could find their way into the hearing of living ears.[34] A civilization briefly practiced that biblical second silence, and practiced it, fittingly, for the sake of men like the example I began with: soldiers, whose words had been oaths. Bonhoeffer made listening the first service owed to God

[33]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1-2. On inarticulacy about the good, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); on moral vision's dependence on moral vocabulary, Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

[34]The proclamation of George V, published November 7, 1919, requested that "all locomotion should cease" for two minutes on the anniversary of the Armistice; see *The Times* (London), November 7, 1919, and the contemporary accounts of the first observance on November 12, 1919.

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and to one another, and he warned that those who cannot listen will soon be prattling on about nothing, even in the presence of God.[35]

The Psalmist offers the solution in one single command, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10; MT 46:11).[36] *Harpu ud'u* (הַרְפּוּ וּדְעוּ) is a meditative imperative inviting surrender, letting go of unconscious tension, and quieting the noise from the outside world. The verb *harpu* (הַרְפּוּ) carries with it the sense of ceasing, slackening, or letting go. Both the LXX's *scholasate* (σχολάσατε) and Vulgate's *vacate* render the context as a command to cease and desist. The construction, (imperative followed by *waw* and a second imperative) bears consequential force (cf. Gen 42:18, "Do this and you will live"). In other words, the knowing is predicated on the ceasing; the knowledge of God is made to wait upon the stilling of the striving that drowns him out.

What the psalm commands, our present age cannot abide. Our reflex before noise is to add to it, to answer speech we distrust with speech of our own, striving against striving until nothing in the field is sound. The answer to simulated speech will not be louder authentic speech; counter-noise is still noise. It begins, instead, where the psalm begins, in a recovered stillness, the ceasing in which a word can once again be received as address, weighed, and answered: what George Steiner called the wager that there is real presence behind the sign.[37]

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[35]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 97–99.

[36] All English scriptures included herein in full text are done so in accordance with the *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition* (NRSVUE). Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[37]George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

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The Word Made Flesh and the Ethics of Speech

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." (Heb 1:1-2). The *Logos* (λόγος) who was in the beginning with God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). In and through Jesus of Nazareth the severed things are one: speech and speaker, word and presence, utterance and accountability, sign and a life laid down for its truth. He taught with *exousia* (ἐξουσία), an authority that astonished, because there was no distance between the word and the one speaking it (ref: Mark 1:22). Before Pilate, who asked "What is truth?" and did not stay for an answer, he stood silent (John 18:38); the incarnate Word can afford silence, because his presence *is* the testimony. What simulation severs, the incarnation joins. This is why the Church's stake in the present crisis has to be more than institutional self-protection. A community that lives by "the Word became flesh" cannot make peace with words that became output.

Ellul ended *The Humiliation of the Word* not in despair but in expectation: the word will be rehabilitated, and the seal of the promise is eschatological, the rider called Faithful and True whose name is the "Word of God" (ref: Rev 19:11-13).[38] In the meantime, Ellul practiced what he awaited, and his practice is instructive all the way down to its little eccentricities. The man who diagnosed technique never used a typewriter; he wrote some sixty books and a thousand articles longhand and handed the pages to the same typist for decades. When an unknown young American mailed an envelope addressed simply to "Professor Jacques Ellul, University of Bordeaux," Ellul

[38]Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 268-69.

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answered by hand within weeks: "How can I tell you of my joy in receiving your letter," the reply began, and the American, who could not yet read French, carried it to a bookstore so a friend could translate.[39] Consider everything that exchange required which no LLM can supply: weeks of waiting, a hand that tired, a friendship taxed for translation, and a word that put its author permanently on record across an ocean. The correspondence lasted twenty-two years and reshaped a scholarly life. Ellul taught that saying "no" is the first act of a free person, that to exist is to resist.[40] His life said "no" in longhand.

An ethics of the word for the age of simulation can be stated as practices, each an act of joining what the machine severs. **Attach your presence to your words:** Bonhoeffer defined truth-telling as the concrete obligation of a located person to the persons before her, which is why a word without a person is not yet even a candidate for truth.[41] **Disclose your mediations:** the Kyiv researchers who documented AI overreliance declared in print the AI tools used to polish their own manuscript and took responsibility for every sentence, while the lawyers in *Avianca* concealed theirs until a judge compelled the confession. The difference between those two acts is nearly the whole of ethics.[42] **Keep the disciplines of address:** proclamation by a preacher who can be

[39]Gill, *What Are You Doing About It?*, chap. 14. Gill, Ellul's doctoral interpreter and later the founding president of the International Jacques Ellul Society, reports both the longhand habit and the 1972 letter; his dissertation remains the standard study of the theme, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984).

[40]Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); cf. Gill, "End of Technicized Work," on saying no as the first act of a free person and on *exister, c'est résister*.

[41]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?," in *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

[42]Avsheniuk et al., "Exploring Overreliance," 16 ("Artificial Intelligence Statement"); contrast with *Mata v. Avianca*, where the mediation was concealed until the court compelled disclosure.

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questioned afterward, absolution from lips that must answer for it, the "yes" that is "yes", oaths kept even when the institutions that administered them drift far away from source. **Fast from simulation as a discipline** rather than a phobia, putting to every tool the question Postman put to every technology: what is the problem for which this is the solution?[43] And **do the un-substitutable things**. "Sit with the child, open the book, and read": Ross Douthat's survival counsel for the digital bottleneck is, bottomline, a list of embodied acts of the word, and it closes with Moses' own admonition: *choose life* (Deut 30:19).[44]

Conclusion: What Do We Do Now?

The situation can seem dire, and in many ways, it is. So, *what do we do now?* The temptation is to answer at the scale of the crisis, with policy for the platforms and countermeasures for the noise. Some of that work belongs to the vocations of legislators and engineers, and Christians should be present in all of it. Still, I think Ellul would warn, and the whole argument here affirms his warning: that the world will not be saved by technique applied to technique. It will be kept the way words have always been kept: by persons who remain inside them, in communities small enough for address. Keep the practices:

Listen before speaking and listen long.
Promise and be findable when the promise comes due.
Bless with a voice that can also weep.
Tell the truth to someone who can hold you to it and stay within reach of being held.

[43]Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 61. Postman's direct quote, "What problem does the information solve?"

[44]Ross Douthat, "An Age of Extinction Is Coming. Here's How to Survive," *New York Times*, April 19, 2025.

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None of this out-shouts the noise, and none of it needs to. A word kept by a person is the one thing simulation cannot manufacture, and it is the mustard-seed form in which the rehabilitation of the word already grows.

Our four twentieth century prophets feared for the word; they diagnosed it but could not fix it, as brilliant as they were. Our very Christian confession is that the Word has already come from beyond the noise, was humiliated further than Ellul dared detail, down to the silence of a tomb… and the Word himself speaks still. Despair is, therefore, not available to us, and neither is panic. In a season when the state can requisition a word and the machine can counterfeit all of them, one retired Army officer that I know still keeps an oath the lexicon no longer knows how to name. No, the word did not keep its meaning. The man kept his word. In that order of loss and keeping, the Church hears its assignment, and its confidence: "The grass withers, the flower fades, and the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8).

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