

ChatGPT and the Network Generation:  
Theological Discussions with ChatGPT on Christ and Culture

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## Introduction

Growing up in Silicon Valley through the 80s and 90s, the “network generation”<sup>1</sup> is a term I have been using since becoming an adult in the early 2000s, in order to describe my generation. While the impact of the internet was evident to all, growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area helped ingrain the nuance with which technology impacted every sphere of society. The way in which business, finance, media, politics, and more were being newly interconnected by technology, was the hallmark of my generation, the “network generation.” Personally, the early 2000s also coincided with my own faith journey from a non-believing college student at UCLA studying sciences and technology, to a saving faith in Jesus Christ on that same campus. Upon reflection, a core component of my early faith journey was a passionate belief that God would use “network generation” to change the world for Jesus Christ and God’s Kingdom.

Decades later, I believe that the concept of the “network generation” continues to hold significance. Following the advent of the internet, this generation has witnessed the exponential growth of technology use in mobile phones and social media, all of which has transformed the way people communicate and engage with one another. This technology also had a profound impact on world evangelization and the advancement of God’s Kingdom. More recently, experts have been pointing towards Artificial Intelligence (AI) as the next transformative technology impacting a multitude of industries.<sup>2</sup> Only now has AI gained wide media attention, prompting businesses and public policy makers to study its potential impact. Even the White House published a report stating that, “As AI technology continues to improve, it may have a substantial impact on the economy with respect to productivity, growth, inequality, market power, innovation, and employment.”<sup>3</sup> I believe that this potential for transformative change also includes missions and ministry for God’s Kingdom. Innovative ways to harness AI tools for God’s Kingdom is key area on the cutting edge of ministry for God's Kingdom.

This paper will provide a limited analysis of how evangelicals in the “network generation” seeks to utilize AI Chatbot ChatGPT in theological discussion, by focusing on discussions about Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, this research paper will explore the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with the future use of AI in theological conversation, providing valuable insight for those seeking to use this tool for missions and ministry. The practical research portion of this paper was limited to observations and analysis of a small group of eight first-year Master of Divinity students at an evangelical school, Olivet University. In short, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how AI technology can be harnessed to support and enrich theological discussions, while also shedding light on the potential challenges and other considerations that may arise in the course of its adoption.

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<sup>1</sup> Olivet University, *Mission Statement*, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell M. West and John R. Allen, “How artificial intelligence is transforming the world,” The Brookings Institute, April 24, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, “The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Future of Workforces in the European Union and the United States of America,” Issues Briefs, December 5, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

## An Overview of ChatGPT

The concept of generative AI has gained significant media attention in recent months, with ChatGPT emerging as a prime example of this advanced technology. ChatGPT was developed by OpenAI, a pioneer in the AI field. OpenAI describes ChatGPT as a “language model trained to produce text” that is “optimized for dialogue”.<sup>5</sup> This means ChatGPT is basically a computer you can have a conversation with, but it really is so much more than that. The GPT portion of ChatGPT stands for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer, meaning that it is in a class of AI known as generative AI. Generative AI is not the AI that people normally think of in the movies, where an AI is capable of learning and growing autonomously. Instead, generative AI operates by using predictive analysis to generate based on the information, patterns, structures it has already been trained on.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, when a person talks to ChatGPT, it is generating contextually relevant and coherent responses based on information, patterns, and structures it has been trained on, which is essentially the internet. According to OpenAI, ChatGPT “finished training in early 2022”, so it has assimilated the vast wealth of information available on the internet up until 2021 and processes user input with the internet up until 2021 to generate a response.

The text prompt for ChatGPT is able to handle a wide variety of comments and questions from users and generate impressive responses. Various applications include content generation, translation, summarization, Q&A, analysis, paraphrasing, and much more. This has led to a number of novel uses, upending multiple industries including education. For example, if a user asks ChatGPT to write a 500-word essay on the subject of the renaissance era, then it will do exactly so with extraordinary efficiency. OpenAI’s own study shows that ChatGPT 4.0 received a 1410 on the SATs and a score of 5 out of possible 5 on the AP Art History, AP Biology, AP Environmental Science, AP Macroeconomics, AP Microeconomics, AP Psychology, AP Statistics, AP US Government and AP US History.<sup>7</sup> The University of Minnesota Law School gave passing grades ranging from B to C to ChatGPT 3.0 for multiple different exams.<sup>8</sup> This has led to cheating and plagiarism concerns throughout the education industry. A survey done by study.com on January 2023 reported that 89% of the 1000 students surveyed had used ChatGPT for homework, while 72% of the 100 college professors surveyed were “concerned about its impact on cheating.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite its impressive capabilities, ChatGPT has significant limitations as well. OpenAI admits that “ChatGPT sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> OpenAI (2023), “What is ChatGPT,” <https://help.openai.com/en/articles/6783457-what-is-chatgpt>, Accessed May 10, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Martineau, “What is generative AI,” *IBM Research*, <https://research.ibm.com/blog/what-is-generative-AI>, April 20, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> OpenAI (2023), “GPT-4 Technical Report,” March 27, 2023, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan H. Choi, Kristin E. Hickman, Amy B. Monahan, Daniel Schwarcz, “ChatGPT Goes to Law School,” *Minnesota Legal Studies Research Paper No. 23-03*, January 23, 2023, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Survey.com, “Productive Teaching Tool or Innovative Cheating?,” <https://study.com/resources/perceptions-of-chatgpt-in-schools>, January 2023, Accessed May 10, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> OpenAI, “Introducing ChatGPT,” <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>, Accessed May 10, 2023.

This means that ChatGPT will sometimes write in a way that sounds convincing, but everything that it is saying is completely inaccurate. In fact, the text prompt where users input into ChatGPT clearly states, “ChatGPT may produce inaccurate information about people, places, or facts.” These types of inaccurate yet plausible-sounding response are also known as “hallucinations”. A study on artificial hallucinations, published at the National Institutes of Health, said that the data ChatGPT generates “is a mix of true and completely fabricated” and has “the potential of creating false experts” when it comes to scientific writing.<sup>11</sup>

Another limitation is that ChatGPT does not retain “memory” from previous conversations, so each new interaction begins without any knowledge of past exchanges. Furthermore, users are limited to inputting text through the chat prompt, without the option to upload entire websites or documents for the AI to process. This limits the accuracy or comprehensiveness of its responses. OpenAI also admits that ChatGPT is “often excessively verbose and overuses certain phrases.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a whole industry of software has been developed to detect AI generated texts by using data analytics to spot these hallmarks of ChatGPT.

Personally, I have used ChatGPT extensively for a wide range of tasks such as exercise routines, cooking ideas, filling out forms, and organizing sermon outlines. In my opinion, the most remarkable attribute of ChatGPT is its ability to hone in on the users’ nuances and subtleties of the users’ intent. This sets it apart from existing tools such as Google search, which appears rudimentary in comparison. Using its understanding of a users’ prompt, ChatGPT is then able to generate contextually relevant and coherent replies by drawing from its vast wealth of information from the internet. Another thing I have noticed is that ChatGPT has a tendency to steer users towards mainstream perspectives where an abundance of information is available. USC Researcher Emilio Ferrara attributes ChatGPT’s bias to the data set it was trained on saying, “the data consists of extensive text corpora available on the internet, which includes websites, articles, books, and other forms of written content.”<sup>13</sup> This has the benefit of steering users away from extreme viewpoints, but it has the drawback of overlooking minority opinions or unconventional viewpoints. This is a very important consideration as AI technology continues to advance and play an increasingly significant role in shaping people’s perspectives, that there could be potential biases embedded within AI-generated content.

In the context of theological discussions, ChatGPT's capabilities present both opportunities and challenges. It creates an opportunity in its ability synthesize complex theological concepts and bring out new perspectives that may not have been considered before. For those seeking in-depth theological reflection, ChatGPT appears able to generate helpful responses. However, challenges may exist for those holding minority viewpoints. ChatGPT still acknowledges a user’s viewpoint, but it may limit engagement with diverse or unconventional theological ideas. Users should

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<sup>11</sup> Alkaissi H, McFarlane S I, “Artificial Hallucinations in ChatGPT: Implications in Scientific Writing,” *Cureus* 15(2): e35179. DOI 10.7759/cureus.35179, February 19, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Emilio Ferrara, “Should ChatGPT be Biased? Challenges and Risks of Bias in Large Language Models,” arXiv preprint arXiv:2304.03738, April 18, 2023, 4.

approach theological discussions critically, acknowledging that ChatGPT's output may not represent the full spectrum of theological thought.

### Considering the Network Generation

Advancements in AI technologies will undoubtedly impact the two generations which have already been transformed by technology. Millennials and Gen Z, two distinct yet closely related generations, are often defined by their inherent connection to the internet and their unique experiences with digital technology. Michael Dimock, President of Pew Research Center, points to 9/11 as being one generational boundary, but hones in on technology saying that “Millennials came of age during the internet explosion,” while Generation Z has had technology as “part of their lives from the start.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the primary distinction tends to hinge on whether they were adults or simply born during the age of the internet, shaping their identities and values in different ways. For the purposes of this paper, I am using the term “network generation” to encompass both generations, recognizing that this label remains relevant due to the constantly changing technological landscape. Since AI technologies like ChatGPT will impact the network generation the most, considering what has shaped the network generation is critical to studying how it will impact areas such as theological discussion.

Perhaps the most obvious consideration is the interconnected nature of the internet and digital technology that has shaped the network generation. The internet has created a globalized society where information is readily available and accessible, fostering an environment of instant communication and collaboration across borders. This digital landscape has given rise to a generation of digital natives who are adept at navigating the complex web of information and networks. As a result, young people today exhibit a heightened sense of interconnectedness and are more aware of diverse cultures and perspectives than ever before. A study on social media use and social connectedness states, “Increased uptake of social media applications has provided more opportunities for young people to connect, communicate, and interact with each other.”<sup>15</sup> However, this interconnected world also presents challenges, such as information overload and the potential for echo chambers, which can reinforce pre-existing beliefs and limit exposure to alternative viewpoints. One study pointed towards Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular social media platforms, as vehicles for such echo chambers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the network generation is one that is more informed and connected, but less empathetic than previous generations.

Another crucial consideration is the rapid and seamless adoption of new technologies by the network generation, including advancements in AI. One study illuminates that “students are

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins,” *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>, January 17, 2019, Accessed May 10, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly-Ann Allen, Tracii Ryan, DeLeon Gray, D. McNerney, Lea Waters, “Social Media Use and Social Connectedness in Adolescents: The Positives and the Potential Pitfalls,” *Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, Volume 31, Issue 1, April 2014, 18-31.

<sup>16</sup> Matteo Cinelli, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Alessandro Galeazzi, and Michele Starnini, “The echo chamber effect on social media,” *PNAS*, Volume 118, Number 9, February 23, 2021.

outpacing instructors and administrator in usage” of ChatGPT by wide margins.<sup>17</sup> The survey indicated that a “greater number of students (48%) have tried AI writing tools at least once, whereas 71% of instructors and administrators have never used these tools, with 32% reporting that they are not even aware of these tools.”<sup>18</sup> This pattern of early adoption among the network generation aligns with historical trends associated with previous technological innovations, where younger users outpaced older ones in usage before the latter eventually embraced the new technology. Examples from the realm of social media include platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and now, AI platforms like ChatGPT. Supporting this notion, an April 2023 Educause poll showed that only 34% of institutions having implemented, or is in the process of implementing, new and/or revised policies to guide the use of generative AI. It is clear that the network generation has consistently demonstrated a propensity for integrating AI more fluidly and swiftly into their everyday lives than older generations can anticipate or react to.

Beyond technology, longer term philosophical influences on the network generation are also important to consider, particularly the challenge of postmodernism. While postmodernism is a complicated topic that is not the subject of this paper, I will simply point to four key areas that Stanley J. Grenz identified as considerations for a Gospel response including being post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric.<sup>19</sup> Evangelical scholar Ronald T. Michener also elaborated on Grenz’s framework and used it describe what is required of a postmodern apologetic. Michener states that being post-individualistic means moving beyond the “radical individualism” of modernism and “affirm the value of community”, specifically the larger community of believers or the Church.<sup>20</sup> Being post-rationalistic is going “beyond simply the cognitive level”, but recognizing that humans are “relational beings with feelings and emotions which help shape our worldviews.”<sup>21</sup> Being post-dualistic means moving away from the simplicity of Descartes’ division of mind and matter, and “speak to the entire human person”, especially how social and environmental context shapes a person.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, being post-noeticentric is valuing biblical wisdom over the “accumulation of knowledge”, recognizing that knowledge can breed power and corruption.<sup>23</sup> Rather, Michener favors “a whole-person, relationally centered, dialogue-based apologetic which appeals to reason, human sensibility, emotion, and imagination.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Louis NeJame, Ria Bharadwaj, Catherine Shaw, Kristen Fox, “Generative AI in Higher Education: From Fear to Experimentation, Embracing AI’s Potential,” *Tyton Partners*, <https://tytonpartners.com/generative-ai-in-higher-education-from-fear-to-experimentation-embracing-ais-potential/>, April 25, 2023, Accessed May 10, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 167-174.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald T. Michener, *Engaging Deconstructive Theology* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 162.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 164.

Grenz' framework and Michener's analysis teaches us that the influence postmodernism on the network generation means considering the nuanced relationship between the individual and the grand narrative. The modernist view emphasized the objective, rational self, which conclusively meant individuals finding themselves within the meta-narrative of society and the world. The postmodern attitude rejects the meta-narrative, encouraging individual self-discovery, with the meta-narratives following the individual. That being said, evangelicals in faith cannot ignore the overarching biblical-historical framework as a grand narrative. This leaves a much more nuanced relationship between the individual and the grand narrative. My personal experience as a pastor in San Francisco affirms the network generation's need to discover themselves within the framework of traditional, biblical Christianity. It is not one or the other. Evangelical faith in the network generation is not simply about a journey of self-discovery, nor is it blind adherence towards a meta narrative. Ministry in the network generation is about developing one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ, together with the community of believers in the Church, and directed towards the grand story of God's Kingdom. The postmodern influence requires an acknowledgment individualism within the grand story of the Kingdom, recognizing that God is so great that He embraces the individual as a part of the larger story of His Kingdom.

These considerations of the network generation are fascinating in examining how ChatGPT inherently addresses these network generation characteristics for theological discussion. First and foremost, as digital natives, ChatGPT seamlessly integrates with the technological environment that the network generation thrives in. The conversational aspect of ChatGPT enables individualized and nuanced discussions, catering to the unique perspectives of each user. Drawing from the existing body of knowledge on the history and tradition of Christianity, ChatGPT provides well-informed responses that contribute to a meaningful dialogue. Additionally, its generative nature allows the AI to use this wealth of information to tailor responses specifically to the individual, further emphasizing the significance of personal engagement and discovery within the broader context of faith and tradition.

Taking into account the various aspects of the network generation discussed above, it becomes evident how ChatGPT has the potential to address these characteristics in facilitating theological discussions. As an AI technology designed for digital natives, ChatGPT appears to be an excellent tool that is integrated into the digital environment in which the network generation appears to already thrive in. Its interactive design could offer opportunities for personalized and nuanced dialogues that resonate with the unique perspectives of each user. By drawing from a comprehensive repository of knowledge concerning Christian history and traditions, ChatGPT has the potential to foster enriching dialogues. It could even potentially act as a corrective to the prevalent issues of information overload and echo chambers on the internet, instead stimulating users to explore diverse viewpoints and promoting a sense of empathy and interconnectedness. Additionally, taking into account the profound influence of postmodernism on the network generation, the generative capabilities of ChatGPT could facilitate individual engagement and discovery within the larger context of faith tradition, the Church, and God's Kingdom. Therefore, ChatGPT may serve as an intuitive bridge connecting the unique characteristics of the network generation to theological discussions.



### Background on Christ and Culture Discussions with ChatGPT

In December 2023, I tasked eight evangelical first-year Master of Divinity students at an evangelical school, Olivet University, in having insightful discussions with ChatGPT 4.0, focusing on the seminal work “Christ and Culture” by Richard Niebuhr. My selection of Niebuhr’s influential book as the basis for these discussions was primarily driven by my personal interest in its profound missiological relevance. Additionally, it was important for me to choose a book and subject matter with an ample and accessible body of information available on the internet, since ChatGPT relies on information from the internet. This would ensure an informed conversation, allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives and thoughtful discussion points. Prior to the meeting, all eight students were asked to read Niebuhr’s book, but to ensure consistency, I also delivered a one-hour lecture on the book. Afterwards, I provided the students with suggested discussion topics and questions in their exploratory conversations with ChatGPT. This section aims to provide an overview of my lecture on Richard Niebuhr's pivotal book while also summarizing the guidelines I gave to the students in having theological discussions with ChatGPT.

Niebuhr's book presents a 5-point paradigm exploring the complex relationship between Christianity and culture. The five models provide a valuable lens to understand how Christians engage with and respond to their cultural context. The first model is “Christ against Culture,” which emphasizes the opposition between the Christian faith and worldly culture, suggesting that “a clear line of separation is drawn between” Christians and the world.<sup>25</sup> The second model is “Christ of Culture” and highlights harmony between Christianity and culture, implying that Christians can embrace and adapt to cultural norms, for which Niebuhr calls them “cultural Christians.”<sup>26</sup> The third model is “Christ above Culture” and acknowledges the coexistence of faith and culture, while maintaining Christ's supremacy, suggesting Christians can engage with culture but prioritize their spiritual allegiance, for which Niebuhr highlights a common moniker for this type is “synthesists.”<sup>27</sup> The fourth model is “Christ and Culture in Paradox” and posits that Christians must live in the tension between their allegiance to Christ and participation in the world, whereby Niebuhr calls this type a “dualist” who is also an “existential thinker.”<sup>28</sup> Lastly, the fifth model is “Christ Transforming Culture” and is the view that Christianity can transform and redeem culture, and for those whose “eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present.”<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr's paradigm offers a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between Christianity and culture and fosters reflection for individual Christians in examining their engagement with the world.

While Niebuhr's five-point paradigm provides a significant foundation for understanding the relationship between Christianity and culture, it has garnered criticism over its perceived comprehensiveness and applicability amidst the dynamically shifting cultural landscape of today.

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<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 47-48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 195.

Esteemed theologian D.A. Carson, for instance, has raised concerns about the paradigms being appropriately grounded in biblical narratives and their potential reductionism that may not encapsulate the myriad of cultural phenomena. In thinking about the relation between Christ and culture, Carson calls biblical narratives such as “creation, fall, incarnation, Jesus’ death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, and the final judgment and consummation” as “non-negotiables of biblical theology” that Niebuhr did not cover.<sup>30</sup> Carson also speaks to the potential reductionism in the paradigms, advocating for a “soft postmodernism” that “recognizes how much we humans do not know” and viewing from the perspective of “the Bible’s story line, the Bible’s metanarrative, the big picture.”<sup>31</sup> In essence, Carson is calling for viewing Christ and culture less in a paradigm format, but through a more biblical and nuanced framework that could better encapsulate the many ways Christians might respond to diverse cultural phenomena. Indeed, Carson is able to see a level of globalization with diverse cultures that perhaps Niebuhr was unable to see in his lifetime.

George Marsden advances this critique by speaking to complexity of Christians in a multi-cultural world that cannot be categorized in a certain paradigm. Marsden writes:

Virtually every Christian and every Christian group expresses in one way or another all five of the motifs. With respect to one cultural activity, they may typically express one motif, with respect to another they may characteristically adopt quite a different stance. Even with respect to a particular category of cultural activities, as regarding learning, the state, the arts, contemporary values, popular culture, business, leisure, and so forth. Christians are likely to manifest something of all five of the attitudes.<sup>32</sup>

Globalization has helped contemporary critics see what Niebuhr perhaps could not, that diverse cultural expressions and influences necessitates a more contextually sensitive understanding of the faith-culture relationship. Despite these critiques, Niebuhr's seminal work remains a cornerstone of theological studies, serving as a critical starting point for scholars to further refine and evolve our understanding of these relationships in light of new cultural realities. This ongoing discourse underscores the enduring relevance of Niebuhr's work, and equally highlights the importance of continual reinterpretation and reassessment amidst the ever-changing dynamics of our global culture.

Having helped students gain a nuanced understanding of Niebuhr's original work and its critiques, I provided suggested questions and topics as guidelines for the students in their discussions with ChatGPT. Students were then tasked to have a 30-minute discussion with ChatGPT to enhance their theological exploration on Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture.” The following is a concise summary of my guidelines to the students:

1. Ask ChatGPT to provide a comprehensive summary of Niebuhr's five-model paradigm

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<sup>30</sup> D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 7.37-7.38, Calibre.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 8.54-8.66, Calibre.

<sup>32</sup> George Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr’s Categories,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Fall 1999.

2. Request further clarity from ChatGPT on any of the paradigms that you lack a complete, nuanced understanding.
3. Use ChatGPT to compare Niebuhr's definition of culture, commonly understood definitions of culture, and your definition of culture.
4. Ask ChatGPT for contemporary critiques of Niebuhr's work, including a list of books and resources for further exploration.
5. Have a discussion with ChatGPT on the relevance and limitations of Niebuhr's paradigms at the current time.
6. Take one part of your conversation thus far with ChatGPT and ask it to compare it with any theological, philosophical, sociological, or historical topic of your choice.
7. Ask ChatGPT to provide biblical substantiation for any of its assertions so far in your previous discussions.
8. Ask ChatGPT to provide a list of questions for personal self-reflection on your own views related to Christ and Culture, and then answer ChatGPT's questions.
9. Ask ChatGPT to analyze and determine which of Niebuhr's paradigms that you most closely align with, and why.
10. Provide ChatGPT with background on your current or future ministry work and ask it for advice on improving it with Christ and Culture in mind.

Following the students' discussions with ChatGPT, they were each asked to spend 30-minutes writing a short reflection on their discussions. Afterwards, I engaged the eight students in a one-hour discussion on various topics related to the exercise. This included the benefits and limitations of using ChatGPT in theological discussion. It also included asking students what they felt the consequences of using ChatGPT in theology, both the opportunities and risks of what AI can offer.

### **Observations from the Network Generation on ChatGPT**

ChatGPT displayed several significant strengths during the students' discussions on "Christ and Culture." Perhaps the most practical strength, was ChatGPT's capabilities to interpret and convey complex information in a clear and simple way. Since all students requested summaries of Niebuhr's work, along with further intricate explications of each of the five paradigms, all found these summaries helpful. Students stated that the AI consistently provided accurate, comprehensible summaries that were easy to understand. Most students reported that ChatGPT's responses were equivalent to my own one-hour lecture, but that the written record from ChatGPT was easy to see and allowed for further personal study. Two students where English was a second language, remarked that ChatGPT's summaries were easier to understand than my own one-hour lecture. This was likely due to the foreign students' increased capabilities in reading English versus hearing English. Furthermore, students found ChatGPT's synopsis of the general critiques of Niebuhr's work to have depth, offering insightful understanding for those seeking to go beyond Niebuhr's work. Given that Niebuhr's writing style can be challenging to understand and navigate, students found the clarity of language provided by ChatGPT to be incredibly helpful in engaging with this topic.

Another strength of ChatGPT was its capacity to draw on the wealth of knowledge available on the internet, which proved helpful for the diversity of evangelical students discussing this

theological topic. One student interacted with ChatGPT on presenting Christ in the Chinese culture in its current political climate, while another did the same in the context of Ethiopia. ChatGPT was able to accurately and comprehensively address both, referencing the Chinese house church movement and Ethiopia's Christian history amidst the tribal diversity in the country. Another student received accurate and helpful advice from ChatGPT on evangelizing in contemporary college culture, while another student received different advice on using music to present Jesus Christ. Students also interacted on topics such as comparing Niebuhr's paradigms to philosophical concepts such as Kierkegaard's existential faith or Hegel's dialectical method. Still others discussed with ChatGPT on a mega-strategy for evangelism versus person-to-person evangelism. In all cases, students reported that ChatGPT, when requested, was competent in presenting biblically rooted support and demonstrated command of biblical knowledge. I believe that ChatGPT was able to handle such diverse theological discussions because of the wealth of information available on the internet about such topics as the Bible, different countries' culture, major philosophical ideas, and missiological strategies. Essentially, ChatGPT's appears to excel in any topic that has a substantial body of information available on the internet.

In addition, ChatGPT appears to excel in personalized conversations it had with students. The AI is able to foster engaging and tailored interactions that cater to individual needs and preferences. When students asked ChatGPT for questions on self-reflections, these questions were different for every student, appearing to adjust slightly, based on its previous interaction with the students. For example, a student with a Chinese background, who had discussed this with ChatGPT, was asked questions related to traditional Chinese values, familial ties, potential persecution, and social exclusion. Although each student's questions and answers were different, ChatGPT was able to accurately analyze responses and match views to the appropriate typology within Niebuhr's framework. Given the evangelical faith of the students, ChatGPT identified most as aligning with "Christ transforming Culture", while two fell into the "Christ against Culture" camp, with one more as "Christ and Culture in Paradox." For some students, ChatGPT highlighted the differences and nuances between their own views and the typology it identified, offering a deeper understanding of their positions. In essence, ChatGPT was able to create a customized, informative, and thought-provoking experience for theological conversations, showcasing its potential in facilitating meaningful dialogue on a personal level for each individual student and their context.

Nonetheless, despite its strengths, students observed limitations to ChatGPT's capabilities. One such limitation is its occasional inaccuracies in handling specific facts. As previously discussed, these "hallucinations" by ChatGPT has been acknowledged by OpenAI as an inherent shortcoming of GPT AI technology, and it was something that students experienced firsthand in their conversations. One example occurred frequently for most students when discussing critiques of "Christ and Culture" with ChatGPT. The AI consistently attributed a critique of "Christ and Culture" to D.A. Carson that he did not actually write in his book. This error probably stems from the fact that ChatGPT does not have access to Carson's full book and the available information about Carson's book is significantly less than information about Niebuhr's book. That being said, while ChatGPT provided a better understanding of Niebuhr's book, even some specific details were also erroneous in student conversations. This suggests that ChatGPT may not have access to Niebuhr's full work either, but that it is simply drawing from the wealth of information about Niebuhr's book on the internet. As a result, the critique provided by

ChatGPT may be more of a general critique rather than a direct reflection of Carson's work, while more direct reflection of Niebuhr's work would be more accurate.

Compounding this weakness is the fact that ChatGPT did not readily acknowledge when it was giving inaccurate information. Instead of simply saying it does not know, ChatGPT constructed persuasive and seemingly informed responses, even if the underlying facts were incorrect. More troubling is the fact that students had difficulty seeing these inaccuracies. In the case of ChatGPT's error on D.A. Carson's critique, all believed D.A. Carson wrote this critique since ChatGPT made it sound plausible. The student themselves could not determine that what ChatGPT was saying, was a "hallucination". It was not until I informed the students that D.A. Carson did not write such a critique in his book, that they understood ChatGPT's error. Among other errors, only one out of eight of the students were able to point out a factual error in their conversations with ChatGPT. When I asked students to do an internet search for some of these inaccuracies, they were able to capably determine most inaccuracies. In this respect, students remarked that traditional fact-checking tools, like search engines, might offer a more reliable source for accurate information than ChatGPT.

### **Reflections from the Network Generation on ChatGPT**

Overall, students emerged with positive reflections on their theological engagement with ChatGPT. The group consensus was that AI can play an important role in theological discussion in our current era. Its ease of use and remarkable ability to appear human-like in conversations, make it a highly accessible tool. Evangelicals in the network generation are grappling with theological questions and seeking deeper theological reflection in a constantly changing environment. Students reflected that ChatGPT is able to readily engage in substantive discussions, with people easily accessing it through their computer screens or on their mobile phones. One student spoke about how they are often hesitant to burden others with their theological inquiries. Another student mentioned that its time consuming to seek out other peers or pastors to seek such a theological discussion. In these cases, an AI like ChatGPT can provide the desired conversational experience in a readily available fashion.

Students also remarked on the capacity of ChatGPT to facilitate an extensive exploration of complex and diverse perspectives and ideologies. Given that theological discussions can often be quite intricate and challenging, the AI's ability to synthesize complex arguments and present them in a simple, easy to understand narratives is an invaluable asset. Students felt a sense of ease in immersing themselves in the complexities of theological subjects, while also ensuring that they have a foundation of understanding what those complex theological subjects actually are. Upon reflection, students were honest about not readily admitting to other people when they do not understand some complex theological term or subject, but that discussions with ChatGPT can facilitate this understanding. This is especially true for individual where English is a second language, they may understand the topic, but not in English. ChatGPT alleviating such social anxiety and would alleviate similar situations for others.

The advantages of utilizing ChatGPT to promote critical thinking and deeper theological reflection were also evident to students. The group consensus was that the exercise on having ChatGPT ask them introspective questions and answering them, was particularly helpful. This

helped encourages students to deeply engage with the subject matter and provide insight into diverse perspectives they had not thought about themselves. In essence, this reflective process was a catalyst for personal development in the students. It also helped provide students with a more refined understanding of their own beliefs and theological convictions. The AI provided nuanced explanations and the conversations helped students gain a clearer sense of their own convictions and values. Again, the students remarked about the benefit of such self-reflection with ChatGPT in a non-judgmental environment of interacting with a computer system.

At the same time, students were quick to recognize ChatGPT's limits, in that the AI does not serve as a substitute for genuine human interaction, particularly when it comes to theological discussions. While the nonjudgmental environment was positive, ChatGPT does not possess empathy, personal beliefs, or a moral compass. Students felt that these elements are fundamental to theological discussions. For example, one student remarked about a recent discussion with their professor, in which the professor spoke about their own theological journey, understanding a concept from one perspective but shifting as they became older. These types of personal testimonies are unavailable in a discussion with ChatGPT. Even if ChatGPT could mimic such experience, student remarked that it would not be genuine and therefore would be a completely different experience from a personal interaction.

Lastly, students reflected at length about ChatGPT being prone to factual errors. The group was surprised at being unable to recognize factual inaccuracies through their conversations with ChatGPT. They had believed everything written by the AI since it appeared persuasive and informed in its responses. It was only when I, as an informed individual followed up on student discussions with the AI, did they understand the dangers of ChatGPT's hallucinations. Students reflected on how they will now approach the information provided by ChatGPT with a more critical eye, assessing the information provided, and verifying the facts it provides with external trusted sources. The group consensus was that the best method for individuals seeking theological reflection is to combine the insights and support provided by ChatGPT with their own critical thinking and research. They felt that this was the best method for engaging with ChatGPT in rich, meaningful theological discussions that contributes to their growth and understanding.

### **Final Analysis on AI, the Network Generation, and Theology**

In general, AI appears to be a positive technological development for the network generation, with ChatGPT being particularly beneficial for certain use cases of theological discussion. While AI itself is a big leap in technological advancement, its immersion into a young generation who are digital natives, appears to be seamless. The network generation does not seem to have any issue integrating AI into their lives, as well as their theological growth and development. Rather, the network generation embraces these advanced tools which they view as being able to help them learn in ways that other people cannot, including professors and peers. There is a vast sea of information available on the internet on theological subjects, with an overwhelming number of sources and opinions within reach online, so pinpointing a starting point can be daunting. In speaking about the benefits of AI for theological studies, Mark Graves commented, "These technologies can provide new tools for scholars to access and analyze vast amounts of

theological literature.”<sup>33</sup> The network generation naturally uses tools like ChatGPT to condense this wealth of information into concise, relevant summaries to save significant time and effort, and allowing them to concentrate on the most important aspects of their exploration. The common refrain among those in education is that generative AI like ChatGPT is most helpful as a companion. “Treat AI as a research assistant not a supervisor,” Mushtaq Bilal, a researcher using AI commented.<sup>34</sup> Professors from the University of Pennsylvania are approaching AI in the same way, studying how to “enhance learning outcomes while ensuring that AI serves as a supportive tool rather than a replacement.”<sup>35</sup> The same is true in theological education, where the network generation can use AI in an assistive way to enhance their learning.

AI also appears to match the underlying postmodern influence that underpins the network generation. The aforementioned Grenz-Michener framework of post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric, certainly applies to the use of AI by the network generation. James Hutson explored the latest use of AI in artistic creativity and concluded that “AI algorithms, with their ability to ideate, scrutinize data, and discern patterns, can streamline the creative process, particularly enhancing exploratory and transformational creativity.”<sup>36</sup> In the theological realm, it is important to recognize that the network generation is diverse and individualized, with evangelicals seeking to find themselves within the grand meta-narrative of the Bible and God’s Kingdom. For the network generation, interacting with tools like ChatGPT enables individuals to develop their ability to articulate, defend, and substantiating their theological viewpoints. It also allows them to discern the strengths and limitations of counter-arguments. The AI appears to facilitate a process of self-discovery that can ultimately contribute to a more well-rounded and informed theological understanding.

At the same time, the network generation appears either naïve or justifiably unconcerned about the dangers of AI, depending on one’s perspective. Many are sounding the alarm about AI, concerned about human ability to detect inaccurate or false information. This is why the European Union called for transparency requirements in a first ever EU AI Act.<sup>37</sup> These concerns appear well-founded when it comes to the network generation, as they seem unable to discern accuracy when it comes to theological conversation with ChatGPT. While these concerns are warranted, perhaps they are justifiably limited in their overall impact. Throughout history, inaccurate or false information has flowed throughout society, sometimes causing temporary

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<sup>33</sup> Mark Graves, “ChatGPT’s Significance for Theology,” *Theology and Science*, 21:2, 201-204, DOI: 10.1080/14746700.2023.2188366, May 11, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Mushtaq Bilal, “Best Practices for Using AI for Academic Purposes,” *LinkedIn Pulse*, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/best-practices-using-ai-academic-purposes-mushtaq-bilal-phd/>, August 21, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Ethan Mollick and Lilach Mollick, “Assigning AI: Seven Approaches for Students with Prompts,” *Wharton School of School of the University of Pennsylvania & Wharton Interactive*, September 23, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> James Hutson, “AI and the Creative Process: Part One,” *JSTOR Daily*, <https://daily.jstor.org/ai-and-the-creative-process-part-one/>, October 24, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> European Union, “EU AI Act: first regulation on artificial intelligence,” <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20230601STO93804/eu-ai-act-first-regulation-on-artificial-intelligence>, August 6, 2023.

disruptions. Yet these attempts often fail, with accurate information often following. James F. McGrath, who has been experimenting with using ChatGPT in education, remarked about error-prone AI being freely used in society and stated, “Those companies and organizations will pay the price.”<sup>38</sup> This speaks to the biblical truth that whatever is evil and false will be judged, and whatever is true, righteous, and good will remain in eternity.<sup>39</sup> Evangelicals in the network generation appear to accept when inaccurate information is pointed out and have a desire to find accurate information, particularly when it comes to their theological studies. Therefore, these types of dangers of AI are concerning, but limited. The same can be said for professors who are concerned about students using AI for cheating, plagiarism, and academic dishonesty. While the potential for misuse is there, the network generation appears to understand the value of genuine learning. Instead, educators should consider encouraging students to use AI in a “responsibly and critical way”, as the KU Leuven promotes in their guidelines for using GPT AI in research and education.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps a more significant limitation is AI’s ability to replace genuine human interaction and learning. In its current form, generative AI like ChatGPT can provide information and engage in discourse based on the data it has been trained on, but it cannot offer genuinely original insights or ideas as a human might be able to. Ted Peters explored asking Google and ChatGPT existential questions and remarked, “Existential questions are so personal they beleaguer us with puzzlement, dread, and fear.”<sup>41</sup> This lack of genuine creativity and understanding in AI can limit the depth of discussions when compared to conversations with other people. While future AI may advance in its ability mimic humans, it is still artificial, and not a human, so it is devoid of genuine human emotion and experiences. While intelligence may be able to be artificially replicated, it is genuine human emotions and experiences that often deeply inform human understanding and interpretations of theology. This is especially true for complex and nuanced theological subjects which may require a cultural, historical, or deeply personal understanding. This issue is a significant limitation that the network generation appears to understand. ChatGPT may be adequate as a theological discussion tool, but there is no one who believes it is genuinely, an actual human.

### Conclusion

AI will undoubtedly and has already made a tremendous impact on society, education, and theology. However, it is important to remember that AI is simply a technology tool that is limited in the same way that humans are limited. As Dorian Scott Cole states, “Artificial intelligence

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<sup>38</sup> James F. McGrath, “The Biblical Story of John the Baptist and Yoko,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/religionprof/2023/10/the-biblical-story-of-john-the-baptist-and-yoko.html>, October 4, 2023, Updated November 24, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:14, 2 Corinthians 5:10.

<sup>40</sup> KU Leuven, “Responsible use of generative Artificial Intelligence,” <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/genai>, Updated December 14, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Ted Peters, “Asking Google Existential Questions,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/publictheology/2023/09/asking-google-existential-questions/>, September 22, 2023, Updated January 3, 2024, Accessed January 15, 2024.



knows nothing more than what humans have given it.”<sup>42</sup> That is why, like any advancement in technology throughout human history, AI should be viewed from a God-centered lens, as opposed to a human-centered lens. From a human-centered lens, AI can be used for goodness, righteousness, and God’s Kingdom, or it can be used for sin, evil, and human fallenness. For example, according to Bible researcher Jonathan Robie, AI is being used in Bible translation “to make the translation process more efficient, ensure the quality of Bible translations.”<sup>43</sup> On the flipside, AI deepfake technology could “entirely fabricated images or videos of people that might misrepresent them, incriminate them or bully them.”<sup>44</sup> Even the internet itself is a technological tool that has been used to spread the Gospel quickly to all nations, while also spreading human greed and depravity. Looking forward, artificial intelligence may reach the point that it is able to artificially mimic human intelligence. Scientists have already started creating AI neural networks that can “mimic human systematic generalization.”<sup>45</sup> Co-author of the study, Brenden Lake claims that the AI neural network captures a “critical aspect of human intelligence.”<sup>46</sup> This means that AI technology may one day be able to capture or even surpass human intelligence, also known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI).<sup>47</sup> However, from a God-centered lens, God is beyond human intelligence and is in fact, beyond intelligence itself.<sup>48</sup> Instead, the Bible asserts that God is love, whose fullness of grace and truth incarnated in the flesh of His Son Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, God is beyond the potential for AI to be used for evil on this earth and AI will never even have the ability to know God. Only humans have the potential to know God, since we were created in God’s image and can form a loving relationship with Him through His Son Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

In the meantime, this paper has navigated the intersection of AI and theology, offering a limited exploration of the role of ChatGPT by studying how evangelicals in the network generation can

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<sup>42</sup> Dorian Scott Cole, “Are AI Companions Bad?,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/newgenerationsexplorefaith/2023/10/are-ai-companions-bad/>, October 18, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Robie, “Artificial Intelligence and Bible Translation,” *Bible History Daily*, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/artificial-intelligence-and-bible-translation/>, January 3, 2024, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Keumars Afifi-Sabet, “3 scary breakthroughs AI will make in 2024” *Live Science*, <https://www.livescience.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/3-scary-breakthroughs-ai-will-make-in-2024>, December 31, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Brendan M. Lake and Marco Baroni, “Human-like systematic generalization through a meta-learning neural network,” *Nature*, 623, 115–121 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06668-3>.

<sup>46</sup> Afifi-Sabet, *Live Science*.

<sup>47</sup> Nicoletta Lanese, “In a 1st, AI neural network captures 'critical aspect of human intelligence',” *Live Science*, <https://www.livescience.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/in-a-1st-ai-neural-network-captures-critical-aspect-of-human-intelligence>, October 25, 2023, Accessed January 15, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9

<sup>49</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>50</sup> Genesis 1:27.

use it for theological discussion. From introducing ChatGPT's capabilities and potential implications to outlining and analyzing the results of student conversations on “Christ and Culture”, this paper has illuminated the AI’s substantial strengths in facilitating meaningful theological conversation for the network generation. This paper has also acknowledged ChatGPT’s weaknesses, ranging from factual inaccuracies to the absence of a genuine human touch that the network generation still seeks. That being said, there were limits in terms of what this paper was able to accomplish. Perhaps the biggest limitation of this paper was the sample size of evangelical students studied. Also, the subject of Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture” is not controversial when compared to other subjects that may have disparate and wide ranging or even extreme theological views. Therefore, the student discussions with ChatGPT on this subject matter did not test the limits of ChatGPT’s capabilities or deficiencies.

Since this paper was limited, there are an abundance of topics related to this subject matter that were not yet explored, not only in theological discussion, but higher education overall. ChatGPT is already producing seismic shifts in higher education, with the current discourse primarily centered around cheating and academic dishonesty. However, ChatGPT's capabilities suggest that it may have profound implications for teaching and learning, potentially causing a paradigm shift towards a more Socratic, discussion-centric pedagogical model. This has exciting transformative potential, but also comes with a unique set of challenges. ChatGPT's capacity to steer conversations with bias, could lead to undue influence towards specific perspectives, an issue particularly critical to Christians, who must navigate both secular influences and diversity of views within Christianity itself. Over reliance on an AI risks minority theological opinions being overshadowed. Also, as users engage more deeply with ChatGPT, sharing personal insights and opinions, produces a significant concern around privacy and data security. This raises the question of how the nuanced personal information shared with ChatGPT is handled, stored, and potentially used by the technology companies which own the AI. This is a critical area for further exploration and scrutiny when it comes to using AI for theological discussion and higher education overall.

Looking towards the future, it becomes evident that ChatGPT has a transformative role to play in theological discussions for the network generation. As we embrace its strengths and address its limitations, it is crucial to strive for a balance between leveraging AI’s potential and safeguarding individual perspectives, privacy, and the richness of theological diversity. As such, the impact of tools like ChatGPT extends beyond academia and theological discourse since it resonates with the broader vision for God's Kingdom. This means promoting meaningful dialogue, enhancing understanding, and fostering a spirit of thoughtful inquiry. As with all new technology, one must remember that while technology like AI can enrich our conversations, it is our shared faith in God through our Lord Jesus Christ that ultimately allows our discussions to be fruitful and meaningful for the Kingdom.

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