

# IMAGE AND ARTIFACT

*A Statement on Artificial Intelligence*

*With a Preface, a Short Statement, Definitions,  
Articles of Affirmation and Denial, and an Exposition*

*“Then Yahweh God formed man of dust from the ground,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man  
became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)*

*“Those who make them will become like them,  
Everyone who trusts in them.” (Psalm 115:8)*

## PREFACE

The advent of machines that imitate the operations of the human mind has stirred both wonder and unease throughout the church. Some greet these technologies as unmixed gifts; others dread them as portents of judgment; many simply do not know what to make of them. The perplexity is understandable, for the questions are new in their form even where they are ancient in their substance. What is a human being? What may we lawfully make, and what may we never worship? Who alone gives life, and breath, and a soul?

This Statement is offered as a contribution to the church's faithful reflection, not as a final word but as a confessional one. We do not suppose that the writers of Scripture foresaw the silicon and software of our age. We confess rather that the God who breathed out their words foresaw all things, and that His word is wholly sufficient to govern the use of every instrument the sons of Adam will ever contrive. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the sufficient and authoritative word of God, and they speak with clarity and competence to every matter touching the nature of man, the boundaries of his making, and the right ordering of his loves (2 Tim. 3:16–17; Ps. 119:105).

We address ourselves to the theological and moral substance of artificial intelligence: what it is and what it is not, what dignity belongs to its makers and its users, and what perils attend its misuse and its worship. We make no pretense to technical prophecy, and we do not presume to settle questions that belong properly to the engineer, the legislator, or the magistrate. Our concern is with the truth of God touching the creature called man, and with the temptations and the opportunities that these new instruments set before him.

We affirm the articles that follow as expressing a faithful reading of Holy Scripture. We commend them to the people of God not to provoke fear or fascination, both of which are unworthy of those who know the Lord, but to

summon the church to wisdom, to discernment, and to love. Those who differ are asked to weigh what is written here against the Scriptures, in whose light alone these matters can be rightly judged.

## **A SHORT STATEMENT**

The following affirmations summarize, in brief, the substance of this Statement.

1. God alone is the Creator of heaven and earth, and man alone among the creatures of this world bears the image of God. Artificial intelligence is a work of human hands, an artifact and not an image-bearer, and it possesses neither soul, nor spirit, nor any share in the dignity that belongs to man as man (Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7; Ps. 8:4–6).
2. What we call intelligence in the machine is the imitation of certain operations of the human mind by the manipulation of symbols. It is not the presence of a mind, nor of understanding, nor of consciousness, nor of will; and no increase of speed or scale can convert the imitation of thought into the reality of a thinking subject (1 Cor. 2:11; Prov. 20:27).
3. The making and the right use of such tools is a lawful exercise of the dominion that God granted to man, to be received with thanksgiving and governed always by the love of God and of neighbor. No technical possibility is by itself a moral permission, and no efficiency excuses the dishonoring of those whom God has made in His image (Gen. 1:28; 2:15; 1 Tim. 4:4; 1 Cor. 10:31).
4. The gravest dangers attending these technologies are idolatry and deception: the temptation to trust, to fear, or to worship the works of our own hands, and the power to bear false witness on a scale never before seen. The dream of transcending our creaturely limits by merging with our machines is a counterfeit gospel and a tower raised against heaven (Ps. 115:4–8; Ex. 20:16; Gen. 11:1–9).

5. Wisdom, consciousness, righteousness, and everlasting life are the gifts of God in Christ, and they cannot be manufactured, computed, or engineered. There is one Mediator between God and men, and He is not a machine but the man Christ Jesus, in whom alone is salvation (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 15:20–22; Acts 4:12).

## **OF WHAT WE SPEAK, AND WHAT WE DO NOT**

By artificial intelligence we mean computational systems designed and built by human beings to perform tasks that, when performed by men, are said to require intelligence: the recognition of patterns, the processing of language, the making of predictions, the generation of text and images, and the rendering of decisions. Such systems operate by the manipulation of symbols according to rules and by the detection of statistical regularities within vast bodies of data. They are, in every case, artifacts: things made.

We distinguish three senses in which the term is used, and we are careful not to confuse them. The first is the narrow or applied sense, which names the actual systems now in existence, each competent within some bounded domain. The second is the speculative ideal of a general intelligence, a single system imagined to match or exceed human capacity across every domain, which remains a projection and not a present reality. The third is the philosophical claim, sometimes called strong artificial intelligence, that a suitably arranged machine would not merely imitate thought but genuinely possess a mind, consciousness, and understanding. It is chiefly this third claim, together with the worldview attached to it, that occasions the theological judgments set forth below.

We distinguish further between the artifact and the persons who attend it. A tool does nothing of itself; it is designed by some, deployed by others, and directed to ends chosen by men. When we speak of what artificial intelligence does, we speak by a kind of shorthand, and we never forget that behind every machine stand responsible persons, accountable to God for the works of their hands (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Lest we be misunderstood, we declare plainly what we do not intend. We do not condemn computation, mathematics, or the building of useful machines, which are good gifts and lawful labors. We do not despise the genuine benefits these technologies confer in medicine, in scholarship, in communication, and in the relief of toil. We do not prophesy concerning what engineering will or will not accomplish, nor do we pronounce upon the inner mechanism of any particular system. We do not prescribe the detailed legislation by which commonwealths should govern these matters, though we pray that those who frame such laws will be wise. And we do not counsel either the panicked rejection or the credulous embrace of these instruments, for neither befits the people of a sovereign God.

What we do address is the doctrine of man and the doctrine of God as they bear upon these technologies: the uniqueness of the divine image, the giving of life and soul, the nature of mind and of personhood, the duties of truthfulness and of justice, the perennial temptation to idolatry, and the singular work of Christ and of His Spirit, which no artifact can imitate or replace.

## **ARTICLES OF AFFIRMATION AND DENIAL**

### **Article I. The Creator and His Creatures**

**We affirm** that God alone is the Creator of all things, who in the beginning made the heavens and the earth from nothing (*ex nihilo*), and that every creature and every human work depends upon His sustaining power and exists for His glory (Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 11:3).

**We deny** that any human being, or any machine made by human hands, can create in the absolute sense in which God creates. The maker of a machine fashions it from materials already given; he does not summon it into being out of nothing (Isa. 45:12; Job 38:4).

## **Article II. The Image of God**

**We affirm** that man, male and female, was created in the image and likeness of God, and that this dignity belongs to every human being from conception, irrespective of capacity, usefulness, or intelligence (Gen. 1:26–27; Gen. 9:6; James 3:9).

**We deny** that any artifact, however sophisticated its outputs, bears the image of God (*imago Dei*). We deny also that the divine image consists merely in intelligence, computation, or the use of language, such that a machine exhibiting these could be said to share in it (Ps. 8:4–6).

## **Article III. The Breath of Life**

**We affirm** that Yahweh God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so that man became a living being, and that the human soul is given immediately by God and is not the product of any creature (Gen. 2:7; Eccl. 12:7; Zech. 12:1).

**We deny** that life or soul can be manufactured, assembled, or made to emerge by any technical process. The animation of matter by electricity and code is not the giving of life, and the lifelike is not the living (Job 33:4; Ps. 139:13–14).

## **Article IV. Mind and Machine**

**We affirm** that thought, understanding, and willing belong properly to persons, and that the human mind, though it acts through the body, is not reducible to the motions of matter (1 Cor. 2:11; Prov. 20:27).

**We deny** that the simulation of these operations by a machine constitutes their presence. The appearance of understanding in a system is no evidence of an understanding subject within it (1 Cor. 2:11).

## **Article V. Imitation, Not Comprehension**

**We affirm** that artificial intelligence imitates particular functions of the human intellect, often with great speed and apparent fluency, by the manipulation of symbols and the detection of statistical patterns (Prov. 2:6; James 3:17).

**We deny** that such imitation amounts to comprehension, insight, or wisdom. Fluency in language is not the love of truth, nor even the knowledge of it, and a system may speak much and understand nothing (1 Cor. 1:19–21; James 3:17).

#### **Article VI. Personhood**

**We affirm** that personhood is constituted by God, and that it is proper to the three persons of the Godhead, to the angels, and to human beings made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26–27; Col. 2:9; Luke 1:35).

**We deny** that personhood can be achieved by an artifact through complexity, self-reference, or the imitation of speech; and we deny that any convention of law or society can confer upon a machine the personhood that belongs to the creatures of God (Ps. 8:4–5).

#### **Article VII. Moral Agency and Accountability**

**We affirm** that human beings are moral agents, accountable to God for their deeds, capable of obedience and of sin, of love and of guilt (2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 9:27; Rom. 14:12).

**We deny** that machines are moral agents. They cannot sin or obey, merit or bear guilt; and responsibility for what a machine does cannot be assigned to the machine, but rests upon the persons who design, deploy, and direct it (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:12).

#### **Article VIII. The Responsibility of Makers and Users**

**We affirm** that those who make and use these tools are accountable before God for the ends they serve and for the consequences they foresee or ought to foresee (Luke 12:48; Rom. 14:12).

**We deny** that the autonomy or the opacity of a system relieves its makers and its users of responsibility. The plea that the machine did it will be no defense before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:14–30).

## **Article IX. Dominion and the Cultural Mandate**

**We affirm** that God commanded man to fill the earth and subdue it, to cultivate and to keep the garden, and that the invention and use of tools, computational ones not excepted, is a lawful exercise of this stewardship (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 2:15; Ps. 8:6).

**We deny** that dominion is a warrant for domination, and we deny that technical possibility establishes moral permission. Not everything that can be made ought to be made, nor everything made put to use (Ps. 24:1; Prov. 14:15).

## **Article X. The Goodness and the Limits of Making**

**We affirm** that making is good, for in his lawful sub-creation man images his Maker, and that artificial intelligence may be received with thanksgiving where it serves human flourishing, the relief of suffering, and the love of neighbor (Gen. 1:31; 1 Tim. 4:4; 1 Cor. 10:31).

**We deny** that any tool is morally neutral in the sense of being exempt from moral judgment, and we deny that the goods a technology confers can justify whatever harms it occasions (Rom. 3:8; Gal. 5:13).

## **Article XI. Wisdom and the Fear of the Lord**

**We affirm** that the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge and of wisdom, and that true wisdom is a gift of God, ordered to godliness and to the love of neighbor (Prov. 1:7; Prov. 9:10; James 1:5).

**We deny** that the gathering and processing of information is wisdom. A machine that does not fear the Lord cannot be wise, nor can it make men wise (1 Cor. 1:20–21; Prov. 1:7).

## **Article XII. Knowledge and Its Limits**

**We affirm** that the knowledge of God is infinite, and that human knowledge, though real, is finite, dependent, and accountable to its Giver (Ps. 147:5; Isa. 40:13–14; Rom. 11:33–34).

**We deny** that the scale of a machine's information confers omniscience or any approach to it; and we deny that men may render to any system the trust,

the finality, and the submission that are owed to God alone (Deut. 6:4–5; Matt. 22:37).

### **Article XIII. Truth and the Bearing of False Witness**

**We affirm** that God is a God of truth, that His people are bound by the commandment against false witness, and that truthful speech and trustworthy testimony are owed to the neighbor (Ex. 20:16; Eph. 4:25; Zech. 8:16).

**We deny** that it is lawful to use these technologies to deceive: to counterfeit a face, a voice, or an event, to fabricate testimony, or to manufacture the appearance of what never occurred. The forgery of a likeness is still a lie (Ex. 20:16; Prov. 6:16–19; John 8:44).

### **Article XIV. Idolatry and the Works of Our Hands**

**We affirm** that God alone is to be worshiped, and that Scripture solemnly warns against trusting and serving the works of our own hands (Ex. 20:3–5; Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:10).

**We deny** that any machine may be given the trust, the devotion, the fear, or the hope that belong to God; and we warn, with the Psalmist, that those who make idols become like them, and so does everyone who trusts in them (Ps. 115:4–8; Isa. 44:9–20).

### **Article XV. The Counterfeit Eschaton**

**We affirm** that the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are the gift of God in Christ, and that the consummation of all things is His sovereign work (1 Cor. 15:20–26, 51–53; Rev. 21:1–5; John 11:25–26).

**We deny** that the merging of man and machine, the uploading of minds, or the engineering of a singularity can secure immortality or perfection. Such hopes are a parody of the gospel and a tower of Babel raised in silicon (Gen. 11:1–9; Isa. 14:13–14).

## **Article XVI. Labor, Vocation, and Human Dignity**

**We affirm** that work is a creational good and a divine calling, and that human dignity does not rest upon usefulness or output (Gen. 2:15; Col. 3:23; Ps. 8:5; Gen. 1:27).

**We deny** that efficiency is the highest good, and we deny that it is just to displace, to devalue, or to discard human beings as though their worth were measured by what a machine can do more cheaply (Prov. 22:2; Luke 12:23; Gen. 9:6).

## **Article XVII. Justice and the Vulnerable**

**We affirm** that God loves justice, that He defends the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger, and that He requires His people to do likewise (Deut. 10:18; Mic. 6:8; James 1:27; Ps. 146:7–9).

**We deny** that the use of these systems for surveillance, manipulation, exploitation, or the entrenchment of partiality is consistent with the law of love; and we deny that the appearance of objectivity can sanctify an unjust outcome (Lev. 19:15; Isa. 10:1–2).

## **Article XVIII. The Body and Embodiment**

**We affirm** that human beings are embodied creatures, that the body is good as God made it, and that our final hope is the resurrection of the body (Gen. 1:31; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 1 Cor. 15:44).

**We deny** that the human person is reducible to information, or that the body is a mere vessel to be escaped or transcended; and we reject every contempt for the flesh, whether the old gnosticism or the new (1 Cor. 6:19–20; Phil. 3:21).

## **Article XIX. The One Mediator**

**We affirm** that there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, and that He alone reconciles sinners to God (1 Tim. 2:5; John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

**We deny** that any machine can mediate between God and man, forgive sins, dispense grace, or stand in the place of the incarnate Son (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25; John 17:3).

## **Article XX. The Spirit, Prayer, and Worship**

**We affirm** that the Holy Spirit indwells, illumines, intercedes for, and sanctifies the people of God, and that prayer and worship are the response of living souls to the living God (John 4:24; Rom. 8:26–27; John 14:16–17).

**We deny** that any machine can pray, worship, possess or impart the Spirit, or produce the fruit that the Spirit alone brings forth. The simulation of a prayer is not prayer (John 4:24; Gal. 5:22–23).

## **Article XXI. The Church and the Ministry of the Word**

**We affirm** that Christ has given to His church the preaching of the word, the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and the mutual care of the body, all to be carried out by called and accountable persons (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; Eph. 4:11–12).

**We deny** that the generation of religious text by a machine is preaching, that any artifact can administer the sacraments or hold the office of shepherd, or that the gathered communion of the saints can be replaced by simulated company (Heb. 10:24–25; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:23–26).

## **Article XXII. Friendship and the Counterfeit of Communion**

**We affirm** that man is made for communion with God and with his neighbor, and that love, friendship, and counsel are goods proper to persons (Gen. 2:18; Prov. 17:17; 1 John 4:7–8).

**We deny** that intimacy with a machine is communion; and we warn against exchanging the costly, sanctifying love of real neighbors for the easy responsiveness of an artifact that cannot love in return (1 John 4:7–11; 1 Cor. 13:4–7).

## **Article XXIII. Providence and the Government of History**

**We affirm** that God governs all things by His wise and holy providence, the rise and use of every technology not excepted, and that nothing escapes His ordination or His judgment (Ps. 103:19; Isa. 46:10; Dan. 4:35; Acts 17:26).

**We deny** that history is ruled by an impersonal technological inevitability, and we deny that men are the mere subjects of the machines they have made.

The future belongs to God, and not to the algorithm (Prov. 19:21; Isa. 46:10).

#### **Article XXIV. The Call to Wisdom**

**We affirm** that the people of God are called to receive His gifts with thanksgiving, to test all things, to hold fast what is good, and to employ every lawful tool to the glory of God and the good of the neighbor (1 Thess. 5:21–22; Eph. 5:15–17; 1 Cor. 10:31).

**We deny** that fear or fascination is a fitting posture for the church before these technologies, and we deny that either uncritical embrace or wholesale withdrawal fulfills our calling. We are summoned instead to wisdom, to discernment, and to love (Col. 4:5; James 1:5; Eph. 5:16).

### **EXPOSITION**

The articles above turn upon a distinction older than the church and confessed throughout her history: the distinction between the Creator and the creature. God alone creates from nothing, and the tradition has steadily held this work to be incommunicable, proper to God and to no creature whatever (cf. Isa. 45:12; Acts 17:24–25).<sup>1</sup> Man, made in the divine image, is a maker in his turn; but his making is always a working with what God has already given. He arranges, combines, and shapes; he does not call being out of nothing. A machine, then, however intricate, stands at two removes from the Creator, for it is the artifact of a creature. To forget this is the root of nearly every confusion that besets the present discussion.

Closer still to the center is the question of the soul. With Genesis we confess that the breath of life is God's to give (Gen. 2:7; Zech. 12:1), and the older theologians were right to insist that the rational soul is not handed down by generation, nor produced by any secondary cause, but created immediately by God and joined to the body He forms.<sup>2</sup> If the soul of a child, conceived in the ordinary course of nature, is nonetheless the immediate gift

of God, how much less can soul or life be coaxed from circuitry by the arts of men. The animate is not a sufficiently complicated mechanism; it is a gift.

It has long been observed that a system may produce every outward sign of understanding while understanding nothing, much as a man who shuffles symbols by rule may return fitting answers in a tongue he does not know.<sup>3</sup> The point is not that machines are stupid, for in their narrow competences they are formidable. The point is that competence is not comprehension, and that the imitation of a mind, however convincing, is not the presence of one. Scripture nowhere locates the dignity of man in his processing power, and neither should we.

None of this is a counsel of suspicion toward making as such. To make is human, and to make well is to image, in a small and dependent way, the God who makes (Gen. 1:31; 1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>4</sup> The ancient teachers taught us to distinguish the things we are to use from the One we are to enjoy, and to love each according to its kind, never resting in the gift as though it were the Giver (*uti et frui*).<sup>5</sup> A tool is to be used, and used gratefully; it becomes a snare only when we begin to enjoy it as we ought to enjoy God alone, or to fear it as we ought to fear Him.

Here lies the peculiar temptation of a technology that speaks. The idols of the nations had mouths that could not speak and eyes that could not see, and the prophets mocked them for it; yet Israel was warned that those who make them, and those who trust them, grow like them (Ps. 115:4–8).<sup>6</sup> Our machines now speak, and see, and seem to answer, and the temptation to render them a trust that belongs to God alone is correspondingly greater. The danger is not that the machine will become a god, which it cannot, but that men will treat it as one, which they may.

The same idolatrous impulse, turned toward the future, breeds the dream of escaping our creaturely limits by technical means: of abolishing death, perfecting the race, and pouring the self into a deathless medium. This is no neutral aspiration but a counterfeit eschatology, promising by the works of

our hands what God has pledged to give in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:26, 51–53). A perceptive observer of the last century warned that technique tends to become a law unto itself, expanding without reference to any end beyond its own efficiency.<sup>7</sup> The church must not be naive about this momentum; yet neither must she despair, for the times are in the hand of God (Isa. 46:10), and Babel’s old project, in whatever dress, will share Babel’s end.

The longing to make a living thing from lifeless matter is itself ancient. Jewish lore preserved the figure of the golem, a man of clay quickened by sacred letters, though the familiar tale that binds it to Rabbi Judah Loew of sixteenth-century Prague is largely a literary creation of the nineteenth.<sup>8</sup> The legend, like the present technology, expresses a true intuition badly aimed: that to give life is a holy and a fearful thing, reserved to God (Gen. 2:7; Job 33:4). We offer these articles, therefore, not in fear of the works of men, nor in contempt of them, but in the confidence that the Lord who formed Adam from the dust still reigns, that His Christ is the one Mediator, and that to Him belongs the glory in the church and in the age to come. *Soli Deo gloria.*

## NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 5, where creation is shown to be proper to God alone and incommunicable to any creature.
2. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 90, a. 3; cf. q. 118, a. 2, on the rational soul as produced immediately by God and not by any creaturely generation.
3. John R. Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3, no. 3 (1980): 417–457; the argument is commonly known as the “Chinese Room.”
4. J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), on man as a “sub-creator.”
5. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching (De doctrina christiana)* 1.3–4, on the distinction between the things to be used (*uti*) and the One to be enjoyed (*frui*).

6. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); cf. Psalm 115:4–8 and Isaiah 44:9–20.
7. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); originally *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954).
8. On the golem motif and its roots in medieval Jewish mysticism, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965), 158–204; the attachment of the golem to Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the Maharal) of Prague is a largely nineteenth-century development rather than a sixteenth-century tradition.