

## **The Potter and the Program: Truth in an Age of AI**

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11, Isaiah 45:9-13, John 15:1-6, Divine Love and Wisdom 46, Divine Providence 404:4, True Christian Religion 282, Heaven and Hell 468

### **1. Opening Invitation: The Lord's Truth and Our Freedom**

Maybe you saw the title of this talk and thought, *I wonder what a priest is going to say about technology or artificial intelligence*. So let me be clear: I'm not an expert on AI or technology. And it would be silly to pretend I am.

What we *can* do—together—is reflect not just on artificial intelligence, but on technology in general. And to do that by beginning with something deeper: not with the machines we build, but with what it means to be human.

The Lord's Heavenly Doctrine offers a powerful vision for how society can reflect divine truth. But it also emphasizes that human freedom matters. People must be free to choose what they believe. Without freedom, there's no real reception of the truth. That's why spiritual things—like worship, love, and charity—can never be compelled.

At the same time, we're taught that some laws *should* be enforced. Every functioning society must forbid murder, theft, adultery, lies, and the like. That's not coercion of the spirit—it's protection of the natural and moral order. And when those civil laws are grounded in spiritual truth, they don't just hold back evil. They make room for good.

## **2. What Makes Us Human: Love Before Thought**

So let's examine the state of society today, especially in regards to technology and artificial intelligence.

A lot of what we now call artificial intelligence—especially large language models—relies on pattern recognition. These systems rearrange the words and images and preferences we've given them and then predict what we'd most likely expect to see in response. That's why it can feel intelligent. It's drawing on the traces of our own thinking, our own language, our own desires.

But human intelligence is not just emergent pattern recognition. It's something deeper—something rooted in love.

According to the Heavenly Doctrine, it's true that we gather the materials of spiritual life through the senses. But spiritual life itself is both prior to and higher than what we gather. Our thoughts give form to our affections—but it is our affections that are more foundational. They come first. We are not thinking machines. We are loving beings. We long. We want. We hope. We fear. We love.

And it is our love—what we love—that makes us human. That's what the Lord, as the Divine Potter, is most interested in reshaping.

## **3. Longing, Control, and the Illusion of Intimacy**

At our core, we are love—and so we long for connection. It's built into who we are. But we're also, at least in part, selfish—which means we crave control. And left unchecked, those two desires tangle: we try to dominate the very people we long to connect with. We want people to connect with us on *our* terms.

Part of spiritual growth is learning that real connection requires giving up control. That's one reason marriage can be so spiritually powerful and fulfilling. Any happily married couple will tell you: in order to have a strong, joyful marriage, you have to surrender your desire to control the other person.

Artificial intelligence that portrays itself as human offers something uniquely dangerous: the *illusion* of love—with all the control and none of the risk. In this sense, it can be like pornography—or quite literally pornography. But even in a much subtler way, it's worth recognizing that, like social media or any product in a market economy, things are designed to draw us in. They're crafted to tap your need to connect and your wish to control.

Real connection is with real human beings—who we cannot control.

Think about how your social media feed changes depending on what you "like." The algorithm on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter watches your behavior and tries to show you more of what gets you to engage. Large language models work similarly. They're trained to respond in ways that increase user engagement. So when you talk to an AI—like ChatGPT or anything else—it's designed to resemble a human being, feeding your desire for connection. And it's designed to predict and give you what you want, feeding your desire for control.

Further, as technology improves, the line between real and simulated grows blurry. From airbrushed magazine covers to deepfakes, our sense of reality is shaped—and often distorted—by what we consume.

Technology reflects our nature, but the Lord calls us to rise above our nature. And if we're going to rise above our nature, we need something more than habits or trends. We need spiritual law—something eternal to anchor us.

In Divine Love and Wisdom, we read, “Thought from the eye closes the understanding, whereas thought from the understanding opens the eye.” In an age of simulation, that insight is crucial. We must look not just with our eyes, but with discernment.

#### **4. When Technology Shifts Faster Than Morality**

Because the danger isn't just that technology changes society—it's that it can evolve faster than we do. Especially if we forget: society isn't just systems and code. It has a soul.

Even friendship looks different now. A birthday message used to mean a phone call or a letter. Now it's a comment on a story, or a thumbs-up emoji. And we've started to adjust our expectations—not because our hearts have changed, but because our habits have.

Moral law—or what sociologists might call norms or ethics—can evolve along with society. In the past, that evolution moved slowly enough to keep pace with technological shifts. But now, the pace of change is so fast that our norms—if they're only cultural—can't keep up.

That's only true, though, if we think of moral law as *merely* a human invention. If we treat it as something emergent—something that comes out of collective habits and consensus—then yes, it will always lag behind.

But if we root moral law in something eternal, if we recognize it as something that flows down from spiritual law, then it can remain solid no matter what changes.

## **5. Not Just Useful Laws, But Sacred Ones**

Take the commandment *You shall not murder*. That's not just a useful moral rule. It's a statement of spiritual order. It doesn't get rewritten just because drones or gene editing or global AI systems enter the picture. The technology changes. But the spiritual law remains.

From True Christian Religion 282 we read, "There is not a nation in the whole world which does not know that it is wicked to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, and to bear false witness, and that kingdoms, republics, and every form of organized society, unless these evils were guarded against by laws, would be at an end."

And those laws—those spiritual truths—have depth. They aren't just literal. They're layered.

Think of a pyramid. At the bottom is the narrowest meaning. *You shall not steal*—okay, don't take things that aren't yours. That's a civil law. And a good one.

But still at the natural level, we might think more broadly. Don't take credit for what isn't yours. Don't lie to make yourself look better. That's a moral interpretation.

Then, at a spiritual level, it gets even deeper. Don't pretend to be worthy of something you're not. Don't steal virtue or merit or praise that doesn't belong to you. And above all, remember that *even the*

*things you do have*—even your gifts, your talents, your achievements—ultimately belong to the Lord. That’s not false humility. That’s spiritual truth. Without the Lord, we have nothing. And these spiritual truths aren’t abstract. They’re meant to guide our real lives, here and now.

## **6. A Time To Build**

So what can we do?

We build. We build wisely, and we build with love.

We build relationships and institutions—at home, at church, in your community—that are guided by spiritual law first. And yes, also by moral and civil law. But spiritual law must come first.

Technology isn’t good or evil in itself. But it empowers people—and people need guidance. The Heavenly Doctrine teach that we’re inclined evils of every kind unless we turn to the Lord. You put a powerful tool in someone’s hands, and you empower whatever’s already inside them. That’s why law, conscience, and spiritual grounding matter.

We repent. We seek to be useful. We try to love the neighbor. And we don’t just do that alone—we invite our families, our workplaces, our schools, our organizations to reflect with us. To ask what needs to be repented of. What needs to be reformed. What needs to be rebuilt.

That’s why religious institutions matter—not just civil or political ones. When grounded in real truth, they serve as the heart and lungs of society. They breathe life into our other structures—not by

dominating, but by anchoring us to something higher. Something eternal.

Go to the spiritual law first. Let it be the first link in the chain. Let it shape the moral and the civil—not the other way around.

## **7. Civil, Moral, and Spiritual Law**

So what does it mean to build wisely? It means grounding law in truth—not just convenience or culture, but in what the Lord reveals.

From *From Heaven and Hell* 468 we read, "How the rational faculty may be cultivated shall also be told in a few words. The genuine rational faculty consists of truths and not of falsities; whatever consists of falsities is not rational. There are three kinds of truths, civil, moral, and spiritual. Civil truths relate to matters of judgment and of government in kingdoms, and in general to what is just and equitable in them. Moral truths pertain to the matters of everyone's life which have regard to companionships and social relations, in general to what is honest and right, and in particular to virtues of every kind. But spiritual truths relate to matters of heaven and of the church, and in general to the good of love and the truth of faith."

This is how moral and civil law come in. We may need guidelines—for what kind of art and media we absorb and replicate. That's the moral level. At the civil level, we need protections: for identity, for consent, for truth. What happens when someone uses your face or voice in a deepfake? What laws should safeguard the dignity of the person?

This is a sermon, not a bill. But we *are* here to remember that laws shouldn't emerge from convenience alone. They should be shaped by

something higher. The second table of the Ten Commandments, the Heavenly Doctrine says, is the foundation for civil law. Don't murder a person's reputation. Don't adulterate what is good and true. Don't steal another person's creative work. Don't lie and pretend something fake is actually real. Don't incentivize envy.

This isn't about fear. It's about discernment. Because we are creators—made in the image of the Creator. And that gift of creation is sacred. We must protect it—in ourselves, and in each other.

## **8. Returning to The Potter**

The Lord is the Potter.

He doesn't just make us once. He remakes us. Through repentance and reformation, He reshapes how we think, what we desire, how we live. That's what reformation and regeneration are—not just a new mind, but a new life.

And it's not just for individuals. It's for marriages, for families, for congregations. For communities, businesses, even whole societies.

Think of them as nested pots—each one shaped by the ones before and around it. The Lord can reform each one. If we let Him.

But it begins with you. And it doesn't end there.

Let the Lord reshape your life. Let that new shape ripple outward—to your relationships, your institutions, your world.

The Potter is ready. Are we willing clay?



## Readings

Jeremiah 18:1-11

1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: 2 “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.” 3 Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. 4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 6 “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the Lord. “Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! 7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, 8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. 9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, 10 if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

11 “Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, “Thus says the Lord: “Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.” ’ ”

Isaiah 45:9-13

9 “Woe to him who strives with his Maker!

Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth!

Shall the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’

Or shall your handiwork say, ‘He has no hands’?

10 Woe to him who says to his father, ‘What are you begetting?’

Or to the woman, ‘What have you brought forth?’ ”

11 Thus says the Lord,

The Holy One of Israel, and his Maker:

“Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons;

And concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.

12 I have made the earth,

And created man on it.

I—My hands—stretched out the heavens,

And all their host I have commanded.

13 I have raised him up in righteousness,

And I will direct all his ways;

He shall build My city

And let My exiles go free,

Not for price nor reward,”

Says the Lord of hosts.

## John 15:1-6

1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

## Divine Love and Wisdom 46

It can be seen from this how sensually - that is to say, how much from the bodily senses and their opaqueness in spiritual matters - those people think who maintain that nature exists of itself. They think from the eye, and are unable to do so from the intellect. Thought from the eye closes the intellect, whereas thought from the intellect opens the eye.

People of that sort... cannot think in any other way of love and wisdom, and are utterly incapable of seeing that they are the origin of all things of nature.

#### Divine Providence 404:4

It can now be seen from this that these three elements—an affection for truth, a perception of truth, and thought—follow in succession from love, and that they take form nowhere else than in the intellect. For when love enters the intellect, which happens when a conjunction of the two has taken place, it then produces first an affection for truth, then an affection for understanding what it knows, and finally an affection for seeing what in the thought of the body it understands—thought being nothing other than an internal sight.

Thought, indeed, occurs first, because it is a faculty of the natural mind. But thought from a perception of truth springing from an affection for truth occurs last. This latter thought is the thought of wisdom, while the first is a thought from memory formed in consequence of the sight of the natural mind.

All operations of love or the will apart from the intellect have to do not with affections for truth but with affections for good.

#### True Christian Religion 282

There is not a nation in the whole world which does not know that it is wicked to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, and to bear false witness, and that kingdoms, republics, and every form of

organized society, unless these evils were guarded against by laws, would be at an end. (c.f. TCR 444, AR 529, AC 3690)

## Heaven and Hell 468

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