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4 The Future of Bioethics

By Dr. Gifford A. Grobien

Christians believe and confess that our bodies will not be free of infirmity in this natural life, this side of the resurrection. If bioethics is viewed only as a discipline for making good decisions about health, we will eventually find ourselves in despair at our inability to overcome sickness, debilitation, and death. Along the way, we will find ourselves tempted to take actions regarding human health and life far beyond the faithful and good stewardship delegated to us by God.

7 The Future of Higher Education

By Dr. Russel P. Dawn

By recognizing Truth, recovering it in our institutions, and maintaining it by intergenerational resolve, higher education can be harnessed for cultural renewal. Through all the changes in higher education that occupy our daily concerns—demographic shifts, online modality, demand for new programs—it’s the transcendent Truth that must define our future.

10 The Future of Parish Ministry

By Rev. Sean R. Kilgo

Many pastors in the last two years have found themselves doing things they never thought they’d have to do. But is this possibly all a distraction from what the future of parish ministry actually has in store for us? Perhaps, in order to get a picture of what the future of parish ministry will look like, we need to first turn our gaze backward to the Scriptures, and see what our Lord has instituted for the work of the ministry.

For the Life of the World

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Beginning the C

While the pace can be dizzying and the questions are challenging, we would do well to remember that there truly is nothing new under the sun. The Church has for generations recognized that cultural and technological changes have profound theological implications and that God's Word still applies as much today as ever. By teaching that Word in its full clarity we can begin to frame the discussion for the changes coming over the next several years.



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In 1966, NBC aired the first episode of Star Trek. Viewers were thrilled by a world of advanced technology, with handheld computers, massive screens, instant communication with anyone (regardless of where they were), computer-based translation, and even computers that you could talk to as though they were human. In the last 65 years, the generation of engineers and scientists who grew up watching Kirk and Spock explore the galaxy have brought many of their futuristic dreams into reality. We live in a world of smart phones, tablet PCs, smart assistants, and other technology of which the Star Trek writers could not have dreamed, and the rate of change is accelerating. As Dr. Robert Weisse described it, “The gap between science fiction and science fact is shrinking.”

By the time this article has been edited, printed, and mailed (or emailed) to you, it will already be out of date. Change, particularly in technology, is relentless. It's overwhelming to try to keep up with what we *can* do, much less to have time to consider what we *should* do. Alvin Toffler described the feeling as “future shock,” or “too much

change in too short a period of time.” By the time a piece of technology has been invented and brought to market, there's no time for the conversation about morality, ethics, and theology. The time for those conversations is when technology is being developed, and with the pace of advancement increasing, the questions need to be asked today about

Conversation

William S. C. Johnson

the technologies of tomorrow.

I won't pretend to have all the answers. The simple questions are simple, and where the Bible directly addresses an issue, there's not much debate. But many of the questions here are not that simple, and the answers will likely not be as neat and simple as we'd like, but the time for the conversation to begin is now.

Upgrading the Body

In 1948, Norbert Wiener published *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* and theorized a world in which human bodies would be repaired and augmented by robotic components. While one can argue just where the threshold is for a "true" cybernetic, it's clear we've crossed (or very shortly will cross) the line from fiction to reality. Prosthetic researchers today are already able to provide patients with limbs that can be directly controlled just like their original biological limbs. Prototypes are even available that transmit return signals to the brain allowing for the senses of touch to be restored as well.

Theologically this seems simple and is, at least at first. If a brother or sister has lost some part of their body and we're able to restore what was broken, then we act to heal. But what happens when the prosthetic outperforms the flesh and blood? Is it moral for a person to replace an otherwise healthy portion of their body with a cybernetic to gain strength, speed, or agility? These questions are years away, but it's already time for the Church to begin preparing its members by teaching clearly about the fearfully, wonderfully made bodies God has given us and providing the context for the inevitable debate.

A New Way to Be Human?

No trope is more prevalent in science fiction than the "thinking" computer/robot/android. From Asimov's *I, Robot* to Iron Man's Jarvis, the idea of computers that can think for themselves is commonplace in fiction, and with it come the questions about what it means to be human and whether sufficiently advanced artificial intelligence (AI) are themselves "alive." We're a ways away from that conversation outside of the movie screen, but recent years have brought this fiction much closer to reality as AI equals and surpasses human minds at a variety of tasks.

In the transportation world, we are seeing rapid research, development, and even active deployment of artificially intelligent self-driving vehicles. As the prices come down and these technologies become more cost effective, the transportation industry is poised for massive disruption, with careers like drivers, pilots, and sailors looking more and more like candidates for replacement by AI.

In similar fashion, creative people such as writers and even songwriters are being challenged by ever more complex machine learning networks. As the network consumes writing samples from a particular author or genre, it slowly improves its efforts to emulate the writing style in its own "original" material. While the efforts are largely lackluster at this point, they're readable, largely capture the tone of the source material, and are improving substantially as time goes on. There are complaints that the content generated by AI lacks any real creativity or insight, but that same criticism has been leveled at many successful human artists as well.

Several companies are already working on (and patenting) AI algorithms

that can be primed with the content of a person's life (social media posts, email, writing, etc.) and can emulate that person after they have died. While it's a far cry from Kurzweil's *Singularity* (where full human beings are uploaded to computers to "live" forever), it does have the potential to change our experience of the death of a loved one. It will be possible, in the coming decades, to escape the grieving process by embracing the simulation of a loved one. As a Church, we need to be very clear in our teaching about life, death, and what it means to be alive and fully human. Clarity in our teachings about humanity will also clarify the inevitable debate about whether truly advanced AIs can be considered human and deserve human rights.

Nothing New Under the Sun

While the pace can be dizzying and the questions are challenging, we would do well to remember that there truly is nothing new under the sun. The Church has for generations recognized that cultural and technological changes have profound theological implications and that God's Word still applies as much today as ever. By teaching that Word in its full clarity we can begin to frame the discussion for the changes coming over the next several years. As we pursue our God-given vocations as salt and light in a broken and dying world, we can help people to see and embrace their essential identity as humans created by a loving God and redeemed sinners for whom Christ died and rose again. 🏠

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