



— DISCIPLESHIP BY DESIGN

Making *real* disciples in an *artificial* age.

A practical framework to help churches and ministry leaders use AI with discernment — on purpose, not by default — without losing the mission of disciple-making.

FREE RESOURCE

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Making Real Disciples in an Artificial Age

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INTRODUCTION

What Are We Trying to Make?

What relationship does technology have with theology?

Imagine a pile of wood. Now imagine having two pieces of state-of-the-art technology at your disposal: a hammer and some nails. What could you make with this technology? Furniture? A house? A raised garden bed? A new life center?

What about an ark? Or a cross? Those are both theologically significant symbols — products of human effort providentially orchestrated by God — that demonstrate something about the theology of the people who built them.

The point is this: **what we make is never disconnected from what we value.**

We are living in a moment where the church has access to tools that previous generations could hardly imagine. We have digital platforms. We have livestreams. We have smartphones. We have social media. And now we have artificial intelligence that can write, summarize, translate, teach, generate, recommend, and respond.

But before we ask, “What can this technology do?” the church has to ask a deeper question: **“What are we trying to make?”**

Because if we are not careful, we may use powerful tools to build something impressive but not faithful. We may produce more content without producing deeper disciples. We may increase our reach without increasing maturity. We may become more efficient while becoming less intentional.

So this begs the question for every ministry: what kind of disciples are we making?

Not just what kind of programs are we running. Not just what kind of content are we producing. Not just what kind of technology are we using. But *what kind of people are being formed through our ministries?*

Are we making disciples who know how to consume religious content, or disciples who know how to obey Jesus? Are we making disciples who are impressed by tools, or

disciples who are being transformed by truth? Are we making disciples who are entertained for a moment, or disciples who are equipped for the work of ministry? (Ephesians 4:12)

That is why this conversation matters. Technology is not just about what we can do faster. It is about what we are forming more faithfully.

AI is designed to replicate human intelligence in machines — but those machines won't have to stand before God and answer for their work. At the same time, we need not disregard or dismiss the value this technology can bring to our ministries in helping us faithfully fulfill the Great Commission.

Now is the time for us to **Recognize** the Moment, **Recover** the Mission, **Realize** the Challenge, and **Respond** with Discernment.

PART ONE · THE FRAMEWORK

Recognize the Moment

Let's start by understanding this thing we call AI. Artificial intelligence is the attempt to recreate human-like intelligence in machines that can process and act, similar to how a human would. AI has been around at least since the 1950s, and originally it was a novel idea that would enable computers to do things like play chess or compute complex formulas.

But in the present moment, it has grown into something much more than that. It can create flyers, recipes, and — if you allow it — sermons. We now have artificial music artists: not only are the songs composed using AI, the voices that sing them are artificial too. We live in a very artificial moment. It can feel like AI is about to take over and ruin our world.

But that is not so. To succumb to that kind of thinking is to negate two very important theological truths. First, **God is sovereign** (Colossians 1:16–17). There is nothing under the sun that God does not have control over. He's got the whole world in His hands. Second, **this God has given us agency** — the ability to choose.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

GALATIANS 5:13, ESV

However, we also recognize that, since the fall, humanity has been bent toward using that agency in destructive ways. The threat is not technology itself; it is how we decide to use it. We should neither assume that technology is innocent, nor assume that technology in and of itself is the devil. When radio first entered American homes, some church leaders denounced it as a corrupting force — yet within a generation it was carrying the gospel farther than any preacher could travel.

Like anything else we use in our ministries, we need a theologically critical lens to determine how we will use it. To do that, we need to understand its mission and its values.

The Mission of AI

Based on what it was designed to do, the mission of AI is to replicate — and in some instances replace — human effort for tasks that require intelligence. The mission is to speed up, automate, and reduce human effort.

The Values of AI

Artificial intelligence is not unbiased. Just like us, it has a set of values based on what it was created to accomplish: **speed, efficiency, scalability, and output.**

Those values are meaningful because they help us discern how to use the tool — based on where its mission and values intersect with our mission and values.

The real question is whether we understand the mission and values of our ministries.

PART ONE · THE FRAMEWORK

Recover the Mission

Every ministry that operates in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ has been given a mandate to reproduce Christlikeness within humanity. Note the contrast: whereas technologists and engineers have attempted to reproduce *humanity within machines*, Christians have a mandate to reproduce *godliness in humanity*.

That is the definition of ministry: **the act of reproducing Christlikeness in humanity.**

AI is supposed to represent the thinking and reasoning of humans. But Christians are supposed to represent the thinking, loving, behaving, serving, and obeying of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what the Bible says, isn't it?

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

MATTHEW 28:19–20, ESV

The Mission of the Ministry

The mission of a disciple-making ministry is to evangelize, teach, and shape humans who represent the Christ of the Bible. Since that is our mission, we must hold a set of values that reflect and support that God-given mandate.

The Values of Ministry

Christian education is a necessary — perhaps central — part of making disciples. It starts with the word of God. There must first be belief in the word of God; there must be teaching of the word of God; obedience to the word of God; and finally, one is not truly a disciple unless there is transformation through all of the above.

THE VALUES OF AI	THE VALUES OF MINISTRY
Speed	Faith
Efficiency	Doctrine
Scalability	Teaching
Output	Obedience
	Transformation

Neither list is wrong. But they are not the same list. So the question becomes: **how do we leverage artificial intelligence to fulfill our mission in a way that aligns with our values?**

Before we answer that question, we need to recognize the risks involved — now that we are aligned on what our mission is and what our values are as a disciple-making ministry.

Realize the Challenge: Four Questions

As we consider how to use these tools in a way consistent with our mission, we need to know where the landmines are. We need to be able to discern where the benefits are and where the drawbacks might lie. In his book *From the Garden to the City*, John Dyer gives us what he calls a “technology tetrad” for evaluating how we should use technology. Here are four questions we need to ask ourselves.

1. Amplify

How might AI amplify our efforts?

How can technology extend or improve something we already do for greater effectiveness? Think about a microphone and how it helps our voices be heard, or a microscope and how it helps us see beyond our natural limitations. How can AI supplement our gifts and talents for greater effectiveness in disciple-making?

2. Amputate

How might AI amputate our mission?

What values or gifts could be lost if we relied on AI too much? Think again about the microphone — over time we lose some ability to project naturally. Or consider the calculator: many of us can no longer do math in our heads or on paper because of our reliance on it.

If we tie this back to our values, one risk stands out above the rest: **making disciples who are informed but not transformed**. While tools like AI give us instant access to information and let us produce content at record-breaking speeds, they do not equate to wisdom.

3. Retrieve

What might AI help us retrieve?

New technology can sometimes help us revive something valuable. Cell phones and social media, for instance, help us stay connected with people we care about across the country.

Think about the golden era of Vacation Bible School — the room decorations, the crafts, the lessons that left an impression for decades. (And yes, the hot dogs and Kool-Aid.) Most churches didn't lose that creativity because they stopped caring; they lost it because life became busier and more complex. We can't bring back the 90s. But AI can help us retrieve the creativity that made teaching more than a lecture — the memorable, formative experiences we no longer have the bandwidth to design from scratch.

4. Reverse

What might AI reverse?

Technology often flips into the opposite of what it promised. While cell phones and social media help us stay connected to people far away, they may cause us to be disconnected from the people right in front of us.

With AI, one of the most obvious risks is the loss of **authenticity, genuine conviction, and organic connection**. Some of the most powerful moments in ministry come when a seasoned leader speaks from lived conviction — words shaped by years of sowing with purpose. No machine can manufacture that. We must not forget that nothing can replace the labor of ministry.

A shovel helps us plant beautiful trees, but it also shapes the one who plants. There are callouses and muscles that cannot be acquired any other way.

As we use technology, we must think not only about what we can do with it, but also about what it might do to us. The question we must ask as we respond is this: **how do we amplify our disciple-making efforts without amputating disciples?**

PART ONE · THE FRAMEWORK

Respond with Discernment

That question gives us a faithful way forward.

If we are going to use AI wisely in ministry, we cannot begin with the tool. We have to begin with the mission. We have to ask whether the tool is helping us make the kind of disciples Jesus commanded us to make.

For some of us, AI may still feel intimidating. For others, it may feel exciting. Wherever you start from, the next two chapters give you a simple way to begin: five faithful ways to use AI in ministry — each with a prompt you can copy and use this week — and five ways to avoid using it.

As you read them, notice the common thread. In every faithful use, the human does the discerning, the studying, the praying, and the shepherding — AI amplifies the work. In every scenario to avoid, the tool has quietly replaced the worker — and started amputating the very things ministry exists to form.

We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.

JOHN DYER

PART TWO · THE PRACTICE

Five Faithful Ways to Use AI in Ministry

1. Amplify Preparation Without Replacing Study

Do your own study first. Then let AI help you turn what *you* found into tools for your class.

PROMPT TO USE

“Help me create 5 discussion questions from Matthew 28:19–20 for an adult Sunday School class. Keep the questions focused on obedience, disciple-making, and practical application.”

2. Clarify Teaching for Different Learners

The meaning stays fixed; the delivery flexes to reach every learner in the room.

PROMPT TO USE

“Explain the meaning of Ephesians 4:12 at a 7th-grade reading level for a church Bible study handout, without changing the meaning of the text.”

3. Extend Discipleship Beyond Sunday

The sermon shouldn’t end at the benediction. AI can help you build the bridge into Monday.

PROMPT TO USE

“Create a 5-day devotional follow-up from this sermon theme: ‘Making Real Disciples.’ Include one Scripture, one reflection question, and one action step for each day.”

4. Retrieve Creativity in Christian Education

Bring back teaching that is more than a lecture — without needing the bandwidth of a full-time creative team.

PROMPT TO USE

“Give me 3 creative activity ideas for teaching youth about spiritual growth using the image of planting seeds. Make the activities simple, low-cost, and biblically connected.”

5. Align Ministry Around Disciple-Making Outcomes

AI is surprisingly good at helping every ministry pull in the same direction toward one formation goal.

PROMPT TO USE

“Our church is focusing on prayer this month. Help me align Sunday School, Wednesday Bible Study, youth ministry, and weekly announcements around the goal of helping members develop a stronger prayer life.”

Five Ways to Avoid Using AI in Ministry

1. Do Not Replace Spiritual Discernment

SCENARIO TO AVOID

A teacher asks AI, “What does this passage mean?” and uses the answer as final — without studying the Scripture, checking doctrine, praying, or reviewing trusted sources.

2. Do Not Avoid the Labor of Ministry

SCENARIO TO AVOID

A pastor or teacher lets AI write the entire lesson because they are tired, then teaches it without wrestling with the text or letting the Word work on their own heart first.

3. Do Not Produce Content Without a Formation Goal

SCENARIO TO AVOID

A church uses AI to create daily devotionals, social posts, and study guides every week but never asks, “What kind of obedience, maturity, or transformation are we trying to cultivate?”

4. Do Not Weaken Authenticity, Conviction, and Relationship

SCENARIO TO AVOID

A ministry leader uses AI to write every encouragement message, prayer response, or pastoral note — until members receive polished words but not personal care.

5. Do Not Use AI Without Review and Accountability

SCENARIO TO AVOID

A church copies an AI-generated lesson into a handout without checking whether the theology is sound, the Scripture is handled rightly, or the application fits the people being taught.

PART THREE · THE PATH FORWARD

Stronger Disciples, Stronger Teachers

I want to close by telling you about a tool I've been building that seeks to honor the values of disciple-making ministry.

My background is in computer science, and I have been working in the software industry for fourteen years. As AI became increasingly relevant and companies began adopting it to solve business problems, I — as a pastor — wanted to figure out how it could be used to help solve a *ministry* problem.

Going back to the values of a disciple-making ministry, one of the clearest connections was in teaching. Have you ever heard that the best way to learn something is by teaching it?

If churches want Christians to learn more, they should turn more into teachers.

MICHAEL S. LAWSON

How many of our churches could benefit from having more volunteer teachers? I wanted this tool to help churches and ministries by amplifying the teaching and the teachers within our churches.

It does not replace the need for study. **It's not an information tool. It is a transformation tool.** It helps teachers structure and prepare to teach the biblical truths they uncover for themselves, intentionally, so they can ensure learning and transformation happen in the classroom.

Another purpose of this tool is to help teachers, over time, develop strong and creative teaching muscles. It gives them a framework for taking biblical truth and communicating it to students for transformation. My hope is not to make us dependent on a tool; I want to make us independent and intentional disciple-makers.

That is the heart of **Discipleship By Design**: to make stronger disciples and stronger teachers.

Bring this conversation to your church

Use the discussion guide on the next page to walk your leadership team, teaching staff, or ministry volunteers through this framework. One meeting, five questions, and a shared set of convictions about how your church will — and won't — use AI.

FOR YOUR TEAM

Discussion Guide for Leadership Teams

Set aside 60–90 minutes with your leadership team, elders, or teaching staff. Read the ebook in advance, then work through these questions together.

QUESTION 1 — The Mission

What kind of disciples is our ministry currently making? How would we know? What evidence would we look for beyond attendance and engagement?

QUESTION 2 — The Moment

Where are we already using AI or automation in our ministry — formally or informally? (Include individuals using it privately for lesson prep, graphics, or communication.)

QUESTION 3 — The Values

Which of AI's values — speed, efficiency, scalability, output — most tempts our ministry culture right now? Where have we already started measuring ministry by the tool's scoreboard?

QUESTION 4 — The Four Questions

Pick one ministry area (Sunday School, youth, communications). Walk it through the tetrad: What could AI amplify? What might it amputate? What could it help us retrieve? What might it reverse?

QUESTION 5 — The Practice

Which of the five faithful uses could we pilot in the next 30 days? Which of the five warnings is our biggest risk? Who will review AI-assisted content before it reaches our people, and how?

A commitment worth writing down

Before you close the meeting, finish this sentence together and write it somewhere your team will see it:

"We will use AI to amplify _____, and we will never use it to replace _____."

DISCIPLESHIP BY DESIGN

About the Author

Keith Shoulders is a pastor and software engineer with fourteen years in the software industry. He is the founder of Discipleship By Design, a tool and framework that helps churches make stronger disciples by making stronger teachers.

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