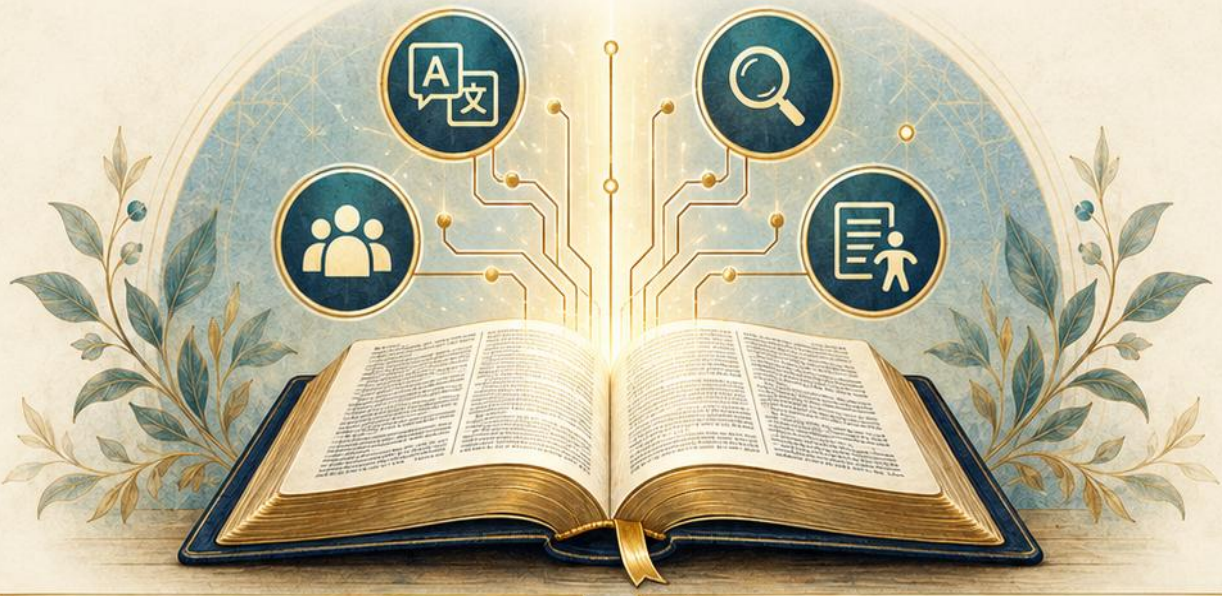
AI, The Bible, and Interpretation

Technology's Benefits and the Need for Theological Discernment



1 What AI Can Support

Compare translations • Find patterns • Organize research • Expand access

2 What Interpretation Requires

Literary and historical context • Canon and tradition • Prayerful discernment • Ethical response

3 Christian Guiding Principles

Truth • Humility • Justice • Neighbor-love • Human responsibility

4 A Responsible Reading Path

Read the passage → Ask focused questions → Verify sources → Discern in community → Act with care

AI can assist biblical study; it cannot replace human, communal, and theological judgment.

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how people search, compare, translate, annotate, and discuss the Bible. These capabilities can widen access to biblical resources, support multilingual study, reveal patterns across large corpora, and assist teachers, pastors, students, and readers with routine research. Yet computational fluency is not the same as understanding Scripture, and a plausible answer is not necessarily a faithful interpretation. This article offers a Christian theological and practical account of AI-assisted biblical interpretation. It distinguishes data processing from exegesis, surveys useful applications, and examines risks involving hallucination, translation, bias, privacy, authority, accessibility, and the formation of faith. Biblical convictions about creation in God's image, wisdom, truth, neighbor-love, the limits of human power, and communal discernment provide a framework for responsible use. The article proposes a staged workflow in which AI generates questions and research leads, while readers verify evidence, attend to literary and historical contexts, engage the church's interpretive traditions, and make

accountable judgments. A worked reading of the Good Samaritan shows how computational tools may illuminate a passage without replacing the ethical and theological work it demands. The central claim is that AI can serve biblical study when it remains a transparent, corrigible instrument under human responsibility and when the dignity of persons, the integrity of Scripture, and the needs of communities govern its design and use.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence; Bible; biblical interpretation; hermeneutics; Christian theology; generative AI; digital humanities; theological education; ethics; human dignity; discernment.

1. Introduction: Scripture in an AI-Mediated World

Artificial intelligence has entered ordinary practices of reading. A student can ask a conversational system to summarize a chapter, a pastor can search a large library for relevant scholarship, and a reader can compare translations in seconds. A digital platform may transcribe a sermon, detect names and places, translate a passage, or suggest cross-references. These activities are not wholly new: Christians have long used writing, codices, concordances, printing presses, libraries, computers, and online databases to study Scripture. What is distinctive about contemporary AI is the combination of scale, speed, natural-language interaction, and the appearance of conversational understanding. A system can respond in a tone that feels confident and personal even when its answer is incomplete or wrong.

This change creates both opportunity and responsibility. It can bring research assistance to readers who lack a theological library, help communities work across languages, and support people with disabilities. It can also make error more persuasive, allow an opaque model to shape the questions asked of Scripture, and encourage readers to outsource reflection. The Christian question is therefore not simply whether a tool is impressive. It is whether its use serves truthful understanding, love of God and neighbor, justice, humility, and the formation of wise communities.

The title of this article names three related subjects: AI, the Bible, and interpretation. AI refers here to computational systems that perform tasks such as classification, prediction, pattern recognition, translation, and language generation. The Bible refers to the canonical collection received by Christian communities, with differences among traditions in canon and ordering. Interpretation refers to the disciplined activity of understanding texts in their literary, historical, canonical, theological, and contemporary settings. These terms must not be collapsed. A model can process biblical words without believing, praying, worshiping, or being formed by them. A system can produce a commentary-like paragraph without being an accountable interpreter.

The article proceeds from this distinction. It describes what AI can usefully do, identifies what interpretation requires, and considers how biblical theology can guide the design and practice of tools. It then examines risks and opportunities in more detail, offers a practical reading workflow and a case study in Luke 10, and proposes recommendations for individuals, churches, seminaries, and developers. The aim is not to sanctify technology or condemn it in advance. It is to ask what responsible service looks like when a powerful instrument enters a practice central to Christian identity.

The New Testament commends careful attention: the Bereans are praised for examining the Scriptures to test what they hear (Acts 17:11), and Timothy is urged to handle the word of truth rightly (2 Timothy 2:15). These passages do not prescribe digital methods, but they establish habits that remain relevant: examination, testing, patience, and accountability. The command to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30) makes intellectual labor part of discipleship. AI may support such labor, but it cannot perform discipleship on behalf of the reader.

2. What AI Does When It “Reads”

The word “read” can describe several different activities. A person reads by attending to signs, relating them to language and experience, asking what

they mean, and responding within a moral and social world. A computational system processes tokens or other representations according to algorithms and learned statistical regularities. It may identify a phrase, estimate a likely translation, classify a literary feature, or generate a continuation. It can be useful to say that a system "reads" in a limited operational sense, but that shorthand should not hide the difference between processing and understanding.

A generative language model is trained on extensive text to predict likely sequences. During use, it receives a prompt and produces an answer shaped by model parameters, context, system design, and safety controls. Such a model may reproduce patterns found in its training material. It does not ordinarily retrieve a verified library passage for each assertion unless it is connected to a retrieval system. Nor does fluent phrasing prove that a sentence is grounded in a reliable source. Work on language-model risks emphasizes that models can reproduce bias, obscure labor and provenance, and generate persuasive text whose relation to evidence is unclear (Bender et al., 2021).

For biblical study, this means that a language model may generate a plausible explanation of a verse while confusing translations, attributing a view to a scholar who never held it, or inventing a citation. A search engine, a digital Bible, a morphological parser, a manuscript database, a translation memory, and a generative chatbot are different tools. Each has a different relation to evidence. A digital concordance can show where a word occurs in a selected translation; a lexicon offers researched lexical data; a model may suggest possible semantic connections but needs checking. When tools are joined, such as a model that retrieves passages from a curated corpus, grounding may improve, but retrieval does not automatically guarantee correct interpretation.

The Christian reader should therefore ask what task is being performed. Is the system locating text, comparing translations, summarizing a source, producing a hypothesis, or making a theological judgment? Has it shown the

evidence behind the answer? Does the answer cite an actual edition and page, or merely sound scholarly? What translation, canon, manuscript base, or interpretive tradition is assumed? Such questions turn a passive exchange into critical use.

There is also an important difference between a tool's output and the authority a reader grants it. A model may be consulted as a research assistant, but if its answer is treated as an oracle, its social role has changed. Christian theology traditionally locates authority in God and Scripture as received and interpreted within communities, though traditions formulate that relation in distinct ways. A machine-generated response has no independent claim to revelation. Its value is evidential and instrumental: it may help a human reader notice, compare, or formulate; its proposal must be evaluated.

3. Biblical Interpretation as a Theological and Human Practice

Interpretation is more than extracting information. The Bible contains poetry, law, narrative, prophecy, wisdom, letters, parables, apocalyptic visions, genealogies, liturgical material, and theological argument. These forms make different demands on readers. A proverb is not a statute; a lament is not a technical report; a parable is not merely a coded allegory. Readers must notice genre, structure, speaker, audience, historical circumstance, rhetoric, and the relation of a passage to the larger canon. They also ask how a text has been received and how it speaks in a present setting.

Christian interpretation has always involved more than private decoding. The early church read Israel's Scriptures in relation to Jesus, worship, teaching, and the life of communities. Christians have developed methods that include historical-critical inquiry, literary analysis, canonical reading, theological interpretation, and readings attentive to class, gender, race, colonialism, and local context. These approaches can disagree, and responsible study makes those differences visible rather than pretending that one method exhausts meaning. Gadamer's account of understanding emphasizes that interpreters

bring histories and questions to texts; Ricoeur explores the distance and interpretive possibilities opened by written discourse. Their work helps explain why interpretation cannot be reduced to locating a single detachable answer.

The Bible's own witness calls readers to discernment. Second Timothy 3:16–17 presents Scripture as useful for teaching, correction, and formation. Psalm 119 portrays God's word as a lamp for the path (Psalm 119:105). Yet Scripture also rebukes shallow certainty: Jesus challenges interpretations that search the Scriptures yet fail to come to him (John 5:39–40), and James warns that teachers bear a stricter responsibility (James 3:1). The point is not that readers should avoid confident conclusions, but that conclusions must remain answerable to the text, to God, and to the effects of teaching on others.

Interpretation also concerns formation. Reading the command to love one's neighbor raises questions about conduct, not only semantics. Jesus summarizes the law through love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40); the Good Samaritan makes neighbor-love concrete through costly care (Luke 10:25–37). A model can list lexical senses of “neighbor,” summarize scholarship on Samaritans, or compare translations. It cannot make a reader merciful. That moral response belongs to persons and communities.

Theological interpretation also carries the language of prayer and the Holy Spirit. Christian traditions differ in how they describe illumination, but they generally do not identify computational output with the Spirit's work. John 14:26 speaks of the Spirit teaching and reminding Jesus' disciples; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16 associates discernment with the Spirit. These texts should prompt humility in the human reader, not anthropomorphic claims about software. A tool may mediate access to a text; it is not thereby a spiritual subject. Christians may pray while using a search engine, but the prayer is addressed to God, not to the algorithm.

4. Theological Foundations for Judging AI

A Christian account of technology begins with creation. Genesis 1:26–27 affirms that humanity is made in the image of God. Christian traditions interpret the image in different ways, including relational capacity, vocation, moral responsibility, rationality, and representation of God's care. Whatever account is emphasized, human worth is not earned by productivity, intelligence, speed, or technical skill. It is a gift and a calling. AI may outperform people on specific computational tasks, but such performance does not establish moral or spiritual superiority. Nor does it diminish the worth of people whose work is automated or whose literacy and access are limited.

The image of God has implications for biblical interpretation. Readers are not interchangeable data points. They are embodied persons with histories, languages, relationships, and responsibilities. A tool that helps a blind reader access Scripture may serve dignity; an application that extracts a person's private prayer notes without consent may violate it. A church that uses AI translation to hear a migrant community may extend welcome; a system that routinely erases a minority language may deepen exclusion. The same technology can either enlarge or diminish human agency depending on who controls it, who benefits, and who bears the risk.

A second foundation is human vocation. Genesis 2:15 describes the human being placed in the garden to work it and keep it. Christian reflection has often understood work as stewardship rather than absolute mastery. Technology can be a form of craft, a means of cultivating the world. But stewardship imposes limits: to create or deploy a system is to accept responsibility for its social consequences. “We can build it” is not an adequate moral argument. A technology that spreads false teaching, harms vulnerable people, or conceals accountability should be questioned even if technically sophisticated.

A third foundation is truthfulness. The ninth commandment prohibits false witness (Exodus 20:16), while Ephesians 4:25 calls the community to speak truthfully. AI systems can help people locate information, but they can also fabricate references or state speculation as fact. In biblical scholarship, false citation is not a minor formatting defect. It can distort a reader's understanding, misrepresent a scholar, and damage trust. Users have a duty to verify claims; developers and institutions have a duty to make provenance and uncertainty easier to inspect.

A fourth foundation is neighbor-love and justice. Micah 6:8 joins justice, mercy, and humility. Jesus' commandment of love (John 13:34–35) gives Christian communities a test for their use of technology: does the tool serve others, especially people with less power, or mainly the institution that owns it? Does it treat people as neighbors or as sources of data? A theological ethic cannot be reduced to individual convenience. It asks how benefits and burdens are distributed across communities, including the poor, disabled, children, linguistic minorities, and people in regions whose texts and labor are used to train systems.

Finally, Christian wisdom includes restraint. Proverbs repeatedly praises the teachable person and warns against haste. James 1:19 commends being quick to listen and slow to speak. A system that answers instantly can tempt the reader to skip the slow work of listening to a text, a community, and an opposing interpretation. Slowness is not always virtuous—pastors may need rapid accessibility support, and crisis translation can be urgent—but speed should not be mistaken for wisdom. The biblical virtues of humility, patience, truth, justice, and love provide criteria for evaluating how AI is used.

5. Practical Benefits for Biblical Study

AI can assist with discovery. A researcher studying a theme such as exile, hospitality, covenant, or healing can use digital search and semantic tools to find passages that may not share the same exact vocabulary. A model can propose related concepts and point toward areas for further investigation.

Such suggestions should be checked against a concordance, searchable biblical corpus, and academic resources. The benefit is not that AI defines the theme, but that it can widen the first map of inquiry and help a reader formulate better questions.

The tools also support comparison. Readers can align multiple translations, identify where wording differs, and ask what translation decisions might matter. A language model may explain that an English phrase reflects a Hebrew or Greek construction, though the explanation requires independent verification in grammars and lexicons. A system that aligns parallel passages can help a student see how a Gospel writer adapts shared tradition. Corpus methods can reveal repeated expressions and patterns across a book. In biblical research, computational analysis has been applied to tasks such as tagging, authorship-related questions, semantic annotation, clustering, and text categorization; a systematic review of this area shows a broad and evolving field rather than a single settled method (Lima et al., 2025).

AI can lower language barriers. Translation tools can help readers navigate scholarly abstracts, compare material in multiple languages, and make basic study resources available to communities underserved by commercial publishers. Speech recognition can turn lectures into searchable transcripts. Text-to-speech can support readers with low vision, dyslexia, or limited time. These are significant benefits when tools are evaluated for accuracy and designed with the users who depend on them. Accessibility is not an optional enhancement; it concerns whether people can participate fully in learning and worship.

For teachers, AI may generate discussion questions at different reading levels, draft a lesson outline, or create a glossary from a provided text. For pastors, it may organize research notes or locate relevant denominational documents. For students, it can serve as a conversational tutor that explains unfamiliar concepts in plain language. Such support is especially useful when a reader has no immediate access to a mentor. However, the tutor should disclose that

its answers are provisional and point learners toward primary sources, not cultivate dependency on its own authority.

The greatest benefit may be the ability to make scholarly habits more accessible. A beginner can ask what “textual criticism” means, request an explanation of parallelism, or learn why a passage's setting matters. The response can be adapted through follow-up questions. In a well-designed environment, the system can show the passage, explain key terms, distinguish consensus from debate, link to reliable sources, and invite the learner to verify. This can make the first steps into biblical study less intimidating.

These benefits matter in a global church. Acts 2:6–11 depicts people hearing the proclamation in their own languages. The passage does not describe machine translation, but it underscores the importance of linguistic access. AI may help translate study materials into languages for which few human resources exist. Yet automatic translation should not be imposed as if fluency in a dominant language were the norm and local knowledge were secondary. Meaningful translation requires review by speakers who understand the language's idiom, theology, history, and cultural associations. AI can assist the work; it should not erase the human expertise that gives translation life.

6. Biblical Languages, Translation, and Textual Evidence

Tools for Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek can support close reading by identifying morphology, parsing verbs, searching lemmas, and organizing occurrences. A learner can explore how a term is used across a book or compare a word's translation in different contexts. These functions save time and make a large body of material navigable. They can also create an illusion of certainty. A lemma is not a complete meaning, and a gloss is not an interpretation. Words do not carry a single fixed meaning that can be pasted into every verse. Context, syntax, genre, collocation, and discourse shape what an expression means in a particular passage.

This is especially important with familiar theological words. The Greek term logos in John 1:1 is not adequately interpreted by looking up a short

dictionary gloss. The reader must attend to the prologue's argument, the use of the term in the wider Greek and Jewish worlds, the relation to Genesis 1, and the Gospel's presentation of Jesus. A model may offer several historical associations, but it may combine them indiscriminately. A responsible study checks claims against primary texts, lexica, commentaries, and the scholarly debate. Theological significance emerges through argument and context, not through an isolated word study.

Translation comparison is useful because translations make choices. A comparison can show where translators differ in syntax, gendered language, idiom, or textual base. It may help a reader notice ambiguity and ask why a phrase is rendered in one way. But the number of translations is not a vote: ten English translations based on similar editorial choices do not necessarily settle a contested question. Readers should know which editions they compare, when they were produced, and what translation philosophy they follow. An AI response that says “the original Greek literally means” should prompt caution, since “literal” is often used imprecisely and can conceal interpretive assumptions.

Textual criticism studies the transmission of biblical writings and the variants found among manuscripts. Digital resources can make manuscript images, transcriptions, and apparatuses more accessible. Pattern recognition might help identify similar scribal forms or locate candidate relationships. Such methods do not make every manuscript question simple. Handwriting, material conditions, chronology, copying habits, and the history of transmission require expertise. A model should not be asked to declare the “true Bible” from a raw set of variants. It may help organize evidence, while trained scholars evaluate the quality and limits of that evidence.

The distinction between text and translation also matters pastorally. If a church member asks whether a verse in a familiar translation “really says” something, the answer should not be delivered as a triumph of machine access over tradition. The pastor can explain that translation involves informed judgment, and that diverse translations can clarify nuance. When an

AI tool produces a surprising claim, it is an invitation to research rather than a reason to embarrass someone for trusting a Bible they have long read. Intellectual honesty and pastoral care belong together.

7. AI and Hermeneutical Plurality

No method reads from nowhere. Historical-critical interpretation asks questions about origins, sources, dates, authorship, and social settings. Literary interpretation attends to plot, characterization, metaphor, irony, and narrative form. Canonical interpretation asks how a passage functions within the final form of Scripture and the wider collection. Theological interpretation considers the claims a text makes about God, creation, sin, salvation, church, and hope. Contextual approaches ask how race, gender, class, disability, colonial history, and local experience shape both the text's reception and contemporary reading. These approaches can enrich one another, but they can also foreground different questions.

AI systems inherit patterns from their data and design. If their training material is dominated by a particular language, denomination, geographic region, or academic style, their default answers may present that perspective as universal. A model trained predominantly on English-language evangelical resources may reproduce assumptions that differ from Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, mainline Protestant, Jewish, African, Asian, Indigenous, or liberation-theological perspectives. Such a system can be useful to a reader within that tradition, but it should label its viewpoint and avoid treating it as the only faithful interpretation.

This raises the problem of interpretive authority. When a system generates an answer in a smooth voice, who is speaking? The developer? The data contributors? The institution that deploys it? The user who prompted it? An implicit interpretive tradition? No single response is adequate. The answer is produced by an entire socio-technical arrangement. Transparency about source material, model limitations, and editorial decisions can help users see this arrangement. In theological settings, teachers should invite students to

ask not only “What does the system say?” but “Which voices are absent, and why does this answer seem persuasive to me?”

Plurality does not mean that all interpretations are equally good. An interpretation can be challenged by grammar, historical evidence, literary structure, the canon, theological coherence, or its effects on neighbors. A Christian community may judge an account to be harmful or false. Yet responsible judgment should explain its reasons. AI is often poor at this kind of accountable disagreement: it may offer a list of positions without making clear why a community accepts one and rejects another. Readers should therefore use it to map debate, not to settle debate by averaging responses.

The church's interpretive life is embodied. It includes Scripture reading in worship, preaching, catechesis, scholarship, testimony, pastoral care, and the wisdom of people whose experiences have been neglected. First Corinthians 12:12–27 portrays the church as a body with many members; no single member has the whole gift. This image challenges both individual arrogance and machine centralization. The system that produces one fluent answer should not crowd out the many voices needed for discernment. A good digital tool can make more voices audible; it should not define the conversation in advance.

8. Risks: Hallucination, Bias, and the Manufacture of Authority

Generative AI can produce statements that are grammatically sound but unsupported or false. In biblical contexts, hallucination may appear as a non-existent quotation, an invented source, a mistaken chapter number, or an overconfident account of Hebrew or Greek. It may blend claims from different traditions or project a modern idea onto an ancient setting. A user may not recognize the error because the response is coherent and uses religious vocabulary. The danger is heightened when the subject is emotionally important or the reader assumes that a technical system is neutral.

A second risk is bias. Training data may contain unequal representation, stereotypes, colonial assumptions, and past scholarly exclusions. A model can

reproduce them in descriptions of ancient societies or contemporary groups. It may portray women as passive, reduce Jewish traditions to background for Christianity, present European theology as the norm, or treat non-Western Christianity as a special case. It can also reflect the values of developers and platform policies. Bias is not corrected merely by adding a disclaimer; it requires auditing, broader participation, ongoing evaluation, and a willingness to revise.

A third risk is false authority. People may treat a system's confident phrasing, apparent empathy, or memory-like behavior as evidence of wisdom. Religious language intensifies this risk. A chatbot that says “God is telling you” or presents itself as a spiritual guide crosses a significant boundary. Christian pastoral care involves accountable relationships, moral judgment, confidentiality, and a community's understanding of vocation. AI may assist a pastor, but it should not impersonate the pastor or claim divine warrant for an output. Users should be told clearly when they are interacting with AI.

A fourth risk concerns privacy. People may enter confessions, prayer requests, pastoral crises, family conflicts, or sensitive community information into a system without knowing how data are stored and used. This can expose people who never consented to participate. Churches and seminaries need clear policies that distinguish public study questions from confidential pastoral material. A tool should not receive identifiable or sensitive information unless the institution has verified its protections and has a legitimate reason. Privacy is connected to dignity and trust, not merely compliance.

A fifth risk is deskilling. If learners always request summaries, they may lose the ability to read a full passage carefully, use a lexicon, assess evidence, or form an argument. Convenience can turn into dependence. This is not inevitable: calculators did not eliminate mathematical reasoning, but education had to reconsider how they were used. Biblical education can make AI a scaffold: use it to clarify a term, then require students to inspect the

passage, consult sources, explain their reasoning, and reflect on what changed in their understanding.

A final risk is the compression of Scripture into an answer engine. Readers may approach the Bible only to extract advice, a slogan, or a proof text. AI can accelerate that tendency by producing instant topical lists. Scripture also confronts, unsettles, comforts, and forms communities over time. The Psalms teach lament; prophets challenge power; the Gospels narrate the life of Jesus; the letters address particular communities. Reading well includes receiving the shape of a text rather than merely harvesting a useful sentence.

9. The Good Samaritan: A Worked Example of Human-AI Reading

Consider Luke 10:25–37, the parable of the Good Samaritan. A reader may begin with a question about neighbor-love. An AI tool can provide a provisional outline: a legal expert asks how to inherit eternal life; Jesus refers him to the commandments; the question "Who is my neighbor?" elicits a story about a wounded traveler; religious figures pass by; a Samaritan stops, treats the injuries, transports the man, pays for care, and promises to return. The tool can also locate the passage in Luke, compare translations, and point out the movement from abstract question to concrete action. These are useful entry points.

The next task is to verify details. The reader should open Luke 10 in a reliable edition, note the literary context in Luke's travel narrative, and examine how the passage connects to the preceding exchange and what follows. The reader can compare translations of the legal expert's question and Jesus' concluding question. If a model claims that Samaritans were universally hated or that a specific historical detail is certain, the reader should check reputable historical scholarship. Broad claims about ancient Jewish-Samaritan relations require careful qualification; a simplistic account can turn the parable into a caricature of Judaism rather than a challenge to the hearer's boundaries.

A model may also generate several interpretive lenses. A literary reading can examine repetition, dialogue, and reversal. A historical reading can consider

the social significance of the Samaritan figure. A theological reading can ask how the story forms the reader's understanding of mercy and neighborliness. A contextual reading can ask who is wounded, who is ignored, and whose service is made invisible today. Each lens can open questions, but the reader must judge which claims are supported and how they relate to the text as a whole.

The interpretive pivot is Jesus' question at the end: which person became a neighbor to the man who fell among robbers? The expert answers by naming the one who showed mercy, and Jesus says to go and do likewise. This shift is ethically decisive. The story does not merely give a definition that can be stored in a database. It calls for action. AI can help a church identify local organizations, translate a guide to emergency support, or draft a lesson on compassionate response. But the community must decide how to care for people, allocate resources, and follow through. A chatbot cannot carry the wounded traveler to shelter.

The case illustrates a sound division of labor. The system can help locate, compare, summarize, and prompt. Human interpreters verify, weigh, situate, pray, deliberate, and act. The human work is not a decorative addition after the machine has “understood” the text. It is the work of interpretation itself. The technology is most useful when it helps readers return to the passage with better questions and renewed attention to the neighbor whom the text places before them.

10. A Responsible Workflow for AI-Assisted Exegesis

A disciplined workflow begins with the text, not with a chatbot's preferred answer. The reader should identify the passage, choose a reliable edition, read it in full, and note initial questions. The passage should be read aloud when appropriate, since sound, repetition, and rhythm can reveal features that a quick search misses. A short prayer for wisdom may frame the work for Christian readers, while recognizing that prayer does not make a tool's

output reliable. James 1:5 invites believers to ask God for wisdom; the request includes the humility to test one's own assumptions.

The second step is to define the task. Instead of asking “What does this mean?” the reader can ask narrower questions: “What words are repeated in this passage?” “Which English translations render this phrase differently?” “What is the immediate literary context?” or “What scholarly sources discuss this textual variant?” Better questions yield more inspectable answers. The prompt should specify the translation, passage, desired level, and whether the user wants candidate questions rather than a final interpretation. It should also ask the model to distinguish direct evidence from inference and to identify claims that need verification.

The third step is to use AI as a research assistant. Ask for a preliminary outline, possible cross-references, definitions of technical terms, or a list of interpretive questions. Save the prompt and output when the work is academic or consequential. Do not enter private pastoral information. If the tool provides sources, open each source independently; verify bibliographic records, page numbers, quotations, and DOI. Treat an uncited assertion as a lead, not as evidence. The reader should compare the system's summary with the primary text and with scholarship from more than one perspective.

The fourth step is contextual analysis. Identify genre, structure, speaker, audience, setting, and the passage's function in its book. Check vocabulary and translation questions with reputable tools, paying attention to semantic range rather than one-word equivalence. Consider the passage in relation to the canon and the history of Christian interpretation. Where tradition matters, state which tradition's claims are being considered. If the passage has been used to harm or exclude people, examine that reception and hear affected communities. A tool may help collect these questions, but human judgment decides their relevance.

The fifth step is theological and ethical evaluation. Ask what the passage says about God, humanity, sin, hope, community, and responsibility. Ask what

interpretation best accounts for textual evidence and what its implications are. Does a reading encourage truth, justice, mercy, and humility? Does it reduce a group to a stereotype? Does it treat suffering as abstract material? These questions do not replace exegesis; they test whether interpretation is faithful in practice. The reader should distinguish a text's direct claim from a contemporary application, and explain the bridge between them.

The final step is transparent communication. If AI materially assisted the work, disclose how it was used according to the relevant academic or institutional policy. Attribute quotations and scholarly ideas accurately. Do not list AI as an author of theological judgment. State uncertainties and competing interpretations fairly. If the tool's output influenced the work, retain responsibility for it. A useful rule is simple: no claim should appear in a sermon, paper, or lesson solely because an AI system produced it. The reader must be able to explain and defend the claim with evidence.

11. Implications for Pastoral Ministry and Christian Formation

Pastoral ministry involves teaching, consolation, correction, accompaniment, and care in moments of vulnerability. AI may assist with routine preparation, translation, accessibility, and the organization of resources. It may help a pastor draft questions for a Bible study or adapt a lesson for different reading levels. These tasks can free time for human presence if the tool is used carefully. Yet a pastoral relationship is not a content-delivery problem. People seek to be heard by someone who can take responsibility, notice context, protect confidence, and remain present beyond a single exchange.

A congregation may choose to use a chatbot for general questions about service times, public events, or introductory biblical vocabulary. It should avoid presenting the system as a pastor, priest, spiritual director, or source of divine counsel. When users disclose grief, abuse, self-harm, family violence, or a crisis of faith, the system should direct them to a responsible human and appropriate care pathways. Even where a platform offers crisis protocols, it

cannot assume the relationship and professional duties of local caregivers. Human oversight must be real, available, and clearly explained.

AI can also enrich formation when its limits are made pedagogically useful. A class can compare an AI-generated reading with students' own observations and ask where it attends closely to the passage and where it jumps to generalities. Students can investigate invented citations, examine how a model frames denominational differences, or compare the system's first answer with a carefully revised prompt. Such exercises teach digital literacy together with hermeneutical judgment. The goal is not simply to catch errors, but to form readers who can ask what counts as evidence and whose perspective is missing.

Christian formation takes time. Scripture is read repeatedly, heard in worship, remembered, questioned, and embodied in service. A model may make personalized study plans or help a learner review vocabulary, but it cannot replace community practices. The church is not only a storehouse of information; it is a body of people who learn to forgive, share resources, lament, celebrate, and seek justice together. Ephesians 4:15 joins truth and love in the growth of the body. An AI-mediated practice that produces accurate information while weakening fellowship would be incomplete.

There is also an opportunity to include people whom existing educational systems have overlooked. A person with limited formal education may ask questions without embarrassment. A reader with low vision may use voice interfaces. A student in a remote area may access explanations unavailable locally. These are meaningful gains. They must be pursued with cultural humility: learners should be able to challenge the tool, use local languages, access human teachers, and understand when the system is uncertain. Technology serves formation when it strengthens agency and belonging.

12. Justice, Language, and the Global Church

The global church speaks in thousands of languages, but digital resources are unevenly distributed. Major commercial languages receive more data,

investment, and quality control than many local or Indigenous languages. A system may appear multilingual while making serious grammatical and theological errors in underrepresented languages. This creates a risk of a two-tier church: some communities receive accurate, richly contextualized resources, while others receive machine-generated approximations. Christian commitments to unity across difference should make this disparity a theological concern.

Translation is not simply word substitution. Words carry histories, metaphors, social relationships, and patterns of reverence. A term for kinship, land, spirit, or community may not map cleanly across languages. Translating biblical material can involve hard choices about register, gender, idiom, and theological vocabulary. Local translators are not merely proofreaders for a model; they are interpreters whose expertise should shape the system and the final text. A responsible project compensates contributors, obtains consent, protects community-held knowledge, and makes clear how material will be reused.

Acts 2 provides a powerful image of people hearing in their own languages, but it should not be used to justify technological triumphalism. Pentecost is a work of God in a community gathered across difference. The event does not imply that every language problem can be solved by automation, nor that a dominant language should determine theological meaning. It offers a vision of communication that honors plurality. AI translation can contribute to that vision when it is developed with speakers, tested in context, and corrected without defensiveness.

Justice also concerns the sources that systems use. Digital collections may include copyrighted works, community archives, or materials whose creators never consented to model training. Biblical research depends on libraries, translators, editors, teachers, and local scholars whose labor should not disappear behind a commercial interface. Institutions should review licensing, attribution, data governance, and the conditions under which material is

collected. The fact that a text is accessible online does not automatically settle whether every form of reuse is ethical.

Finally, the benefits and burdens of AI infrastructure are uneven. Data centers consume energy and water; supply chains depend on human labor; automated systems can restructure employment. A theological assessment should consider these costs alongside the convenience of a Bible-study chatbot. This does not mean that every pastor must calculate the full environmental footprint of each query. It means that churches, universities, and technology companies should not describe AI as immaterial. Stewardship includes attention to creation and to the people whose work makes digital services possible.

13. Human Agency, Accountability, and the Limits of Automation

AI can influence interpretation without explicitly making decisions. Search rankings determine which resources a reader encounters first. Recommendation systems shape which sermons and commentaries appear. A generated summary determines which details are foregrounded and which are omitted. Even an apparently neutral interface has an architecture: someone chose the data, categories, thresholds, and presentation. Christian institutions should therefore ask not only whether a system is accurate, but who has authority over its design and how users can contest its outputs.

Accountability requires identifiable human responsibility. If a seminary adopts a model for course feedback, faculty remain responsible for grading policy and fairness. If a church uses a system to answer pastoral questions, leaders remain responsible for what the system communicates and for the pathway to human care. If an AI-generated translation is used in worship, a qualified team should review it and a community should be able to raise concerns. “The algorithm did it” is not an acceptable answer when people are harmed.

Human agency also includes the right to refuse automation. A community may decide that a practice should remain relational, even if automation is cheaper. People should know when AI is involved and have a meaningful

alternative where feasible. A church member should not have to disclose a sensitive pastoral concern to a chatbot because no human is available. Students should know which uses of generative AI are allowed and what form of disclosure is expected. Clear rules prevent both covert substitution and unfair penalties.

The question of whether AI itself has moral status is philosophically and theologically complex. Current language models do not provide a sound basis for claims that they possess consciousness, spiritual experience, or moral agency. Their language may simulate first-person reflection, but simulation is not proof of inner life. Christian ethics should avoid both careless personification and careless dismissal of human consequences. Even if a system is not a moral subject, the way people design and use it can affect subjects who are morally considerable. The primary accountability remains with people and institutions.

A key limitation is the inability of a model to bear the consequences of its interpretation. A pastor who teaches a passage may be questioned by the congregation and must answer for the teaching. A scholar may defend a claim before peers. A reader may discover that an interpretation was harmful and repent. A model does none of these in the human sense. Its developers, deployers, and users can be held responsible, but the system itself cannot participate in repentance, reconciliation, or covenantal fidelity. This asymmetry is central to the theological case for human oversight.

14. Research and Design Principles for Theological AI

Research on AI for biblical study should begin with clear task definitions. “Interpret the Bible” is too broad to evaluate. Researchers can instead study the accuracy of named-entity recognition in a particular corpus, compare translation quality for selected languages, test how systems identify quotations, or evaluate whether summaries preserve argument structure. Each task needs appropriate benchmarks and expert review. A system that performs well on verse retrieval may still be poor at theological synthesis.

Results should be reported with limitations, not generalized beyond the tested conditions.

Datasets should reflect the diversity and complexity of Christian interpretation. This involves more than collecting a larger number of texts. Researchers should document language, tradition, period, genre, editorial status, and rights. They should ask whether underrepresented communities are included as partners or merely as sources. Where the system is intended for a particular church or educational context, local users should shape its evaluation criteria. “Faithfulness” cannot be measured only by similarity to a dominant corpus.

Interfaces should make evidence visible. When a tool answers a biblical question, it should identify the translation, passage, and sources on which it relies. It should distinguish quotation from paraphrase, evidence from inference, and well-established findings from contested claims. Links to primary sources and stable bibliographic metadata help readers verify. The system should be allowed to say that it does not know. A response that admits uncertainty is often more useful than an elegant but unsupported explanation.

Designers should also build in correction and appeal. If a community identifies a mistranslation or harmful representation, there should be a route to report it and a process for review. Updates should be documented. Human review should include people with relevant linguistic, theological, and cultural expertise. A single “expert” cannot represent every tradition, but a plural review structure can reveal blind spots. Ethical design is an ongoing practice, not a one-time approval label.

Theology contributes questions that technical benchmarks may miss. Does the system encourage humility, or reward certainty? Does it help users attend to the neighbor, or turn people into data? Does it give marginalized voices genuine influence? Does it respect the difference between informational support and spiritual authority? How does its use affect worship, teaching,

and fellowship? Such questions do not replace software testing. They widen the account of success to include moral and communal consequences.

15. Institutional Guidelines for Churches and Seminaries

Churches and seminaries should adopt concise policies that name permitted, restricted, and prohibited uses. Permitted uses might include generating first-draft study questions, exploring public-domain texts, summarizing non-confidential readings, or providing accessibility support. Restricted uses might include translating liturgical or doctrinal material, grading student work, or generating public theological teaching; these require human review and disclosure. Prohibited uses should include uploading confidential pastoral records to unapproved services, impersonating clergy, fabricating citations, or presenting generated text as a verified quotation.

Training is essential. Clergy, students, and staff need practical instruction in how language models work, what hallucination looks like, how to verify sources, and how to protect sensitive information. Training should use actual biblical examples rather than generic technology slides. Learners can inspect a model's response to a passage, compare it with a commentary, and identify unsupported claims. They should learn to maintain an audit trail for consequential work. The aim is not to make every user a computer scientist, but to establish informed, accountable practice.

Academic integrity policies should distinguish types of assistance. Brainstorming, copyediting, translation, and drafting are not identical activities. Institutions can require disclosure proportionate to the contribution and ensure that students remain able to demonstrate their own learning. A student who uses AI to clarify an unfamiliar term may need a different disclosure from one who submits a generated commentary as original work. Policies should be clear before assignments begin and applied consistently across languages and access needs.

Pastoral policies should define boundaries. If an AI service is used for public information, the interface should identify itself and provide contact

information for a human. Sensitive disclosures should not be retained longer than necessary, and the system should not request personal details it does not need. Leaders should decide who monitors the service, how errors are corrected, and how a user reaches help. A church should never assume that a vendor's general privacy statement automatically meets its pastoral obligations.

Governance should be reviewed periodically. AI services change rapidly, and a policy that was adequate for one model may not fit another. Institutions should review contracts, data retention, model updates, security, accessibility, and user feedback. They should include theological, technical, pastoral, legal, and community perspectives. Smaller congregations may not have those resources; denominational bodies or consortia can provide shared evaluation and guidance. Responsible governance is a ministry of care because it protects trust.

16. Sermon Preparation and Public Teaching in the Age of Generative Tools

Sermon preparation is a useful test case because it combines textual study, theological judgment, communication, and pastoral responsibility. A preacher may use AI to generate possible outlines, identify words worth studying, create a first draft of discussion questions, or suggest ways to explain a difficult term to children. It can also help a preacher locate public resources in a second language or convert notes into an accessible handout. These activities may reduce repetitive labor, particularly for pastors serving small congregations with limited staff. The tool becomes problematic when a generated sermon is presented as the preacher's own considered interpretation without review, or when it supplies a spiritual voice that the preacher has not truly inhabited.

A responsible preaching process begins with the preacher's encounter with the passage. The preacher reads and rereads it, notices its form, places it in context, and identifies questions before asking a system for an outline. This

sequence matters because the first prompt can set the frame for all that follows. If a preacher begins by asking a model to “write an inspiring sermon on forgiveness,” the answer may default to familiar moral advice and miss the passage's difficult claims, narrative tension, or communal context. If the preacher first records observations and then asks the tool to identify counter-readings or missing context, the system is more likely to function as a critical partner in research.

The preacher should verify every quotation and historical claim. Generated sermon drafts sometimes blend Bible translations or paraphrase a verse as if quoting it. The preacher should consult the named Bible edition and use exact quotation marks only for exact wording. Claims about ancient customs, Greek or Hebrew meanings, or the intentions of biblical authors should be checked against reputable scholarship. A sermon should not repeat a striking anecdote unless its source is traceable. In public teaching, an invented illustration or citation can damage trust even if the larger message is sound.

Pastoral discernment also asks how a sermon lands in the lives of hearers. A model may produce a tidy application that sounds universal but overlooks someone experiencing poverty, grief, disability, racism, migration, or family violence. Preachers should ask whether the application burdens people who are already vulnerable or absolves people with power. They should listen to members of the community, particularly those whose experience is rarely reflected in the tool's training material. This is one reason human community is not merely a quality-control layer added after generation; it is part of the act of responsible preaching.

Disclosure practices can be proportionate. A preacher need not announce every spelling correction made by software, but should be transparent when AI has materially shaped research, wording, translation, or structure, especially where a congregation or institution has asked for disclosure. The preacher remains the accountable teacher. If a system generates an error, the preacher should correct it openly rather than blaming an invisible machine.

James 3:1's warning about the responsibility of teachers makes this accountability especially fitting.

For students in homiletics, comparing a generated sermon with a human draft can become a useful learning exercise. Students can identify what the model notices, where it relies on cliché, how it handles ambiguity, and whether it turns a narrative into a list of moral lessons. They can revise the draft while documenting why they accepted or rejected particular suggestions. Assessment should value the student's reasoning and engagement with the text, not just polished prose. In this way, AI becomes material for learning discernment, while the vocation of preaching remains a human, ecclesial practice.

17. A Christian Account of Appropriate Trust

Trust is not a switch that is either on or off. People trust tools differently for different tasks. A reader may trust a search function to find every occurrence of a phrase in a specified edition, while not trusting a generative model to interpret a disputed passage. A pastor may trust speech recognition to produce a draft transcript, then review names and theological terms. Good practice calibrates reliance to the evidence, stakes, and error rate of the task.

This calibration resembles the biblical virtue of discernment. First John 4:1 instructs the community to test the spirits; 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says to test everything and hold fast to what is good. These verses address spiritual and communal discernment, not machine validation procedures. Still, they support a posture of examination rather than credulity. Christian readers can ask what a tool's output is grounded in, what it leaves out, and whether it bears good fruit. Testing means more than asking the same model to confirm itself; it involves independent evidence and accountable conversation.

Trust also requires an honest account of what cannot be outsourced. A tool may propose interpretations; the reader must decide what to teach. A model can generate a prayer draft; the person or community must own the words. It can summarize a theological controversy; the student must understand the

positions well enough to represent them fairly. When the work concerns another person's life, consent and care cannot be delegated to a machine. The more consequential the decision, the stronger the need for direct human involvement.

Christian trust is ultimately directed toward God, not toward any human artifact. This does not imply that Christian readers should distrust every technology. It means that no tool can bear the ultimate weight of meaning, salvation, or moral responsibility. The Bible's testimony calls readers into a relationship with God and neighbor. AI may support some practices around that testimony, but it cannot become the object or guarantor of faith. Theologically appropriate trust is therefore modest, task-specific, transparent, and revisable.

18. Theological Questions for the Next Generation

AI's development raises questions that deserve sustained theological research. How do Christian traditions understand human uniqueness when machines perform tasks associated with language and reasoning? Which accounts of the image of God are compatible with the reality that many capacities are shared in degrees across humans and other creatures? How should theologians distinguish instrumental intelligence from moral agency? These questions should not be rushed into simplistic answers. Theological anthropology has resources in relation, vocation, embodiment, dependence, and community that can broaden the debate beyond performance metrics.

A second question concerns revelation and mediation. Christians have always encountered Scripture through material forms: oral performance, manuscript, print, translation, lecture, and digital screen. AI introduces new forms of mediation that can generate summaries and dialogue. What changes when a person encounters the Bible through an interactive system that anticipates questions? Does the interface help people hear the text, or does it make the tool the primary interpreter? How should churches preserve practices of slow

reading, memorization, public reading, and communal discussion amid personalized automated experiences?

A third question concerns authority. If a church's members increasingly rely on a commercial chatbot for theological explanations, how does that reshape the authority of pastors, theologians, traditions, and local communities? Could AI help democratize theological knowledge by making scholarship more accessible? Could it also consolidate power in a handful of platforms whose algorithms determine what Christians see? The answer may be both. Theologically responsible communities should pursue access while resisting unaccountable centralization.

A fourth question concerns justice and reconciliation. Can AI help identify historical patterns of exclusion in biblical interpretation, or will it reproduce those patterns in a more scalable form? Can systems support indigenous language revitalization without appropriating community knowledge? Can tools help churches listen across political and cultural division, or will personalization intensify echo chambers? These are empirical and theological questions. They require participation by the communities whose lives and languages are at stake.

Finally, Christian scholars should examine the spirituality of attention. A tool that makes every answer immediate may train people to expect instant closure. Scripture often forms people through repetition, silence, waiting, and unresolved lament. How can digital practices leave room for these forms of attention? The question is not whether technology is fast, but whether communities can shape its use around the rhythms of worship, study, and care. The future of AI and biblical interpretation will depend partly on what kind of readers churches choose to become.

19. Conclusion: Technology in Service of Faithful Reading

AI offers real assistance to biblical study. It can organize information, compare translations, support accessibility, reveal patterns, lower language barriers, and help learners take their first steps into complex material. These

capacities can serve the church and the academy when they are designed and used with care. They are especially valuable when they extend access to people who have been excluded from traditional forms of theological education.

But AI's fluency should not be confused with wisdom, and its outputs should not be granted the authority of Scripture, scholarship, pastor, or community. Interpretation requires attention to genre, history, language, canon, tradition, context, and ethical consequence. It involves readers who can be corrected, communities that can deliberate, and people who must act on what they understand. A machine can assist many tasks around interpretation; it cannot assume the full human and spiritual responsibility of interpreting.

Christian theology gives a demanding framework for this work. The image of God protects human dignity from reduction to performance. Stewardship insists that builders and institutions remain accountable. Truthfulness requires verification and honest citation. Neighbor-love asks who benefits and who bears the cost. Wisdom values humility, listening, and restraint. The church's life together resists the idea that one automated voice can replace a plurality of accountable witnesses.

The practical invitation is therefore neither fear nor fascination, but faithful discernment. Christians can use AI with open eyes: asking clear questions, checking sources, protecting confidences, disclosing assistance, including marginalized voices, and refusing to confuse speed with understanding. The measure of success is not merely whether a system can say something plausible about the Bible. It is whether its use helps human beings hear Scripture more carefully, love God and neighbor more fully, and serve the common good with greater truth and humility.

Glossary

Artificial intelligence (AI): Computational systems designed to perform tasks associated with learning, prediction, classification, perception, or language generation. The term covers many technologies and does not by itself imply consciousness or moral agency.

Canonical reading: Interpretation of a passage in relation to the form and theological witness of the biblical canon as received by a community.

Corpus: A structured collection of texts prepared for searching or computational analysis. A biblical corpus may be based on a specific edition, translation, or manuscript transcription.

Exegesis: Careful, evidence-based interpretation that seeks to understand a passage in its literary, historical, linguistic, and canonical contexts.

Generative AI: AI systems that produce new text, images, audio, or other outputs in response to prompts, learned patterns, and contextual input.

Hallucination: A generated claim that is presented plausibly but is unsupported, inaccurate, or fabricated, such as a false quotation or citation.

Hermeneutics: The theory and practice of interpretation, including how readers understand texts across historical, linguistic, cultural, and theological distance.

Human-in-the-loop: A process in which people review or guide an AI system's output. Effective oversight requires real authority and the ability to correct or reject the output.

Illumination: In Christian theology, the Spirit's work enabling the church and believers to understand and respond faithfully to God's revelation; it should not be equated with machine computation.

Large language model (LLM): A machine-learning system trained on large text datasets to predict and generate sequences of language.

Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG): A system design that retrieves documents from a selected source collection and uses them to inform

generated answers. Retrieval can improve grounding but does not guarantee sound interpretation.

Textual criticism: The scholarly study of manuscript witnesses and variants to understand the history and most likely form of a text.

Theological discernment: The accountable practice of testing interpretations in light of Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, community, prayer, and ethical fruit.

Translation alignment: A computational method for linking corresponding words or phrases across different language versions of a text.

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