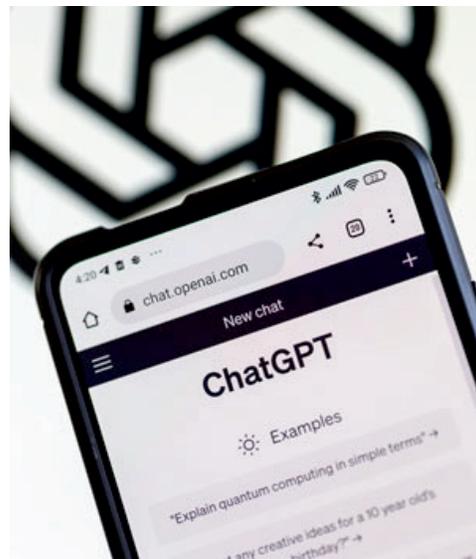


Think for Yourself

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Too many people today are letting others do their thinking for them. After all, it takes time and effort to do your own thinking and form your own opinions. Today, the average attention span of a person has shrunk by approximately 25 percent in the last 20 years; people are finding less time and desire to do individual research to form their own points of view. It has become far easier to turn on the television, computer, or handheld device and find another person who has done all the work and formulated an opinion for you. Quick sound bites or images are all many people need today to vote, converse intelligently at a cocktail party, or engage in an argument on social media. And now we have AI, artificial intelligence – ready made responses, opinions, essays, manuals, and arguments at our fingertips. But, as Jesus taught us, if we lose the ability to think for ourselves, we will lose our souls and eventually become a part of an unthinking mob with vicious and expedient intents.

Our youngest child, Maureen, is currently an English major and senior at the University of Illinois. She tells us that one of the greatest temptations facing college students today is chatgpt -- the free use of AI systems – which produces ready made papers, essays, and research upon request. With fear and daring, rushed and harried students are submitting papers these days to professors from their own AI resources, hoping not to be caught or discovered. They are not taking the valuable time to do their own research, wrestle with choosing the most persuasive words or arguments on their own, weigh complex issues with discernment, or achieve a sense of accomplishment having done their own work. Somewhere along the way, they became distracted, ran out of time, and panicked before a paper was due and took the easy way out.



High school teachers tell me they are having trouble finding as many motivated, curious, and creative students in their classrooms these days since many of them have become increasingly robotic in their learning; the only concern for many students has become knowing what it takes to pass a class rather than taking the time to contemplate, debate, or wrestle with the subjects at hand. Education has become something you can Google rather than a valuable exercise you can pursue, discover, or enjoy. For a growing number of people, education has become a means to an end rather than a journey for growth and transformation.

This is why an increasing number of universities and colleges today are reducing the number of curriculums and even whole departments in humanities or liberal arts, but at what price? With less exposure to the humanities, critical thinking skills often become less developed. With less awareness of history, culture, philosophy, religion, and English, people can become more vulnerable to the lure of hate groups, conspiracy theories, or dangerously narrow thinking. They can eventually become practitioners of overly simplistic reasoning or logic. And if they are not careful, they can become less aware of what is lawful, considerate of others, and good for society.

Some of the best independent and critical thinkers I know of were the Puritans who boarded the Mayflower in 1620 and landed in our new world. They were being harassed, persecuted, and chased by the prevailing Church of England and told their independent thinking, no matter how devout and Biblical, was not welcome in England. They were looking for a land which would allow them complete freedom to be who they were and pursue Christ as they understood him. Very fortunately, they found that land to be our precious country, the United States of America – a place where independent, yet respectful and courteous thinking could be encouraged and allowed. And they helped form a country and set of laws which guaranteed these privileges and rights that hopefully and prayerfully will never be lost.

One of my favorite passages in all the Bible is John, Chapter 3, and the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the most independent critical thinkers recorded in all of Scripture. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people at the time. Yet, he was bold enough to meet with Jesus in the middle of the night when his other council members would be unable to find him. He was wrestling with whether to believe Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. He wanted to talk with Jesus face-to-face alone to investigate on his own rather than be influenced by other council members who felt very threatened by Jesus and his teachings. By the end of their conversation, Nicodemus became convinced of Jesus' Messiahship. Nicodemus became a secret believer in Jesus while maintaining his membership on the Sanhedrin at the same time. He was a very brave man who did his own research, weighed the evidence himself, and came to his own conclusions despite the tribal and mob-like influences that surrounded him.



For these reasons and many more, one of the things I enjoy most in my ministry is leading Bible studies, helping people read the Scripture for themselves rather than allow their church,

minister, or tradition to do that kind of thinking for them. The Bible is the single greatest gift our triune God has given to humanity. But, sadly, too few people read it for themselves. They allow professional clergy or authors to interpret it for them. However, when you have a Bible study group and a willing teacher to guide you, reading the Bible for yourself becomes enlightening, life-giving, and exhilarating. Currently, I am leading three different men's groups involving nearly 80 individuals. It is a joy for me to watch these men grow in their faith and understanding of our Holy Bible.



One of the most beautiful and profound things about the Christian life is that it has nothing to do with intelligence, let alone artificial intelligence. The only thing that matters to Jesus is wisdom, gaining it through faith, and growing in it every day. There is no such thing as artificial wisdom. Wisdom is a direct gift from God we receive in our hearts through our belief and trust in Him. It is purely divine and spiritual, unaffected, or influenced by the intelligence of humanity, computer-constructed or otherwise. Divine wisdom is the single most powerful force in the universe, greater than anything the world or humans can manufacture or even what Satan can create or mobilize. For Christians, there is no need to fear AI or try to use it for our own selfish ambitions or reasons. On the contrary, may we pray together that humans will learn how to use AI in ways which will please Jesus and advance his kingdom on earth and never substitute for our calling and purpose to do our own critical thinking, leading to greater faith.

The Apostle Paul said it best when he wrote the following words to the people of Corinth, "As the Scriptures say, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.' ...But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. This foolish plan of God (having his son die on the cross) is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength." (1 Corinthians 1:19,24,25)

Jesus did not want his disciples to go along with the crowd. He never wanted his followers to take the easy way out. He took his time to teach them. He often disciplined them with truth and grace and encouraged them to come to their own conclusions about what was true and right. He never supplied the answers for them. He made them think critically and find what they believed on their own. The Apostle Matthew tells us, "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' 'Well,' they replied, 'some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.' Then Jesus asked them, 'But who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'" (Matthew 16:13-16)

I am thankful I belong to a religion that encourages me to think for myself. I am thankful I am a citizen of a country which provides freedom to pursue my own faith. I am grateful I do not need Artificial Intelligence or anything else man-made to make me whole. All I need is Christ and the family members, friends, provisions and wisdom he has given me.

Sharon, our children, and I wish you a most blessed Thanksgiving season!