

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP AS A RESPONSE TO CURTAILING NEGATIVE EXCESSES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT: Children are the future of any family, church and nation. When they are properly disciplined and trained for the future, they become helpful in the church, themselves, their families, and the community at large. Children are not left out in the era of technological advancement that has ushered in Artificial Intelligence (AI), as they are widely engaged with it. Whereby technology has become more available to them. AI has come to stay, and its continued usage has shaped the digital landscape. With all of these, the concerns about its harmful excesses, such as addiction, misinformation, overreliance on AI, and moral degradation among children, are growing. This paper explores Christian discipleship as a holistic response to these challenges, offering a faith-based framework for ethical engagement with AI. Discipleship fosters moral resilience. By integrating scriptural teachings, mentorship, and community support, Christian discipleship can guide children in developing a Christ-centered digital ethic. This approach not only mitigates AI's harmful effects but also empowers children to use technology as a tool for good, aligning with their faith and values. Ultimately, this study highlights the role of Christian discipleship in equipping young believers to navigate AI-driven realities with wisdom and integrity.

Keywords: *Christian Discipleship, Curtailing, Negative Excesses, Artificial Intelligence, and Children.*

Introduction

This paper discusses Christian discipleship as a church response to curtailing the harmful excesses of Artificial Intelligence among children. Discipling children is among the many tasks or functions of the church; other functions include worship, fellowship, evangelism, proclamation/witnessing and ministering. Children are members of the church today and tomorrow's leaders. There is a need to intentionally prepare them for the task ahead through discipleship, so that children will not grow up in the church without the church making an impact on their lives. Discipleship is the crux of the Great Commission given to Jesus' disciples as He was commissioning them for the work ahead of them in Matthew 28:19-20, saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations"; it is not optional, it is a command that must be obeyed. That must involve all people, adults, youth, children, males or females. However, for children, intentional discipleship must be organized and carried out in the church by parents, children's teachers (in church and in secular schools), and willing church members. The church disciplines parents, and they, in turn, disciple their children.

Artificial intelligence is not new; it has been developed since the 1950s. Elon Musk and some others founded OpenAI in 2015. Children interact with these devices daily to command them, and the devices use those commands as part of their dataset to learn through video gaming and toys. Mobile phones and the cartoon world (Artificial Intelligence, or AI hereafter). It offers excellent potential, opportunities, advantages, and disadvantages for children, which, if unlocked and harnessed, can support better child development. It has become part of our everyday life; it is not possible to cut children off from interacting with AI. Its harmful excesses can be curtailed only through discipleship. The children in this paper are between 7 and 12 years old (younger and older children).

Definition of Artificial Intelligence

Drawing from the assertion that Artificial Intelligence has come to stay, and alluring to the fact that there are many benefits in teaching children the proper usage of it.

Therefore, an attempt will be made to define AI using the definitions of several authors. Holmes (2022, 8) defined AI as a “set of sciences, theories and technologies purposed to reproduce the cognitive abilities of human beings”. Also, it is a field of science concerned with building computers and machines that can reason, learn, and act in ways that would typically require human intelligence, or with data whose scale exceeds what humans can analyse. Quoting Burdon Olaniyan (2024), made an allusion that AI seeks to make computers do things that the human mind can do. Robinson (2018, 37) also states that AI is a field of computer science that simulates intelligent behavior, with the capacity to mimic intelligent behavior in computers and improve human behavior. Thomas (2023) states that the tasks include things like problem-solving, learning, reasoning, understanding natural language, and perception. AI technologies use algorithms, data, and computational power to simulate human-like intelligence and make decisions or perform tasks autonomously. Today, many banks use AI to identify unauthorized credit card users. From analyzing complex genetic data to performing the most delicate surgeries with the highest precision is also being worked on to integrate with AI.

Concept of Children's Discipleship

Before discussing discipleship, it is imperative to understand who a disciple is. Ayo-Obiremi (2004, 10) quoted Janvier as defining “a disciple to be everyone who claims to be a Christian.” The point here is not about claiming, but about having a personal relationship with him. People can claim to know someone to be what they are not; a disciple must be a follower, a learner, an apprentice. In Matthew 4:19, Jesus called his disciples to follow Him, and they followed Him. Harvey (2016:19) asserts that “the disciple was used at least 230 times in the New Testament and 28 times in the book of Acts to refer to followers” of Jesus in a broader sense. Discipleship is from the word disciple. According to Barna (2000:29), discipleship is becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ. It is about intentional training for people who voluntarily submit to the leadership of Jesus Christ and want to be imitators of Christ in every thought, word, and deed.

Based on teaching, training, experiences, relationship and accountability, we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ (2000:20). The three key words

mentioned in Barna's definition are worth taking in the above definition- becoming complete (is a process), intentional training (purposeful), and voluntary submission (willingly without compulsion). Some argue that discipleship is necessary for a Christian; others consider it optional. Christian discipleship for a child of God is not optional; it is a Christian's whole way of life. Its omission is an error, because being a disciple should be synonymous with being a Christian. In Acts 11:26, the name Christian was first given to the disciples at Antioch. Before that time, in Acts, the followers of Jesus were referred to as disciples.

Discipleship is a great commission and not an omission given by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to His disciples, of which we are all partakers today. Nihinlola (2016, 125) also defines discipleship to be 'a process of growing in relationship with Christ by learning of him, living under his authority and applying his teaching to every area of life.' Discipleship for a Christian is not optional for anyone who desires to conform to the image of Christ by living and doing his will; it is a God-ordained way for Christians to walk. Christian discipleship is a call into a relationship with God. The starting point of this relationship is the moment of spiritual birth; one is saved from sin (i.e., after conversion). In light of the above statement, Akintola noted that discipleship is one among other functions of the church: the redeemed community. Other functions of the church include worship, fellowship, evangelism, and ministering/care. Church members are groomed through discipleship processes for character formation, acceptable habits, and attitudes (2016, 33).

Christian discipleship entails the process through which believers in Christ Jesus are opened to, and are being shown and tutored in the lifestyle, character and ideal pattern of behaviour, portraying that of Jesus Christ, hence, Christian discipleship is not merely attending some programme, ministry or training, it is a life-long commitment to a lifestyle to that effect having a required change in behaviour, attitudes, skills and lifestyles. God calls Christians in all walks of life to be disciples makers wherever they are found. Barna (2000, 33) states that discipleship is not about reading books and storing knowledge, or attending discipleship-planned programmes, accumulating head knowledge only, and leaving out the life.

Corroborating Barna's statement, Oyedemi (2019, 194) states emphatically that "discipleship is neither a programme nor an activity but a voluntary lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ." This has a significant effect on discipleship today, in which people attend to gain cognitive domain while their affective domain remains the same. The goal and crux of discipleship is spiritual formation, which leads to transformation, and the intentional formation of disciples into the likeness of God should be the focus of any human disciple to his disciples (Ishola-Esan, 2016, p. 184).

Rationale for Discipling Children

Several things negatively influence children's behaviour today, including what they see in their surroundings, social media, media, and peer group pressure, which have led to the global degeneration of morality and the moral decadence witnessed. Children must not be allowed to come to church to worship, sing hymns, and engage in spiritual exercises without surrounding their lives with Christ and following him daily to become like him. Discipling them is "catching them young," a concept by Ayo-Obiremi (2016, 30), meaning to start, which leads to transformation. The intentional formation of disciples into becoming the likeness of God should be the focus of any human discipling on time, "securing and hooking the next generation," and "closing the sale." Are concepts of children's discipleship? She explains that this means discipleship is a byproduct of evangelism and that children must be intentionally engaged in discipleship.

Discipling children requires a proper understanding of children's nature and characteristics. According to Price (1982, 10), "Understanding children also involves understanding their needs. These needs include: a quest for knowledge of God, love, acceptance, security, a sense of belonging, social independence and dependence, and guidance and control. Children generally have a limited attention span, are restless, and learn better with concrete objects. They learned through repetition, imitation, observation, doing, play, interaction, listening and practice. A proper understanding of children will help nurture and discipline them effectively. For children who are saved and the unsaved to stand on their feet physically, the need to disciple them is the only sure way and is foundational to Christian faith.

The key players in children's discipleship are the parents, teachers and the church. Each of these players played different roles in moulding and upbringing. In the words of Inch (1992, 34) and Oyeniya (2016, 260), children are not little adults; they are human beings growing into adulthood. Christian parents and teachers, as led by the Holy Spirit, the great discipler. Also, the church has the responsibility of equipping parents to disciple their children by preparing them to grow to know God in his fullness. Children's discipleship is a joint ministry, and only as there is planned and enthusiastic cooperation between them. Parents are the first educators of their children. This implies that both the church and the family are in a symbiotic relationship, helping each other fulfill the Great Commission.

Discipling Children is a Necessity

The command in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples of all children, inclusive, is contrasted with God's command in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 to teach their children. The same instruction was repeated in Deuteronomy 31:12-13. In Proverbs 22:6, the Bible says, "Train up a child in the way he should go". In Isaiah 54:13, while God, through the prophet Isaiah, was talking about the restoration of the people of Israel, God says, "I will teach your children, and great shall be their peace." Paul commanded the parents to disciple their children and not to make them angry. Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. No wonder, McDaniel and Richards say, "children need to experience the Lord.... When children are not being taught the word of God, they are denying the child's experience of the Lord- an experience an adult can never have."

Children are gullible; a child's mind is open to receiving instructions from adults without struggle. That is why it is necessary to disciple them with the right message. They are in their formation age. It is a critical age for the right things to be formed and for experience to be transformed. The Jesuits have this maxim that 'give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man'. Therefore, discipleship is a critical strategy in raising a new generation to transform the church and society at large. Islam, Buddhism and other world religions are already aware of this and are indoctrinating and brainwashing their children systematically. Politically, Nazism and communism have ensured that children are well-equipped to continue their fight. While the Evangelical/Pentecostal movement in our nation has continued to give

second priority to children, militant groups like the Taliban, Boko Haram, Maitatsine, etc, are training their children to advance their agenda.

Children are the future of any family, church and nation. When they are properly disciplined and trained for the future, they become helpful in the church, themselves, their families, and the community at large. To pass on the faith and Christian values, Paul was very emphatic about conveying the correct teaching to the right people, who would then pass it on to others. When children are properly disciplined, they will, in turn, discipline their own children and others. This should be taken seriously to avoid the mistakes of the Israelites during the time of Joshua, who failed to pass the baton to the next generation. The consequence was very grievous because that generation did not know God or remember the miracles that God had done in their midst, Andrew (2015) and Ayanrionla (2013,71).

According to Ayo-Obiremi (2004, 23), if children accept Christ, discipleship training can multiply their potential. To have a sound, dependable Christian faith, children of God need to cultivate a Christ-centered worldview that shapes their choices and use of AI.

“Discipleship training is important in developing a healthy Christian life.” When children are properly taught the Word of God, and they have deep roots of a Biblical world view, they will be better equipped to face the challenges of artificial intelligence technology and other related issues and their concomitant blessings and banes; drugs, alcoholism, globalization, peer group influence and so on. Everyone who has accepted Christ as Saviour and Lord needs discipleship to grow in discipline and be conformed to the image of Christ. Have the right skills and knowledge to help others know Christ. See that the body of Christ as a whole might grow, foundational experiences through discipleship “contribute to discipleship development and responsible church membership as these children grow into adulthood, equipped to take leadership and supportive roles in their churches.”

Roles of the Church

Discipling children aims to bring them to Christ, help them know Him as their Lord and personal Saviour, and grow in their understanding of Him. In addition, Total

Development of the Children Physically, Socially, Emotionally, Mentally and Spiritually. Different types of Discipleship can be used for discipling children today. Ayo-Obiremi (2016: 96) & Ola (2021: 14).

Church discipleship must aim at transformational lifestyles in children, providing principles related to children's discipleship, including preparation, selection, prayer, teaching or instruction, commitment, sacrifice, challenges, content, context, exemplary living, letting go, and withdrawal. Jesus was very strategic in how he modelled discipleship and the sharing of the Gospel. Therefore, church disciplers should be intentional. Quoting Caesar Kalinowski, who suggested that there is a need to change our thinking about discipleship in order to be intentional.

Another role is that the church must disciple the children's parents, who are the key disciplers of their children. They must not leave their responsibility to AI, television, tablets, and video games. Churches must discourage parents who replace their interactions with children with these gadgets; this is bad discipleship.

The required time for discipleship starts early, from the womb; continues in Infancy; Timothy was taught the scriptures from infancy (2 Tim. 3:15); continues in Preschool years; continues in Childhood – i.e., younger, middle, and older childhood years; continues in Adolescence and teenage years.

Intensify when the child makes a specific conscious decision for Christ. Ensure that discipleship continues for life, do it with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Choose the right Bible Study/Discipleship material to guide your group time so the Word is carefully presented, examined, and discussed, and disciple with Joy. Make sure the group does not exceed 15 members at a time. Mentoring or Apprenticeship: make use of written discipleship material for discipleship training (e.g., Follow the Master) in lifestyle discipleship, relational discipleship, and Bible clubs.

Benefits of AI to Children

There are several benefits of using AI generally and for Children. AI has changed the way children learn and play. Among the benefits of AI for children, Personalized learning is one of the most significant, as it allows instruction tailored to their

individual strengths and weaknesses. Notably, AI can offer many benefits for learning, play, and social connection, but it also poses potential risks and challenges for child development and safety. As a parent, it is important to understand how to navigate these issues and set healthy boundaries around your child's use of AI. Mike (2023) noted that, using AI algorithms, teachers and parents can create learning plans tailored to each child's unique needs, resulting in better academic performance.

It also offers a new level of play for children with AI-powered toys and games, providing a better experience than traditional toys. Besides, AI also provides children with access to a wealth of information and resources, enabling them to learn about new topics and explore their interests in greater depth. With the help of AI, children have access to educational resources and online libraries, allowing them to learn about history, science, and other subjects in a fun and engaging way (Copeland, 2023). This access to knowledge and information can inspire children to pursue their interests and foster a lifelong love of learning. With the proper guidance from parents and educators, AI can help children develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the digital age.

Risks and dangers of AI for Children

As the benefits of AI abound, so do the risks and dangers that parents should be aware of. Over-reliance on technology is one concern, as children may become overdependent on AI for problem-solving, leading them to a lack of creativity and critical thinking skills. Conversely, it will negatively impact their academic performance and their ability to succeed in school and in life. Another concern is exposure to inappropriate content, such as violence or hate speech, that can be found on some AI-powered platforms. Tempering with children's mental health and emotional well-being, again, contributes to the spread of harmful attitudes and behaviors. Oppermann (2023) warned against the potential dangers of AI: "These things could get more intelligent than us and could decide to take over." He made this statement after observing how AI was becoming increasingly sophisticated and widespread worldwide. UNICEF also expresses the same concern about the use of AI by children.

Opperman (2023) noted that posing a privacy challenge will be high as AI may collect personal data from children. This will put children at risk of identity theft or other forms of exploitation. Also, AI algorithms can bring bias and cause discrimination, particularly around race, gender, and other identity factors and cause harm to children. Parents should take steps to mitigate risks and encourage responsible, safe use of AI. This they can do by setting healthy boundaries around screen time and monitoring their child's online activity, choosing age-appropriate apps and devices, and talking to their child about the potential risks and challenges of using AI. Again, parents can advocate for greater transparency and encourage the development of ethical and inclusive AI practices. By taking these steps, parents can help ensure their child has a positive, safe experience with AI (Opperman, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper examines Christian discipleship as a response to AI's influence among children. Knowing fully of many other factors that influence children today, and with the advent of the big one as AI, if there is no discipleship, then the future will be bleak. The place of children in the home, church, nation and society at large cannot be jettisoned. The parent is responsible for disciplining their children. Discipleship for believers is not optional; children are also believers, and doing so is an act of obedience to the mandate of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Children's discipleship may not take conventional methods; whoever will disciple children must consider the nature of the children, prepare to teach them creatively and sacrificially, and, through relational and intentional discipleship, determine to do his work to see Christ formed in their lives. This writer advocates that relational and transformational discipleship should be the focus of discipling children. It was noted that AI has come to stay, and it is not bad, but to a certain degree, it can influence the child negatively. Children must be closely monitored by their parents; it has advantages and disadvantages, benefits and risks associated with its use. UNICEF has called attention to and is working to ensure policies that protect children's safety.

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