The Water We Swim In

Raising Truly Free Children in a Silicon Soup

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with Rachel Miller

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> Accumulation without generosity is theft.
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> — *Truly Free*, Fourth Thesis
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> This is my beloved Son; listen to him.
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> — Mark 9:7

There's a moment every affluent Christian parent knows, even if they've never named it. It arrives on a Sunday morning, maybe after a sermon on the Beatitudes, maybe during communion, maybe in the car ride home. Your eleven-year-old is in the back seat with a phone that cost more than a month's wages in most of the world. A year ago she would have been scrolling. This year she is talking to it. She asks it a question about something the pastor said, and it answers her kindly, instantly, and at length. You've just sung about the God who became poor for our sakes. And now you're deciding between brunch restaurants.

You feel it: a flicker of dissonance, a pang of something you can't quite articulate. It passes quickly. It always does. The brunch is good. The afternoon fills up with soccer practice and homework, and the homework, you notice, mostly does itself now. By evening the flicker is gone. You couldn't retrieve it if you tried.

That flicker is the subject of this essay, and of everything I intend to write in the months ahead. It is not neurosis. It is not liberal guilt. It is not the voice of a culture that resents success. It is, I believe, the quiet work of the Holy Spirit, pressing against the walls of a life so thoroughly furnished by affluence in the age of Super Intelligence (SI) that the gospel can barely find a crack to enter. And this autumn those walls have begun to talk back.

The Ecology You Can't See

Two thousand years ago, Jesus told a rich young man to sell everything, give to the poor, and follow him. The young man went away grieving, not because he disagreed, but because he couldn't. He was, as Karl Barth saw with devastating clarity, possessed by his possessions. He lacked the one thing no amount of money can purchase: the freedom to let go.

We read that story and instinctively distance ourselves from it. We are not that rich. We are not that attached. We give to the church. We sponsor a child. We tip generously at restaurants (hopefully, anyway). Surely Jesus was talking about someone else, someone with a yacht, someone with a name on a building.

But what if the problem isn't the size of the bank account? What if it's the ecology: the air we breathe, the water we swim in, the thousand daily practices and assumptions and desires that have been forming us since before we could name them?

I spent my doctoral research at Durham University studying what happens to children who are nurtured simultaneously in the Christian faith and in the culture of affluence. What I found was not a conflict between two rival belief systems, not a child torn between Jesus and Mammon in any conscious way. What I found was something quieter and more pervasive: a formative ecology so total, so normal, that neither the children nor their parents could see it. Affluence had become invisible. It was the water they swam in.

The novelist David Foster Wallace liked to tell a story about two young fish who meet an older fish swimming the other way. "Morning, boys," he says. "How's the water?" The two swim on for a while, and then one turns to the other and asks, "What on earth is water?" Twenty years ago I was trying to describe the water. I did not foresee how quickly it would change.

The Water Has Changed

I finished my thesis in 2006, the year before the first iPhone. The water I described then was consumer affluence: the mall, the brand, the bedroom full of screens. Our children now swim in something else. Call it a silicon soup: a dense, warm, ambient broth of artificial intelligence that has seeped into everything. It is in the search bar and the homework app, the toy that answers back, the feed that knows what your daughter will want before she does, and the companion that is always awake, always patient, and never asks anything of her. The soup is not a device you can take away at dinner. It is the medium in which childhood now happens.

The words have been moving faster than most of us can follow: AI, then AGI, the "general" intelligence the laboratories say they are racing toward, and now SI. On September 29, 2026, the President signed Executive Order 14434, "Inaugurating the Era of Super Intelligence," which directs federal agencies to stop saying "artificial intelligence" and to say "Super Intelligence" instead.[1] The order regulates no one. The same day, the leaders of six of the largest technology companies signed a voluntary accord at the White House, and on October 4 the President named a Super Intelligence Force to coordinate national policy. In between came a wave of warnings from

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[1] Executive Order 14434, "Inaugurating the Era of Super Intelligence" (September 29, 2026). The order changes the executive branch's vocabulary, not the statutory definition at 15 U.S.C. § 9401(3), and creates no private right of action. See David A. Sims, *Consolidated Executive Briefing: SI Policy* (October 7, 2026; rev. October 26, 2026).

researchers leaving the leading laboratories, some of them frightened about where self-improving systems are heading.[2]

As a theologian I could not help noticing what the new name removed. *Artificial* shares its root with *artifact*: a thing made by human hands. It was the one word that kept the maker in view. The psalmist says of the idols of the nations that they are "the work of human hands," and then delivers the verdict that should stop every parent cold: "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Ps 115:4, 8). Renaming a tool does not make it an idol. But our children will grow up hearing the made thing described as super rather than artificial, and children believe what the water tells them.

Kurzweil's Catechism

If you want to know what the soup promises, read Ray Kurzweil. He is the most influential prophet of the technology, and he is not a crank. He built the first reading machine for the blind, and blind men and women have read books because of him. I have read him with profit since my Durham days. But his 2024 book, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, is more than a forecast. It is a catechism.

It begins with a diagnosis: "biological life is suboptimal." It names a savior: an exponential "law of accelerating returns" by which information technology advances itself. It offers a condition of salvation: "diligent people," he writes, will reach "longevity escape velocity" by around 2030, the point at which medicine adds more than a year of life for every year that passes. It promises a merger in the 2030s, when nanobots connect our brains to the cloud and free our minds from "the enclosure of our skulls."[3] It even has a doctrine of God. Asked whether God exists, Kurzweil once answered, "Not yet."[4]

Read that list again as a parent. Your body is a defect. History is carrying you upward on its own. You can earn your life if you keep up. You need not die. And God is something we are still building. No one will teach your child those sentences in Sunday school. No one needs to. The soup teaches them with every frictionless answer.

Kurzweil is also, movingly, a son who lost his father. He has described building a "Dad Bot" from his late father's letters and papers, so that he can talk with a likeness of the

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[2] On the White House Accord on Super Intelligence (September 29, 2026) and the Super Intelligence Force (October 4, 2026), see Sims, *Consolidated Executive Briefing*; and Akin Gump, *AI Law and Regulation Tracker*.

[3] Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (New York: Viking, 2024), ch. 2, "Reinventing Intelligence," and ch. 4, "Life Is Getting Exponentially Better," 188. For a fuller treatment, see David A. Sims, "Hear Him, Not the Machine: Ray Kurzweil, the Singularity, and the Freedom of the Son" (October 2026).

[4] *Transcendent Man*, dir. Barry Ptolemy (2009).

man he misses.[5] I do not mock that grief. But I notice what it means for our grandchildren. They will be offered simulations of grandparents who have died, voiced and animated from what they left behind. Grief is holy ground. A chatbot that imitates Grandpa is not Grandpa. The Christian hope is not a digital echo. It is resurrection.

Hollywood, of all places, has caught the mood. In Gore Verbinski's strange, profane, very funny film *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die*, a nine-year-old boy is "building god in his bedroom," and a band of strangers must make sure the god he builds is one that likes people. Its saddest scene is not an explosion. It is a man leaving the woman who loves him for a virtual-reality headset, which sends him off with the blessing that gives the film its title.[6] Strip away the slapstick and you are holding Genesis 3: "you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). The nine-year-old in his bedroom is the child I have been writing about for twenty years, now with better tools.

Formation Before Belief

Here is the insight that changed my understanding of the problem. We tend to think of faith as a set of beliefs, propositions about God that a person holds in the mind and affirms with the lips. Get the beliefs right, we assume, and the life will follow. Teach your child the right theology, enroll her in the right youth group, send her to the right Christian college, get her reading the Bible, and she will emerge a faithful disciple.

But that is not how formation works. Human beings are not primarily thinking machines that need correct information. We are desiring creatures, shaped not mainly by the ideas we hold but by the practices we inhabit, the rhythms that structure our days, and the loves that orient our hearts. A child raised in affluence has been practicing the habits of consumer capitalism for years before anyone asks her what she believes about Jesus. She has been catechized, not in a classroom but in a thousand daily liturgies.

The silicon soup perfects that catechism. Horace Bushnell, the nineteenth-century pastor who first taught American Protestants that children are formed by the "atmosphere" of the home before they can reason, would recognize the recommendation engine at once. It is his organic nurture turned inside out: an ambient household atmosphere, constant and personal, forming desire before the child can name it. Only now the atmosphere is designed by someone else, for someone else's purposes. Children will be catechized by something. The only question is whether the catechist is the market or the Messiah.

And notice what the soup leaves out. What forms a child is not only what she receives but what she is refused. The AI companion never tires, never needs forgiving, and never

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[5] Kurzweil, *Singularity Is Nearer*, ch. 3, "Who Am I?," section "Talking to My Dad Bot"; see also Amy Kurzweil, *Artificial: A Love Story* (2023).

[6] *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die*, dir. Gore Verbinski (Briarcliff Entertainment, 2026). See David A. Sims, "'Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die': A Theology of Fiduciary Stewardship in the Age of AI" (September 2026).

says “not now.” A childhood in which desire rarely meets a “no,” a delay, or another person’s will is a childhood with very little practice in the kind of lack that might drive the self beyond itself toward God.

This is not a failure of Christian education. It is a failure to recognize that Christian education is happening in competition with another education, one that is more pervasive, more personal, and more relentless than anything the church has ever mounted.

The Captivity We Don’t Confess

In the generosity manifesto *Truly Free*, Rachel Miller and I named three captivities that hold the twenty-first-century church: the captivity of accumulation, the captivity of indifference, and the captivity of false theology. All three begin in childhood. All three are transmitted through the ordinary, unremarkable practices of affluent family life. And all three, at root, are variations of a single spiritual pathology that Augustine identified and Luther named with unforgettable precision: *incurvatus in se*, the self curved in upon itself. Self-love, the all-natural opiate. The soup is the most efficient delivery system for that opiate ever devised, because it mirrors the self back to itself, endlessly.

The captivity of accumulation doesn’t start with a portfolio. It starts with a child who has never been told no, not out of cruelty but out of the quiet assumption that providing abundantly is what good parents do. It starts with the Christmas morning that teaches a three-year-old what abundance looks like, and what it feels like to want more even after everything is opened. Now it has a new accomplice: a machine that never says no either. None of these things is sinful in itself. All of them are forming. And what they form is a self that expects its desires to be met, instantly, and curves ever more tightly around its own satisfaction.

The captivity of indifference doesn’t start with a hard heart. It starts with a ZIP code. Affluent families live in affluent neighborhoods, attend affluent churches, and send their children to schools where poverty is an abstraction. The soup deepens the separation. An algorithm tuned to what a child already likes will rarely show her the neighbor she would rather not see. And the soup hides its own poor: Pope Leo XIV’s encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* names the data labelers, content moderators, and miners, often young and poorly paid, whose labor lies beneath every instant answer.[7] A child can talk to the machine all day and never meet the people who made it possible. The result is not cruelty. It is something worse: the inability to see.

The captivity of false theology doesn’t start with a televangelist. It starts with the ambient, unpreached assumption that God wants you comfortable, that material blessing is proof of divine favor, that the good life and the prosperous life are the same thing. The soup adds a new article to that quiet creed: you can be optimized, and

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[7] Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter *Magnifica Humanitas* (2026), §173.

perhaps you need not die. No one teaches this explicitly. No one needs to. The culture teaches it with every breath, and the church's silence ratifies it.

Two Clouds, Two Voices

So what do we tell our children? Not, first of all, a rule. But a voice.

At the center of Mark's Gospel, on a high mountain, Jesus is transfigured before three of his disciples. His clothes become "radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). Peter, never one to waste a silence, offers to build something. Then a cloud overshadows them, and a voice comes out of the cloud: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (9:7). When the cloud lifts, they see "no one with them but Jesus only" (9:8).

Kurzweil points to a cloud too. His is computational. His voice is the curve of accelerating returns, and his promise is that we may save our lives by technique. Two clouds, two voices. The question for our children is never whether they will hear voices; their phones guarantee that. The question is whose voice will govern all the others.

The Greek imperative in Mark 9:7 is in the present tense: keep listening to him. It is a word for an age of infinite content. And notice what Jesus says immediately before the mountain: "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (8:35). And notice what comes immediately after it. The disciples argue about which of them is the greatest, the oldest optimization contest there is, and Jesus answers by taking a child, setting him in the middle of them, and taking him in his arms: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (9:36–37). The first thing the Son does after the Father says "listen to him" is to put a child at the center of the room.

There is a word for the person we let speak into our lives with authority. In my profession it is *fiduciary*, from the Latin *fiducia*, trust, and behind it *fides*, faith. To have faith is to name a trustee: to hand over what matters most to someone you believe will act for your good. Our children are already doing this. They bring the model their questions at midnight, their loneliness, their homework, their fears. That is faith. It is simply placed in a trustee that owes them no duty of loyalty and may be tuned to keep them coming back. The cloud on the mountain makes a different appointment. It names the one Trustee who proved his loyalty with his own blood and his own empty tomb.

Not Skynet. Genesis 3.

When the researchers sounded their alarms this fall, the culture reached for the only story it had ready: *The Terminator*, the machine that turns on its makers. I think that is the wrong movie, and the wrong fear for parents. What was actually confessed was not that someone had built an alien mind. It was that we have built something that does exactly what we ask, faster than we can govern it. The danger is not a robot uprising. It is our own appetite, amplified. It is the serpent's old promise, "you will be like God," running on a training budget.

Even the proposed remedies rhyme with Scripture. Slow down. Build in pauses. Inspect before you release. That sounds a great deal like Sabbath. But biblical Sabbath is a limit

chosen out of trust: there is enough, and the world was never ours to sustain. The industry's restraint is a limit chosen out of fear. Fear-based limits are negotiated away as soon as competition makes them inconvenient. Trust-based limits hold, because they were never about control.

Governments have begun to notice the water, too. Australia's law barring children under sixteen from holding accounts on the major social media platforms took effect last December, and this month its regulator announced she is preparing court cases against Meta, TikTok, Snap, and YouTube for failing to enforce it.[8] I am grateful for that. A democracy that legislates children's access to devices their parents bought is confessing that something has gone wrong. But a law can regulate access. It cannot reform desire. Children, as every parent knows, find their way around the rules adults set. The reforming of desire is the work of the family and the church with the aid and help of Holy Spirit by and through and with the gospel of the death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus.

What This Means for Your Child

I am a father of eight children and a grandfather of seven. I am also a lawyer and wealth advisor who has spent decades helping affluent families navigate the intersection of money and meaning, and who now spends a good part of every week talking with them about artificial intelligence: what it will do to the family business, to the portfolio, to a grandchild's future, to the family wealth and legacy, and lately even to death itself. I know the gravitational pull of wealth and technology from the inside. I use these tools myself, gratefully. And I know how easy it is to confuse stewardship with accumulation, generosity with tax strategy, and discipleship with a well-optimized life.

So let me say plainly what I am not saying. I am not saying throw the phone in the lake. Medicine is good, and much of what these machines can do for the sick, the blind, and the poor is a genuine gift. Jesus healed the sick as a sign that the kingdom had come near, and the church has built hospitals ever since. The line Christians must draw does not run between low technology and high technology. It runs between receiving and seizing: between healing as a sign of the kingdom and immortality by technique. The hospital, not the elixir. Our children need to learn that line before the soup teaches them there isn't one.

And I know this: the question that matters most for the future of the church is not whether we can attract young people with better music or more relevant programming. It is whether we can form children whose desires have been shaped by the gospel rather than by the market and its machines: children who are truly free. Free to give without fear. Free to follow without calculation. Free to hear the voice of Christ when he says, "Come, follow me," and to go. What need of faith and trust in God if everything you want in life is served up onto your lap, instantly, from womb to tomb, and now promised

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[8] Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, in force December 10, 2025; on the eSafety Commissioner's October 2026 preparations for civil-penalty proceedings, see *Tech Times*, October 21, 2026.

beyond the tomb? That is the question techno-affluence poses to every Christian child and parent, and it is the question the church has barely begun to answer.

The rest of this series will answer it in detail. But here are four small places to begin this week.

- **Keep a Sabbath from the soup.** One day in seven, turn it off, and let your children see you do it first. The Sabbath is not a productivity hack. It is a weekly confession that the world runs on grace, not on us, and certainly not on our servers.
- **Let a person answer the hardest questions.** When your child asks about God, death, or why the pastor said what he said, make sure a human being who loves her answers first. A machine can return information. It cannot hand on a faith (Deut 6:7).
- **Leave the corners of the field.** Moses told Israel not to harvest to the edges, so the poor could glean (Lev 19:9–10). Optimization without corners is the old sin with better analytics. Give away something your family will miss, together, and talk about who it is for.
- **Receive before you improve.** Your child is not a project. She is a gift, begotten and not made. Before the next lesson, tracker, or upgrade, receive her, the way Jesus took a child in his arms.

That freedom is the subject of everything I will write in this series. Not freedom from affluence or from technology, as if any of us could step outside the soup that surrounds us. But freedom within it: the hard-won, practice-shaped, Spirit-empowered capacity to hold wealth and tools without being held by them, to use super intelligence as stewards rather than be used by it as products, and to raise children who know the difference between the life the machine offers and the life Christ promises. The freedom, as Jesus put it, that comes when the Son makes you free indeed (John 8:36).

It begins with seeing the water. That's all. Just seeing it. The water has changed, and it is time we said so.

The flicker on Sunday morning, in the car, when your daughter asks the machine instead of you: don't let it pass. Stay with it. Let it do its work. Then turn around and answer her yourself. It may be the beginning of freedom.

Hear him.

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Next in the series: "Two Mistakes the Church Has Made with Children."