



# Hope in the Humanless Economy?

ROBOTS COULD TAKE  
HALF OF ALL JOBS IN THE NEXT  
DECADE. HERE'S WHY CHRISTIANS  
KNOW WE HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR.

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**THE GOAL WAS** to save money,” Ken Dean said.

A senior IT manager near Sacramento, Dean oversaw Sprint’s mailroom operations in the early 2000s. Inside the data center, one of three in the United States, hundreds of employees folded bills and stuffed envelopes.

“Our two largest costs were postage and people,” Dean said. Over time, he discovered what many large companies were realizing—that electronic bills could cut postage costs and machines could replace people. “Eighty percent to 90 percent of what was done in the data center could be done by a robot,” he said. It was his job, identifying technology to make the data center more efficient, and he was good at it. Naturally, expenses shrank. So did the staff.

The technology progressed dutifully to its inevitable destination: In 2008, Dean shut down the company’s last data center. Another 70 employees lost their jobs. A Christian, Dean took some solace in recognizing their God-given value beyond their roles in the labor market. His employees did not. “They were devastated,” he said. “For many of them, their confidence and worth was based upon their paycheck. They did not think they were valuable outside of their work context. There was a lot of fear.”

That was when mailrooms were still a thing. Today, workplace automation—and the fear it evokes—has expanded to horizons previously unimaginable, vanishing drivers from taxis, writers from journalism, and clerks from grocery stores.

Economists describe our current moment by distinguishing between economic growth and an economic pivot. Growth increases goods and services. A pivot, however, is a fundamental shift in how those goods and services are produced and delivered. (Think movies: What once required a visit to a brick-and-mortar rental

store now arrives digitally with the click of a button, no retail workers needed.)

A mounting body of research suggests the labor market is in the middle of a pivot—a rather ominous one already being called the “fourth industrial revolution.” One study by Citigroup and Oxford University found that 47 percent of jobs could be automated in the next decade. More recently, a report by the McKinsey Global Institute found that nearly half of all jobs could be replaced by technology that already exists—drones, self-driving vehicles, automatic kiosks, robo-traders, self-learning software, 3-D printers, and other forms of artificial intelligence.

Far more than trade, economists point to technology as the biggest culprit in the loss of US manufacturing jobs. Each new industrial robot deployed in America since 1990 may have reduced overall employment by three to six jobs.

Robots will short-circuit millions of careers in the United States alone, and with each disruption, more people will find themselves mid-career with obsolete skills, leaving them underemployed or worse, unemployed. The rapid shift is impacting families and entire communities, where predictable work no longer provides a foundation for stability in other areas of our lives.

Let’s be honest: The prospect of uncertain employment prompts fear at the deepest levels. The ideals of the modern American man and woman are built on hard work and reward. So if we can’t be certain of the future of work, what can we be certain of?

How we—and how the

church—answer this question will depend on our assumptions about what it means to be human.

It may be more important than ever to be clear about which narrative we really believe: a story where grit and market forces determine our worth or a story where we are made in the image of a God who gives us worth that transcends the market. Our imaginations and actions in the area of work are driven by one of those two stories—but only one offers us much hope in the shadow of the robots.

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## TWO TALES OF WORK

The dominant story of labor in America is what we'll call the materialist narrative. It derives from Darwin's mechanism of natural selection, characterizing humans by their survival attributes. Those with skills to survive in a competitive environment make it another day and, just maybe, they'll bestow those skills on their offspring in the form of meritocratic privilege.

In the materialist narrative, human purpose gives way to pragmatism: If it works, it survives. This is the narrative most Americans and even most Christians ascribe to, whether we realize it or not.

In times when humans were only competing among ourselves at the top of the food chain, this narrative was palatable, even comforting for those of us who took shelter in our advanced degrees and sterling résumés. But as superior non-humans entered the competition, a more disturbing reality began unfolding.

For example, in the 2014 documentary *Humans Need Not Apply*, director C. G. P. Grey compared humans to horses. Noting how the horse population

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dropped dramatically after 1915 because of new forms of transportation and machinery, the film observes: "There isn't a rule of economics that says better technology makes more, better jobs for horses. . . . But swap horses for humans and suddenly people think it sounds about right."

If the machines are now our peers, and the complexity of computers will soon surpass that of our brains, then humanity seems inevitably replaceable. As William Davidow and Michael Malone wrote in *Harvard Business Review*, "We will soon be looking at hordes of citizens of zero economic value."

This vision of humanity is bleak. If our value in life is found only in economic productivity and half of us can be replaced by more compliant robots, we have no ground to stand on. We risk being stripped of all value. In short, we will expire.

But there's a major problem with the materialist narrative. If humans are in an epic struggle of survival, then people are chiefly about consumption, not creation; competition, not cooperation. As Christians, we know better.

Humans want to survive, but we are also endowed with relational capacities and moral sensibilities. We can be self-regarding, but we can also be selfless, empathic, and compassionate. We consume, but we also invent, design, and produce. We were deliberately designed in

the image of a creator God.

The materialist narrative misses this entirely. What our time of labor uncertainty needs is another framework, one we'll call the creation narrative.

Scripture tells us that God is creative, productive, and relational. In the creation narrative, each life is supremely valuable because it was created by God and bears his image. We have a godlike resemblance (Gen. 1:26–27).

While we do not know everything it means to be created in God's image, the implications are significant.

First, if humans are designed and resemble their productive, creative, and relational designer, we should be deeply skeptical of attempts to compare humans to horses, computers, or anything that does not bear God's image. There is a theological reason for this, but there is also a practical one: As Michael Harris writes in *The End of Absence*, the largest database in the world, the most complex computer system, and the most advanced adaptation of artificial intelligence "still lack the honed narrative impulse of a single human mind." Software and circuitry might model the mechanical transactions of a brain, but they can never fully replicate the omni-layered complexity of a mind. As scientist Emerson Pugh pointed out: "If the human brain were so simple

that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't."

Second, humans have a particular calling and set of gifts. Work is much more than unpleasant toil, a means to survive, or the pursuit of status. God calls humans not to be consumers, but to creatively serve those around us. He invites us to exercise our God-reflecting capacities to glorify him and serve others.

University of North Carolina professor Fred Brooks is a Christian and one of the world's top computer science pioneers. He argues that the human ability to exercise judgment and care for others is a non-transferable asset. "Are robots going to help do a nurse's job? Yes," Brooks said in an interview. "Will they do it as well as a human? No." Many aspects of human service simply cannot be automated. "Robots will be able to better administer medication without mistakes, and eventually they will be able to talk to you, but it will not be the same."

Finally, our consciousness and moral awareness give us a spiritual agency that cannot be outsourced. The creation narrative not only posits man as a moral being but also as a being that inhabits a moral reality. So while Eric Schmidt—executive chairman of Google's parent company, Alphabet—claims his company can "make you smarter" if provided with enough of a user's data, Google's algorithms can never make humans *better*. They will increasingly equip us with data-driven decision making but never with moral excellence or a deeper, more contemplative moral imagination.

Humanity has at its core both free agency and obligation; meaningful connections with others; compassion, goodwill, and commitment. The deepest attributes of our existence can

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never be programmed, because they are born not of logic but of spirit. They are, you might say, our glory.

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### SO LONG, SUB-HUMAN WORK

Not long ago, before massive machines took on the macabre task of processing poultry and ducks, workers did it by hand. Imagine a lone assembly-line worker. Every 30 seconds, the conveyor places a feathered duck carcass in front of him, and he promptly guts it. Another 30 seconds, another duck, for hours upon hours.

All work—even routinized or unglamorous—is a form of service. But not all work is equally humanizing. While automation is scary, there is reason for optimism—particularly in light of the creation narrative. Technological innovations can elevate our work, affording employees more opportunities for creative expression, collaboration, decision-making, and service to others.

To be clear, routine labor has real value. But intelligent machinery that replaces Sisyphean tasks also creates new opportunities for the laborer. Technological disruption is not simply displacement from work, but also can be an invitation to other forms of work that may allow us to better exercise an array of God-reflecting capacities. "The ability to be creative is a necessity for meaningful work," said David Kim, executive director of Redeemer Presbyterian's Center for Faith and Work. "If people are mere cogs in a machine doing things over and over again, it may be valuable, but we can agree that it is probably not the aspirational

work people want to do."

Nevertheless, the sobering realities of automation remain. Tim Eastridge knows this well. He creates systems that will slowly, but inevitably, replace many of his co-workers at a major North American bank. His algorithms eliminate manual processes and, in theory, provide opportunities for employees to undertake more humanizing work like talking with clients.

But not everyone will transition seamlessly into the looming tech-dominated marketplace. "I think of automation as a wave in the ocean," Eastridge said. "As it is coming, it seems low and non-threatening, but as it comes close, it begins to rise and accelerate. Some will catch the crest of the wave, moving them forward. The rest will be left behind, floating and motionless."

Are ocean waves good, or are they bad? For Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary ethicist Brent Waters, that's the wrong question. "I often tell my students that to be for or against these forces is tantamount to being for or against icebergs," Waters said. "The challenge is to learn to navigate these treacherous waters."

Critics have pointed out that America's postmodern

economy—largely a product of the materialist narrative—is a means without an end. It serves progress while no one is really sure if what lies ahead is actually better. Markets are no respecters of persons—they cannot confer onto humans value that transcends wages and salaries. Nor are they oracles—they cannot prophetically guide us into the realm of the good, the right, and the true. We have built a machine that churns people and professions by necessity.

If we can't stop the machine, can we cope with it?

Many have proposed some kind of universal income to provide for people's basic needs, a taxpayer-funded cash safety net for the entire adult population. America has experimented with basic income guarantees such as the Permanent Fund of Alaska. A universal income would share the wealth produced by automation directly with those replaced by robots; if a world materialized where work was scarce, people could still have a minimum standard of living.

Even without a universal income, there will be considerable pressure on the government to respond to robot-related unemployment by expanding the social safety net or making job transitions easier through education or health care initiatives.

However appealing and potentially needed, such costly programs are no substitute for God-ordained creative work. Government assistance cannot remedy the loss of opportunity to serve, and money in the

bank does not necessarily equate with human flourishing.

At best, under the materialist narrative, markets facilitate progress, and the government provides mechanisms for us to survive the collateral damage. Surely there is more.



## CHANGING OUR OPERATING NARRATIVE

Let's return to Ken Dean, the mail room operations manager. Dean was automating out of existence Sprint's final print data center, and he chose when employees would be laid off by writing their names on a list.

One day, he added his own name.

Having committed a decade of his career to efficiency through labor-replacing technology, Dean decided to make himself eligible for displacement. "I was seeking the Lord in a deeper and richer way than I had before," he said. "This changed my perspective, which allowed me to see where my real value comes from."

Dean had recognized that his employees understood their value and worth in a limited way. But it dawned on him he was no different, motivated more by status and survival than by relevance.

You could say that Dean made a shift from the materialist narrative to the creation narrative. Now he is engaged in graduate studies while also serving as a financial consultant to nonprofits.

Ironically, the threat of automation is the church's great opportunity: an open invitation to its congregants and beyond to change our operating narrative. A key task for the church in the automation economy is to unmoor us from the materialist narrative and to help us reimagine our self-worth in a more faithful way. The body of Christ can help all of its members (employed and unemployed alike) live into a vision of humanity constituted by universal dignity and worth, relationship and community, and creative and productive service.

"All work, has, in some ways, intrinsic value, instrumental value, and innovative value," Redeemer Presbyterian's Kim said. "And we think by emphasizing these perspectives, we can help people see their work in new ways by expanding their vision."

Christians leading the world to reimagine

self-worth will inevitably take various forms. Identifying and developing new expressions of creative service and skill development may be one of them. Blue Jean Church in Selma, Alabama, facilitates several ministries that emphasize soft-skills training, job support, and entrepreneurial development. "A part of our mission as a church is to transform our community," said Bob Armstrong, a judge and one of the church's founders. "So training is definitely a function of being a church."

America is filled with churches that facilitate networking events, job transition workshops, and training and mentorship programs. Para-church organizations address unemployment through local church entities or nonprofits. If anything, these programs will reproduce at a greater rate as automation spikes.

But creative responses are not limited to the church proper. Christian business leaders are perhaps best positioned to address the realities of technology and unemployment. Merely treating employees fairly and providing decent wages and benefits may no longer be enough. Firm owners in all industries can serve their workers by investing in employee skills and continuous retraining, ensuring that technology improvements actually make workers more productive. Even when a firm has to lay off or replace workers, employees leave with more valuable skills and opportunities than they started with.

Not only can Christian firms train for jobs, they can also create jobs. J's Place Coffee and Café in Nicholasville, Kentucky, uses its profits to fund a nearby residential addiction recovery center. But the café is not a just mechanism to support the "real" ministry. "The business is the ministry," said Todd Johns,

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executive director of the center, Revive Ministries. In lieu of hiring experienced baristas, J's Place employs men from the treatment center. The aim is to restore residents' dignity by giving them an opportunity to work, serve, and create value. "From a business standpoint, it's a risk. But work is at the heart of the ministry," Johns said.

While inspiring, church-related employment initiatives will not solve the challenges raised by automation. Churches do not exist simply to buffer harsh social and economic setbacks; they invite us to organize our lives by a different reality. "Our job is to alert people to their own story," the late Richard John Neuhaus said.

This must happen not only in church programs, but in the pulpit and in the messages the church sends about where our worth comes from. The automation threat offers the church a new opportunity to awaken humanity to its real story—which is, put differently, to awaken us to the gospel of who God made us to be and who Christ saved us to become. That story is as urgently important as it's always been, because our work activity and aspirations, even as people of faith, are far more grounded in the materialist narrative than we know.

We constantly clamor for new, innovative ways to be productive. We associate labor market success with social prestige. Our church leaders often come from the ranks of those most successful in business. We implicitly believe that a good life is bound up in visible accomplishments.

We characterize industrious workers as "machines." We're awash in self-help books and articles about productivity and success.

Where activity and productivity are emphasized at the expense of meaning, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between humans and robots. Humans will eventually lose that game—robots never sleep, and eventually there may not be much "productivity" left for us.

The consequence of existing within this narrative, whether we're aware of it or not, is the inevitable increase of anxiety and despair. In the automated future, our impulse to keep up, stay relevant, and accomplish more will only become more illusory. We will abandon deeper meaning to compete harder in a ruthless meritocracy. To borrow an expression from author and columnist David Brooks, we may find ourselves compelled to double-down on the pursuit of *résumé virtues* (marketplace skills), and not the cultivation of *eulogy virtues* (human goodness and character).

Jesus had a different idea. God's plan was never for us to concern ourselves with the cares and pursuits of this world. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compels us to orient our lives by the creation narrative: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," he says, "and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33). His appeal is just as real, and as relevant, today.

Job loss will bring real pain and disruption. The new normal for many people of faith may likely include an unpredictable cycle of job transitioning, periods of unemployment, or training for new skills. The good news is the church has proven to be a place that mitigates the pain of unemployment and the attendant loss of community and socialization.

So the church is good for the unemployed.

But could it also be that the unemployed are good for the church? They are at Selma's Blue Jean Church. "On a given Sunday, it would not be unusual to see the bank president in town worshipping next to someone out of a job," said church leader Armstrong. Such a picture reminds us that the gap between employed and unemployed is narrower than we think. One possible church response, therefore, could be intentional efforts to offer leadership or ministry positions to those who lack other job opportunities.

For centuries, the creation narrative has invited people of faith to reimagine their identity from within God's timeless story. Andy Crouch writes in *The Tech-Wise Family* that work is "the fruitful transformation of the world through human effort and skill, in ways that serve our shared human needs and give glory to God." If that is the case, then jobs may change, but will we ever lack for work, for "fruitful transformation" and service to one another? "I don't think so," Kim said. "The goal is to engage in activity that better aligns with our sense of humanity."

It is difficult to say exactly what the future job market will look like. Moreover, it would be wrong to dismiss the complexity of job displacement and the uncertainty of automation. But if we accept the creation narrative as our overarching story, humans will never lack for value, for relationship, and for opportunities to work and serve. "Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself" (Matt. 6:34).

In an unpredictable future, this is a hopeful certainty. **CT**

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