

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Dust & Data

A Christian Confession in the Age of the Machine

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CHAPTER NINE

The Liar's Machine

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

— Exodus 20:16

I have spent thirty years in a profession founded on a single grim assumption: that people lie, that systems will be attacked by people who lie, and that the whole art of security is learning not to be fooled. It is a strange education. You spend your career studying deception the way a physician studies disease — closely, unsentimentally, and with a growing respect for how good the other side is. And over those thirty years I watched the tools of deception evolve, from the crude forged email to the sophisticated impersonation, always an arms race, always the deceivers and the defenders trading the advantage back and forth. I thought I had seen the shape of the thing.

Then, in the space of just a few years, something changed that I believe is the most significant shift in the landscape of human deception in my lifetime, and possibly in a great deal longer than that. Here is the change, stated as plainly as I can. For the entire history of the human race, some things were *hard to fake*. A human face in motion. A particular voice. A moving picture of a real event. These were expensive to forge, often impossible, and that difficulty was doing quiet, enormous, unnoticed work: it was one of the pillars holding up the whole structure of human trust. "Seeing is believing" was not a naive proverb. It was a rough but workable security model, and it held because sight was hard to counterfeit. That pillar has now been removed. We have built a machine that can forge any witness — any face, any voice, any scene — cheaply, convincingly, and at scale. And the commandment that saw this coming, three and a half thousand years ago, is the eighth.

THE TREASURE THE COMMANDMENT GUARDS

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. At first hearing it sounds like the narrowest of the ten — a rule against perjury, against lying in court. And that is indeed where it starts. Picture the original setting: a dispute before the elders at the city gate, one man's word against another's, and everything — a neighbor's property, his freedom, sometimes his very life — hanging on whether the witnesses told the truth. A false wit-

ness in that setting was not a small sin. He was a murderer with his mouth. The commandment stands guard at the one point where a lie can do a man the most concrete and irreversible harm.

But the church has always understood that the commandment reaches far past the courtroom. When Luther expounded it, he opened it out to cover the whole vast territory of the tongue's power to wound a neighbor — not only the sworn lie but the slander, the gossip, the whispered defamation, the casual destruction of a reputation over coffee. And he saw exactly what treasure the commandment exists to protect: the neighbor's *good name*. A person's standing in the eyes of others, his reputation, the trust the community extends to him — this, the Scriptures insist, is a treasure more valuable than money; a good name is to be chosen over great riches. It is also terribly fragile. It takes a lifetime to build and an afternoon of well-placed lies to destroy, and once destroyed it is nearly impossible to restore, because you cannot un-ring the bell of what people now believe about you. This is among the things, the Proverbs tell us, that the Lord positively hates: the false witness who breathes out lies, the one who sows discord among brothers. God hates it because it is a way of murdering a person while leaving the body alive.

And notice — this is the part we most often forget — the commandment is not only a prohibition. In Luther's hands it turns immediately positive, and demanding. We are not merely to refrain from lying about the neighbor; we are to *defend* him, to speak well of him, and, in the phrase that ought to be carved over every comment section in the world, to *put the best construction on everything* — to interpret his words and actions in the kindest way they will bear. The eighth commandment does not just forbid us to tear down a neighbor's name. It puts us on active duty as the *guardians* of it. Hold that in mind, because in the age of the liar's machine it is going to ask far more of us than it ever has before.

THE MACHINE THAT BEARS FALSE WITNESS

Now set that commandment, and that treasure, against the thing we have built.

We have constructed, as I argued several chapters back, a machine of words — a system whose native output is fluent, plausible language with no one behind it. In this chapter we meet the shadow side of that same fact. A machine that can generate any plausible sentence can generate any plausible *lie*. And it does not stop at text. It can now clone a human voice from a few seconds of recording, so that your mother, your banker, your commanding officer can be made to say anything at all in tones you would swear on your life were theirs. It can generate a moving image of a real person doing what that person never did, saying what they never said, in a place they have never been. Give it a

photograph and a purpose and it will manufacture the evidence. The eighth commandment's ancient nightmare — false witness against the neighbor — has just become something any person with a laptop can produce against any other person on earth, cheaply, at volume, and with a realism that defeats the eye.

Let me make that concrete, because an abstraction is too easy to wave away. A woman's phone rings at eleven at night, and it is her son's voice — his voice, unmistakably, with the little catch in it he has had since he was small and frightened. He has been in an accident. He is crying. There is someone with him who needs money wired in the next twenty minutes or he will be held, and please, Mom, don't tell Dad yet. She has known that voice since it first said her name. Every cell in her body knows it. And it is not him. He is asleep in his own bed three states away, and the voice on the phone was built from a thirty-second clip of him laughing at a cousin's wedding. By the time he wakes and calls her back, the money is gone. I have not invented that for the chapter; it is an ordinary Tuesday now, in the world we have made, and it works for one reason only: it turns against us the very thing the eighth commandment was given to protect — our reliance on one another's word, and voice, and face.

Let me tell you how a security professional sees this, because it cuts to the heart. Our whole discipline rests on the question *how do you know?* — how do you know this message is really from the person it claims to be from, that this evidence is what it appears to be, that this witness can be trusted. For most of history we had a rough answer: some artifacts were hard enough to fake that their mere existence was decent evidence of the fact. A photograph was pretty good proof that a thing had happened. A recording of a voice was pretty good proof of who had spoken. That is over. We have entered the first era in human history in which a moving picture of a real person, saying real words in a real voice, proves *nothing at all*. The artifact no longer testifies to the fact. The neighbor's good name, that fragile and priceless treasure, has never in all of history been so cheap to destroy, because now the false witness need not even be a person. It can be manufactured on demand, and it will look exactly like the truth.

THE TWO HARMS

There are two harms here, and the second is worse than the first.

The first is the obvious one: the manufactured lie aimed at a particular neighbor. A forged recording that ends a marriage. A fabricated video that destroys a candidate three days before an election, too late to disprove. A synthetic "confession" that convicts an innocent man in the court of public opinion long before any real court can sort it out. This is the eighth commandment's classic crime — false witness that murders a name —

now weaponized and industrialized. And the cruelest feature of it is that the victim often cannot clear himself. How do you prove you did not say a thing, when there is a recording of you saying it that your own friends cannot distinguish from real? The lie has a body now, and the truth is left standing there with nothing but its word.

But the second harm is deeper, and it is the one that will do the most damage in the long run, and it is subtle enough that most people have not yet seen it. When everyone comes to know that anything can be faked, then the fakery need not even be deployed to do its work. For now the guilty man has a defense he never had before: he can look at the real recording of his real crime and say, *that is a deepfake*, and a meaningful number of people will believe him, or at least be unable to say he is wrong. Call it the liar's dividend. In a world where any evidence can be forged, no evidence can convict — and the same technology that lets you manufacture a lie against the innocent lets the guilty dismiss the truth against themselves. The end state of this is not a world full of clever lies. It is a world in which the very category of *witness* quietly dies — in which nothing can be established, nothing can be trusted, and every claim, true or false, dissolves into the same grey fog of *who can say?*

The most clear-eyed student of this dynamic was not a technologist but the French writer Jacques Ellul, who understood, sixty years ago, that the deepest aim of the most sophisticated deception is not to make you believe a particular falsehood. It is to wear down and finally destroy your capacity to believe *anything* — to flood you with so much contradictory, plausible, exhausting material that you give up on the possibility of truth altogether and simply choose whichever version flatters your side. The liar's machine industrializes exactly that. It does not need to win any single argument. It needs only to make the ground of trust so soft that no one can stand on it. And a people who can no longer trust any witness is a people who can no longer live together, because human community, all the way down, runs on the assumption that words and appearances bear some reliable relation to reality. Pull that assumption, and it is not just this or that neighbor's name that falls. It is the possibility of neighborliness itself.

WHEN THE MACHINE LIES FOR YOU

Here a question arises that the eighth commandment answers with uncomfortable clarity. When the *machine* bears the false witness — when I do not lie with my own mouth but merely prompt a system to generate the lie, or forward the forgery someone else made — am I guilty? Have I kept the commandment, having never personally spoken a false word?

No. And the reason matters. The commandments have never governed only the outward act of the tongue; they govern the heart and the will behind it. Jesus made this the whole burden of his teaching — that the commandment against murder reaches the anger in the heart, and the commandment against adultery the lust in the eye. So too here. To *procure* a false witness, to *commission* it, to *spread* it knowing it may be false — this is to bear false witness, as surely as if you had sworn it yourself at the city gate. The machine does not absorb the guilt. It only launders the labor. You have simply hired a tireless, conscienceless liar to do your lying for you, and the hiring is the sin.

And the positive side of the commandment presses even harder in this age, because it makes us responsible not only for the lies we tell but for the lies we *pass along*. If I am commanded to defend my neighbor's name and put the best construction on everything, then I am not permitted to be a thoughtless relay for whatever plausible slander the machine produces and the feed delivers. In an age when false witness is manufactured by the ton and flows past us all day long, the eighth commandment demands a discipline it never had to demand before: the discipline of *not spreading what I cannot verify*, of refusing to repeat the damaging thing merely because it is plausible and confirms what I already wished to believe about someone I already dislike. Passing on the unverified accusation is no longer innocent, if it ever was. The machine has made each of us a potential broadcaster of false witness, and the commandment holds us responsible for what we broadcast.

THE FATHER OF LIES

I have been careful in this book not to call the machine demonic, and I will not start now; it is a tool of the left hand, as we have seen, and the sin here is in the use, not the silicon. But it would be dishonest to write a chapter on industrialized deception and say nothing about the character of the thing. Scripture gives the enemy of God a specific job title. He is the *father of lies*, and his very first recorded act was a piece of deception aimed at destroying trust between the creature and the Creator — *you will not surely die*. The corruption of the word, the severing of speech from truth in order to harm, is the oldest craft there is, and it has always been his. I am not saying the machine is his. I am saying that a technology which mass-produces plausible falsehood, whatever the intentions of the good and clever people who built it, has handed that ancient craft an engine of a power it never remotely possessed before. The father of lies has always had to work through a corrupted human tongue, one mouth at a time. He now has access to a machine that can corrupt the word by the ton. That is not a reason to fear the machine. It is

a reason to be very sober about what it can be turned to, and very serious about the commandment that stands against it.

HOW TRUST SURVIVES

So how does trust survive this? It is the practical question the whole chapter has been driving toward, and I want to give you the honest answer, which begins with a hard truth from my own field.

Trust will not be saved by detection. There is a natural hope that we will simply build better tools to catch the fakes — detectors that can spot the forgery the way an expert spots a counterfeit bill. I have spent my career in arms races like this, and I can tell you how this one goes: the fakers win. They win because the very same technology that generates the forgery can be trained to defeat the detector, and every improvement in detection becomes, immediately, training material for the next generation of fakes. You cannot forensics your way back to a world where seeing is believing. That door is shut. Anyone who tells you the detectors will save us is selling something.

Trust survives, if it survives, by moving back to the one place forgery cannot reach: *relationship*, and the *accountability* of a real person who stands behind his word. Think about what a forgery actually lacks. It lacks a speaker who means it and can be held to it. And that is exactly the thing we found, chapters ago, at the very heart of what a word truly is — a bond between persons, backed by someone present who is accountable for it. In a world where the disembodied word is infinitely forgeable, the *embodied* word becomes the only reliable one: the person you actually know, who is actually present, who answers for what he says and can be looked in the eye. Trust migrates back from the artifact to the relationship, from the message to a messenger you can hold responsible. And this is not a sad retreat into suspicion. It is a recovery of the kind of trust that was always the real thing — trust grounded not in the un-fakeability of an image but in the known character of a person who loves you and will not lie to you.

And here, I think, is the quiet mercy hidden inside this whole grim development. The gospel has never come to us as a free-floating text that could be forged. It comes, as we have seen, through an embodied and accountable word — a real person, a called and ordained mouth, standing in a real community in the stead of Christ, who can be known and held to what he says. When the pastor lays his hand on you and says "I forgive you," you are not trusting an artifact that might be counterfeit. You are trusting a present person who answers for those words, and behind him a Lord who cannot lie. The machine age, by dissolving the forgeable disembodied word, is driving the human race back toward exactly the kind of embodied, present, accountable word in which trust

and truth have always actually lived — the neighbor face to face, the friend who is really there, the congregation gathered in one room where no one can be a deepfake. The liar's machine, for all its terrible reach, cannot touch a word spoken to your face by someone who loves you and will answer for it. It turns out that is where the truth was all along.

THE TRUST-KEEPER

So this is the shape of faithfulness in the age of the liar's machine, and it is nothing more or less than the eighth commandment, kept in the hardest hour it has ever faced. The Christian is called to be a *trust-keeper* — a defender of the neighbor's good name precisely where the machine has made that name trivial to destroy; a truth-teller in a fog engineered to make truth unrecoverable; a person who refuses to spread the plausible slander, who puts the best construction on the neighbor the algorithm wants him to despise, and who becomes, himself, an accountable and embodied word that others can trust in a world of forgeries. This is not nostalgia for a simpler age. It is obedience, now, to a commandment that always guarded the neighbor's name and now must guard it against an adversary it never imagined.

The eighth commandment is one bright, sharp instance of a larger law that governs every use of every tool the left hand of God ever gave us — and it is time to state that larger law directly. Behind the question *is this witness true?* stands the question behind all the others, the one that will measure our every use of the machine from here to the end of the book: *does this serve my neighbor, or does it use him?* That question — the measure of the neighbor — is where we turn next.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Dust & Data is the invitation it opens onto.

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