I have taught over a span of well over three decades, and that often as a business professor. And, of course, I've taught about financial debt, from both an organizational and a personal perspective. To that end, I almost always challenge the listener with this question: *is debt good or bad?* And, after we have studied it enough for them to have an opinion, the answer that is most accurate is this: *it depends!*

Now, I know that many American Christians teach most everyone that personal debt is bad—then they go home and write their monthly check to their mortgage company for a long-term loan with a 3% interest rate! Well, of course they often happily do that because 3% interest rate on a 30-year mortgage for the right owner-occupied home in America can be the result of a wise decision to incur smart debt!

But, on the other hand, incurring debt for discretionary luxuries like global vacations or more-expensive-than-needed new cars can often be really unwise, especially for those already financially strapped. Now I raise this issue of financial debt because the true secret is to *intentionally and wisely handle financial debt.* It isn't that debt is always bad, it's being wise and intentional about it all. Another example is student loans. No discernible way to pay it back after school due to lack of career opportunities…well then, that can be bad, very bad! But incurring student loans to move from minimum wage capabilities at age 18 to six-figure income in your 20s? Now that can be considered a very sound financial approach.

In the tech world, the word "debt" attached to the word "tech" or the word "code" can be very bad…as in this little two-sentence, real-world story: "Well, our company has started losing some of our biggest customers because our competitors didn't cut corners when they programmed their software like we did. Yeah, we did cut corners to save money and time, and the tech debt we incurred from doing that is now eating us up! That's because it's now crucial that we go back and rewrite a whole bunch of software code to catch back up—or we could actually go out of business!"

This particular tech debt heaped up in a really big macro way in America during the 1980s and 1990s. Here's why. For several decades, coders of software commonly wrote software with the codes for years to be captured in just two digits—for example, "1983" was captured in two digits as "83" to save what was pretty universally considered the expensive cost of computer memory and storage. So, when the next millennium would inevitably roll around on January 1 of the year 2000, many tech folks realized their entire functionality could be compromised at midnight, on the first tick of time in the new year 2000 in the new century!

This crisis was soon called "Y2K," which abbreviated the year 2000 to "Y2K." This big event on the lips of every adult in late 1999 was in reality nothing but big-time tech debt or code debt, and many companies spent huge amounts of time and money solving the problem. You see, the tech debt was accumulated due to choices that seemed or were actually valid when they were first made—at least in the short-term. But when the tech debt matured in needing to be paid for, it didn't look so smart.

But you be the judge here: many times we don't have a crystal ball when we're making decisions right now and then the technology advances so much we unavoidably start stacking up tech obligations that we will bear the burden of fixing sooner or later. Like when people used to do bookkeeping on paper pads with lead pencils and then the capabilities of Microsoft Excel and other software options made that skill obsolete. But their knowledge didn't really become obsolete, just the efficiency of doing bookkeeping did!

All that brings us to the topic of this episode today—intentionally and wisely handling *knowledge debt!* That's right: we're talking about intentionally and wisely handling knowledge debt! And the economic prosperity of each person in the future—especially that of young people today—is dependent upon their handling of knowledge debt! OK, you might be saying, I'll take the bait: what is "knowledge debt!"

Well, let me give you my personal example. When I was in my late teens, I decided the field of business and organizations was in my future. So I learned about business, accounting, marketing, management, economics and law in order to be proficient in that field. And I made an intentional choice right then and

there: in the interest of time, I was not going to learn how to fix a car beyond changing the oil and a few other basics. But, wait, didn't I need to fix my car sometimes? Yes, but I was very willing to pay car mechanics the price of my lack of knowledge about transmissions or engines. Yes, indeed, I intentionally incurred my own personal "knowledge debt" about fixing cars that later would cost me thousands of dollars. But incurring this debt was exactly the right decision, I think! That's because I have only owned one to three cars at the same time throughout the decades and they are well-built enough to only need occasional repairs.

So even though I did spend several thousands in car repairs, my ever-increasing knowledge-building in the business world more than compensated for the amounts I have spent on car repairs. Again, that process captures the name of this episode: intentionally and wisely handling knowledge debt—in summary, I was willing to incur knowledge debt about fixing cars but not about exceptional business practices.

But you know what? Right at this very moment in time, I observe a whole lot of folks who are intentionally handling knowledge debt in a particularly way…and doing that quite gleefully but very badly. That is, they are stacking up knowledge debt every day, debt that will cost them dearly in the future. But, sadly, they often think what they are doing is savvy, in fact they honestly consider what they are doing is *very* savvy.

Curious about that, are you? Well, it's all about generative AI. People are now starting to routinely have someone else provide and deliver answers and solutions—kind of like I depend on car mechanics. But in this case, they are not bothering to learn the core knowledge they need to do their occupation well.

That's right, they are not just delegating tasks like car repairs or plumbing to others—no, they are letting generative AI provide answers that substantially or totally substitute for their own brains and learning. In this way, they are intentionally piling up knowledge debt in the very area they are hired to be experts in. And if these folks can type in prompts into a handy AI service, well then, their boss and their company can do that, too! And it's just that way that these folks will then be considered very costly and very expendable. Yeah, in summary, they are intentionally but *unwisely* handling knowledge debt! Instead of that, the right approach is for you to master the use of AI as a welcome addition as one of many key resources to drill down upon…and the wrong approach is to let AI be a master over you!

Here's the thing. Technological replacement of human endeavors is not new. It happened when the first wheel was invented. It happened when electricity worked to replace many candlestick makers. But nowadays there are many workers in the electricity-generating industry. It happened to workers in the horse industry when automobiles took over the basic transportation world in many nations. But nowadays there are many workers in the auto industry, workers who have mastered the technology and work in concert with that technology. And yes, it happened to car mechanics who used to need just a wrench or two. But nowadays, car mechanics work hand-in-hand with deep technology designed for repairing cars!

Look, a highly Bible-literate layperson can read what the current generation of AI gives as answers to certain Bible questions and tell you the religious bias of the AI tool being used, whether that bias be Catholic or Baptist or Pentecostal—and yes, perhaps even the bias of a budding skeptic who denies the supernatural events of the Bible. Generative AI is only as good as, first, the sources that it has itself chosen, and second, how it filters the choices in or out, and third, how it chooses to display its output.

Business usage is no different. Well-studied folks in businesses can immediately spot a particular lack of depth, the flaws, the unaddressed issues, or the bad supporting references embedded in AI output that seemed at first to deliver a superior competence in just a few seconds. No, a thousand times, no! If you are relying on generative AI as the starting point and the ending point of your thinking in your core life activity—well, then, you have indeed intentionally handled knowledge debt unwisely. And you know what? Your client or your boss will not find it amusing. Then neither will you when you are fired! So, go forth, and intentionally and wisely handle knowledge debt…because you cannot afford to let your current and future value rest in the hands of AI output instead of your hard-earned competence!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Would you utilize a brain surgeon who uses generative AI as a continuously core source of their knowledge? Discuss.

2. How deeply are you tempted to succumb to allowing Chat GPT or like functionally replace your continuous knowledge development? How much do you succumb to that temptation, just a wee little bit that you think won't get out of hand? Discuss.

3. How are you doing personally when it comes to intentionally and wisely handling knowledge debt? Discuss.