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Students sit seemingly idle in the techno-hunch, engrossed in their own little square of light. An outraged outsider might opine, "Is this how a church youth group gathers?" This lament is only part of the story. While students do engage in mindlessness, they also search scripture, message friends, listen to inspiring music, watch videos of performers and everyday people sharing their faith. They tweet the silly. They tweet the profound. They live together in a digital world.

The scene characterizes an age-old tension of a technological shift—we lose some things with each new technology, but we also gain. Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner's *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* provides needed reflection on what is happening in our digital world in relationship to Christian theology and its practice. Changes are afoot. The ways people gather as a church are in flux. The concept of place is blurring. Speaking to this context, the authors provide evaluative language for a theological perspective on the changes and challenges of a digital world, helping us all to live "wisely" (14).

With the refreshing starting point of making "theology visible through the eyes of media studies and the network metaphor" (12), Campbell and Garner argue that theology is inherently networked. To explore this perspective, they bring the neophyte to this area of study up to speed. Basic definitions of theology and new media ensure the readers understand the breadth of their approach. For those already actively reading and studying in this area, much of this is review, but if the readers are new to either practical theology or media studies, the book will systematically map characteristics of each. Therefore, this book will be appropriate for both upper level undergraduates, supplementary graduate studies, and the thoughtful layperson.

Nevertheless, rarely in discussions of the digital world do we find an understanding of technology as something that encompasses more than just the hardware. Using the work of scholars such as Arnold Pacey and Stephen Monsma, Campbell and Garner include the processes of production, cultural values, and context in their definition. The authors trace the historical technological paradigm shifts and reactions to them. This history reminds us of how the illiterate were marginalized, which raises questions regarding the marginalization of the non-networked. As characteristics and values of this networked world are named, the strengths of the book begin to emerge. To live in our digitally-shaped world thoughtfully, they point out, awareness of the

media ecology is a must. Additionally, they stand in the line of James Carey's "media as culture" work and Quentin J. Schultze's framing of media within a cultural definition and Christian worldview.[1]

Proceeding systematically, Campbell and Garner define new media all the while looking hopefully for positive new practices. Their description uncovers the nature of what I prefer to call convergent media (new media) and suggests questions which we need to consider. What are the implications for the church if more people are living in augmented reality? The blurring of space and place, the blurring of creator and user—of author intent and interpretation—mean both new connections and lost connections. If reality is a malleable concept, how should the church speak of Truth? If traditional logic matters not, how do we persuasively communicate? And how are the values of this new media culture shaping us? If interactivity is a norm and the freedom of creativity with, at best, limited boundaries, is the method, then how might theology look and sound differently? Ontologically, adapting one's message to the audience takes on new dimensions. Interrogating what is normative and what is culturally preferable begins to take on new urgency. To thoughtfully do so requires that we foreground the characteristics and values of digital life—something this book does well.

As they move on to describe characteristics of networked religion, issues around the nature of the networked community, identity, merging and blurring practices, the irrelevance of authority, and the practice of multisite experiences emerge. Participating in this networked life comes with costs. Life online means giving up authorial ownership, offline living, communal authority, and privacy. This is a culture that is constantly in flux, mixing and re-mixing anything and everything. A culture where the expectations are that we will be in constant contact. A culture that assumes the individual "I" takes precedence over community. A culture where what I do online is not private and might be publicized. These are all conditions of this networked world.

People are taking their theology online with them, and they are discovering other stories and other practices, argue the authors. Living out one's theology in the network accords new relationships in community that are flattened, less hierarchical. Geographical boundaries are crossed. Our neighborhoods are no longer easily defined, as digital relationships begin to trump spatial ones. Connectedness happens on screen. Barriers to entry are lowered if not removed, but because of the equalizing effect, appeals to authority or orthodoxy are trivialized, and with freer access safety becomes a concern. Traditions are mixed. Identities are more fluid, more performative, emphasizing story and individual experience. The fluidity and fickleness of this community could easily lead to a loss of a moral compass. While Campbell and Garner believe defining "neighbor" more broadly evidences an incarnational theology that goes beyond the immediately physical (92), I wonder how a message of Jesus' incarnation is received when embodied presence is not central to online faith practice

Once the characteristic assumptions are laid out, the authors address countermeasures that might need to be enacted. Despite the fact that the digital environment makes identifying who one's neighbors are and where they are found difficult, the authors believe a simple heuristic will empower appropriate use of technology: love God and love neighbor. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). These values will cause disruption to those engaged in the digital environment. As *New York Times* journalist David Brooks reminds us, social media encourage self-aggrandizement and the publicizing of oneself.[2] By focusing on neighbor and practicing virtues of humility, honesty, and authenticity before God, our networked theology can

become a natural and necessary realm for the practice of a thoughtful Christianity, advocacy which Campbell's earlier and more broadly religious book avoids.[3]

Campbell and Garner's work makes a significant contribution to both media studies and theology, but their task was not easy. They encountered the challenge of attempting to extract themselves from their environment, examine it, and comment on its effects even as they are still a part of it. I see no way out of this conundrum. Academics who live in the older logic of process rationality are speaking about evaluating a digital culture that operates with a different logic. They are often constrained by the language of that older technology. They call for a "careful reading of technological trends." They speak of "systematic analysis," a "discernment process," and "digital literacy" (2). Their evaluation uses language to harness a networked world and turn it into a linear, step-by-step, point-by-point analysis—taming the wildness into something those of us who grew up in the older world might dare to think we could manage. But for those who have only lived with the technology, the approach may seem quaint.

Overall, this book makes the much needed argument for Christian communities to humbly and confidently question and engage with digital culture. Campbell and Garner's research is thorough, pulling from multiple disciplines and gathering in this one textbook earlier scholars' investigations and insights with the topic, extending that research in valuable ways using biblical norms.

This is no narrow rant from a particular theological interpretation nor does it dismiss technology. Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper once wrote, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"[4] The authors take this seriously in their exploration of the intersection of digital culture and theology. They refuse to encourage churches to take either an anti-cultural stance by ignoring this technological environment, nor do they succumb to an inevitable digital environment uncritically. The church, preach Campbell and Garner, must live out its beliefs and values in every area of life. Networked theology is simply not optional.

**Notes**

[1] James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1980); Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

[2] David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 250.

[3] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[4] *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461.