

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 10

2019

Reviewing *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*

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Recommended Citation

Voth, Jeffrey (2019) "Reviewing *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31380/1559-8624.1065>

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Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education. By Steven D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Publishing, Inc., 2018. 228 pp. ISBN 978-0-319-8308-5 (PAPERBACK) \$22.50.

Without a doubt, the world is in transition. It is difficult to find an arena that is not in some form or fashion affected or, at the very least, influenced significantly by the rub that exists between the digitized and the non-digitized. In *Spiritual Growth Through Online Education: Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, the authors, Stephen and Mary Lowe, endeavor to make a case that education, discipleship, and spiritual formation can be accomplished effectively in a digital, online context. The case for these beliefs rests upon the following assertions: (1.) There is an inherent biblical theology of ecology, (2.) Spiritual formation occurs naturally through digital ecologies and, (3.) Ecological connections to Christ and community that result from these ecologies are limitless.

The first section of the book, “A Biblical Theology of Ecology,” defines the authors’ biblically grounded model of formation. The model holds that as humans, we live in a series of “nested” ecologies (p. 21), an interconnected whole that is comprised of little interconnected ecologies that point back to an initial, perfect ecology in the Garden of Eden. The point is repeatedly made that examples such as flowers (Psalm 103:15), trees (Isaiah 5:1-7), seeds (Mark 4:8), vineyards (John 15:1-11), and an assortment of other mixed ecological domains (Psalm 65:9-13, Joel 2:21-22) are prevalent throughout scripture.

The second section of the book, “Spiritual Formation Through Digital Ecologies,” begins to apply the previously elucidated biblical theology of nested ecologies in a digital context. The authors offer evidence that online Christian communities of learning are just as valid and authentic as on campus communities and can produce the same spiritual outcomes.

The third section of the book, “Ecological Connections to Christ and Community,” provides a thorough examination of Pauline theology and the Apostle’s usage of the preposition *syn*. *Syn*, being defined as “connected to” Christ (see Romans 6:4), is used as the lynchpin for the ecological model and resultant substantiation of the thesis that these “nests,” whether physically present in the same space or online, can be considered synonymously.

The authors bolster their position with a second aspect of Pauline doctrinal support, the term *allelon*. This Greek term is defined as “one another,” and the authors hold that its repeated usage is indicative of “reciprocal” interactions and “exchanges of energy” (p. 172) between members of Christ’s Body. It is stated that there are “...over twenty-nine distinct verbs that identify ways Christians reciprocally interact with each other” (p. 181). Therefore, there are a “...multitude of ways Christians can engage one another in relationships... (p. 181).” This being the case, individuals need not be present with one another to be truly present with one another.

I have engaged in spiritual formation in various contexts for over thirty-five years. I found Stephen and Mary Lowe’s presentation to be biblically based and methodologically feasible. However, I feel that their case is slightly overstated and that the online method of building Christian community is preferred in this book, as opposed to being offered as a potentiality. Can online education and community offer everything a healthy, live, interactive setting can? Is it supposed to? Should it be the preferred method of making disciples? The authors of this work seem to lean in that direction. I would prefer to have seen their methodology offered as a potential way to offer “in Christ,” “reciprocal connections” for churches and schools, rather than the preferred one.

REFERENCES

Lowe, Steven D. and Mary E. Lowe (2018). *Ecologies of faith in a digital age: Spiritual growth through online education*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press Publishing, Inc.

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