Review

Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education. By Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018. x + 259 pp. Paper $22.50. ISBN 9780830852055.

As universities grapple with the place of online education alongside traditional residential and face-to-face learning, they likely ask highly pragmatic questions: How can this increase enrollment? Who is our target audience? What equipment must we buy? And most importantly: How will this increase revenue? In an era of uncertainty for higher education, these questions are understandable and necessary.

In addition, however, places of learning ought to be exploring the interpersonal and pedagogical implications of online education. For faith-based institutions, theological questions are appropriate and essential, too. In *Ecologies of Faith*, Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe set out to explore some of those theological issues. Both authors serve Liberty University's Rawlings School of Divinity: Stephen as graduate chair of doctoral programs and professor of Christian education, and Mary as associate dean for online programs and professor. Both have a natural interest in exploring the place of online learning because of their academic positions.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled "A Biblical Theology of Ecology," and the third part, entitled "Ecological Connections to Christ and Community," explore human interconnectedness and spiritual formation from philosophical and theological angles. The middle part, entitled "Spiritual Formation through Digital Ecologies," seems to be the heart of the book, and it directly addresses online learning.

In part one, the authors use the lens of human ecology to ask how online teaching and learning affects community formation and spiritual growth—two outcomes skeptics of online learning often mention that distance learning cannot accomplish well. Beginning in chapter one with the ecology of the Garden of Eden, the authors lay out the interconnectedness of creation, where God provided all the necessary elements for growth and flourishing.

The rest of part one explores the ecological motif through the rest of scripture. Chapter two explores some "ecological images of growth" in scripture, including trees, vineyards, flowers, and seeds. Chapter three focuses on the parables, exploring the parable of the seed (Mk 4:26-29), the sower (Mk 4:1-9 and parallels), and the mustard seed (Mk 4:30-32 and parallels). Chapter four examines Paul's imagery of the body of Christ and how it contains its own ecosystem.

The authors describe part two as "the heart of our case for an ecological perspective on spiritual formation" (67), and indeed this section begins to address the

topic named in the book's subtitle, spiritual growth through online education. Chapter five, entitled "Growing Together Online," gives a defense for the very concept of an "online community," a phrase some might consider an oxymoron. While acknowledging the unique hurdles that accompany fostering a community of persons who are not physically with each other, the authors mount a defense of "mediated presence" (72ff) as a means to foster community among online teachers and learners. The authors also rightly point out that in scripture, physical presence is not always required for spiritual transformation. For instance, Paul uses κοινωνία to describe the fellowship between humans and the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14), and there is obviously *no physical presence* involved (75). The authors later note that Paul engages in distance learning when he sends letters to stand in his place at churches (110). Through mediated instruction, Paul engages in community spiritual formation even when he is not present.

Chapter six, "Designing Learning Ecologies," is the most practical of the book. After reminding readers that an ecosystem is "interconnective, interactive, dynamic, and mutualistic" (88), the authors attempt to give some tools and strategies for making an online learning environment such an ecosystem. They rightly remind readers that online learners have their own ecosystems *outside* their learning environment (e.g., family, neighborhood, community, local church) and that a good online learning ecosystem should enable learners to engage their *other* ecosystems in hearty ways. Additionally, learners are themselves engaged by their other ecosystems. It is acceptable, for instance, to engage in online learning on spiritual subjects because learners should have a local church context coming alongside to provide spiritual formation through the physical presence of others (93). Turning briefly to strategies, the authors mention the obvious (Facebook, Twitter, blogs) alongside some lesser-known apps and platforms (Spreaker, Wikispaces) to give educators a vision for what might be available to foster the kinds of communities they desire—and to which they are accustomed when doing in-person teaching and learning.

Chapter seven addresses "Digital Ecologies Across the Digital Landscape" and points out some of the generational differences among emerging learners that teachers belonging to older generations might not know. Chapter eight focuses specifically on "social networks" and the power they possess to bring together persons with common interests.

Just when the authors seem to have found a trajectory for addressing online learning, however, they return to more theological discussions on "ecological connection to Christ" (ch. 9), "ecological connections to Christians" (ch. 10), "ecological interactions with other Christians" (ch. 11), "ecological sanctification" (ch. 12), and "thinking ecologically about spiritual growth" (ch. 13). This final section makes only passing references to online learning.

This book attempts to offer both a theology of human relationships and interconnectedness *and* a guide for online learning. It excels at the former but falters at the latter. One of the most practical tips, for instance, is to start a Facebook group for

any online class you might teach and let people share their prayer requests there (97-98). Even now, that sounds somewhat trite. The authors never quite address deep ways to foster spiritual growth in online settings.

For educators wanting some insights into how to continue the important work of building relationships and forming learners spiritually despite little to no in-person contact, this book comes up short. Only the middle third of the book addresses these topics in meaningful ways. Even still, there are important questions unaddressed. What does it mean to educate students for professions (e.g., ministry) that involve heavy interpersonal interaction while using pedagogical methods and settings that isolate them from interpersonal contact with peers? Are there some types of classes or topics that are better suited to online learning than others? Is being in the physical presence of other humans itself a spiritual discipline that ought to be cultivated?

For readers wanting an overview of human connectedness through a theological lens, or who want a brief defense and justification of online learning even in faith-based settings, this book may prove helpful. The authors provide an excellent tour through the scriptural imagery of human relationships. If nothing else, their arguments may persuade some educators that in-person learning is not the *only* way to do theological education.

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