Book Review/Critique – Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture

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Abstract

This is a review of the book Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture by Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner. This book brought together concepts which dealt with Theology and Technology. The authors reviewed the technologies of the past, which are referenced as Traditional and compared them to the new media technology of today. It is explained how a networked theology can be comprised not only for a church but for all facets of one's life. Several reviews are included from various book sites.

Keywords: Network Society, Technology, Digital Culture, New Media

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Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture was written by Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner. It was published in 2016 by Baker Academic, in Grand Rapids, Michigan and sells for $11.19 - $13.49 on Amazon and slightly higher on other websites. It is also available on Kindle for $12.99. Heidi A. Campbell is an associate professor at the Department of Communications and an Affiliate Faculty in the Religious Studies Interdisciplinary Program at Texas A&M University. She received her Ph.D. From the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom.

Stephen Garner received his Ph.D. From the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Stephen Garner is the Head of the School of Theology at Laidlaw College. He teaches primarily in the area of practical theology, and his research focuses on theology in dialogue with science, technology, and new media, as well religion, media, and popular culture. This book is part of the Engaging Culture series whose editors are William A. Dyrness and Robert K. Johnston. Dyrness and Johnston (2016), have developed this series, "to help Christians respond with theological discernment to our contemporary culture" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, np). The book is formatted in six chapters, totaling 175 pages and includes acknowledgments, bibliography, notes, and an index.

Heidi A. Campbell's name is synonymous with digital media and the church. She has written several journals, books, and co-authored books. This writer had not heard of Stephen Garner, however, Ms. Campbell speaks of him very highly. He according to his biography, is very interested and has had several conversations with Heidi A. Campbell, concerning theology and new media. The two authors have come together to present a work for today's church. In

the introduction of the book, they define theology and the relationship between Network and Theology.

The definition of theology is taken directly from what this writer was taught in Seminary. Campbell and Garner (2016) define it as "… derived from the Greek words theos (god) and logos (word, or teaching of study), literally means 'words about god' or 'the teaching about or study of god'" (p. 10). From this writing, a problem was presented. Whenever a writer defines God in the sense of theology, it is never shown with a small letter "g", neither is Theos or Logos written with a small "t" or "l". The "g" is always capitalized denoting who God is, and Theos, which means God is capitalized, along with Logos, which is the Word of God, so this writer was disappointed from this point forward. The word God was also interspersed throughout the document going forward as God, however, this is something that the copyeditor should have caught. The audience intended for this book appears to be Christians, however, Christians would not necessarily need these definitions.

One of the reviews on the Amazon website stated, "Good look at modern issues the church must face. The authors seem to have a well-balanced approach sharing many valuable perspectives leaving the reader to decide for themselves the appropriate responses to new technologies" (Heather, 2016). While the discussion of modern issues facing the church today, the examples of such are limited in the book.

In a review of the book which was printed in Publishers Weekly (2016), this discussion is continued:

> Perhaps most salient is this book's lack of specific examples: in a discussion of how the Internet has enabled laypeople to challenge the authority of more official theological gatekeepers, the authors cite the abstract studies of other scholars rather than including mainstream examples. (p. 95)

Chapter one begins with a discussion to ensure that the reader understands the relationship between theology and technology and the church's response to technology. Campbell and Garner (2016) say there are three key responses to technology within the Christian Church. They are optimism, pessimism, and instrumentalism (p. 29). In this writer's opinion, these reactions are unique to each other. They are positive in that technology can enable the church to spread its message throughout the world as Jesus requested in Matthew 28:19-20.   The responses are negative in the sense that the technology, of the World Wide Web, opens up to a Christian, a brand new world of web applications which they are not aware existed and may be harmful.

Arthur (2013) also provided insight saying, "… Media can help 'foster forms of dialogue and debate' and so 'reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family" (p. 11). This dialogue also contains information concerning what was viewed as traditional media and new media.

Chapter two introduces the reader to new media. Here the authors provide information as to what was considered traditional media, such as analog devices or televisions and radio. New media consists of the digital devices, which are laptop computers, cell phones, IPAD, and smartphones. This chapter is informative, yet technical as Campbell and Garner explain how the world came from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0. Understanding these concepts will help the church understand the capabilities of new media.

Daniel, an Amazon reviewer, posted,

'Networked Theology' gives helpful historical background on Christian's responses to technology over the centuries, examines the philosophies behind accepting or rejecting certain technologies, and then attempts to form a theology for a digital age. One concern that I had here was that the authors seem to focus more on a social justice agenda than the

gospel. While this book contains much helpful material, it is technical enough that it may only be worth reading for those who want to seriously examine their views of technology. "Networked Theology" is a good book overall, but not very accessible for the average reader. (Daniel, 2017).

Chapter three discusses how faith is lived in a network society viewing the impact of online religion and religion online. Online networking is flexible. A person can interact with another person and not share the same geographical space. Relationships can increase and include more diversity. "Online communities, therefore, transcend geographical and physical space and form a new shared space via digital media" (Cloete, 2015, p. 3).

Some terms stand out in the online communities. Digital religion, online religion, and religion online seem similar there is a difference. Religion online refers to the different information that is available online and online religion refers to religious practices formed online. Religion online is one-way communication as there is minimal interaction. "Digital religion includes religion online and online religion" (Cloete, 2015, p. 4).

Online religion is a place where people can come together, whether they are a part of the church or whether they had left the church. Online religion tosses traditionalism out of the church door. Knowing the difference will help the reader understand what it means to merge the network with theology and determine the identity of the neighbor.

Chapter four begins a discussion of who the neighbor is in the digital culture and how they can best be served. The digital world expands the territory of the neighbor to web addresses all over the world. Cyberspace is the expansion of the network. Campbell and Garner (2016) declare, "Knowing who our neighbors are, where they are located, and how we should act toward them lies at the heart of a networked theology" (p. 95). Hess (2016) a professor of educational leadership, offered this review,

A thoughtful, compelling, and substantial reflection on the intersection of networked

religion and Christian theology. The authors' unique backgrounds--his in computer

science, hers in media studies--offer unique perspectives from which to consider difficult

questions about identifying and loving our neighbors in the midst of digital cultures. An

excellent text for both seminary and congregational study. (Hess, 2016)

Chapter five provides a framework for groups to develop a faith-based community

response to new media. Campbell and Garner (2016) present a four-stage strategy that groups

can work through and develop their process to new technology. The strategy is first knowing the

history of the community and understanding the traditions. Also, one must know the core beliefs

of the group involved, the media negotiation and decision makers and know how the community

will be involved in the roll-out of this new technology (pp. 103-104). Soukup (2017) in his

review stated "At some level, each religious group that approaches digital technology has

thought about their technological choices. Here they make those reflections much more explicit"

(p. 25).

Chapter six brings it all together. This chapter discusses how new media technology can

enhance the delivery of the Word of God to the world. All of the ideas that were presented

should enable a group to put together a networked theology. This will include the "biblical

themes of justice, mercy, love of God and neighbor and humility before God" (Campbell &

Garner, 2016, p. 146). The networked theology is not just for the church but can be utilized in

every aspect of one's life.

The beginning chapters which discussed the technology portion of a networked theology

were extended to this writer because this writer was more interested in the theology. The authors

brought together specific knowledge based on their specialties. Campbell understands theology

and Garner does also, however, with the addition of his science and technology background, this

book becomes a possible valuable tool for churches.

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