Introduction

Toward a Theology of the Internet

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This book is a collection of independent essays brought together into one volume focusing on a variety of themes revolving around a theology of the internet. There are at least two key common themes (and several subthemes) that have emerged from the collection that are noteworthy and helpful to be aware of prior to reading the individual chapters, namely, the themes of *community* and *character*.

In regard to the theme of *community*, upon reading the collection of essays as a whole, we discovered a reoccurring focus on the nature and the type of community that is formed through the medium of the internet. Concerning the theme of *character*, we detected a nearly ubiquitous focus on the shaping power of internet behaviors and communities upon the formation of virtue and vice. In this brief introduction, I will highlight some of the instances of these themes—*community and character-formation*—as they appear in the content of the various chapters of this book. My goal will not be to summarize the chapters, nor will it be to offer a critique of them. Rather, I will aim to simply draw out the implications of the themes of *community* and *character* to provide a hermeneutical prolegomena and a coherent theological lens that can be used to assist the reader in assessing the individual chapters of the book, and the book as it works together in its various component parts.

The Internet and Community: Toward a Cruciform Network Sociality

The Digital Communion of the Saints

Central to most of the chapters in this book is a consideration, assessment, and critique of community that is created through the internet compared to community that occurs outside of the digital realm. It is worth bringing the voices of Myers/Stephens, Elliston, Frederick, Callaway, and Moore into constructive dialogue in order to assess the main points that have been made, and to consider how they can be synthesized to speak in a preliminary manner about the issue of community and the internet.

The two main currents that appear in this collection typically fall into opposing sides of the spectrum, namely, those which critique internet-based communities as in some sense deficient or problematic (Elliston, Frederick, Rae, and Gilbertson), and those which cast a more positive vision for the purpose and potential of internet communities (Myers/Stephens and Callaway). Of course, as the reader will discover, the actual positions of each author contain both positive and negative assessments of internet community. Yet, I am speaking here in general terms in reference to the main emphasis—whether positive or negative—in the particular essays of the authors in this book. For example, in my own chapter ("Cybergenesis of the Digital Self") I mostly focus on the negative potential for disastrous, communal and demonic activity through the medium of the internet. Yet, in stating negatively what is potentially dangerous about the medium, I have, through engaging with the other essays in this book, come to see how these same technologies can be used in a redemptive manner.

Myers's and Stephens's chapter focuses initially on exploring an ethics of seeing through parsing out a biblical and patristic visual-ascetic practice of the "fasting of the eyes" as it relates to the internet. However, its secondary point relates to the power of sacred images to create communities of proximity and sacramental presence. The idea is that the context for the celebration of the sacraments and the Christian visual experience is the community of the church. The implication and challenge—as I take it—seems to be in applying this patristic experience of transformative, communal "seeing" to our experience as a digital community, or what I would like to refer to as the "digital communion of the saints." The question becomes: In what sense can our cyber-praxis contribute to the experience of the proximity

and presence of God through our own proximity to and presence with one another as a digital communion of believers?

While there seems to be great potential in the power of the internet as a medium for building community, Elliston in his chapter rightly wonders: Are the communities created by the internet able to operate as effectively as flesh and blood communities? Citing the inability of online communities to foster long-term friendships and the decreased function of burden-bearing in cyber-settings, Elliston focuses on the deficiency of the medium to compete with flesh and blood communities to produce true Christian presence and proximity. This resonates with Rae's suspicion that the move to virtual workplaces will result in a perceived lack of adequate human interaction leading to the feeling of a lack of belonging and identity in workers. He also keenly detects that the loss of a sense of the intrinsic goodness of work when it undergoes a shift into a merely instrumental role in its virtual instantiations could constitute a deficiency in the virtual workplace as a community.

In my view, both perspectives represent the reality of the potentiality, potency, and presence of cyber-communities. Unless it is recognized that the internet constitutes a different type of community than non-cyber social settings and mediums, there will always be an inherent deficiency in communities that have their genesis in the zeros and ones of the internet. As technology and communications expert Andreas Wittel has argued in his article "Toward a Network Sociality," internet existence is far less stable and coherent than life occurring outside of the net. Due to the ambiguous, often inflated and fabricated nature of online communication, community exists in the internet as a "network sociality," a unique communal phenomenon of community that is inherently fragmented and unreliable. While not using the term "network sociality," readers will find the concept of internet communication and community as a "network" taken up by Callaway in his chapter as a guiding metaphor for understanding digital engagement and culture. Likewise, Gilbertson, in her chapter, also draws attention to the network-based culture of the internet by exploring the loose nature of the communities they form. Thus, she too picks up on a common thread in cyber-studies, namely, that there is a potential and proclivity within the medium of the internet and its users to experience community as a network sociality typically characterized by fragmentation.

In a preliminary attempt to bring these diverse perspectives together, I would like to suggest that while it is true that "our cyber selves exist in a network sociality of fragmentation rather than a community of

coherence,"[1] nevertheless, this is not a defect inherent in the medium of the internet. Rather, it is a problem that is derived from our sinful use of the medium. If the church is to embrace the internet as a mechanism of cultivation for the koinonia of the digital communion of the saints as the body of Christ, Christians must transform the phenomenon of a network sociality into something that exceeds the current modus operandi. What is required in order to redeem the medium so that it might be a sufficient generator of transformative Christian presence and proximity is a sanctification of cyber-community into a *counter-cultural*, *cruciform* network sociality. If the current trend in behavior of our network socialities is based on fragmentation, distance, and individualism, we must aim as the church to rebuke these anti-communal tendencies, replacing them with the virtues of coherence, presence, and burden-bearing communalism. To use Kim's framework, we can adopt the medium of the internet and network socialities, but we must become innovators and repudiators of them as well. The network sociality of the internet must be cruciformed in order to become a catalyst for the pneumatic power and presence of the digital communion of the saints.

Incarnation through Interface

While readers will likely agree that the above approach to online communities and networks is worth pursuing, it is less likely that there will be agreement on the question of whether the internet presents a medium that increases embodiment through incarnation, or if it is one that decreases embodiment through "excarnation."[2] Callaway argues that our interfaces become part of our embodied existence, thus extending our bodies by incorporating them into the technology of the internet. He helpfully compares this to the concept of the body of Christ in the New Testament in which human persons are envisioned as existing within an extended network. To Callaway: "Paul's understanding of the church hinges upon a conception of the human person not as body-bound but as extended."[3]

Moore's chapter likewise views our use of the internet as an "extension" of the human person. Yet, Moore keenly points out one potential problem with this reality, namely, the fact that human beings are sinful.

1. Frederick, *Cybergenesis of the Digital Self*, 42.
2. Callaway, *Interface is Reality*, 25–28.
3. Ibid., 35.

Thus, theological anthropology is a variable to consider when discussing the extended nature of our bodily existence through the internet. If we are sinful, then it stands to follow that our cyber-extension will also engage in sinful acts, and is susceptible to assault and damage from the sin of the cyber-extension of the Other.

In stark contrast to Callaway, Elliston argues that internet churches "can speak to the theological revolution enacted in the Incarnation, but cannot be incarnate for its members."[4] Here too, I think both sides of the coin are necessary. To point out, as Elliston has, that what essentially constitutes the phenomenon of internet community is more accurately designated as a "network sociality," is to highlight the current problem with the medium that really does hinder the full blessing and experience of embodied Christian communion. Yet, in my view, recognizing this problem does not delegitimize the medium. Nor does it disqualify it in any way from its cruciform consecration as a viable instrument for the digital communion of the saints. Rather, in recognizing the sinfulness of the humanity that is extended through interface (Moore), and reckoning with the flightiness and fragmentation that currently constitutes our often disembodied ecclesial social networks (Elliston), we can identify the very problems and sinful proclivities that must be eliminated in order for the presence of God to be manifested through a cruciformed community of incarnate, extended souls in communion with each other through the zeros and ones of the HTML of cruciform love.

The Internet and Character: Toward the Sanctification of the Saints through a Cruciform Network Sociality

Demonology of the Digital Self

The second major strand of cohesion that emerged from this collection relates to the formation of character and identity through our online engagement and patterns of behavior. It is generally recognized by all of the authors that the medium is capable—in varying degrees—of contributing to the formation of virtue or vice. Yet, within the individual essays (perhaps with the exception of Bogosian's which deals with the topic of virtue ethics) there is typically a tendency to emphasize either virtue or vice.

4. Ibid., 170.

In regard to vice, the most severe of the critiques is my own chapter which formulates a demonology of the digital self. The idea here is that our online engagements leave in their wake clusters of data which can be activated by others even after we unplug—indeed, even after we physically die! The activated—or to use the technical hermeneutical term "ideated"—result of our digital imprint, I argue, conjures up a residual narrative self that can become a negative phantom presence. Wallenfang's discourse on the "promiscuity of the self" created through the varying forms of self-presentation on the internet hits on this same point. The worlds and selves that we create through the internet are not *like* the real world; *they are, in some sense a real world*, with real effects, and real consequences. The picture of digital demonic gloom and doom that I paint in my chapter—while talking more about *the result* of our negative behaviors on the internet on others—connects substantially with the observations of Bogosian, Wallenfang, and Elliston who parse out *the particular behaviors* that lead to the creation of harmful, indeed demonic (in a phenomenological sense), digital content.

Bogosian, for example, focuses on the propensity of internet users to develop habits of vice through the practice of vainglorious online behaviors. This vainglory becomes ingrained in our being, our character, through our actions that are rooted in the misrepresentation of our social status, physical appearance, and our expertise. An instantiation of human pride and inauthenticity, these behaviors affect ourselves and others. In relation to my own thesis, these behaviors would affect not only ourselves and current users, but future users through their seemingly endless activation and ideation.

Resonating with Bogosian and my own observations are the contributions of Wallenfang who applies Levinas' idea of the "temptation of temptation" to our experience of internet search engines. The concept of an empty, blinking search engine bar itself represents a true invitation to either virtue or vice; that is, the medium itself, apart from its content, constitutes a tempting phenomenon. This is important, because as Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul have famously argued, it is not merely the *content delivered* through mediums of technology, but the *mediums themselves* that constitute part of the impact and effect of the message. This point is well-delivered by Baker in his chapter which successfully brings this core idea to bear on a theology of the internet by keenly and carefully arguing that *efficient* mediums are not always the same as *effective* mediums.

Sanctification and the Digital Self

The positive counterpoint to the prophetic digital doom oracle that is my own chapter comes through the work of Myers/Stephens and Bogosian. Both chapters offer rich resources for the life of holiness and virtue in the digital realm, and both chapters drink deeply and impressively from the well of Scripture and the early church fathers. Myers/Stephens break new ground in applying the patristic emphasis on "the moral use of the eyes" and "visual asceticism" to a theological praxis to Christian life on the internet. In applying Clement of Alexandria's concept of a "systematic curriculum for the pedagogy of the eyes" to contemporary internet praxis, Myers/Stephens offer a new way forward for Christian spiritual formation in the cyber realm. It strikes me that most of the literature I have encountered concerning Christian behavior on the internet is reactionary rather than catechetical. What Myers/Stephens offer here should, in my view, be incorporated into the very fabric of contemporary catechesis in order that our approach to cyber-reality would be preemptive and formative, rather than primarily reactionary and restorative.

In the same manner, Bogosian's chapter is where the abstract theologizing of the book (which itself is necessary and good) hits the ground running. Bogosian offers the patristic practices of prayer, silence, and solitude as a framework for turning our engagement on the internet into an experience of virtue formation, character growth, and sanctification. Regarding transformative approaches to the internet, Stoddart's response to the dulling, capitalistic, consumeristic "internet gaze" makes a major contribution. He argues that the transition from a dulling "gaze" to a "caring gaze" will cultivate "connection and community." In my view, this type of community is precisely what we have previously labelled a cruciform network sociality for the digital communion of the saints.

Conclusion

Labelling this section a conclusion is, perhaps, deceptive. In all reality this book constitutes a truly collaborative beginning. In working toward a constructive, cruciform theology of the internet, there is much work to be done. The one conclusion I can make is that the topic of the internet, technology, the church, and the self is one that is vastly underrepresented in the literature at the time of this book's publication. It is certainly viewed

as a "special interest" topic. Yet, it is evident to the contributors and likely to you as the reader that there is perhaps no topic more pertinent to our daily walk as contemporary followers of Jesus Christ than the theological implications and presuppositions of the internet. My hope is that what this book offers will be expanded, corrected, and supplemented by many other books, articles, sermons, catechetical materials, podcasts, and conversations to come. It is only when we come to terms with our existence as embodied persons connected through interface that we will begin to see the internet as more than a mere supplementary component to our personal lives, but a medium of vital connection for the digital communion of the saints through the HTML of cruciform love.