

Network Theology: Christian Understandings of New Media

Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009).

Reviewer: Tim Hutchings
tim.hutchings@humlab.umu.se

Recent years have seen a rush of new books seeking to help Christian audiences understand the ecology of digital media. Church leaders can now find texts to guide them through the construction of websites (Stephenson 2006), blogs (Bailey and Storch 2007), digital worship resources (Schultze 2004, Wilson and Moore 2008) and online evangelism (von Buseck 2010). Douglas Estes has provoked controversy by offering a theological defense of online churches (2009), leading to a series of online discussions in *Christianity Today's* blog Out of Ur (e.g. Hyatt 2009) and a scathing review in Baylor University's recent special issue of *Christian Reflection* (Owens 2011). Lay Christians have been addressed by new publications seeking to encourage authentic godly living in digital environments (Birdsong and Heim 2010). At least two new books use digital media as a metaphor to discuss Christian faith with humor (Haskew and Parker 2010, Keefauver 2010), following the example of earlier works like *The Spiritual Adventures of CyberCindy* (Rowell 2003).

The three books discussed in this review occupy a specific place within this burgeoning landscape of Christian technological commentary. Each seeks to undertake a theological analysis of digital media as a whole, explaining the significance of new communications technology –

particularly social network sites – and proposing Christian responses. A shared theological vision emerges from these texts, emphasizing networks and relationships while encouraging critical reflection on the impact of technology.

Each text comes from an evangelical author with a background in church leadership. Dwight Friesen is an associate professor at Mars Hill Graduate School, a Christian college in Seattle, and pastored the Emerging Church group “Quest: A Christ-Commons” until its closure in 2007. Quest features in Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger’s book *Emerging Churches*, where Friesen receives a lengthy biography (2006, pp. 269-272). Shane Hipps wrote *Flickering Pixels* while working as the pastor of Trinity Mennonite Church, Phoenix, and has since joined the teaching staff of Rob Bell’s Mars Hill Bible Church, Grand Rapids. Jesse Rice worked for eight years as “worship arts director” for Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, California, and is now a Christian musician. Each author emphasizes their success in secular employment, coming to Christian ministry from backgrounds in the dot-com industry (Friesen), advertising (Hipps) and psychology (Rice), and relies heavily on this experience outside the church to provide a wealth of anecdotes and examples. Training in business is important in each book as a demonstration of the author’s understanding of secular culture, grounding the writer’s authority to interpret it.

Dwight Friesen’s *Thy Kingdom Connected* was published by Baker Books as part of the Emersion series of Emergent Village resources. Emersion is intended for church leaders, helping to meet “the challenges of a changing culture with vision and hope for the future” (title page). Subtitled *What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*, Friesen’s text argues that online connections offer models for new understandings of church leadership, institutional structures, local community, proselytism and spiritual formation.

The thirteen sections of *Thy Kingdom Connected* are divided into five “clusters,” each

addressing a different theme. The first, “Seeing Connectively,” begins with a Foreword by Leonard Sweet, the popular Christian author and speaker. Sweet poetically interprets the significance of God’s creation of light in terms of connections. If light is formed by links between frequencies, he suggests, then God’s first words in the Book of Genesis could be translated, “Let there be links.” The language of light and darkness is used in the Gospel of John to speak of a state of relationship with God, reiterating this connection between light and links. Darkness brings the delusion of isolation, from God and from one another – in other words, hell.

Friesen’s own Preface sets out his purpose in more polemical terms, beginning with the tale of a young couple, burned out in church leadership, who find hope through a new kind of small-group community. “We’ve lost sight of God’s networked kingdom,” he declares (p. 19), and we need to discover a new way of seeing, rejecting the individualistic worldview of modernity. This new relational vision is presented as a paradigm shift, shared with Emergent Village and other new Christian movements, and *Thy Kingdom Connected* draws on Scripture, theology, science and network theory to “tap out the music that will enable critics and early adopters to dance together to God’s glory” (p. 26). Mere print cannot capture the dynamic nature of networks, so each chapter ends with a list of further readings and discussion questions to share “in the context of your own relational network” (p. 29).

The main chapters of the text begin in the second “cluster,” “God’s Networked Kingdom.” Friesen uses his own life experience, network theory and the Bible to introduce the idea of a scale-free Kingdom – in which every part of creation is a node, connected to every other through a flexible network of links around well-connected hubs. The “networked person” (p. 64) comes into existence, grows and gains self-understanding through relations with God and others.

The third “cluster,” in keeping with the stated target audience of the Emersion series, applies this understanding to leadership. “Leading That Connects” calls for new “connective leaders” who exercise “relational authority” (p. 81), striving “to live as a Google-like linker of meaning-making connections and suffering-eliminating relationships” (p. 82). Connective leadership is costly, self-emptying, and follows the model of Christ’s ‘connective action’ on the cross (p. 83); all Christians are called to be leaders in this sense, serving those around them by building the connections they need. This kind of leadership does not seek structure and control, but to hold order and unpredictability together in “chaordic” relationship.

The fourth “cluster,” “Networked Church,” applies these ideas of relationship and unpredictability to ecclesiology. Friesen looks first at the institution, or “Christ-Commons,” and then at the spontaneous gathering of “Christ-Clusters” – the body and soul of the church, respectively. A “common” is a public space of connections; its purpose in the church is to act as the visible structure within which “clusters” can form, encouraged by the stewardship of a pastor/gardener/“network ecologist.” Each “cluster” comes together briefly, at the prompting of the Spirit, to pursue a particular task, and this participation in God’s mission gives life and adaptability to the whole church.

The final cluster, “Connective Practices,” looks at the actual processes of linking. Friesen describes missional linking as a practice of “And-ing,” connecting one’s own Christ-Cluster to other nodes and clusters and hoping to be transformed in the encounter. This kind of change is “viral,” spreading uncontrollably from person to person through “And-ing” connections. Indeed, “living the viral gospel is a little like sneezing” (p. 143). Switching metaphors again, Friesen suggests that “networked spiritual formation,” healthy transformation, comes from “active participation in the weaving of the kingdom tapestry” (p. 163). A networked paradigm combines

centered and bounded ideas, seeing God not just as a goal to be reached but as a presence to be encountered in, and the force that animates, relationships.

Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith is Shane Hipps' second book on Christianity and media. Hipps' earlier book, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and the Church* (2006), was intended for an audience of church leaders. *Flickering Pixels* repeats much of the same material for a more general audience. In essence, Hipps' argument is very simple: McLuhan was right – the medium is the message, and we must learn to use our technologies or be used by them. This is a much more cautionary approach than Friesen's, focused on the dangers of technology and how they can be controlled. Hipps agrees that a new message emerges from new media, but he is much less enthusiastic about the form that message will take.

While working as an advertising executive, Hipps claims, he discovered the writings of Marshall McLuhan, “a thinker who had been considered irrelevant for decades” (p. 12). McLuhan's once-famous insights have “profound implications for the Christian faith,” demonstrating that “any serious study of God is a study of communication” shaped by technology. McLuhan has hardly been forgotten in media studies, of course, and Hipps at least cites Ong, Meyrowitz and Postman in his bibliography, but the theoretical foundation of *Flickering Pixels* relies almost exclusively on McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1994). Even McLuhan's own religious writings (McLuhan, McLuhan and Szlerek, 1999) are ignored.

Flickering Pixels is divided into seventeen brief chapters, each around ten pages long. Hipps begins by encouraging his readers to wake up to the impact of technology as far more than a tool, drawing examples from popular culture, Greek myths and his own life experiences to illustrate the importance of seeing the hidden messages encoded in the world around us.

Channeling McLuhan again, Hipps explains that each medium really has four dimensions: it is an extension of the self, it makes an older technology obsolete, it retrieves some experience once offered by an older medium, and it carries unintended consequences. Print culture, he argues, changed church architecture and established cognitive reasoning – rather than emotion or desire – as the foundation of Christian faith. Moral relativism arose through the proliferation of information that began with the telegraph, through which knowledge could be shared instantly without any development of wisdom. The Internet accelerates this process even further, with potentially dangerous consequences. “If we are not alert, the information Age may stunt our growth and create a permanent puberty of the mind” (p. 72).

Images also have their own distinctive impact, encouraging an emotional response but – particularly in the form of TV – weakening imagination and favoring appearance over substance. Image culture favors the story of Jesus over the abstract doctrines of Paul, ethics over theory, and practical over systematic theology. Print culture favored Paul’s model of instant, dramatic conversion; image culture makes space for Thomas’ doubt and seeking.

Connection over distance is another ambiguous gift of media, with both positive and negative effects. Telephone and radio communication retrieve some of the tribal experience of pre-literate culture, while also disembodied and separating us. TV encourages empathy for a constant parade of far-off tragedies, but undermines our capacity to help those nearby. The Internet encourages us to share information with everyone, but this ease of communication actually erodes true friendship (p. 113). The “anonymous intimacy” of virtual communities and social network sites “provides just enough connection to keep us from pursuing real intimacy,” which entails risk, exclusiveness, permanence and proximity (p. 114). The best solution to this plight is to take breaks from our electronic communicators and speak to our friends and

colleagues face-to-face, particularly at points of argument and conflict. Family relations, meanwhile, are reversed: armed with their knowledge of digital media and coded “1337” speak, children have escaped the oversight of their parents.

Hipps pays great attention to the relationship between the supposedly logical left and emotional right hemispheres of the brain, something that fascinated McLuhan. “Bulging left-brain muscles are an essential tool for understanding the Bible,” Hipps explains, but electronic media favor the right. Our true potential is unlocked only by “brain balance,” which apparently begins with awareness of the significance of the tools we use.

These discussions of religion and technology have demonstrated that the Christian message is inseparable from, and significantly affected by, the methods used to share it. Contrary to the classic evangelical dictum, both methods and message must evolve to meet our new cultural context (p. 153). Hipps encourages pioneers to adopt a stance of “daring humility” (p. 159), demonstrating radical commitment without pretending to certainty. Intentionality is vital: Christians must pay attention to their media choices and act accordingly. God cares about media, as shown by His painstaking instructions for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant specified in Exodus. These observations suggest a media approach to the Incarnation: Jesus is God’s perfect communication, in which medium and message are united. If the church is the body of Christ, then “the message of the gospel is conveyed by the medium of the church’s life in the world” (p. 168). The habits, values and practices of church communities reflect, or deny, the gospel. “Go therefore, and *be* the message” (p. 184). This is all vintage McLuhan, explained in *The Medium and the Light*, but for once Hipps is curiously reluctant to admit his debt: just one footnote appears, without comment.

The Church of Facebook, by Jesse Rice, is the only one of these three texts to claim to

address a non-Christian audience. Rice does not intend to promote any particular doctrine, he promises: “It is simply my contention that the gospel (literally “good news”) of Jesus is particularly well suited for helping us understand, adapt to, and even thrive among the challenges of living within a hyperconnected culture” (p. 22). The usual pages of enthusiastic recommendations come not only from Christian leaders and authors but also from secular Facebook experts. Rice’s cautionary approach echoes that of Hipps, and his conclusions – particularly the need for intentional evaluation of our media practices – are much the same, but the emphasis here is on practical and human insights rather than ecclesial change.

Rice’s book opens with the concept of “spontaneous order.” Crowds, machines and insects all tend to fall into sync, generating unexpected outcomes. Those affected must adapt their behavior to fit the new order (pp. 20-21). Facebook is a perfect example: hundreds of millions of users have joined, their new habits have unanticipated consequences, and we must adapt to navigate the change. *The Church of Facebook* is divided into six sections, two addressing each of these three themes. Examples are drawn throughout the book from engineering, business, architecture, history, theology and the Bible, but particularly from experimental psychology.

Rice’s core argument is very simple: “*connection* is the key to happiness” (p. 28), creating a sense of safety and belonging. According to Rice the incredible growth of Facebook is accomplished by one fundamental force: “the human need for *home*” (p. 51). Facebook has four home-like qualities: it’s “where we keep all the stuff that matters most to us,” including photographs and things that express who we are (p. 76); it’s where we find family; it’s where we feel safe, because “we can control the environment” (p. 80); and it’s “where we can ‘just be ourselves’” (p. 82), displaying our images and reporting our activities on a platform “that dishes

out a form of ‘unconditional positive regard’ in spades” (p. 84).

This kind of spontaneously emerging order has unexpected consequences, and Rice’s second set of chapters starts to introduce a more cautionary tone. Facebook’s appeal is rooted in the power to control self-representation, “creating and operating our own little world” (p. 98). This leads to the first problem: control is vital to well-being, but too much control has the same effect as too little, a sense of being isolated, overloaded and overwhelmed. Hyperconnection is the experience of having too much control, too many choices, too many links to maintain. The second problem is equally serious: a transformed understanding of friendship. Each user is constantly surrounded by an audience, an “invisible entourage,” awaiting their next performance of self-revelation (p. 111). Facebook homogenizes this audience, blurring boundaries between public and private and between different social contexts. Privacy and authority are confused when children and parents, employees and bosses become “friends.” Peer and romantic relationships become harder to define. Time management and the self are blurred by a new kind of “tethered self,” permanently connected. “The ‘voices’ of our invisible entourage can drown out the sound of our own hearts” (p. 145), stunt our independence, and blind us to our surroundings – “almost as though we’re living an out-of-body experience” (p. 147).

Rice’s third set of chapters demands adaptation, shifting how we think about and live in community. The real problem with our relationships is not their online component, but an attitude of “relational consumerism” (p. 173), the kind of controlled, low-cost, entertaining connection facilitated by Facebook. People are thirsty for community, and the site offers “enough of an emotional buzz to keep us coming back, even though we grow increasingly thirsty with every visit” (p. 187). Jesus demonstrates a completely different kind of relationship when he meets the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, and his display of intentionality, humility and

authenticity establishes three principles that can transform our online communication. Jesus focuses on what matters most, without being distracted by the busyness of the moment or by procrastination. He is open to the needs of others, without giving in to fear, judgment, jealousy and irresponsibility. His honesty and genuineness creates trust, freedom and the chance for change. This is a model for living that avoids the vices Facebook can foster. Rice ends his text by suggesting a few more specific tasks to get this process underway: regular personal inventories of our feelings, to practice mindfulness; avoidance of online devices before and after bed; paying attention to how we use Facebook; checking our online authenticity; and focusing on one or two friends for a month, to experience life without hyperconnection.

Each of these books emphasizes the theological importance of networks and relationships, presented as an ancient truth rediscovered through Christian evaluation of digital media. For Friesen, the network is a paradigm that can transform every aspect of our thinking about Christian life, including discipleship, community, organization and leadership. For Hipps, the theological lesson is more specific: reflection on the interplay between medium and message shows us that the Christian community of the church is an integral part of the “good news.” Both of these arguments represent a reframing of Evangelical Protestant ideas. Friesen’s critique of evangelical church structures is more explicit, and consistent with his involvement in the Emerging Church. Hipps’ text also calls for a reconsideration of the traditional evangelical emphasis on the atomized individual, as well as the classic idea that preaching methods can change while leaving the message unaltered. Rice’s theology of innovation is less dramatic, and focuses on practical rather than conceptual or ecclesial concerns. Jesus appears here primarily as an example of the virtues needed to form satisfying relationships in a technological world. Rice addresses his text to an audience that includes non-Christians, and this treatment of Jesus as role

model is an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the gospel message as a source of answers to contemporary concerns.

Friesen's attitude to technology differs strikingly from that of Hipps and Rice. For Friesen, the (evangelical) Christian church is failing to satisfy the spiritual needs and ambitions of a new generation of believers and their would-be leaders. This problem is self-inflicted, through obsessive focus on hierarchy and individualism, and the new network paradigm offers a return to a more holistic and genuine understanding of Christianity. Technology features in this argument as a source of inspiration and insight, helping us to understand the power and potential of networks. Friesen pays almost no attention to the social changes in patterns of networking connected with digital media. Hipps and Rice, in contrast, are fascinated by these transformations. New technologies create new opportunities to connect, and have an enormous impact on our worldview and relationships. As such, Christians should treat them with the greatest care and caution, and both authors outline speculative accounts of the dangers posed by a digital society to sound Christian thinking and healthy relationships.

One glaring omission is any kind of engagement with actual Internet research. All three books emphasize the worldly knowledge of their authors and gather anecdotes from science or history, but avoid the one directly relevant area of study. Friesen discusses network theory by drawing analogies and parallels with all kinds of physical and human networks, but hardly discusses actual studies of online interaction. Hipps claims to be a disciple of McLuhan, but barely mentions any subsequent development in the field of media studies. Rice pays great attention to the quasi-mystical idea of spontaneous order, when a brief and focused discussion of the actual documented reasons why users join Facebook would surely have been more useful to his argument. This reluctance is all the more difficult to understand when each text relishes

engagement with so many equally complex but only tangentially related academic fields.

All three books make a helpful contribution to an emerging Christian discourse of Internet theology. Despite thin connections to the wealth of data now available on the questions they discuss, each author does hit on some points of major significance. Friesen is quite right that networks are crucial in contemporary society, even if he does not pay sufficient attention to the changing ways in which those networks operate. Hipps is correct that media affect communication and thought, even if his neat binaries of print vs. image and left vs. right brain are rather simplistic, and his concerns over teenage slang recycle wearied old moral panics from decades past. Rice's discussion of Facebook as "home" is not wholly convincing, but he raises important themes regarding the impact of social network sites, including the blurring of boundaries, pressure to perform for an unseen audience, constant connection and the economy of positive reinforcement. These are all issues of importance to theological evaluation of digital media, and will merit much further attention. The field remains open for future works to evaluate the theological significance of networks from a sociologically grounded position, but some useful foundations have been laid.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, B. and T. Storch. *The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church Through Blogs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Birdsong, T. and T. Heim. *@stickyJesus: How to Live Out Your Faith Online*. Gallatin: Digital Scribe Press, 2010.
- Estes, D. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- Friesen, D. *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009.
- Gibbs, E. and Bolger, R. *The Emerging Church: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. London: SPCK, 2006.
- Haskew, D. and Parker, S. *Jesus on Thyface: Social Networking for the Modern Messiah*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.
- Hipps, S. *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- Hyatt, B. "There is NO Virtual Church (Part One)," *Out of Ur Blog*, August 26 2009. [online] HTTP: http://www.outofur.com/archives/2009/08/there_is_no_vir.html. Accessed 10-01-10.
- Keefauver, L. *The Gospel According to Twitter: Following Jesus 140 Characters At A Time*. Tulsa: Word & Spirit Resources, 2010.
- McLuhan, M. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.
- McLuhan, M., E. McLuhan and J. Szlarek. *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*. New York: Stoddart, 1999.
- Owens, L.R. "Virtual Reality Comes to Church," in *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, "Virtual Lives" Special Issue (2011): 88-93.
- Rice, J. *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009.
- Rowell, G. *The Spiritual Adventures of CyberCindy: Dialogues in Cyberspace*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003.
- Schultze, Q. *High-Tech Worship: Using Presentational Technologies Wisely*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.

Stephenson, M. *Web-Empower Your Church: Unleashing the Power of Internet Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Wilson, L. and J. Moore *The Wired Church 2.0*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

Von Buseck, C. *NetCasters: Using the Internet to Make Fishers of Men*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010.

