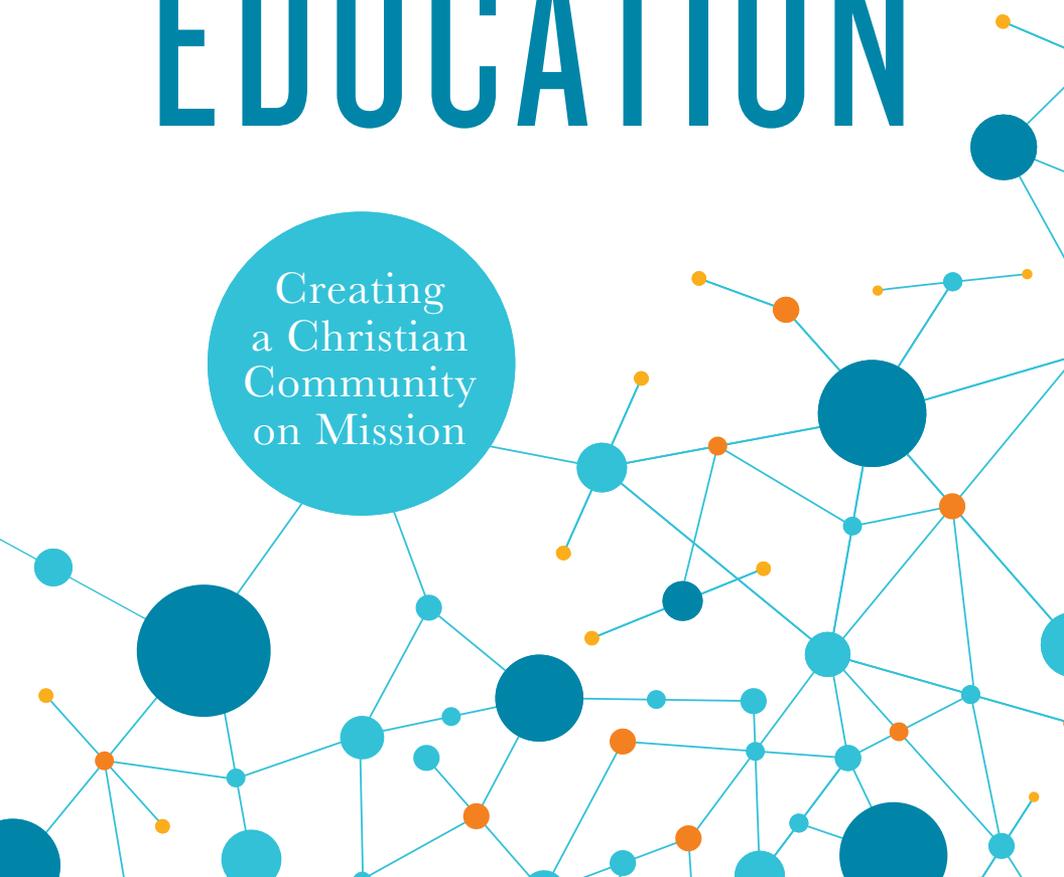


KRISTEN A. FERGUSON

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# EXCELLENCE IN ONLINE EDUCATION



Creating  
a Christian  
Community  
on Mission

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a Christian  
Community  
on Mission

**B&H**  
ACADEMIC  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Kristen Ferguson  
From isolation in Beaumont, CA  
May 2020

## *Introduction*

# Welcome to the World of Online Education

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Online education is an ever-changing field of innovation and development. Just as technology continues to push boundaries and invent new markets, so also online educators adopt technology and create delivery methods to make education more flexible, convenient, and attractive to the modern student. Christian education, on the other hand, is marked by an unwavering commitment to the stable truths of the Bible. The Bible provides us with a mission: to shape students into being more like Christ and to advance his kingdom. The Bible determines the method by which we teach and evaluate every innovation, new technology, and creative pedagogical approach. We are not bound by innovation but by the powerful Word of God that transforms lives and changes the world. If the proposed technology or delivery method is not consistent with Scripture, we leave it behind to press on toward our mission. We do not

change simply for change's sake, but we use every tool at our disposal to further the goals of Christian education.

As Christian educators consider modern innovation, the pace of adoption often makes us unsettled. We prefer to take our time to determine carefully whether or not this innovation can achieve the mission of Christian education, and we weigh its value against our theological convictions. As schools adopt online education in record numbers or must move entirely online during emergencies, we feel the tension of embracing this delivery method without getting our questions answered, convictions sorted, or hearts engaged in the vital work that we do. Although some educators readily see the opportunity to reach a greater number of students with the gospel through Christian online education, others wonder if it can achieve our objective.

As I wrote *Excellence in Online Education*, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about work stoppages and closed college campuses worldwide. In this new reality, online education is more important than ever. Schools of every grade level are utilizing technology to deliver education. Even my preschool son is videoconferencing with his class! As life returns to normal in the coming months, or at least a new kind of normal, professors will increasingly be expected to teach parts or all of their courses online. The luxury of debating whether to offer online education has been replaced with an urgent need to develop the skills necessary for offering online education from a Christian perspective.

This book will provide professors and administrators with an introduction to the theory and practice of online education that is grounded in Christian convictions. Regarding the

theory of Christian online education, we will explore some of the arguments for and against it, develop a framework for creating Christian community online, and consider how God's mission can engage the student in his or her context. Once the theory has been established, we will delve into the practicalities of implementing excellent online course design, delivery, and program management from a uniquely Christian perspective.

Wherever you find yourself in your perception of online education, I would like to welcome you to the world of online learning. Entering this world means learning new terms, technology, and teaching strategies; but it also provides a unique opportunity to influence students for Christ and advance God's mission. As we begin, let's become familiar with a brief history of online Christian education and a review of the terms associated with online education in general.

## **A Brief History of Online Christian Education**

Before the 1990s Christian educators saw the potential to further the message of Christ across physical boundaries through correspondence courses. These courses were typically conducted through the mail. The institution or professor sent lectures and assignments to the student, and the student returned the completed assignments for grading. The physical separation and length of time between interactions made correspondence courses less than ideal, but still an option in rare cases.

As the internet became more widely available in the 1990s and 2000s, early adopters began finding ways to reach new students around the world by sending and receiving coursework through email or basic websites. Modeled largely after

the traditional course structure, these early online courses were lecture-heavy with minimal interaction. Brave professors who pioneered this new frontier were often tech-savvy and eager to find ways to utilize technology in education. Many Christian institutions began offering some courses online, but most did not offer full degrees.

As a new generation of students who grew up with computers in their homes entered college, online education continued to develop, as did technology. Institutions began to use online platforms designed specifically for education, create email addresses for students and teachers, and implement new technology in the classroom. With the onset of social media in 2005–2006, internet usage deepened as students' lives were increasingly intertwined with the digital world. The pressure for institutions to take online education seriously continued to mount.

Empirical research about quality online education and better standards for online teaching became more commonplace as online courses increased in popularity. Professors began to adapt their teaching strategies to the online learner and consider research-based principles for course design and delivery. Secular and Christian institutions alike monitored the quality of online education in an effort to plan for their futures, which would almost certainly include an emphasis on online learning.

In 2013 the Association of Theological Schools began to allow institutions to receive an exception to their residency requirement for the master of divinity degree. As seminaries and colleges across the United States and Canada began offering entire degrees online, the debate about the value of online education for the Christian continued to be a concern and topic for discussion. Many institutions forged ahead with

online classes and degrees, while others continued to emphasize the necessity of face-to-face interaction.

At the time of this writing, institutions of higher education must include some form of online or distance education in their future as COVID-19 threatens the safety of physical campuses worldwide. As professors scramble to make this monumental shift in relatively little time, they are learning the technology, terms, and theories necessary to deliver quality education online. Some Christian educators embraced online education years ago; they continue to seek to achieve the Great Commission and have learned the pedagogical changes required for quality online education. Others, however, have resisted transitioning to online classes in the past, and they are entering this new world with more questions than answers as they maintain their convictions about what makes education—regardless of delivery system—uniquely Christian. This book has both confident and concerned Christian educators in mind; it has been written to serve all who are making these transitions during a challenging time.

## Terms

*Christian education.* Refers to formal instruction from a Christian worldview offered from institutions such as colleges, universities, and seminaries. I recognize that churches also participate in Christian education; and for that reason, I believe they will gain important insight from this book as well.

*Distance learning.* The broadest term used to describe a variety of course types that require some or all of the coursework to be

completed online. Included in this category are flipped classrooms as well as hybrid, online, and remote teaching courses.

*Flipped classroom.* A classroom in which the lectures are delivered online, and the face-to-face class time allows students to complete activities with the professor's guidance. The goal is to assist the students in their work while the professor is present.

*Hybrid course.* Requires some face-to-face interaction and some online education. The percentage of online education allowable in a hybrid course will vary, depending upon the accreditor. Hybrid courses may meet once or many times throughout the term. These courses are often designed carefully to wield the strengths of the face-to-face meetings and the online environment.

*Online education/learning.* Teaching and learning that are designed for and delivered through the internet. Online education can be synchronous or asynchronous and can be included as part of the curriculum in a hybrid course.

*Asynchronous online education.* Online education that does not require students and professors to meet at the same time. The entire course can be completed according to the student's schedule but will require a pace established by the professor.

*Synchronous online education.* Online education that requires or offers opportunities for students and professors to meet at the same time, online, through videoconferencing or chat rooms.

*Remote teaching.* Synchronous online education that takes place during a face-to-face course as students enter the class through videoconference. Remote teaching can also be used to describe

a face-to-face class that transitions to videoconferencing for the delivery of the class period but does not otherwise alter the curriculum for the online environment.

*Learning Management System (LMS).* The online platform or website used to store and organize the online coursework. Popular options include Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle. The LMS is where students can engage with the course content, the professor, and their classmates.

New course types and delivery systems continue to emerge, especially as online education demand increases. Beyond the terms listed here, competency-based education, adaptive learning, hybrid-flexible courses, and other creative education models are on the horizon or already in existence at some institutions. These emerging innovations are beyond the scope of this book but will likely become a serious consideration for Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries in the near future.

As we begin to explore the world of online education together in the following pages, may you be encouraged to learn, plan, prepare, and utilize every tool and strategy at your disposal to give your students the best online experience possible. May their education cause them to come into a deeper fellowship with God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May his reputation be enriched among the nations as we deploy our students into their world for his glory.

## *Chapter 1*

# Christian Education and Online Education: Friends or Foes?

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**A**s a Christian educator, you have likely heard arguments for and against online education. You may have heard proponents of online learning insist that there is incredible potential as well as a good reason to utilize online education for missional impact. Maybe you have heard other educators question whether it is educationally equivalent to face-to-face education, whether it can offer a community where students can grow spiritually, or whether biblical teaching methods can be replicated online. Regardless of what you may have heard, this chapter will provide evidence that online education *is* educationally equivalent and will survey the literature from both friends and foes of online Christian education. As you read, consider where you may fall on the spectrum—friend, foe, or perhaps simply willing to learn for the sake of your students, wherever they may be.

## **Educational Research: Online Education Works**

Online education in secular, Christian, and evangelical institutions of higher learning has been a prominent topic of research for decades. As secular accreditors and institutions of higher education across the nation determine if and how it can be implemented effectively, careful consideration has been given when comparing face-to-face education with online education in terms of quality, achieving stated learning objectives, and student satisfaction. In Christian educational research the Association of Theological Schools conducted a multiyear evaluation of online education in theological institutions as they sought to redevelop accreditation standards that provide insight into how online education can work in a Christian institution. Finally, research specific to evangelical education has also emerged to understand faculty perceptions of online education. The synthesis of this data concludes that online education works but must be designed intentionally to preserve the convictions of Christian education.

### ***Online Education***

For nearly twenty years researchers have monitored carefully the growth and changes of online education in public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit institutions of higher education in the United States. Annual surveys collect data from across the nation to determine changes in enrollment trends and perceptions among administrators, faculty, and students. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new interest in online education research, we do not have to look very far

for long-standing, annual data to come to the conclusion that learning online can indeed work.

At the beginning of 2020, most institutions had already accepted online education's role in their future but assumed that face-to-face courses would continue as normal. In fact, one 2015 survey found that online education is a significant component of the long-term plan of 70 percent of schools in the United States and has been a priority since 2012.<sup>1</sup> In 2019 another report found that most schools plan to add anywhere from one to four new online programs in the next three years.<sup>2</sup> Online learning has already been a prominent area of investment and growth for institutions of higher education for some time.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world, online education instantly became even more critical for institutions. As colleges and seminaries shut down face-to-face classes and moved to online education, administrators and professors had countless decisions to make for their immediate and long-term future. In the uncertain months after the initial outbreak, institutions had to be prepared to move online at any

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<sup>1</sup> I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Online Report Card: Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, February 2016), 22, available online at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED572777>. This report found that in 2002 the proportion of academic leaders including online learning in their strategic plan was 48.8 percent, but in 2015 the percentage had grown to 70.8 percent.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Garrett and Ron Legon, *CHLOE 3 Behind the Numbers: The Changing Landscape of Online Education*, 2019, 12, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.qualitymatters.org/sites/default/files/research-docs-pdfs/CHLOE-3-Report-2019-Behind-the-Numbers.pdf>.

given moment, should another outbreak occur. Additionally, even face-to-face instruction will likely require social distancing, which reduces class sizes. Thus, students may still need to take online courses to fulfill their degree requirements. This dependence on online education is unsettling for many who prefer face-to-face classes or have reservations about the quality of online learning.

Thankfully, the technology to deliver courses online does exist; online teaching strategies are already established; and a growing majority of professors and students are already familiar with teaching and learning online. Moreover, educational research in online learning provides us with ample insight into the effectiveness of this delivery method. As we consider the research from institutions across the United States, we can identify some key indicators to help us understand the quality of online education as it stands now. These indicators include (1) the ability for online learning to achieve learning objectives, (2) the impact of online education professionals on course design, and (3) student perceptions about online education.

First, research suggests online education can achieve course learning objectives satisfactorily. When comparing student achievement of the learning objectives, research indicates that 71.4 percent of administrators believe that online education can achieve the learning objectives “as good or better” online when compared to learning face-to-face.<sup>3</sup> Even so, educational research has long held that the way those learning objectives are achieved should be crafted for the online

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<sup>3</sup> Allen and Seaman, *Online Report Card*, 29.

environment specifically rather than simply transfer a face-to-face course online.<sup>4</sup>

Second, in an effort to design and deliver high-quality online courses, many institutions have invested financial and human resources to help them excel in that task. Institutions that do not invest in online program operations and personnel may find that their course quality is lacking and community online is sparse. Online education professionals can help provide a specialized understanding of course design and delivery for a better online student experience. Important considerations include, for example, the length of videos, intentional interaction, concise and consistent instructions, and technological support when planning and teaching their online courses.<sup>5</sup>

As of 2019 a variety of course development approaches exists to assist faculty in creating online courses that implement the best practices found in educational research. Some of the most effective strategies provide the faculty member with access to an online education professional, often called an instructional designer, or an online education support team.<sup>6</sup> In courses

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<sup>4</sup> Jared Stein and Charles R. Graham, *Essentials for Blended Learning: A Standards-Based Guide*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia J. Brame, “Effective Educational Videos,” Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University (2015), accessed April 17, 2020, <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/effective-educational-videos/>; Quality Matters, <https://www.qualitymatters.org/>; “Quality Framework,” Online Learning Consortium, accessed April 17, 2020, <http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/about/quality-framework-five-pillars/>. Both of these organizations support adherence to best practices backed by current research.

<sup>6</sup> Garrett and Legon, *CHLOE 3 Behind the Numbers*, 14–19.

developed with online-education professional assistance, higher interaction between students and professors exists, deepening the community of learning experienced by students.<sup>7</sup>

Third, as online education has increased in quality, student perceptions have also improved. From merely lecture videos and minimal interaction in the early days to substantive, multi-media interaction with a variety of learning assignments now, online educators refine their ability to optimize the online environment for student learning. In 2019 students from both undergraduate- and graduate-level degrees felt their experience in online education was valuable and worth the cost of the tuition. They even believed that their online education was just as good as, or better than, face-to-face courses.<sup>8</sup> These perceptions among students at a wide range of institutions give additional motive for schools to adopt online education as a valid delivery option for students.

Key indicators conclude, at least from a national perspective, that online education can work. Learning objectives for courses and degrees can be achieved online. When supported by online education professionals and solid research, the result can be a deepened sense of community where interactions are frequent and substantial. Most important, students perceive the value of online education. Those conclusions may be sufficient for many public and private schools, but Christians have a more focused mission to achieve beyond simply praxis and perception.

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<sup>7</sup> Garrett and Legon, 14–19.

<sup>8</sup> David L. Clinefelter, Carol B. Aslanian, and Andrew J. Magda, *Online College Students 2019: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences* (Louisville: Wiley, 2019), 48–49.

### ***Online Theological Education***

Christian educators hold convictions about education that may alter the adoption of online education at their schools, regardless of the above research. Transitioning now to Christian educational research,<sup>9</sup> the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) conducted a helpful study about online learning over the past few years as they prepared to redevelop their accreditation standards for theological education in the United States and Canada.<sup>10</sup> Their research provides insight into the perception of online education at Christian institutions of higher education.

In 2012 and 2013 ATS began granting exceptions to the standard that required residency in the master of divinity degree.<sup>11</sup> As schools were permitted to offer fully online degrees, ATS required interim reports to determine the quality of online education when compared with face-to-face instruction. Schools were asked to track the retention and graduation rates among students, the support structures available to faculty and students, and the quantitative and qualitative data

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<sup>9</sup> “Christian” in this section is broadly defined and includes mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical institutions as represented in the Association of Theological Schools.

<sup>10</sup> Association of Theological Schools, “Redevelopment of ATS Commission Standards and Procedures,” Commission on Accrediting, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.ats.edu/accrediting/overview-accrediting/redevelopment-ats-commission-standards-and-procedures>.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Tanner, “Online Learning at ATS Schools: Part 1—Looking Back at Our Past,” *Colloquy* (February 2017): 1, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/online-learning-part-1.pdf>.

provided by each school's existing assessment structures.<sup>12</sup> This information helped ATS determine if online education was a valid delivery option for Christian education.

In collating research for the redevelopment of their standards, ATS initiated eighteen peer groups to study various aspects of theological education, two of which were focused on online education. These two peer groups, representing twelve schools and seventeen individuals from a range of theological backgrounds, explored spiritual formation in online education and the values found in offering online courses. They determined that online education could implement strategies for spiritual formation effectively and that the benefits further the mission of theological education in profound ways.<sup>13</sup> The research from these groups led Tom Tanner, Director of Accreditation and Institutional Evaluation at ATS, to write, "Our recent past and our present results indicate that online learning is becoming a proven pedagogy for theological schools."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Association of Theological Schools, "Appendix 3: Guidelines Regarding Petitions for Change," *Policy Manual of the Board of Commissioners*, 35, accessed on April 17, 2020, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/board-of-commissioners-policy-manual180710.pdf#pagemode=bookmarks>.

<sup>13</sup> Association of Theological Schools, *Educational Models and Practices Peer Group Final Reports*, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/current-initiatives/educational-models/publications-and-presentations/peer-group-final-reports/peer-group-final-report-book.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Tanner, "Online Learning at ATS Schools: Part 2— Looking Around at Our Present," *Colloquy* (March 2017): 6, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/online-learning-part-2.pdf>.

In the summer of 2020, ATS was scheduled to vote on a monumental shift in its accreditation standards to allow schools to operate online education without special permission. Established principles for theological education guide the redeveloped standards so that education is of the same quality, regardless of delivery method. ATS's careful and intentional research resulting in such a profound change provides another layer of evidence to affirm online education can work for the Christian educator.

### ***Evangelical Online Theological Education***

Decades of research conducted across the United States and years of research leading up to the redevelopment of the ATS standards of accreditation certainly provide Christian educators with substantial reasons to consider online education as a valid option. For evangelicals, however, who have deep convictions about the authority of Scripture to guide all decisions—pedagogical, technological, or otherwise—that data, though helpful, may be insufficient.

In an endeavor to discover those evangelical perceptions of online education, I surveyed professors belonging to the Evangelical Theological Society in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Combined with follow-up focus groups, my research found that evangelical

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<sup>15</sup> Kristen A. Ferguson, “Evangelical Faculty Perceptions of Online Learning in Graduate-Level Theological Education” (Order No. 10240930, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, <https://gbtssbc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.gbtssbc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1849021866?accountid=11145>.

professors were somewhat conflicted about online education. Almost 75 percent of respondents believe that online education benefits Christian education as it provides access to students, can meet the goals of theological education, and can even foster spiritual formation. However, 50 percent of respondents qualified that affirmation with a concern regarding community in online education. Related responses included hesitations about mentorship and discipleship that so often occurs through real-time interaction and relationships formed on campus. Evangelical professors expressed reservations about wholehearted acceptance of online education, given their priority of student transformation as they encounter the Christian worldview from God's Word in their classes. To better understand these concerns and insights, let us turn to the ongoing debates found in the research literature.

### **The Debate: Friends and Foes of Online Education<sup>16</sup>**

Friends and foes of online education engage in lively debate as they seek to maintain their convictions about Christian education while also grappling with the potential of learning online. Some reject online studies, preferring to hold fast to the vital growth that comes through sharing space and place. Others accept the challenge of developing new community creation strategies as they find the benefits of online education outweigh the difficulties.

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<sup>16</sup> A more robust review of the literature, research, and argumentations for and against online education can be found in my thesis. See note 15.

Since we hold to the authority of the Bible, we cannot simply do whatever is possible technologically; we must operate faithfully according to our calling as Christians. As Paul says in 1 Cor 6:12: “‘Everything is permissible for me,’ but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me,’ but I will not be mastered by anything.” Although online education is widely considered to be a valid form of education, that does not mean that Christians must adopt it. Benjamin Sasse reflected on this point, warning, “Technology has made [distance learning] possible, but technology cannot tell us if this is actually a desirable thing.”<sup>17</sup>

For those who are unwilling to assume that online education is desirable for Christians, several theological and practical concerns arise. The most prominent is the concept of “incarnational” or “embodied” presence in education. This argument holds that just as Christ took on flesh to save us, Christians should be “in the flesh” as we conduct our ministry of education. The incarnation of Christ communicates God’s intimate love for humanity, even identifying with us in humility (John 1:14–18; Phil 2:5–11). Modeling Jesus’ embodied care and love for humanity means that we should be able to eat, walk, or simply be physically in a shared space with our students.

In 2001 David Diekema and David Caddell identified the incarnation as evidence of God’s dissatisfaction with distance education.<sup>18</sup> Concerns about the need for theological

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin E. Sasse, “Theologians and Utilitarians: Historical Context for the ‘Distance Learning’ Debate,” *Modern Reformation* (May 1, 1998), 33.

<sup>18</sup> David Diekema and David Caddell, “The Significance of Place: Sociological Reflections on Distance Learning and Christian

education to be “embodied” and “incarnational” in a community are echoed by Paul House, professor at Beeson Divinity School. In 2010 House argued:

God sent his son, not just his Word. Moses, Elijah, Huldah, Jesus, Barnabas, Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla mentored future servants of God. They did so face-to-face in community settings. They did so individually and in groups. They ate together. They prayed and worshiped God together. They suffered and shared together.<sup>19</sup>

In a more recent publication in 2015, House maintains his commitment to embodied education and argues that although some may use the Epistles as justification for online education, those letters were heavily dependent on existing relationships.<sup>20</sup> Further, for those who would advocate for mission advancement through online education, House rebuts their claim, stating that lack of internet access, governmental censorship, and the biblical model of physically present missionaries make online education inadequate.<sup>21</sup> As such, the practicalities of online education, according to House, cannot outweigh his theological convictions.<sup>22</sup>

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Higher Education,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 182.

<sup>19</sup> Paul House, “Hewing to Scripture’s Pattern: A Plea for Personal Theological Education,” *Colloquy* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Paul R. House, *Bonhoeffer’s Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), loc. 3048, Kindle.

<sup>21</sup> House, loc. 3082.

<sup>22</sup> House, loc. 3014.

Similar sentiments contrary to online education include the effects of technology on Christian growth as schools and churches alike depend more and more on online interaction. Regarding discipleship and spiritual growth in the digital age, Jay Y. Kim wrote, “The *speed* of the digital age has made us *impatient*. The *choices* of the digital age have made us *shallow*. The *individualism* of the digital age has made us *isolated*.”<sup>23</sup> Kim, and others, advocate for limited engagement with technology in exchange for community characterized by the best of Christian character as we pursue Christ apart from technological indulgence.<sup>24</sup> These authors argue from a variety of ways that technology tends to harm a person’s spiritual growth.

Christians rightly warn against overuse and ungodly use of technology. However, a counterargument advocating for the acceptance of online education, in particular, has also been present throughout the years. In 2001 *Christian Scholar’s Review* published Samuel E. Ebersole and Robert Woods’ article, “Virtual Community: Koinonia or Compromise? Theological Implications of Community in Cyberspace.” In a critique of Diekema and Caddell, these authors sought to inspect the nature of community itself. They found that the most crucial aspects of community were not the physical location but the

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<sup>23</sup> Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017); Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

content and type of communication between its members.<sup>25</sup> By deconstructing the elements found within a transformative community, Ebersole and Woods proposed mimicking the community online by intentionally implementing elements such as consistent communication, intimacy, honesty, commitment, diversity, and safety.<sup>26</sup>

In the summer 2004 issue of *Christian Scholar's Review*, Dan Klassen and Van B. Weigel observe that as technology advanced to allow for more meaningful and instant interactions, the positive potential of online education began to replace their concerns about lack of community.<sup>27</sup> They challenged educators to exercise "pedagogical responsibility" to use technology in Christian education to accomplish Great Commission purposes,<sup>28</sup> to understand community possibilities and significances in face-to-face and distance education,<sup>29</sup> and to debunk the misconceptions about proxemic distance in

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel E. Ebersole and Robert Woods, "Virtual Community: Koinonia or Compromise? Theological Implications of Community in Cyberspace," *Christian Scholar's Review* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 191.

<sup>26</sup> Ebersole and Woods, 207–15.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Klassen and Van B. Weigel, "E-Learning and the Spiritual Gift of Discernment: Toward a Pedagogy of Responsibility—Introduction to the Theme Issue," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 429.

<sup>28</sup> Shirley J. Roels, "Global Discipleship and Online Learning: What Does Blackboard Have to Do with Jerusalem?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Alfred P. Rovai and Jason D. Baker, "Sense of Community: A Comparison of Students Attending Christian and Secular Universities in Traditional and Distance Education Programs," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004).

education.<sup>30</sup> In other words, online education is a responsibility that Christians should assume with care and precision to further our mission.

Another proponent, Mary E. Hess, argues that an insufficient understanding of education causes many to oppose Christian online learning.<sup>31</sup> Joining her in this argument, Matthew Ogilvie concludes that online education requires careful pedagogical design and cannot replicate a face-to-face course.<sup>32</sup> Both Hess and Ogilvie allow that theology must dictate how we teach, so we must design the online classroom intentionally and not assume our convictions will be present without that intentionality. Determined to use every tool at their disposal to further the name of Christ through Christian education, Hess and Ogilvie believe that adapting the teaching strategy to achieve the priorities of the theological convictions can guide the use of technology.

Other advocates include Mark Maddix, James Estep, and Mary Lowe—who provide a road map to designing curriculum that takes advantage of discussion boards, group activities, and faculty interaction.<sup>33</sup> They describe ways to overcome transactional

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<sup>30</sup> Alan C. Hueth, “E-Learning and Christian Higher Education: A War of the Worlds, or Lessons in Reductionism?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can’t Leave Behind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Matthew C. Ogilvie, “Teaching Theology Online,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 13 (2009): 9, [http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=theo\\_article](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=theo_article).

<sup>33</sup> Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, eds., *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte: Information Age, 2012), 36–37.

distance, a theory that proposes the physical separation between professor and student can result in a psychological distance, causing potential hindrances to learning and relational barriers.<sup>34</sup> Applied to the goal of student spiritual formation, transactional distance may result in stymied opportunities for spiritual growth that comes as a result of interaction with biblical content through meaningful relationships with the student's professor and peers.

Offering strategies to reduce transactional distance, Lowe says, "Persons who are studying online have a common bond of connection that transcends physical time and space."<sup>35</sup> Identifying points of online interaction among the professor and class can overcome those issues. Lowe concludes that online learning can indeed invoke spiritual formation in learners through online community interaction but maintains that the local church should always be the student's primary community for formation.<sup>36</sup>

Beyond the arguments proposing adjustments to pedagogy to achieve the learning objectives of Christian education, Timothy Paul Jones et al., provides Christian educators with a robust analysis of theological convictions about online education. Key points in their argument for online studies include a rebuttal against Paul House's dismissal of using Paul's epistles

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<sup>34</sup> Originally in M. G. Moore, "Theory of transactional distance" in Desmond Keegan, ed., *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, *Best Practices of Online Education*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, 59. For a further explanation on literature regarding online community and spiritual formation, please see Kristen Ann Ferguson, "Evangelical Faculty Perceptions of Online Learning in Graduate-Level Theological Education."

as justification for online education;<sup>37</sup> a theology of the “image of Christ” as evidence for whole-person transformation in education;<sup>38</sup> and a list of best practices for online education, given these important theological conclusions.<sup>39</sup> The authors also highlight the importance of the local church as a primary community for the student, which can be enhanced by the students’ participation in Christian online education.<sup>40</sup> Although online learning is proposed as a valid delivery method, these authors caution that it must retain relational strategies, resist ignoring the students’ primary community of the local church, and use both the online and church community to provide education that is truly Christian.

Going deeper into the theological considerations, Stephen and Mary Lowe also contribute a substantive work as we weigh how Christians should interact in the online classroom. Using biblical examples of ecological motifs, such as creation and the body, the authors present an argument for online education being a part of an ecology, an interconnected network of interactions that weave together to form each member of the community spiritually.<sup>41</sup> They state, “In God’s ecology, individual

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<sup>37</sup> Timothy Paul Jones et al., *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* (Nashville: B&H, 2017), 25. Contrary to House, the authors find that the Epistles serve a strategic educational role in Paul’s apostleship ministry to various churches and is positively analogous to online education.

<sup>38</sup> Jones et al., 84.

<sup>39</sup> Jones et al., 142–44.

<sup>40</sup> Jones et al., 117.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth through Online Education* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 4–5.

things and people do not grow alone. They grow when they connect to and interact with the ultimate Source of Life and other growing people.”<sup>42</sup> Stephen and Mary Lowe join with Jones et al. in using the Epistles to validate and describe a biblical model for mediated learning and further argue that the Holy Spirit is not hindered in his work among the communion of saints despite their distance.<sup>43</sup> They add, “The Holy Spirit carries out his ministries among us when we are gathered and when we are scattered, when we are present with one another and when we are absent from one another.”<sup>44</sup>

As applied to online education, the Lowes suggest that any person’s spiritual formation is always a result of his or her connection to Christ and other Christians.<sup>45</sup> While understanding that people can blame technology for isolation, the authors believe that students join the ecology of an online class, bringing with them their own “vast network of social connections that influence” their learning.<sup>46</sup> A design for an optimal Christian online learning environment, then, must allow students to collaborate as they exchange ideas and experiences of growth.<sup>47</sup>

From the research and literature, we can see that online education does work; however, if it is going to work for the Christian educator, we must be intentional and careful about how we design and deliver our online courses. We must make an effort and take the time to build relationships at a distance

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<sup>42</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 73–74, 110–12.

<sup>44</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 138, 150–51.

<sup>46</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Lowe and Lowe, 93.

and launch students into their context for the sake of Christ. We must understand how to replicate a biblical, growing community online. Without these important elements, an online course may be able to teach students information, but it will not transform them to the extent we desire in Christian education.

### **Where Do You Fit? Friend, Foe, or Willing?**

Upon reviewing the educational research and theological debates regarding online education, you may find that you relate better to the friends or maybe to the foes of online education. Perhaps, though, you are like most of the professors with whom I work, especially the new-to-online professors. You are simply willing; you are willing to reach students regardless of the limitations or barriers initially perceived. You may have concerns about online education—technologically, theologically, or just practically—but a love for your students overshadows those concerns. Maybe you do not love technology, but you will learn it out of love for the students. Maybe you do not love adapting to new teaching strategies, but you will do it to ensure students have the best experience possible.

Whether you are friend, foe, or willing to try online education for the sake of the student, my goal in the next chapters is to consider a biblical perspective of community and mediated presence, then provide you with a framework for creating community in your online course that engages the student's local context out of that community. Building on the conclusions drawn from the theological debates, we will explore how you can implement those theological convictions practically in your online courses and online program.