

Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and The Art Of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011)

It was lunchtime. I was hurrying to complete this review but was famished. A sliver of smoked salmon on multi-grain bread. Nothing else. My taste buds were salivating. I hit the button to listen to the Australian ABC Radio and..... Wonderful food, lousy thinking now found on 'Auntie' on occasion, and Steven Guthrie's theology of the human body and human personhood within our communities and creation... They all collided.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation was telling me that the Christian view of the body was *negative*! The ABC was proclaiming that we Christians believed that the body was evil and negative and the 'spirit' good! "Auntie" was telling the world that Christians saw sex as "yucky". And other supposedly Christian ideas that reject the sheer beauty of this world followed.

What absolute rubbish!

Have these producers, directors and interviewers of the ABC never looked at the statue David? That was sculpted within the Christian tradition.

Have they never thought about the practice required to learn how to play the wonder that is Bach...nothing escapist about that!

Have they never read Annie Dillard?

Have they never spent a few hours in a Cathedral and considered how the architect visualized space?

Have they never heard of the view of beauty in the church tradition?

Have they never wondered why it is the Christian tradition that has borne countless NGOs which care for the poor in the ever increasing slums in the world?

Have they never thought about the incarnation and bodily resurrection.

The Christian tradition celebrates creation and seeks human flourishing within creation. That is foundational to a Christian view of life including sex and the Arts. The book I was reviewing evidently is desperately needed.

The brilliance and necessity of Guthrie's book is that it focuses the sheer delight of being human in the midst of particular communities within creation through wonderfully reflective theology alongside reflection on aesthetics generally and the arts in particular. It is joyous in its reflection of wonderful theology—Athanasius, Annie (Dillard) and Armstrong (Louis of course) unveil different aspects of life. And that is just the 'A's. There is a treasure trove covering an alphabet of famous musicians and artists, authors and others in the arts interacting with key theologians and biblical scholars in Guthrie's narrative.

I call it a narrative deliberately for it retells what the Creator is about in the drama of the arts and life as the Triune Creator remakes humanity within community and creation through the inbreaking kingdom. And in focusing the agency of the Spirit in the Trinitarian action we see a world remade in new creation, not escaped to reside in some ethereal transcendent non-physical "reality". This book is a celebration of life not an escape from it into an ascetic spirituality which denies a wondrous doctrine of Creation.

Before I deal with the book who should read it?

First, teachers of adult Sunday school groups. If we could persuade groups of facilitators of adult Sunday school groups to read this book, our classes would become provocative, fun, relevant, enriching and naturally engaging those around us. Being naturally engaging to those around us is not something church folk do too well... The missional movement has received a boost in this book.

The publisher should create a workbook to go with it. The world of music (all kinds), sculpting, painting, dance—even the aesthetics of fine food and sports—soon would be inhabited by people from within the "church community" if the church seriously considered the gift of this book. Instead of congregating in Christian ghettos, this book should cause those following Jesus to be "meaning-makers" in the larger particular world of time and space we inhabit through participating in creative ways in the arts. And, of course, beyond adult Sunday school teachers, lecturers and professors and anyone who is involved in "meaning-making"—scientists, taxi drivers, politicians and university students—should read it. And everyone who uses the word "spiritual" or "spirituality" in this contemporary world.

This book is far too valuable to be left to professional theologians, biblical scholars and artists. If husbands and wives were taught from this book, parents would help their children to become disciples without all the Christian ghetto language. They would engage their world as "meaning-makers" where most fail to see any meaning.

So on to the book....

The foreword by Jeremy Begbie surfaces the semantic chaos of the language of "spirit" within contemporary society. The offspring of Greek Platonism revived in Kantian epistemological dualism, such chaos is a minefield which Guthrie disperses through wonderful interaction between excellent theology and artists across the world of the arts. Guthrie confronts the chaos with his introduction surfacing the chaos of the language of "spirit". Immediately we also are aware that Athanasius will be a guide in this story of the re-creation of humanity by the Holy Spirit as it is reflected particularly in the artistic vocation of humanity.

The book is divided into three sections. The first focuses on the *making of humanity*. In the first chapter, Guthrie immediately undermines any fear that because there is mystery in knowing the Creator, we cannot speak clearly of the Spirit. Obviously we do not speak exhaustively of the Spirit. Drawing on recent Trinitarian discussion through scholar Colin Gunton, he is able to speak both of "boundaries and precision and definition" while celebrating mystery.

In Chapter 2, Guthrie focuses on *remaking humanity* with the subtitle "John Coltrane and a Love Supreme". Through the discussion of jazz great Coltrane's music, we become aware of the voice of Coltrane pointing us to a transforming of human persons. The interwoven examination of Coltrane's music with reflection on biblical and theological metaphors and passages introduces a pattern. It reminds us that the artist permits us to see in everyday life the beauty of a Love Supreme dwelling in the ordinary. And that is something we so often forget.

Guthrie enables us to see that if we only perceive God in transcendent glory, we fail to understand the incarnation. Guthrie declares the dwelling place of God is the ordinary that has been created from dust.

Guthrie's second chapter on "Making Human Bodies" focuses the wonder that being "spiritual" is found in the everyday life by examining Annie Dillard's writing. By comparison, Guthrie examines wrong understanding of "spirituality" by examining the concept of "spiritual" in the abstract painting of Russian artist, Wassily Kandinsky who lived most of his life in Germany and France. Kandinsky argued that everyday life was divorced from the spiritual depths of art. Such a concept of spirituality focuses why many see Christians belief as being irrelevant to life. But the truly spiritual is never escapist.

Through examining metaphors of indwelling, resurrection, and 'a heart of flesh', Guthrie again refocuses how Christian faith is focused on creation as the context of our being spiritual beings, not permitting a bifurcation of concepts of spirituality divorced from physical dwelling. And as he continues the dialogue between art and Spirit, Guthrie brings us to our identity within the relationships of a community. He reflects that the arts have the power to enact and embody the shared life of a community, potentially pointing the way into the future as well as embodying the past. Herein the arts are important to the work of the Spirit in *remaking community*. And in that critical task they reject escapism.

Throughout the book, as Guthrie examines the work of the Spirit, he takes the reader out of the Christian ghetto to engage all of humanity with the knowledge of a God who is self-revealing in the particularity of Jesus Christ. But as he develops the relationship between the arts and the work of the Spirit, the challenge to the church is that we enter into dialogue with the world. He shows how to do it by inhabiting the world of the arts.

In the middle three chapters, the author presents an analysis that will help all understand the radical difference between an authentic Christian view of the arts and the views from other perspectives. It presents not only a clarity at the point of difference but also a clear vision that art for the Christian is a clear representation that our indwelling the world is perichoretic in nature. That is, I am indwelt and inhabited by other voices without forfeiting my own. This is contrasted with a non-Christian view of the inspiration of the artist where the Muse "takes over" the artist, virtually eradicating the person.

In the last section of the book, "A World Remade", Guthrie deals with truly seeing the world no longer blinded by an ideology where the artist is the passive conduit for the Muse. Here, the artist, through the work of the Spirit, begins to see the world truly. In response to that new perception, the artist speaks of and for the world, faithfully, creatively and redemptively. Here, Guthrie focuses on how art from a Christian perspective actually commends a way of seeing the world and moving us toward a way of being in the world that serves in making ourselves and others as they are intended to become. In this way, the arts cause us to understand that we live in a world that is open to the future, a future where the service of the Kingdom of God also involves the arts.

Guthrie has provided us with a wonderful book. It has clear theology of the Spirit and creation. It challenges us to enter into the world of the arts as inhabitants of creation who seek meaning. It invites us to participate as a missional community in meaning-making for the world through the arts. It is clear in its challenge to be active participants in what the Triune Lord of Creation desires to do through Christians in the arts, through our interacting with artists in every sphere as they shape human understanding of 'what it is all about'. It understands that as artists seek to be

meaning-makers within culture, Christians must participate in that conversation or become irrelevant.

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