

CogentNotion

Thoughtful Christian Commentary & Review

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Simply Listen

by Bill Moller

The skies were mostly overcast, yet a few brief gaps in the clouds permitted the sun to stream through the trees in golden rays. May flowers were abundant along the wooded mountain trail near Asheville, NC. Mid-way through my five mile hike, I reached the overlook platform perched nearly 4000 feet above sea level and was overwhelmed by the awesome beauty of the distant mountains and the contours of the valleys below. Although no one else could be seen on the path that morning, I was not alone.

The next morning opened the heavens to expose a clear blue sky; the trees were gently swaying, and a solitary bird was twittering its call as if conversing with the mountain breezes. Hundreds of people were scattered about the massive deck, some of them sitting cross-legged and bare-foot, others

enjoying the rhythmic motion of their rocking chairs. A few sat with their eyes closed, deep in thought, while others silently read passages from their Bibles and then gazed off into the distance. All were listening intently, but the "voice" they heard was inaudible.

As dusk approached, the melodious whistle of an alto-flute gently pressed through the silence bringing tender melodies to our ears. A chorus of guests sang out in unison sending ethereal harmonies into the night air. The lyrics spoke of wandering from the fold, being brought safely home and rejoicing in the comforting arms of God. There was only one musician, but the Holy Spirit brought a symphony to our hearts, as though a full orchestra were playing.

Each of these experiences was simple in composition, yet satisfying in a manner beyond description. The hustle and bustle of life had vanished. The distractions were gone. We were

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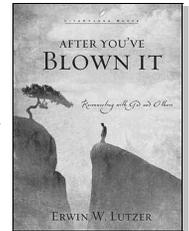
BOOK REVIEW

by Bill Moller

After You've Blown It:

Reconnecting with God and Others
by Erwin W. Lutzer

Dr. Erwin Lutzer's moving and insightful little book begins with this thought-provoking statement:



This message of hope is for my brothers and sisters who need to be reminded that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.

and ends with this message of hope:

Yet even as he knew that the mess he'd created would never be cleaned up, [King] David rejoiced in God.

After reading the opening dedication, one might assume the author was referring to two separate sets of people - sinners and saints. However, the closing comment

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MUSIC REVIEW

by Bill Moller

Simple Songs

by Steve Bell

Simple Songs is a delightful, acoustic escape from the everyday grind. The picture on the CD cover



very nearly says it all - blue jeans, bare feet, a big comfy couch and a mandolin. Add to that Mr. Bell's wonderful guitar playing talents

and the tender vocals of both his daughter Sarah and himself, and you have a collection of music that's truly irresistible.

This CD was the first in the *Livingroom Series* - a series of albums intended to provide an intimate, "unplugged" experience for the listener. The light and breezy tunes are truly diverse in origin. One song was inspired by the peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi while two others were plucked from the early works of Bruce Cockburn. Then, nestled among the 14 titles, you find the

touching and personal works of Steve Bell, including a benediction-like piece entitled "For The Journey", which was based on the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26.

Three instrumentals are included on the CD, and though they seem almost simplistic in composition, the standard of quality and clarity that is attained is quite profound. I suspect that many of you have picked up a guitar, strummed the strings, and enjoyed the pleasant sound. However, when someone

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ready to commune with the Lord .

Productivity has been an industry buzz-word for decades. Along with the introduction of Microsoft Windows, came the term "multi-tasking". "Don' t just sit there, do something!" is a phrase most of us have heard at one time or another. "Down-time", as it is called in business, is something to be avoided. Bill Hybels, in his book *Too Busy Not To Pray*, addresses this issue:

If we are involved in the marketplace, we are trained to believe that time is money ... Start earlier. Work later. Take work home. Use a laptop on the commuter train. Phone clients while you drive. Check e-mail while you fly ... Performance, performance, performance...

Regrettably this concept has spilled over to our leisure time as well. However, down-time allows our bodies and minds to rest and recuperate. In Richard Swenson' s book *Margin* he makes the following observation:

Americans do not tolerate an activity vacuum well...Therefore, when "leisure time" appears on our schedule, we select from the many activity options society offers. This is not inherently wrong. Neither is quiet, introverted reflection always right. But when we work hard and then play harder, no wonder we feel fatigued so often.

It seems to me that what we need, from time to time, is to take a walk in the woods, or just sit on the porch in a comfortable chair and do absolutely nothing for as long as necessary. To let the distractions of our busy lives fade into the background as we relax and let nature soak into our tired bones, is truly a necessity. And, while peace and quiet slowly envelops our existence, our ears of faith need to

be listening for the "still small voice" of God as He speaks to us.

In Michael Yaconelli' s book *Dangerous Wonder* he quotes the following at the beginning of the chapter titled "Wide-Eyed Listening":

A four-year-old girl was overheard whispering into her newborn baby brother's ear, "Baby", she whispers, "tell me what God sounds like. I am starting to forget."

Yaconelli then goes on to say:

Sadly, by the time we are adults, most of us have lost our God hearing...we have decided that listening to God is less important than knowing about God...we have jobs and children; the noise of our lives has increased to such a level that we couldn't possibly hear God because God rarely shouts - He whispers.

If one exists in an environment where only shouts can penetrate the noise, and everyone is screaming "More! More! Faster! Faster!", how will one ever hear the whisper of God?

Yes, our busy schedules can tie us up in knots, and the "noise" that surrounds us does seem to block out God' s voice. In addition, living in this prosperous nation, we also tend to accumulate "things" - amenities, as we like to call them. Our society is so comfortable with these modern conveniences that most of us cannot imagine doing without them. Purchasing a printed map rather than buying a GPS device, or admitting that you don' t own a DVD player or a cell phone can actually ostracize you from certain social groups. In the song "Things We Leave Behind", performed by Michael Card and Scott Roley on the *Scribbling in the Sand* CD, we are also challenged to seek freedom from the "things" that control our

lives:

Every heart needs to be set free / from possessions that hold it so tight / 'Cause freedom's not found in the things that we own, / It's the power to do what is right / Jesus, our only possession, / giving becomes our delight / We can't imagine the freedom we find / from the things we leave behind

Suppose we manage to get away for a quiet time alone. Perhaps we unwind sufficiently to silence the noise and the pressures of our jobs. Let' s even assume we decide to live a simpler life-style, possessing only the true necessities of life. Only one obstacle remains. Our thoughts. How do we filter out the feelings and emotions that make us who we are? Is it possible the reason we like our busy lives is that the busy-ness keeps our inner thoughts at a safe distance?

Gary Thomas, in his book *Seeking The Face of God*, describes this way of life as "simplicity". He addresses the resulting issues in the chapter titled "Cultivating the Quiet". Here are a few of his remarks:

The difficulty of simplicity is that it will, at times (especially in the early stages as we break our addiction to diversion), lead us into soul boredom, gloom, depression, and possibly even to despair...We are spiritually fearful people, and alone before God, we stand naked and vulnerable. We won't be able to pretend anymore...Possessions

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makes it very clear that the sinner and the saint can, indeed, be one in the same person - David, the adulterer/murderer whom Scripture tells us was "a man after God's own heart." What separates the two distinctions is a changed heart, dedicated to Jesus - the One who forgives sin and reconciles us to God.

The cover of this very practical book depicts a weary traveler standing at the edge of a great chasm, shoulders stooped, head hanging low in a posture that mutely telegraphs the message, "It'll never make it to the other side. It's too much to overcome." To those who feel (or have felt) a similar way, Dr. Lutzer offers an encouraging, careful analysis which sheds a very different light on the subject - offering hope and reassurance.

In the six brief chapters of this 87 page "message", Dr. Lutzer alternates between modern day and biblical examples of people who had seemingly "blown it". In case after case he describes circumstances that span the vast range of possible human indiscretions and reveals how God redeemed each of them. Not content to simply spout chapter and verse before sending one on one's way, the author chooses instead to lead the reader skillfully through the battlefields of real life, exposing the land mines of guilt, unforgiving people and repeat offenders, while pointing the way to the often overlooked clear path of Grace.

In chapter one, "The Waiting Father", the author uses the story of the Prodigal Son to remind us how his father patiently waited, watching the hillside for any sign that his child might return. In chapter two, "The Guilt You Can't

Wish Away", one encounters this shocking opening paragraph:

Tell me man-to-man: Is there a way out or isn't there? If there is I want to know about it; if there isn't, I'm going to blow my brains out.

Then, in Chapter three, "What God Does with Forgiven Sin", one gets to breathe a sign of relief while discovering that God:

covers our sin, removes our sin, forgets our sin, and cleanses our conscience.

Next, in chapter four, "So You've Done It Again!", Dr. Lutzer writes about "rebirth" - the inner change that takes place within the sinner who commits his or her life to God. In chapter five, "Reconciling With Those You've Hurt", we're presented with the fact that we're only responsible for our part in any problem, not how others react - regardless of what part in the indiscretion they may have played. Finally, in chapter six, "When Someone Won't Forgive You", Dr. Lutzer reminds us of the hope that only God's grace can bring.

Included on the back cover of this little gem, is a quote from Charles Spurgeon:

My Lord is more ready to pardon than you to sin, more able to forgive than you to transgress.

Clearly, a fitting epilog to a wonderful book! •

For more information about Dr. Lutzer visit: www.moodychurch.org

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who is gifted by God does the same thing, there is more to the sound than just vibrating strings across a hollow wooden box. This rich quality is true in the case of *Simple Songs*. Steve Bell is a gifted musician. He has the ability to take "simple" notes and combine them

into a joyful noise offered to the Lord. We just happen to benefit from his offerings.

Lyricaly the collection tugs at your heart strings from beginning to end. The opening song "God Our Protector" (based on Psalm 84) includes the lines:

for if we could be with you / one day in time / it is better than a thousand without you

is a clear reminder that life is better when we include God. A little farther into the CD we're treated to the delicate vocals of Sarah Bell singing about the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:40 in the song "Unto The Least Of These" which contains the lyrics:

when you give of your heart / to the ones set apart / in a moment of grief / you can be their relief

Then later we hear the song "We Come", where Steve reminds us of the posture we should maintain before God and others with the Celtic refrain:

we come / we cry / we watch / we wait / we look / we long / for you.

All that said, you're probably asking the question, "But what does the music sound like?" Well, I want to avoid characterizing Steve Bell's work in a manner that would cause you to pigeon hole him in a particular genre. Although, I understand comparisons are helpful to those who aren't willing to take the risk and purchase a CD without hearing it first. So, rather than saying "he sounds like so-and-so" or "he plays like such-and-such", I'll suggest you finish this article, get online, and visit his website at www.steve-bell.com, where you can listen to the available samples and order his CD.

May you be blessed by every aspect of these "Simple Songs"! •

CogentNotion

CogentNotion - a thoughtful and compelling article written to motivate Christians to think about what they say, do and believe.

Notion - an individual's conception or impression of something known, experienced, or imagined.

Cogent - having power to compel or constrain, appealing forcibly to the mind or reason.

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(Continued from page 2: Feature Article) and diversions weigh us down. Simplicity is a liberating invitation, not another religious obligation.

Earlier in the same chapter Thomas writes:

God is more than a revealer; He is also a healer. Our sadness and our misery can be transformed, but not by running from them. God calls us into the quiet (Isaiah 30:15), not to chastise us, but to draw us into a deeper communion with Him.

Jesus regularly slipped away from the crowds to enjoy quiet time with the Father. (see: Matt 14:13, Mark 1:35, Luke 4:42) In Matthew 6:25-34, He reminds us not to worry about our lives as he contrasts the beautiful, carefree birds of the air and lilies of the field, with the worrisome "pagans" who do not trust the Lord -- chasing after food and clothing, desperately struggling to gain what God freely gives to us all. Finally, in Luke 10:38-42, Jesus tells Martha that she need not

fuss over the details of life, and points out how Mary, her sister, had the right idea - to sit at the feet of the Lord and listen. Simply Listen!

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27 NIV)

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