

Simple Spirituality: Learning to See God in a Broken World.

by Christopher L. Heuertz. InterVarsity Press, 160 pp., \$15.00.

Reviewed by Kelly Givens, FASTEN staff

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now, I see.

When John Newton wrote those words in the hymn *Amazing Grace*, he was not referring to a physical blindness, (although he was in fact blind at the time of his death). Newton was lamenting an even darker blindness: his life before the light and hope of Christ had poured in. *Simple Spirituality* is about that same blindness. It is Chris Heuertz's reflections on his spiritual journey toward a simpler faith. It is the story of his eyes being opened to the brokenness of the world and the response God desires His children to have.

As the international director of Word Made Flesh—an organization created to bring the love of Jesus through advocacy and ministry to the poorest people in the world—Heuertz has traveled to dozens of countries. Undoubtedly, the suffering he has witnessed has marked his faith and theology deeply. In *Simple Spirituality*, Heuertz brings those stories of suffering to us in a vulnerable narrative, sharing his own reactions and experiences to the pain he has seen, letting us step into the lives of those whom we might not in any other way have known.

Although Heuertz spends a lot of time sharing stories of the poor, *Simple Spirituality* is not a treatise on helping those in need. Rather, it is a blend of personal experience and a study on spiritual formation in light of this personal experience--which happens to be shaped by the desperately poor people Heuertz has come to embrace. In his journey, Heuertz has come to find that five spiritual disciplines have helped him navigate faith in a way that's respectful and responsive to the world's suffering.

On a trip to Jerusalem, Heuertz reports, he visited the Brook of Elah--the stream where David pulled five stones out and... well, you know how it goes. These five stones became symbols of the "giants" in Heuertz's life that needed to be slain. He started leading retreats and speaking at universities on key disciplines: humility, community, simplicity, submission, brokenness. From that, *Simple Spirituality* was born.

Obvious from the title, simplicity is the central theme in Heuertz book. For him, living a life of simplicity isn't as much about *what* you have, as *how* you hold it. His intended reader is the Christian who desires to cultivate a deeper spirituality, but who also struggles against the powers of this world: greed, consumerism, pride. We learn simplicity and the other disciplines from the model of Christ, Heuertz shows. Jesus preached a message of faith that children could understand, using parables and simple illustrations to help his audience see more clearly the Kingdom of God.

Simple Spirituality won't satisfy the reader looking for a more doctrinal, heavily referenced study of Christian formation. Additionally, some readers may take offense at the numerous times Heuertz brings up the failures of the Church (isolation from the poor

and divisions within the faith are his two biggest qualms). There are moments in the book when it seems like all Heuertz wants to do is bemoan American culture. Possibly, though, the sense of insult we feel may reveal the underlying weaknesses of our own hearts.

If the stories in *Simple Spirituality* don't convict us, they should at least break our hearts. Heuertz tells account after account of the dying, impoverished friends he and his wife, Phileena, have met during their travels. These people face suffering and injustice far greater than anything most of us will ever experience, or even see. His stories serve to reinforce the importance of the five disciplines he reiterates in his book.

Heuertz's hope and point in writing *Simple Spirituality* is not to make Americans feel guilty for certain lifestyle choices or for being blessed with wealth. His point is that there is a connection to the way we live and how the rest of the world suffers. Moreover, he argues that the reason we might not be able to see God clearly is because we are blinded by the excessive amounts of material goods we hold so tightly. Heuertz tells stories of the most destitute and marginalized peoples in the world, not to make us feel helpless, but to share the hope and life these people have even in the midst of their hurt. Their brokenness acts like a lens, filtering out the "noise" that invades our lives and focuses us on the essentials, the simple commands of love and mercy Christ bids us go and do.

Two points of critique need to be made. First, though *Simple Spirituality* should be applauded for the emphasis it gives on unmerited grace, readers should be cautious; Heuertz does not directly base grace in the Cross. Personal salvation and evangelism, while surely they are important to Heuertz, go unmentioned. He often blends Christians and the poor in his stories, and we must make proper distinctions here. While his audience is implied as Christian, it would have been beneficial to make the distinction between "children of God" in the sense that all of humanity, whether they accept it or not, are made and loved by their Father in Heaven, and, "children of God" in the sense of those who have received salvation and are adopted into the family of God. Heuertz uses this term multiple times without addressing that distinction. While this does not matter when it comes to those we are called to help, it does matter in terms of who is a part of "Christ's body."

Second, Heuertz calls out the Church several times in *Simple Spirituality* for her lack of attention to the injustices the poor face. This is good, but it would have been helpful for readers (especially church leaders) to see real life examples of churches "getting it right." It's fine to address problems, but it's more useful to provide solutions.

Overall, *Simple Spirituality* accomplishes its goal of waking up readers to the brokenness of the world. And it shows readers a path forward for pursuing a spirituality that lovingly regards that pain and can shape us as compassionate responders.