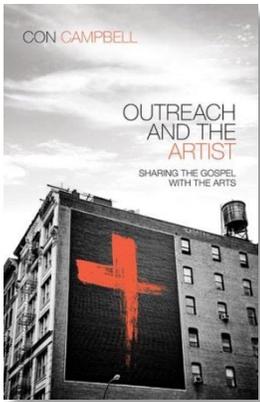


[Review] Outreach and the Artist: Sharing the Gospel with the Arts, by Con Campbell

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Sometimes book titles raise expectations that are inaccurate or unfulfilled. As I began reading Con Campbell's *Outreach and the Artist*, I expected to glean some insight into leveraging the arts for evangelistic outreach—a straightforward interpretation of the title.

Then I reconsidered the title: *Outreach and the Artist*. Does that mean outreach *using* artists, or *targeting* them? Does the subtitle, *Sharing the Gospel With the Arts*, mean using the arts to share the gospel, or bringing the gospel to the arts community? As I read, I discovered that Campbell develops both dimensions of interpretation. In spite of its brevity (just 116 pages), this book is effective, practical, and heartfelt, with the author drawing not only on his own experience, but also including profiles of artists from different artistic domains. Some of these artist profiles, inserted between the chapters, are particularly well placed, since their content is relevant to adjacent chapters.

Campbell's reflexive work begins with a testimonial that I was able to connect with, given my own path as a performing artist and a Christian. He details his life as a jazz musician and its eventual intersection with Christianity following his conversion. He addresses an inner conflict that I suspect is common to many artists: whether to continue with the artistic path, a life that demands a high level of devotion; or, to abandon his chosen art in order to give a higher level of devotion to his relationship with God. Campbell engagingly explores some of the emotions felt by an artist confronting these realities. He also addresses the tension between pursuing excellence in an art form and allowing the art form to become an idol. As I read the opening



chapter, it occurred to me that my life a couple of decades ago as an aspiring performer and young Christian might have been less confusing if I had had access to a book like this.

The next two chapters offer a view of how the author has taken his art and used it as a medium for ministry outreach. In the first of these two chapters, “Outreach With the Arts,” Campbell looks at potential pitfalls for artists in understanding the possible connections between their art form and evangelistic outreach. He postulates that it is not always evident to the artist how his or her art is connecting with the general public. In this chapter the author is addressing two distinct audiences: artists and non-artists.

Campbell encourages artists to use their established creative activity to find a connection between their work and the gospel message for the purpose of outreach. He further asserts that “there is always an angle,” which leads to a moderately detailed discourse on the theology of creativity. He sums up this idea by stating, “If the arts are a God-given tool to express our humanity, they are necessarily connected to Jesus, because our humanity is connected to him” (35).

Campbell also reminds non-artists of the artists' need to be affirmed and given time to creatively contemplate the angle. Campbell says, “a potential problem in recruiting an artist for outreach is that they may feel that their art form is a bit obscurantist, poorly understood, esoteric, and definitely not mainstream. The more ‘artistic’ the artist, the more this will be true” (33). Again drawing on his own experiences, the author empathetically demonstrates that, because this struggle is real for the artist, non-artists must take care to allow the artist time and space to process the possibilities creatively.

The third chapter, “What Works and Why,” seemed in some ways like it belonged in a collection of memoirs, but I see value in Campbell’s presentation of good and bad experiences of artistic outreach events. The most salient message that I discovered is that high-caliber artists are inextricably attached to quality in their art; being able to function in that “quality zone” is crucial to effective artistic outreach. The message to people wanting to engage artists for outreach is to allow artists the opportunity to excel in an environment that is comfortable for them, in order to deliver the message in a way that will satisfy the (often harsh) inner critic that most artists struggle with. Likewise, he advises artists to communicate in advance with organizers to set goals and expectations. While deviating slightly from the flow established in the first two chapters, the relayed experiences offer valuable insight into the mechanics of artistic outreach events.

At this halfway point in the book, Campbell’s direction changes. Though still reinforcing the concept of outreach, he delves into additional topics of struggle that will be familiar to most Christian artists. Most of the

content in the fourth chapter, “Outreach Through the Arts,” is focused on the concept of “message versus medium.” Many Christian artists confront the question of whether their creations must be overtly Christian. Campbell addresses this conundrum by playing on the word order of *message and medium* or *medium and message* to denote the priority that a Christian artist might attach to one or the other. He succinctly shows the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches, including the idea that prioritizing the medium makes outreach less tenable. However, the author asserts that “Art created through a ‘medium and message’ approach will receive a wider audience in the art scene itself, because it will be seen as ‘genuine’ art” (65). The multiple nuggets of wisdom to be gleaned from this chapter segue well with the artist profile that follows it: jazz singer Kristin Berardi sheds light on her wrestling with these very issues as a Christian artist performing predominantly in a secular context.

The author makes a nice connection into two chapters that became quite personal for me. In the chapter “Outreach to the Arts,” Campbell describes the arts community as a subculture in itself. As an artist, I found this affirming; to the non-artist, this would be important information to have. As I read this chapter I found the language crossing into another familiar domain: cross-cultural ministry. Campbell presents a sound missiological philosophy in approaching the problems of reaching the arts subculture for Christ. His comments echo the same concerns I have in ministry in Central Africa as I ponder the level of credibility I have as a cultural outsider in certain domains, and to what degree I need to rely on cultural insiders to vet my acceptance into the community. Campbell also addresses the idea that it is always difficult for anyone other than a cultural insider to have a profound evangelistic influence within a specific community. As such, the author advocates equipping believing artists in order to reach the arts subculture. As an artist and missionary, I found the author’s assertions insightful and valid.

Most believing artists will resonate with some difficulties in relating to mainstream Western church culture. The level of misunderstanding can be high. In the penultimate chapter, “Artists and Church,” Campbell highlights potential pitfalls. In this chapter, which is largely a caution to the mainstream evangelical church, Campbell addresses many cultural trappings of this church culture that may inhibit artists from effectively engaging. The content here is directed to non-artists, to help them develop a better understanding of the arts subculture. By extension, this understanding could lead to more effective inclusion and engagement in outreach.

As the book concludes, Campbell revisits the idea of one’s art becoming an idol in the artist’s life. Setting his examples predominantly in the domain of music, he argues that the idol of art can and must be dethroned for artists to engage Christ fully as lord of their lives. The examples he gives underscore the care that must be

taken to understand artists and their personal relationships with their art. A recurring theme in these concluding pages is that art is beautiful, good, and a gift of God; however, it can be challenging for the Christian artist to have the right order of lordship in his or her life. Poignantly, the author states, “The two key things to be modeled, I think, are not surprising. What it looks like for Christ to be Lord needs to be modeled—as does how to appreciate God’s good gifts while not committing idolatry” (108).

Con Campbell has managed in this brief volume to develop the discussion from practical considerations of working alongside artists for evangelistic outreach to thoughts on reaching and understanding the arts subculture. The book seems to weave through different interpretations of the title, an ambiguity that I did not find troubling: in fact, it was edifying. While this book does not address ethnoarts or ethnodoxology ministries specifically, I found it to be a pleasurable, profitable read. I resonated with most of the content regarding the artist’s mindset, and enjoyed some moments of self-discovery.