



A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

Imagination



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Imagination



What is Imagination?

Imagination. Perhaps the word brings to mind works of art or fairy tales. Maybe you view it as an abstraction, an ethereal concept. Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines imagination as “an act or

process of forming a conscious idea or mental image of something never before wholly perceived in reality.”¹

The dictionary doesn't give us all we need, but this is a good place to start. From the outset, it helps move us away from some common misconceptions of the term, such as the idea that imagination is nothing more than simple “make-believe.”

I would argue that imagination should be seen as something which belongs to the function of thinking itself. In this booklet, we'll explore the nature of imagination and its status as an intrinsic element of our humanity. We will examine the biblical basis for understanding it, look at the

ways in which it has been misunderstood and misused, and propose some ways in which we might properly understand its place in our lives.

The Biblical Basis for Imagination

Scripture is made up of various genres of literature, including historical narrative, prophecy, wisdom literature, and poetry. The most basic study of literature will show us that not every genre should be read in the same way. For instance, nobody reads Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken” and assumes the author was making a navigational choice in a literal forest. This is the language of poetry. We must observe similar rules

when reading the poetry of King David, the proverbial wisdom of Solomon, and the storytelling of Jesus. They are calling us to engage our imagination.

In Exodus 25-31, we are given a detailed account of the plans for building the tabernacle. Materials included acacia wood, gold, bronze, linen material dyed several colors, and skins from rams and porpoises. There was a great deal of imagination involved, but notably, not all of it was useful. Take a look at the design of Aaron's robe, for instance. God instructed them to attach fabric pomegranates to the hem. These pomegranates were colored scarlet, purple, and blue. Have you ever seen a blue pomegranate? They don't exist in

nature. They were there to reflect God's creativity. That was reason enough.

Solomon's temple (II Chronicles 1-4) had several examples of beauty. There was gold overlay, stone pillars, and bas-relief throughout. As with the priest's robes in Exodus, much of what was built was done so with an eye to imaginative beauty, not usefulness. There was a "molten sea", which was basically an enormous tub made of cast metal. It was supported by a dozen metal oxen, and by some estimates held almost ten thousand gallons of water. There may have been some practical purpose to this, e.g., washing of the priests during their sacrificial duties. Yet there was also a great deal of cre-

ative imagination involved. This was no simple bathroom sink.

One of the most common types of figurative language in the Bible is metaphor. A well-known example is found in Psalm 23, in which the Lord is seen as a shepherd. We know that David does not view God as a literal shepherd watching over flocks of literal sheep; rather, he is likening the qualities of God to those of a shepherd. A shepherd protects, guides, and feeds his flock, much like God in his behavior towards His children. In Isaiah 64, the prophet refers to God as a potter and His people as clay. In both of these instances, it is assumed the reader will understand the passages figuratively.

In the New Testament, Jesus often taught people by way of storytelling. He consistently used parables and figures of speech to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. The parables range in size from the extremely short story of the mustard seed to the elongated story of the prodigal son. Jesus was calling on His listeners to visualize something that did not exist in observable form, but which had grounding in what was observable. Neurons fired in their brains, visual images formed, and they found truth through this process of mental construction. Their cooperative effort with the *imago dei* in them created a space in their mind where they could house an eternal truth.

Our Need for Imagination

In *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis speaks of the longing we have for a “far-off country.” It is what some would call romanticism or nostalgia, a fond remembering of days gone by. But what we ultimately discover is that this longing is for something not in the past, but the future, and our life in the present is locked up in the realization of its absence. This longing is “only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard...”² And without the imagination, we can neither apprehend that void nor what is required to fill it.

Lewis’s atheism had proved a roadblock to what he intuitively

knew to be true and beautiful. “Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”³ The beauty of Lewis’ journey is that God so baptized his imagination that it became the means by which he could both comprehend and convey truth. This earthly existence blossomed before him in a way that exceeded his rational concepts.

The fact that stories are written, songs are sung, and vast oratorios and concertos are composed points to the image of God in us. This *imago dei* pushes its way out as we exhibit what Francis Schaeffer called the “mannishness” of man. These creative acts are the way we

reproduce our conception of God's world, even as the sexual act is the way we reproduce our physical bodies. This is not to say that everything we create is an accurate image of either the divine nature in us or the external world around us. Because of our fallenness, we will never create perfectly. But we go on creating, and this ought to tell us something.

Imagination is an essential part of how we perceive the world. It allows us to synthesize and integrate information, to take in visual, audio, and tactile elements and make sense of them. It helps us visualize something that does not exist in observable form, but which has grounding in what is observable. Imagina-

tion allows us to find a space where we can house an eternal truth. This is part and parcel of the human condition. When we ignore this need for imagination, we elevate our minds above the ineffable "I am," and our reason extinguishes the flames of the burning bush. The mystery of God is overtaken by rationalism.

Flannery O'Connor, a mid-twentieth century American novelist and essayist known for her Southern Gothic style, emphasized the importance of this mystery for the Christian. Writing about the lack of God-consciousness in the world over the last few hundred years, she asserted that "the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to

the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man.”⁴

How We Get It Wrong

Instead of viewing imagination as essential to our human condition, it can be tempting to see it as the domain of children, whose minds form the shape of an imaginary friend, or whose folded piece of paper becomes an airplane. Perhaps it is assigned to the realm of pretty and interesting things, mere ornaments of life. Where did such an idea come from?

Enter the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant was a preeminent philosopher of that movement, and his modernism disconnected the elements of good-

ness, truth, and beauty from art. Though most Christians would recoil at the thought of being labeled a modernist, the pragmatism of some seems to indicate otherwise. When we assign worth to a piece of art based solely upon its ability to communicate the Gospel, for instance, we engage in a sort of Kantian utilitarianism. Instead of art being an extension of who we are—creative beings made in the image of God—it becomes only a useful means of bringing souls into the Kingdom.

This leads to another error, that of requiring art to be labeled “Christian” or “secular.” We may believe that in doing so we are maintaining the required separation from the world. We are, in fact, doing

no such thing. We are saying that a landscape painting by Turner may indeed be beautiful, but not near so much as a painting of Jesus. This is foolishness.

Likewise, some will assert that an artistic style is either good or bad, moral or immoral. Such a claim is simply not provable, whether using philosophy, aesthetics, or theology. A style of art has no innate moral quality. You may dislike abstract expressionism, for instance, but that does not make it immoral. A similar thing can be said regarding music. For example, it has been argued that the phrase “rock and roll” may have originally had sexual overtones, and thus the music itself is immoral. This reasoning displays a serious lack of logical thought.

Moreover, there are no biblical guidelines for musical elements such as rhythm and melody, and the reasoning behind any claim to the contrary all too easily drifts toward cultural hegemony or xenophobia.

Moving Forward

What sort of difference does the imagination—and art by extension—make in our lives? Along with Francis Schaeffer, we need to ask, “how should we then live?”⁵ How can we use our imagination to the glory of God?

Our art should be informed by a biblical worldview, accurately depicting the condition of man and the character of God. At times that may take the form of ebullient praise. At other times

it may look like a song of distress or a tragic stage play. We must remember that the Scripture is full of characters who cried out to a seemingly absent God amidst intense suffering and confusion. The life of a Christian is often marked by blurred spiritual vision, a path clouded by sorrow, anger, and uncertainty. Art that arises from such a place can accurately reflect the fallenness of humanity as we try to embrace the mystery of God's interaction with us.

Philippians 4:8 tells us that we ought to dwell on things that are true, honorable, right, and of good repute. "If there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things," Paul says. This passage can too

easily be viewed as a prohibition against those things not on the list. We ought instead to see it as an encouragement to focus on the things which are listed. This passage is not warning us against something, but rather pushing us toward something. When we move in that direction, we become so familiar with goodness that we are able to rightly judge all things.

Flannery O'Connor believed that those enlightened by their Christian faith are often the ones with "the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable." "Redemption is meaningless," she writes, "unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has

been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.”⁶ Let us be the ones who give the world great cause to believe in the need for such redemption.



End Notes

¹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Chicago: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1986

² Lewis, Clive Staples. *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980, p. 7

³ Guite, Malcolm. *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*. Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2021, p. 16

⁴ O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus

and Giroux, 1970, p. 158

⁵ *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* was both a book and documentary film series by Francis Schaeffer. It was first released in 1976.

⁶ O'Connor, p. 33

Recommended Resources

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