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THE IMAGINATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

Walking by Faith and Not by Sight

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I. Why a Paper About the Imagination?

The imagination has been an interest of mine for about ten years. Ten years ago, I providentially came upon a definition for the imagination: “The imagination is a faculty for the ideal conception of reality.” What dawned on me then was that my imagination was a God-given faculty for perceiving unseen reality. God gave me eyes to perceive visual reality. God gave me the sensation of touch to perceive tactile reality. He gave me my ears to perceive aural reality. He gave me my tongue to perceive taste and my nose to perceive smells. I believe God gave the imagination, not so much to create unrealities, or to live fantasies, but to engage and inhabit unseen reality. As Francis Schaffer is oft quoted, this unseen reality is “real reality” though much of it is not directly accessible to our five senses. **God gave us imaginations so that we can live meaningfully and engage in the unseen realities of His creation.**

I shared some of these thoughts with Reid Ferguson over lunch, and Reid passed them onto Dave, Dave then approached me with the idea for this paper. I welcomed it because it gave me a chance to try to pull together what has only been disconnected threads in my mind up to this point. I was also excited to prepare this paper because I believe this is an important and timely topic. Its relevance is vast. I hope as I unpack the role that our imagination plays in orienting us to God’s world, all of us may place greater value on stewarding our own, and then, as pastors and counselors, we may gain insight in our work to carry out our Lord’s great commission. Lord-willing this paper will be coherent, helpful and I add with a wink, true to reality as God has ordered it.

You'll notice by virtue of footnotes that this paper owes a big debt to theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. I have been introduced to his thoughts about the imagination recently but have found that he gives an articulate voice to much of what I have been thinking and has thought well about how these insights affect church life.¹

My goal for this paper is threefold: first, breathe life back into our concept of the imagination by moving towards a better understanding of this God-given faculty; second, show the imagination's indispensable role in faith and discipleship; lastly, consider how these insights influence ministry.

I. Rehabilitate our Concept of the Imagination

Why do we need to breathe new life into the concept of the imagination? Many of us, I assume, hold to a deficient definition of the imagination. This is because of the word itself. The word 'imagination' has in it the root word 'image'. Thus, it is widely assumed that the imagination primarily forms mental images or pictures. This, I believe, is unhelpfully reductive. It's not that it is wrong, but only that forming mental images is only one of the imagination's functions.

Another reason that the imagination needs rehabilitation is because it is held in suspicion. The second commandment forbids the making of images so many Christians have been wary of a faculty that's primary role is the making of images.² If we are going to rightly value the

¹ Dr. Vanhoozer has authored two books on the subject. The first is *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom*. This book treats the subject of the imagination and theology proper. The second is an application of the first for the church. The second book is called *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine*.

² Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. (19).

imagination, we need to properly define it and free it from *unnecessary* stigma. The best way I've found to accurately conceive of the faculty of your imagination is to contrast it with your faculty of reason.

a. The Imagination is a Synthetic Faculty

Our reason is a deductive faculty while our imagination is a synthetic faculty. Reason pulls concepts apart to examine the parts isolated one from another. Our imagination puts those parts together into a coherent whole. Reason takes the puzzle pieces apart and the imagination puts the puzzle together.³

With our God-given faculty of reason we study something and break it down so we can understand how it works. With our imaginations we *build* something, put the pieces into a sum that is greater than the parts. Reason and imagination are then *complementary faculties*. Compare music theory and a symphony. Music theory is concerned with the grammar of music and the rules. The imagination conceives how these pieces fit together into something far grander and more beautiful than the parts. The products of our reason are suitable for textbooks, while the products of our imagination are suitable to be experienced.

b. The Imagination Discerns Meaningful Wholes

But the imagination is not only for creating something like a symphony it is also for discerning. When creating, your imagination puts the pieces together into something that does not yet exist. When discerning, your imagination sees and discovers meaningful wholes. A meaningful whole

³ Ibid (24).

is a pattern that makes sense of otherwise disconnected facts. The imagination discovers the plot we might say. When you are reading a novel, you have many features of the story: characters, settings, conflicts, etc. and your imagination maps these otherwise disconnected parts together to make sense of the story. The author has an intended meaning and by our imaginations we *discern* the meaning of the story.⁴

Esther Meeks has written an accessible book on epistemology titled, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People*. In her work she relies heavily on Leslie Newbiggin and Michael Polanyi and argues that to ‘know’ something is to discern a coherent pattern from facts. She argues when that we speak of “knowing something”, what we are really saying is that we have come to trust a coherent pattern that conforms to and makes sense of the facts. In the ordinary process of knowing we observe facts, heed authorities, and put all these pieces together into a coherent pattern. When we are convinced of a pattern that fits the facts, we commit ourselves to this perceived pattern. We then inhabit this knowledge to learn more. The new pattern becomes part of the spectacles through which we view the world. We live in it. *Knowledge then is not something that we possess, it is something we live in.*⁵ As C. S. Lewis said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”⁶ You can hear that Lewis is living in the coherence of the Biblical vision of reality, and from the inside he is able to see and make sense of what he was not able to before.

⁴ Please note I say *discern*, not create. A post-modern would argue as the reader interprets, he or she creates meaning. I disagree with the post-modern. The author, small ‘a’ in the case of books, and big ‘A’ in the case of life, creates meaning and the reader’s job is to *discern* it.

⁵ Meek, Esther. *Longing to Know*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Publishing Group, 2003.

⁶ Lewis, C. S. *The Weight of Glory*. 1st edition. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001. This quote comes from his essay titled, *Is Theology Poetry?*

Where does reason fit in? We use reason for substantiating the logical consistency or uncovering the inconsistency of one's 'knowledge' or beliefs.⁷ We can see then how reason works alongside the imagination. Reason helps us discern the logical validity, and truthfulness, of the patterns perceived by the imagination. Connecting the dots and seeing these patterns and coherent wholes is the work of the imagination. The imagination proposes a coherence and reason either confirms or denies the validity of the perceived coherence. Truth is a pattern that conforms with the true nature of reality as God Almighty has created and ordered it. The imagination discerns that pattern. So, it is with our imaginations we discern the plot of the Great Author, God.

c. Worldviews and Social Imaginaries

The most comprehensive patterns are all-encompassing stories (meta-narratives) that make sense of all the details of life, like the Christian faith. We commonly call these visions of reality worldviews. A worldview is what someone believes about creation, meaning, and destiny. It is how one answers life's big questions. Sociologist Charles Taylor refers to these worldviews as 'social imaginaries.'⁸

Most often when we talk about these meta-narratives (Christianity, Secular Materialism, etc.) we do so from the perspective of reason. In worldview discussions we assess the claims and logical coherence of beliefs and compare those beliefs to other worldviews. This is important in the

⁷ Shedd, W. G. T. *Dogmatic Theology*. Titus Books, 2013. (50)

⁸ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Reprint edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2018.

I have not yet read Taylor's *A Secular Age*. This is I believe where he introduces the concept of a 'social imaginary.' I was introduced to his concept through authors like D. A. Carson, K. A. Smith, and others building on Taylor's work.

realm of apologetics but most of our worldview discussions overlook that we are to live *in* these worldviews. The worldview is to be spectacles through which we see all of life. Inhabiting our worldview is really important to Christian discipleship because Christ is concerned not just with holding the right beliefs, or being able to defend them, He is concerned with practically living them. It is very possible that someone assents mentally to the truths and doctrines of Christianity, but they do not see the world as a Christian. Taylor's work is important because he recognizes that these meta-narratives are perceived by the imagination and that it is by the imagination, we inhabit and live in these stories.

d. The Imagination is Not Merely Cognitive

When our imagination lays hold of a vision of reality, such as the Christian faith, it is not just a thought, or set of thoughts. The vision held by the imagination is not abstracted from our bodies. We *feel* it deeply. It engages our minds, our wills, and our emotions. The imagination addresses our entire being. Ian McGilcrest speaks of this phenomenon as knowledge *in context*.⁹ The vision held by the imagination *affects* all of us, as it situates us as actors in the story. We are not passive observers, rather we are participants. As participants we *feel* deeply, like a fan in the middle of the stadium *feels* the unfolding drama of the game.

Vanhoozer makes the case that the imagination is very closely related to the Biblical conception of the heart. The heart, Biblically speaking is the very center of the person. Martyn Lloyd Jones says about the heart, "It is the very center of man's being and personality; it is the fount out of

⁹ McGilchrist, Iain. *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Second Edition, New Expanded. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

which everything else comes. [The heart] includes the mind; It includes the [emotions]. It is the total man.”¹⁰ We are to guard the heart vigilantly because it is the wellspring of life (Prov. 4:23). Paul prays for the Ephesian believers that “the *eyes* of their hearts” would be enlightened so that they might behold Christ and his love that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 1:18). He is praying for a kind of seeing of unseen realities that affects the mind, emotions, and will. This sounds very close to what we have been saying about the role of the imagination.

What we perceive by our imagination affects the whole of us. Jesus said, “If your *eye* is dark how great is that darkness indeed (Matt. 6:23).” If in the imagination we perceive Christ, our hearts are full of light. If not, our hearts are full of darkness. Our imagination then is the faculty God has given to us to see reality the way He created it and to *feel* its glory.

e. How the Imagination is Formed

K. A. Smith argues that habits (which he calls liturgies) shape the imagination, which in turn shape the affections and desires of the heart.¹¹ We are perpetually engaging in ‘cultural liturgies’ that are made up of rituals that have woven in them visions of “the good life.” He uses the example of going to the mall, or a sporting event. He reads these common practices through a worship lens. As we walk down corridors of the mall (think *temple*) we are confronted with giant posters that *evangelize the good news* of purchasing power, status, and sexual appeal. We go into our preferred *shrines* ... etc. He argues these cultural liturgies implicitly form our vision of the world and the good, via our imagination, which then re-shapes the desires of our heart.

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984. (110-111)

¹¹ Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. New ed. edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2013.

Smith is right that our daily practices have stories behind them that give them significance and that as we engage the practices, we implicitly shape our imaginations. He is also correct that our embodied habits implicitly form our visions of reality. I think Smith captures the negative ‘conforming’ Paul has in mind in Romans 12. “Do not be *conformed* to the pattern of this world ... (Rom. 12:1).” We are certainly formed implicitly in our daily life of malls, movies, news, social media, etc. But Smith goes on to commend habit as the primary means to transform our imaginations and redirect our hearts.¹² I think Smith correctly diagnoses the problem but does not offer the right solution because the apostle Paul commends not habit, but a renewing of the mind according to the truth. Our imaginations are renewed primarily by God’s Word by the Power of His Spirit.

Scripture argues that the greatest force to shape our imagination is not embodied practice, but God’s Word and His Spirit. These are the most powerful agents to transform the imagination’s hold of reality. The Bible certainly does not discount practice. Scripture is rich with practice. Examples include the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper and worshipping along with other believers at church. Believers are given practices that make visible and tangible the invisible realities of the gospel. However, the primary means to reform the imagination is God’s Word by God’s Spirit. These practices no doubt serve God’s ends in the lives of his saints. They give needed encouragement, through them we re-live the promise, and they create plausibility. *Transformation* through is the Spirit’s work by God’s Word.

¹² Smith, James K. A. *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Illustrated edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017.

II. The Imagination's Indispensable Role in Discipleship and Faith

I hope the relevance of the imagination to faith and discipleship is coming into focus. I'll now briefly consider three ways the imagination is integral to faith and discipleship. I'd like the reader to keep in mind that some of these thoughts are under-developed, but I do believe the general thrust is compelling and should help you see how what I've discussed up to this point bears on the Christian life.

a. Faith as Seeing the Unseen

“By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured **as seeing him who is invisible** (Heb. 11:27).” Moses was held by an invisible vision of reality, a vision of God Almighty. God was not for Moses an abstract truth, though He was unseen.

My question is where does this vision of the unseen take place *in us*? I believe it happens in our imagination, this faculty given to us to perceive unseen realities, that apart from God's grace is captive to darkness and lies.

It may be right to speak of enlightening the imagination as a component of the miracle of saving faith: God renews our hearts and awakens our imagination to perceive and understand what we were formerly blind to, the glory of Christ. His glory is a reality that is beyond the reach of our eyes but affects our hearts. The new birth Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in John 3, refers to a new heart given by the Spirit, **but** may also imply new eyes for Jesus says, without it one cannot 'see' the Kingdom (Jn. 3:3).

b. God's Word and Reshaping the Redeemed Imagination

After God grants the new birth by His Spirit, God's Spirit and Word continue to *renew* and *reform* the redeemed imagination so that he or she can know God's will (Rom. 12:1-2). One indispensable aspect of discipleship is gaining a clearer and clearer vision of reality.

I think even a surface consideration of the different Biblical genres reveals that the Bible, far from giving us encyclopedia articles and abstract knowledge is aimed at deeply affecting us by forming our vision of unseen reality. The Bible's stories reshape how we see our world: created by God, fallen into sin, the devastation and deception of sin, God's faithfulness and redemption through Jesus Christ, and our participation by the Spirit.

David Powlison talks about the of role of biblical counseling as helping someone put on the "spectacles of Scripture" so that they can see God, themselves and the world as God sees it.¹³ He says God's Word is the counselor's tool to, as I would put it, renew their imagination.

c. Metaphors in Scripture

Metaphors are profuse in Scripture. By them, God reforms the redeemed vision of reality. It is intriguing to me that Jesus, the great discipler, used metaphors as much as He did. Some examples of Biblical metaphors include: God as a good shepherd; human leaders as shepherds (both the good and bad kind); God's people as sheep; people as either fruit-bearing trees or withered branches; sin as a wild beast; Babylon as a prostitute; chaos as churning waters; God's

¹³ Powlison, David. *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture*. First edition. Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2003.

Kingdom as a hidden treasure; The church as a body; disciples of Jesus as little children. This list is only panning the surface of a deep mine. Timothy Laniak says this about metaphors:

“Metaphors ... invite, entice, induce their readers to *experience* a reality, not just hear about it. Lakoff and Johnson call this a global understanding an ‘experiential *gestalt*’. We are familiar with this effect in the context of Gospel parables. They were only understood fully by ‘those who had ears to hear and eyes to see’. The images Jesus painted with his words were not simply sources of information; they were invitations to accept or reject a novel perspective. They forced a choice.

...While many metaphors are much more modest in their aims, they all have a capacity to communicate in ways that are unique to figurative language. They are compact, felicitous, and engaging. They prompt reflection, feeling, evaluation, and action. The meaning of a metaphor like the meaning of a joke can be unpacked, and to a certain extent explained. But the full impact of the image on one’s imagination requires an image.”¹⁴ (I preserved the author’s emphasis)

The extensive metaphors in Scripture open the unseen world through verbal images that give the redeemed reader a new lens through which they see and process the world, the struggle, the Kingdom, the grace of God, and many other aspects of reality.

III. How these Insights Influence Ministry

One goal of discipleship is to help people walk as Jesus walked, to be like Christ. This involves renewing the mind so that we can see clearly and know God’s will even at times and situations not directly addressed by God’s Word. This effort involves developing the imagination’s vision of reality chiefly by God’s Word.

a. Standing Faithful Amidst Rival Stories

¹⁴ Laniak, Timothy S., and D. A. Carson. *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*. Leicester, England : Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006. (39).

The Christian disciple is to stand fast and witness to the truth of Christ and His gospel amidst rival stories (Rev. 12:11). The Bible is clear that there are imaginations (as the KJV renders 2 Cor 10:5) or arguments (ESV) that set themselves up against the knowledge of God, namely rival stories. These are false conceptions of reality hold people captive like strongholds. Last month we had a good paper on Gnosticism and its contemporary cousin. Indeed, these imprisoning rival conceptions of reality are everywhere. These are the stories implicit in the cultural liturgies that K.A. Smith describes, stories that appeal to our imaginations. Discipling (the forming of our imaginations) is happening all around us by these competing stories.

Paul says regarding these that we have a weapon with divine power to tear down these arguments, and that is the Word of God brothers and sisters (2 Cor. 10:4). God's Word has the power to dismantle deceptive stories. Sometimes the rival story has even so impacted people in the church that it needs to be publicly dismantled by God's word.

But simply acknowledging that these are cultural practices *not* neutral can alert the disciple so that they are not so subtly influenced. The early Christian church re-branded Rome 'Babylon' (1 Pt. 5; Rev. 17) so believers were on guard against the idolatry of Rome. This same kind of stigmatizing can alert disciples of Jesus that these are not neutral practices. They can engage but do so wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

It is not rare that a believer experiences disjunction between what they believe propositionally and the life they are living. It is possible that the doctrines have not yet affected their vision of reality and they need to be renewed by the word. A rival story has, at least for the moment,

captivated their imagination. As a pastor my goal is to help them see reality through Scripture by the power of the Spirit.

b. Doctrine *and* Drama

The Bible is a *story* of our Triune God's redemption through Jesus Christ (we might call this as Vanhoozer does, the 'Drama of Redemption'¹⁵), and the Bible teaches us truths about God, Creation, Man, Sin, and Salvation. The Bible is both drama and doctrine. The doctrine informs the drama. In this drama God is the chief actor, and we ourselves are actors.

If we ignore the drama of Scripture, we lose the coherence and cohesion of its vision of reality. Our imaginations are impoverished. We lose its power to orient us via the imagination in the world and equip us as disciples. While if we ignore doctrine, we are susceptible to distortions, and have diminished thoughts about God. The doctrine enriches the drama, and the drama gives meaning and significance to the doctrines. We need both.

What I have been saying about the imagination helps us see why as ministers of God's Word we need to preach, teach, and counsel, both the drama and doctrine of Scripture. Our ministries need a balanced ministry of the word, teaching the unfolding drama and enduring doctrine. We each have dispositions that lend us toward one or the other, but if we neglect either the drama or doctrine our people are under-formed.

¹⁵ Gupta, Nijay. "K. Vanhoozer and the Drama-of-Redemption Model of Theology." *Crux Sola: Formed by Scripture to Live like Christ* (blog), October 31, 2009. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/cruxsola/2009/10/k-vanhoozer-and-the-drama-of-redemption-model-of-theology/>.

c. Metaphors and Ministry

Powlison in his book *Seeing with New Eyes*, acknowledges the important role metaphor plays for the Biblical counselor. Metaphors, again help us get inside and live in a truth. Powlison was helping a couple and the man was overly harsh and exacting with his wife. In the conversation he found that this man was an avid gardener and Powlison vividly shared with him how marriage is like tending a garden, it needs constant attention, water of affection, etc. And this man got it. He was able to see what he was otherwise blind to. The metaphor awakened something straight language would not.

A friend told me recently that to help his five-year-old son to use words with care told him that some words are like sharp knives, and we need to be very careful how we use them, or we can hurt people. This counsel sounds very similar to proverb's warning that the tongue has the power of life and death. I've since told my three-year-old son the same thing.

The role of our imagination urges us to make much of metaphors in Scripture. As an example, a few weeks ago our congregation was in Matthew 17:22-27. This passage uses the Greek word 'skandalizo' (stumbling stone) many times throughout. I suggested to our congregation that we are on "the trail maintenance crew" for the narrow way, we are to remove any unnecessary obstacles from the narrow way of life. If a tree falls, or mud makes it impassable the trail maintenance crew cuts the tree out or puts in steppingstones. The trail has its own difficulties that we cannot pave over, but we remove *unnecessary* offenses (stumbling stones). I tried to take what was a metaphor in the Bible (stumbling stone) and help our congregation relate to it, to

orient their imaginations to the truth of Scripture. I trust there was a little renewing happening by the truth of the Word.

d. Ethical Decision Making: Moral Vision

Richard B. Hays has written a book titled, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. I have not yet read the book, but as I understand it Hays argues that we need to be so shaped by the New Testament vision of reality that we are able to morally improvise in situations that were not imagined by the Biblical authors nor faced by NT churches. Thus, as our imaginations are reformed by the word, and we are indwelt by the Spirit we are more morally agile and ready to walk justly and faithfully in our times.

IV. Conclusion

I hope you have begun to understand and appreciate how the imagination is a God-given faculty to perceive meaning and to engage in the unseen reality of God's creation. I suggested that in the new birth that God, along with giving us new hearts, opens our eyes to see what we could not see before, and after the new birth our spiritual vision is renewed by the Spirit and the word.

Word ministry then engages the imagination through exposing rival stories, teaching the drama and doctrine of Scripture, making use of metaphor, all reshaping our vision so we can faithfully improvise in our contemporary context. "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing, and perfect will (Rom. 12:2, NIV)."

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