

# Can You Imagine?

Why imagination is crucial to the Christian life

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Faith is an act of the imagination. And a healthy, vibrant imagination is crucial to the Christian life.

You will likely disagree with these statements if you associate the imagination with delusion, fancy, and/or make believe. Christian belief is quite concerned with facts. After all, we follow the One whose name is Truth, so we must be committed completely and unwaveringly to the truth, not led astray by fantasy and illusion. I couldn't agree more. The trustworthiness of the Christian message is grounded in historical fact—the very real event of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The whole of Christianity hangs on whether or not there truly was a first Easter morning. "If Christ has not been raised," Paul explained, "... we are of all people most to be pitied" ([1 Cor. 15:17-19](#)). Fortunately, we have solid historical reasons to trust the testimony of the Gospel writers that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. That means our faith is reasonable, grounded firmly in fact and reality.

The reasonableness of our faith has been a major preoccupation for many Christians, especially in America, for the last few generations. Apologists and theologians have worked hard to amass scientific and historical evidence that supports Christian claims to truth. We've developed complex and compelling arguments in defense of the faith. This research is geared to provide intellectual support for Christian belief. And it is important work. Unfortunately, this vigilant war for the truth can have—and has had—collateral damage. Christians dedicated to shoring up the intellect often do not think too highly of the imagination. If we let the imagination run wild, they fear, we risk sacrificing the truth.

But imagination is not the opposite of reality or the enemy of truth. In fact, we do ourselves an enormous disservice when we ignore the imagination (whether intentionally or accidentally) and only develop the intellect. For the intellect is only half the equation. Imagination is the partner of the intellect. One is not more important than the other; they do different things. But because we have neglected the imagination, it deserves our special attention.

## Imagination and the Bible

The dictionary defines *imagination* as "the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses." We are accustomed to trusting our senses to tell us what is true. It is true, for example, that rocks break windows. How do I know? Because I've seen a rock break a window. Or at least I have seen something hard (like a rock) break something fragile (like a window), and I can apply the principle. For many people, especially nonreligious people, the arbiter of truth is experience—only what I have perceived and can perceive with my senses can be trusted. This rules out things like Creation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection. Imagination offers a broader perspective on truth. If imagination is the capacity to visualize, to be confident in or hopeful of a reality that contradicts our experience, then it refuses to let our senses determine the limits of what is possible. This is why faith is an

act of the imagination. Faith requires us to envision and inhabit a world that we cannot perceive with our senses—a world where an invisible God lovingly maintains his creation, where the Son of God became a human child, died on a cross to save sinners, and is seated at the right hand of God in glory.

From beginning to end, the Bible calls us to adopt a sanctified imagination that helps us look beyond our own experience. Experience tells us prayers go unanswered, as the singer cries out in [Psalm 22](#): "My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer" (v. 2). Experience tells us sinful, rebellious people get their way in the end, that the values of the world are profitable and preferable. As the psalmist says, "In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak ... he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord ... in all his thoughts there is no room for God. His ways are always prosperous" ([Ps. 10:2-5](#)). When the biblical writers call us to faith, they are calling us to reject this view of the world and, instead, foster an active imagination that can see what God sees. When the prophets looked around them, they too saw injustice, sin, and unrighteousness. The rational response to this sort of experience is despair. But the prophets called the people—and us—to hope. A constant refrain of the prophets is a summons to imagine a godly future. "The day is coming," they said again and again, a day when injustice will be judged, when evil will be put right, when exploitation will cease, when God's faithful people will experience the deliverance they have hoped for—hoped against experience. This is a radical message. It requires a godly imagination that can form "images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses," an imagination shaped by the truth that God is a loving Creator who is deeply connected to his people and works tirelessly for their good. The prophets call us to share this vision, and they do so by painting landscapes of a world that contradicts our experience because it exists only in the mind of God until that "day" comes.

Jesus calls us to an even more demanding act of imagination. He stood in the line of the prophets, but he radicalized their message. "The day is coming," they had said. He changed the tense. He says, "The day *has come*." The world the prophets had envisioned is no longer a future reality. It is happening here and now. Jesus invites his followers to imagine that the kingdom of God is at hand, and with it have come all those promised reversals. If I may be so bold, it appears that the imagination was Jesus' main target. With his parables about the kingdom of God, Jesus helps us peek behind the veil and see the truth beneath the appearances of our experience. A statement like "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" takes considerable imagination to believe. The apostle Thomas lacked imagination. The other apostles had seen the risen Lord, and they told him so. But Thomas only trusted his own experience. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were," he said, "and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" ([John 20:25](#)). Jesus rebuked Thomas and, in doing so, affirmed those of us who trust the testimony of the apostle through the faith enabled by a sanctified imagination: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" ([John 20:29](#)).  
Imagination and the Christian Life

More often than not, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God in a way that aroused the imagination. We tend to think that if we simply *believe* the right things then

we'll *behave* the right way. But Jesus knew better. He knew that touching the imagination means penetrating beyond the intellect and pricking the conscience. If reason changes our minds, the imagination changes our hearts. It helps us *feel* the truth, not just know it. We can know full well what we *ought* to do. But touching the imagination can inspire us with a vision of God's reality that will compel us to *act*. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is an excellent biblical example of this principle. The religious leaders knew intellectually that they were supposed to love their neighbors. And they tried to trap Jesus with an intellectual question: "Who is my neighbor, after all?" Jesus replied with a story, a small gem of fiction that drove the question beyond the intellectual realm and into the heart. The question they should be asking, Jesus implies, is not "Who is my neighbor?" but "What does it look like to be a good neighbor?" He was not concerned only that they *knew* what they ought to do, but that they actually do it. His final words to them were, "Go and do likewise" ([Luke 10:37](#)). So how do we strengthen our imaginations? The best way to develop a biblical imagination is to spend time dwelling in the Scriptures. This requires more than reading a few verses a day. It is a lifelong habit of meditating on the stories of God's creation, redemption, and new creation. Christians have used practices such as *lectio divina* (slow, meditative reading) to help internalize the Bible's worldview in their own hearts. In this way, over a lifetime, we can "be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind." Then we "will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" ([Rom. 12:2-3](#)).

The Scriptures, though, are not the only source for developing a Christian imagination. Creative arts, both Christian and non-Christian, can help us develop a Christian imagination. Here's how:

First, works of art that appeal to the imagination help expand our experience beyond our day-to-day circumstances. Christians who live in different places, or at different times in history, face different challenges as they strive to live the gospel faithfully. Works of art, including literature, that introduce us to these people and their struggles can expand our own understanding of what God is doing in the world. Through the works of Japanese Christian novelist Shusaku Endo, for example, I have been better able to associate with my brothers and sisters abroad, and even adjust my own behavior to better coincide with the values of the kingdom of God that they demonstrate. This helps us to see the limits of our own experience.

Second, works of art can embody or incarnate values and principles in ways that help us visualize the reality of the kingdom of God. We know we should exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But what do these abstract concepts and values look like in real life? We can learn by seeing them portrayed in literature, music, film, or visual art. As in Scripture, sometimes this is done effectively through positive example and sometimes through negative. The undoing of a character like Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* vividly illustrates the biblical teaching (think Ecclesiastes) that a life of licentiousness is ultimately empty.

Eventually, when our imaginations are trained by the Bible and Christian tradition, we begin to perceive with our senses what we know to be true by faith. In this way, a

biblical imagination can ultimately alter our experience. To offer only one example of this, the early American theologian Jonathan Edwards believed God had built into nature clues about the deep themes of Scripture, including salvation, sanctification, the futility of the law, and the beauty of grace. He saw in the butterfly an image of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. He saw in the spider's web an illustration of the craftiness and stealth of Satan. He saw in the sunrise the eclipse of the law of works by the more perfect law of grace. His uniquely Christian imagination helped him to see beyond the material world to the significance that lay beneath and behind it.

In short, our problem is not an overactive imagination. The real threat is a lack of imagination, or an imagination stunted or misshaped by our experience. Through Scripture and the creative work of fellow pilgrims we can develop a hearty imagination that will help us believe and embody the gospel of Christ in our day.

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