

# 11

## The Holy Christian Imagination

- I. The *imagination* enables us to use our faith to apprehend the unseen realities and the meaning of God's creation.
- A. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, exhorts them to exercise their holy Christian imagination by fixing their eyes on the *unseen real*.
- ?? Hebrews 11:1 ***Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.***
- ?? 2 Cor. 4:18 ***So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.***
1. Faith is believing in the unseen real, not believing in things that have no existence in reality.
  2. Seeing the unseen real is central to a truly Christian worldview.
  3. Faith utilizes the soul's capacity to imagine.
- B. Imagination is part of the *Image of God* in us that enables us to grasp meaning.
1. The imagination, says Cheryl Forbes in *Imagination: Embracing A Theology of Wonder*, is a part of the "imago dei" in us all. She writes, "*it helps us know God, receive his grace, worship him and see life through his eyes.*"
  2. C.S. Lewis called the imagination, "*the organ of meaning.*"
  3. Leanne Payne says the imagination is, "*the way we as creatures 'see' and 'hear' the inaudible, the invisible. It involves our loving and receiving from God, and from all that He has made and calls good.*" *The Healing Presence*, (p.139).
- II. As God's creatures, our ability to imagine is related to language, *symbol*, and communion with God Himself.
- A. We are creatures that symbolize using words, dreams and visions.
1. Words are symbols - A.P.P.L.E. is not the same thing as the object.
  2. Dreams - when asleep.
  3. Visions - when awake.

- B. As fallen creatures, our capacity to symbolize needs to be redeemed from the mire of vain and delusional visions and diseased fantasy lives.
1. Vain visions or imaginings are not in harmony with the will of God or reality. They may come as divinations that puff up our egos.
    - ?? Ezekiel 12:24 KJV ***For there shall be no more vain vision nor flattering divination within the house of Israel.***
    - ?? Ezekiel 13:7 RSV ***The LORD said, . . . “Have you not seen a delusive vision, and uttered a lying divination, whenever you have said, ‘Says the LORD,’ although I have not spoken?”***
  2. If we read our diseased fantasy lives literally then we may repress our imagination to avoid bad images.
    - a) Men who repress their imagination for fear of their sexual fantasy lives are also repressed in their faith. They often say to me:
      - “I never see in pictures or have visions, my wife is the one who does all that touchy feely stuff in prayer.”*
      - “Really?” I reply, “You’ve never had a dream or a sexual fantasy?”*
      - “Well, yes, I have.”*
    - b) Images may be read literally or figuratively, or both ways.
- C. We are to devote our imagination to God to be used in harmony with reality.
1. Brown-Driver Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon, the Hebrew word *yay'-tser* means, *of what is framed in the mind: imagination, device, purpose or frame of mind*.
  2. *Yay'-tser* may be interpreted as the human capacity of picturing or framing abstract concepts symbolically. Hence when *yay'tser* is used in Isaiah 26:3 it is sometimes translated, as in the RSV, as imagination. *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose imagination is stayed on thee.*
  3. Oswald Chambers, My Utmost For His Highest, (Feb. 10th & 11th entries)—*One of the reasons of stultification in prayer is that there is no imagination, no power of putting ourselves deliberately before God. . . . Imagination is the power God gives a saint to posit himself out of himself into relationships he never was in. . . . Imagination is the greatest gift God has given us and it ought to be devoted entirely to Him . . . Learn to associate ideas worthy of God with all that happens in Nature—the sunrises and the sunsets, the sun and the stars, the changing seasons, and your imagination will never be at the mercy of your impulses, but will always be at the service of God.*

4. The imagination used in harmony with reality leads to hope and great works of art.
    - a) Leland Ryken writes, *The imagination has its unique way of expressing truth and reality . . . At the level of human issues, works of art are a window to reality. Like a lens that distorts in order to enable us to see something more clearly, the artistic imagination creates imaginary worlds that allow us to see reality with heightened clarity.* The Liberated Imagination, (pp. 121-122)
- III. Truly imaginative experiences are apprehensions of reality in the realms of nature, supernature, and the Divine.
- A. In his 1960 book *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis shows how classic Christian philosophy identified three realms of reality and shows how Jesus and Christians believers participate in these three realms.
    1. The realm of nature is the material natural world created by God as described in Genesis 1.
    2. The realm of supernature is the non-material supernatural world also created by God and inhabited by angels and demons as described in Paul's letter to the Ephesians  
?? Ephesians 3:10 ***the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.***
    3. The realm of the divine is reserved for God alone as described in Paul's letter to Timothy.  
?? 1 Timothy 6:16 ***God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.***
    4. Jesus, being fully God and fully man, participates in all three realms of reality, and consequently, so do we.
      - a) In our body, we participate in nature.
      - b) In our spirit, we participate in supernature.
      - c) Through the indwelling presence of Holy Spirit in the Christian believer, we participate in the divine nature.  
?? 2 Peter 1:3, 4 NKJV ***His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.***
  - B. In the realm of nature, the imagination helps us see this world as it really is.

1. For example, the artist in painting a picture of nature tries to paint the object of work by depicting some aspect of it as it truly is.
  2. Claude Monet, the great French impressionist, did a series of paintings of lilies on a pond. His images are purposely blurred.
    - a) He was not trying to literally illustrate lilies, he was trying to communicate the wonder of the lilies' relationship to the rest of nature.
    - b) He is communicating one aspect of the lilies' essential existence—or their **is-ness**. If you stare at one of his lily paintings long enough, you will begin to have a sense not only of the lilies floating on the water, but of them slightly moving with the light summer breezes blowing over the waters.
- C. In the realm of supernature, the imagination can help us apprehend the unseen realities within our Christian worldview, realities such as demons, angels and archangels, and the soul and spirit of man.
1. In the late 1980's Frank Peretti's book, This Present Darkness, was a popular book in the USA for several reasons.
    - a) First, he is a fine storyteller.
    - b) Second, he wrote about unseen realities and the warfare that takes place in the heavens. His story begins with a conversation between two angels who are coming to the aid of a Christian who is praying to God for help. As the story unfolds, we learn of demonic spirits who have nearly taken over an entire town in the USA through a university professor who is teaching New Age techniques in her class.
  2. C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia paints a picture of Christian reality in a world of talking animals replete with powers of good and evil.
- D. In the realm of the Divine, the truly imaginative experience is one of receiving a word or a picture from the Lord.
1. It is an occurrence of God's thoughts descending into our thoughts.
    - a) This is what C.S. Lewis called transposition.
    - b) It is the Higher coming down into the lower.
  2. St. Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-23 is an example of a truly imaginative experience.
    - a) vs. 9-10: It begins with Peter in a deep, trance-like prayer.

- b) vs. 11-16: Three times, he receives a vision with a message attached to it.
  - c) vs. 17: Peter contemplates the meaning of the vision to access its prophetic implications.
    - (1) As soon as he understands the meaning, the power of the vision changes his life.
    - (2) *Dunamis* in Greek is both “meaning” and “power.”
    - (3) From that point on, Peter begins to understand the Gospel is for everyone, not just for Jews.
  - d) vs. 19: Peter continues to think about the vision.
    - (1) This is an imaginative experience for Peter.
    - (2) The full implications of the Gospel being given to all people are still unfolding for him.
3. The Lord never sends a vision or a word without meaning.
- a) Sometimes the meaning unfolds, as it did for Peter.
  - b) Sometimes circumstances and future events help us to understand the vision.
4. Like Mary after giving birth to a child conceived not through creaturely means, and being visited by shepherds and the great company of heaven in the gospel of Luke, Luke 2:19 says, *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*
- E. We can think imaginatively without receiving pictures.
- 1. Holy Spirit “nudges”.
  - 2. An impression, a holy “hunch” or intuition.
  - 3. A sense of anticipation.
  - 4. A thought that continually returns.
  - 5. Biblical prophetic prayer.
- IV. Resymbolizing hearts that are starved for images of Glory is central to healing.
- A. Not only must we rid our minds and hearts of vain visions and diseased images, but more importantly, we must replace those old images with healthy images of reality that feed and nourish the soul.
- 1. Reading books that accentuate all three levels of reality (nature, supernature and the Divine) can help us.
- B. Reverence for creation can cause us to rightly embrace natural beauty.
- 1. Not as some “creation spirituality”, but as having its source in God.

2. For all He has made we need to give Him thanks: for the cosmos, the earth, animal life, plant life and especially human life.
- C. Employing a *metaphoric* understanding of past incidents and memories can help us access the symbolic import of these events.
1. A metaphoric understanding means reading events and incidents in a figurative manner to access the varying levels of effects these have on you.
    - a) This does not lessen the gravity of the literal events.
    - b) Understanding the figurative effect on the soul can help unlock the depth of the wounds.
    - c) Understanding the figurative effect on the soul can help identify when the effects of the abuse are appearing in other circumstances of life.
  2. In cases of sexual abuse, what is the *symbolic meaning* of the abuse?
    - a) Being overpowered.
    - b) Loss of control.
    - c) Feeling diminished and belittled.
    - d) Having your masculinity or your femininity tarnished.
- D. Honoring the Christian symbolic system as given to us in the Scripture and subsequently the liturgy. Memorizing the Bible helps us do this.
- E. *Witnessing* healthy and holy relationships between men and women within the Body of Christ, but naming unhealthy relationships when we see them.
- F. Imaginative exercises, which cleanse the imagination and pull up weeds of fears from our hearts, help to *free* the imagination to become holy and Christian.
1. Cleansing the imagination.
    - a) Pulling out diseased fantasy lives.
    - b) Pulling out pornographic imagery.
  2. Garden of the Heart
    - a) Bringing up desires.
    - b) Weeding out fears.
- G. It is important to keep our imagination *clean* of diseased imagery coming through the internet, television and movies, music lyrics, comic books and novels.
1. The internet provides access to unlimited images that can hold the imagination captive.
  2. Television and movies may assault your mind with images of sex, violence and a twisted view of the supernatural.

3. Music lyrics often have a strong content of violence and sexuality.
  4. Comic books may contain distorted images of men and women along with alternative views of reality.
  5. Novels can have plotlines that portray reality in a skewed way.
- H. Simply because God can cleanse our imagination does not mean we should have an antinomian attitude toward those things that can pollute our imagination.
1. Antinomianism is when we live without any laws or rules.
  2. All who desire to live in freedom from unholy images must abide by rules and laws that protect their minds from visual pollution.
- I. When the images in our hearts reflect Christian reality, then God can more easily use the images within our hearts to speak to us.
- J. Jesus redeems our imagination for beauty and devotion to God.
- 

**Group Ministry**

1. Have you had any New Age or occult experiences through misuse of the imagination? If so, renounce those practices in prayer with a prayer minister in the large group.
2. Have participants close their eyes, and see the outstretched hand of Jesus before them. Then have them reach up to their foreheads with their hand and pull the diseased images from their minds and place them into the hand of Jesus. Then ask them, "What do you see Jesus doing with that image?" If they see nothing, then ask for the love and holiness of the Lord Jesus to fill up that place where that disease image used to be.
3. Have participants close their eyes, and take a look in the garden of their heart to see if there are any weeds of fear growing there. Then, if they see the weeds of fear, ask them to ask the Lord Jesus to name those fears. Then, ask them to ask the Lord to remove the fear. Finally, have them ask the Lord Jesus to fill that place up with love, because perfect love casts our fear.

**Bibliography**

- Brown, Francis, Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979.
- Chambers, Oswald, My Utmost For His Highest, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1935, renewed 1963.
- Forbes, Cheryl, Imagination: Embracing A Theology of Wonder, Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986.
- Lewis, C.S., Miracles, New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1960.
- Payne, Leanne, The Healing Presence: Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1996.
- Peretti, Frank, This Present Darkness, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1986.
- Ryken, Leland, The Liberated Imagination, Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989.