

**Outline for**  
**“Eyes of the Heart”: Imagination and Being Human**

Ted Turnau, Ph.D.  
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**Introduction: Christian hesitations about the imagination...**

1. Isn't imagination lying?
2. Doesn't imagination infringe on God's territory as Creator?
3. Aren't creative people weird, sometimes leading scandalous lives?

But there is much more to the imagination that makes it vital to being human.

**I. What does the Bible say about the imagination and being human?**

**A. Imagination is rooted in the Triune God.**

God is Trinity, and the persons of the Trinity relate to each other by *perichoresis*, like a conversation woven from imagination.

Out of the overflow of that conversation, God creates. And he has an endlessly fertile imagination.

**B. Imagination is rooted in God's meaningful creation.**

For non-Christians, creation means nothing, it is chaos. We humans alone create meaning. Imagination is “screaming into the void.”

The Bible shows that creation isn't meaningless because it points back to the creator.

Creation is, therefore, not a monologue, but a dialogue with the meanings woven into creation.

Further, we ourselves are made in the image of the Creator. Genesis 1:26-28 ties together the image of God and the “Cultural Mandate,” the command to go and create beautiful, useful things from God’s creation.

And not just things, but intangibles as well, as in Adam’s naming of the animals. Adam was interpreting, making sense of God’s creation. So, too, our cultural creations are ways of interpreting and making sense of God’s creation, giving us “homes” of meaning for ourselves.

We create meaningful “worlds” within God’s larger meaningful world, and we understand reality through those “worlds”.

### **C. The imagination is twisted by the fall, yet God’s Spirit is still intimately involved with our imaginations.**

The fall into sin (Genesis 3) distorted everything in human existence, including our imagination. Just because something is imaginative doesn’t mean it’s good.

And yet, God hasn’t abandoned our imaginations. He gave his own Spirit to dwell in Bezalel (Exodus 31). He anointed David the musician in 1 Samuel 16. Are these special cases, or do they apply to all imaginations?

The concept of “common grace” (Matthew 5:44-45 and Acts 14:17) shows God to be generous even to those who care nothing for God. Though common grace doesn’t save, makes *all* of our lives better (more beautiful, just, and good) than it would be if left to our own devices.

More than that, passages like Psalm 104:27-30 and Job 33:4 show God breathing his Spirit-breath (*ruah*) into *all* living creatures. Isn’t the same true of our imaginations?

Yes, David and Bezalel were specially anointed, but there is a sense in which God’s Spirit is mysteriously active in *all* imaginations, allowing sinful humans to produce works of beauty and goodness (common grace).

#### **D. Imagination is key to our experience as new creations in God.**

Our redemption, even more than our creation, is a stunning work of imagination, as God reversed death into life, sin into righteousness, rebels children into adopted sons and daughters.

And we ourselves are artworks in whom God is still working (Ephesians 2:10), and God has promised to bring that work to completion (Philippians 1:6).

The biggest work God's resurrection Spirit must do in us is to change our imaginations, our "eyes of the heart" (see Ephesians 1:17-20). We learn to see reality with new eyes, with a new imagination.

Puritan pastor-theologian Richard Baxter called this "opening the creatures" like we open our Bibles.

In Christ, we learn not just to see how the world seems (dark, God-forsaken), but how it could and should have been, how it *will* be when Christ returns. We need imagination to live and think and create as Christians.

Example/illustration: Lucy Pevensie seeing past the deadness of the trees, *and* seeing Aslan, in *Prince Caspian*. A faithful imagination is a creativity/sensitivity needed to see the truth and swim upstream against the current of unbelief that surrounds us. To catch a glimpse of Truth, you need imagination.

## **II. The Bible’s teaching resonates with cognitive science and literary theory (some of it, anyway).**

There’s been a shift in perspective regarding the imagination over the past few centuries, from a decorative, disposable organ (like the appendix) to one that is necessary to sustain life (like the circulatory system).

### **A. The “perceptive imagination”: imagination filters the way we perceive the world.**

We think of perception as passive; we *absorb* data from our environment. Nigel J. T. Thomas’ “Active Perception Theory” says that the imagination participates in perception by projecting patterns out into the world and seeing what “catches” – what’s confirmed, what needs adjusting.

It’s more complicated than that, as cognitive scientist Jim Davies lists a whole host of mental operations in which the mind generates hypotheticals: reconstructing memories, planning for future scenarios, fantasizing, as well as creating things. But it also mediates our perception of the world around us.

We only notice it when something misfires, when we “see” something that wasn’t there because expected it to be there (like my cat Enkidu).

Perception is not a passive reflection of things, like a mirror. Nor do we passively soak up information, like a sponge. The imagination is like a lamp, illuminating our world through its questioning/patterning activity. We perceive our world filtered by through our imaginations.

And through this perceptive imagination, we build up an “imaginary landscape” woven throughout with our expectations, presuppositions, biases, hopes, fears, and desires. In this sense, the real world is imaginary (not fictional, but imagination in dialogue with the world around us).

### **B. The “creative imagination” gives us different worlds, alien imaginary landscapes.**

This is how we typically think of imagination: the place from which we make stuff up (artists, kids, daydreamers). We create “worlds”.

This happens whenever cultural works are created. *And* we need imagination to enjoy those cultural works, to inhabit those imaginary worlds.

According to literary theorist Paul Ricoeur, the real meaning of cultural works lies in *le monde du texte*, the imaginary world of the text projected by a cultural work.

Inhabiting a cultural world changes how we see the real world. Our creations shape our perception.

### **C. The bridge between the perceptive and creative imagination: metaphor, “seeing-as”.**

The basic power of the creative imagination is the same as that of the perceptive imagination: metaphor, seeing-as. Metaphorizing is being able to hold two concepts in tension, seeing one *as* the other. This is what makes poetry function (my love as a red, red rose, etc.).

Through this seeing-as that joins the creative and perceptive imagination, we learn to see the world anew, reflected and refracted in a different light.

Because both aspects of the imagination draw power from the same engine, the two bleed into each other, like watercolours. What you watch, listen to, read, or play will shape your experience of reality, your “seeing-as”, the eyes of your heart. (Though being part of a strong community gives some immunity). And it shapes the collective “imaginary landscape”.

There are studies that show that practicing guided imagery meditation can, over time, produce hallucinations. Well, what is enjoying entertainment but a mild version of guided visualization? That’s why it’s likely it can have an impact on the eyes of the heart, your seeing-as.

### **III. Why this matters...**

The perceptive and creative imaginations shape our whole world. Imaginative seeing-as lies at the heart of worldview: we all see the world, others, our own lives *as*, in light of certain contexts and meanings.

Then, it's not a question *if* you have an imagination. The question is: What sort of imagination do you have? Through what lens are the eyes of your heart focusing? For they can orient a person's whole life (e.g. politics-shaped, economics-shaped, or entertainment-shaped imaginations).

These are sub-Christian imaginations; they kill our motivation to live lives for God. They make the gospel seem weird and superfluous, instead of the pearl of great price it actually is.

This is why defaulting on our aesthetic witness to the surrounding world by making cheesy, kitschy, or propaganda culture is so deeply damaging. The church needs to get serious about the imaginative, cultural work it produces.