

Outline for
Planting Oases: Christian Imagination and Creative Cultural Engagement

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Introduction: Christians are fond of the phrase “In, but not of, the world” from John 17:14-18. But it’s not correct. We are not just “in” the world, we have been sent *into* the world to engage it, to create justice and peace and goodness in this culture we share with our neighbors.

The real question, then, is *how* to do this in a culture inoculated against the gospel?

Option A: Politics/culture warring only causes division and resentment. Plus, it results in weird forms of corruption and compromise as ends justify means.

Option B: Create a safe-space, a “Christian bubble”. But that denies Christ’s call on us to go into the world.

Neither option really engages the “imaginary landscape,” the hopes, dreams, fears, anxieties and desires that lie back of culture. No long-term cultural change happens without engaging the imaginary landscape.

I. A third path: planting oases

We could engage the imagination as a way of cultural engagement.

Illustration: “The Oasis that Was Really a Portal to Another Universe”.

Planting oases means making cultural works that open up breathable spaces that creatively challenge both Christian and non-Christian imaginations to see differently, question assumptions, provoke conversations, and build relationships.

It’s NOT about making cultural works that appeal primarily to Christians, add to the “Christian bubble” subculture.

It’s about joining the broader cultural conversation.

It’s about engaging the imaginary landscape of post-Christian culture so non-Christians can begin to see the gospel *as* true and beautiful.

The church needs to gain a better understanding of the imagination so they support those who can do this imaginative work well, so they can create networks of oases.

Makoto Fujimura calls this “culture care.” Illustration: Koyu Abe, a Buddhist monk who passed out sunflower seeds to absorb the radiation from the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster. Christians’ creative efforts can do the same for our culture, removing the toxic conflict and life-killing patterns that poison our shared culture.

What is the imagination (yesterday’s topic)? A metaphorizing “lens” through which we see our world, and from which we create, the “eyes of the heart.” The two aspects of the imagination—perception and cultural creativity—bleed into and shape each other.

This is what makes creative cultural engagement so critical, and what makes *bad* culture-making so damaging.

We need to get serious about planting oases. When we plant oases, we can begin to engage the collective eyes of the heart, the shared imaginary landscape of post-Christian culture.

II. What makes the Christian imagination distinctive?

What makes the Christian imagination/seeing-as different, and what kind of imagination is best suited for planting oases?

A. Brightness control: the tension between a cross-shaped and empty tomb-shaped imagination.

The cross is an apt symbol for the dark, twistedness of the world (which should move us to compassion), and the darkness that dwells within (which should move us to humility for God’s grace).

The empty tomb means that though the world is dark, it is not only dark. It means seeing *past* the darkness to light and hope, the momentum of all things towards the new creation.

The faithful Christian imagination sees through *both* perspectives simultaneously, like two lenses of a pair of glasses. In this way, we have a way of seeing the world that is mournful without despair, joyful without naiveté, triumphant without triumphalism.

B. Volume control: the balance between shouting and mumbling.

This area has to do with maintaining a balance in how explicit we are in our Christian commitments in our creative works.

Preaching or shouting Christian propaganda will not reach non-Christians.

Neither will mumbling our Christian convictions, trying to blend into too much to the post-Christian culture.

Rather than shouting or mumbling, let the work whisper, resonate with the audience. Indirection: create an imaginary world where the gospel makes sense and permeates the very fabric of your imaginary world.

By keeping this tension between the darkness and light (cross and empty-tomb), and the balance between shouting and mumbling, the artist can create oases that allow for exploration, that refresh and challenge imaginations.

III. What is art, and what's it for?

Philosopher of art, Calvin Seerveld, gives this definition:

Art is an object or event conceived and structured by human design to be perceived by our senses, and characterized by an imaginative and allusive finish that affords the piece its own independent identity.

Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves (2000), p. 8.

He means:

1. Art is sensual, made for the senses.

2. Art is “allusive,” gestures beyond itself, creates worlds to explore.

3. Art has its own independent worth and identity *as* art. It’s worth does not depend on how “useful” it is.

So what does art do? What’s it for? Is it a luxury item?

Art is part of what it means to be human in God’s world.

It feeds, refines, and reforms the imagination.

It brings encouragement, escape, entertainment, questions, challenges, wonder, and glory. It crystalizes and focuses our shared human experience.

Art expands our imaginative boundaries, helping us to empathize with each other. It lets us live in a bigger world, or it convinces us that our world is quite small, and can lead to rejecting and demonizing others. It tells the truth about God’s world, or helps us believe the lie.

Art does all this in a way that gets under our skins, goes around to the back door of our minds.

Conclusion: We can engage post-Christian culture that neither participates in culture warring, nor withdraws and retreats to the Christian bubble. We can pursue the Christian imagination, the seeing-as that shapes how we see reality and how we create alternative realities through cultural works/worlds. This is how we plant oases that open up spaces that challenge, refresh, and transform both Christian and non-Christian imaginations. To do this, we need imaginations that keep in tension the cross and empty tomb, and strikes a balance that resonates rather than blasts propaganda or blends in to secular culture. Understanding the nature of art and what it’s good for helps.

Time for some concrete examples...

