

# THE DRAMA OF THE CHRIST:

## THE GOSPEL AS THING DONE AND WORD MADE

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM  
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO  
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

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BY KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

George Lindbeck, formerly Professor of Theology at Yale University, made a statement about our inability to read the Bible with imagination which is as striking today as when he wrote it in 1986: “This loss of intratextuality [the ability to read Scripture as a unified narrative and to use that narrative as a framework for understanding our world] is perhaps a more serious part of the global crisis than are the social, economic, and political problems to which we more commonly advert.”<sup>1</sup> Lindbeck is reflecting on what his colleague Hans Frei called the “great reversal” in hermeneutics: once upon a time, Christians lived within the imaginative and linguistic world of the Bible. Today, however, the situation is reversed: we use what we know from modern learning about the world - about ancient history, linguistics, science, etc. - to interpret the Bible. The world frames the word whereas in the past the word framed the world. This great reversal marks nothing less than a conversion of the imagination, from supernaturalism and the Christ of faith to naturalism and the Jesus of history. Indeed, many of the stories that hold present-day imaginations captive are variations on a Darwinian (i.e., naturalistic; evolutionary)

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<sup>1</sup> Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” *Theology Today* 43 [1986].

theme. Christian thinking goes wrong, however, whenever it relies on some other story or set of categories in its search for understanding - of God, the world, ourselves, or the Bible itself - than those provided by the biblical story itself.

### **A. The Gospel according to Gibson: the power of story-showing**

The great reversal took place before the advent of film, that powerful new means for re-enchanting the imagination. Mel Gibson's 1994 release, "The Passion of the Christ," was a stellar phenomenon where planet Hollywood lined up with church to produce a cultural supernova. The only question is whether it produced more heat than light.

Films provide instant world views - literal views of the world. At its best, cinema offers us "film seeking understanding" - moving picture stories that give a sense of what the world is like and why we are here. Some films present nihilistic pictures of life, others, like Gibson's, tell the story of Jesus, still others pander other gospels. By "gospel" I mean some version of good news. For example, the recent film "Pursuit of Happyness" is an uplifting rags to riches tale that depicts success as a combination of opportunity, hard work, and perseverance; it preaches the gospel of the American Dream.

Many of the stories circulating in our society give subtler sermons, but they still preach. Their message pertains to the products and programs that will enhance our lives; their goal is to form us into capitalist-consumers who are willing literally to buy into their vision of the good. Of course, what they hold out as good "for us" is really good, that is lucrative, for *them*: stock-holders, retailers, producers, and marketers.

Each year I show a Frontline PBS video called “The Persuaders” to my Cultural Hermeneutics class. The “persuaders” are marketing gurus who know how to tell a story through words and images so as to elicit the desired response. They know that culture indoctrinates us, capturing our imagination with stories and pictures that project images of the good life. Thanks to ubiquitous advertising, we’re constantly bombarded with mini-narratives that say we can have the world and ourselves (or at least our burger) just the way we want it. Health and wealth are only a phone call (or prescription) away. Coca-Cola has done a particularly good job of associating drinking their product with world peace and Christmas. And we all know that Macintosh users are cooler than their PC counterparts.

Another film I show to my Cultural Hermeneutics class is “Trekkies”. It’s about fans of the various “Star Trek” shows who either collect Trek paraphernalia, attend conventions, or otherwise express their devotion. Some in their fanaticism inhabit the story too literally, like the man who asked the actor who played Dr. McCoy: “How does it feel to be beamed up?” Most Trekkies, however, are ordinary folk. Yet the level of their commitment to the primacy of the “Star Trek” narrative is striking. There are members of local Trekkie clubs all over the world. A few dress up like Trek characters and seek to live as Trekkies, in the world but not of it! One young woman who calls herself “Commander” actually wore her uniform to court when she served on the jury of the Whitewater trial in Arkansas.

What is behind such devotion? A compelling story: the world of the Trek-text. In the future projected by the Trek narrative, not only will science solve our problems, but there will be no need for money and everyone will be treated equally regardless of

gender, race, or class. Interestingly, several persons interviewed in the documentary commented on how inclusive the Star Trek narrative is. Gene Roddenberry, the author-producer of the original series, was essentially a humanist who believed that peace and enlightenment, if not just around the corner, lie only four hundred years in the future. Roddenberry was an evangelist, and Trekkies are continuing his aborted mission, boldly going where no Klingon has gone before. As one fan puts it: “We’re always recruiting. Wherever we are, whatever we’re doing, we’re Trekkies, 24/7.” Would that Christians were as zealous about preaching (and embodying) their narrative as many Trekkies are theirs!

#### **B. “Bad” evangelical imagination**

That other stories effectively employ imaginative techniques is a cautionary reminder for evangelists and theologians alike. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and early Christians made good use of it but, as Augustine says, we must be as concerned with the truth of the message as its means of presentation.<sup>2</sup>

Cinema, like other forms of story-telling, is a powerful medium of communication, combining images and sounds that engage both mind and senses, imagination and emotions. Film not only tells but shows stories: if a picture is worth a thousand words, a moving picture is worth ten-thousand. Moreover, though all narrative texts invite us to inhabit the worlds they display, film literally displays the sights and sounds of its world, leaving less work to do for the imagination.

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<sup>2</sup> *Additionally, the means of presentation must be consistent with the end for which the message is given. If McLuhan is right and the medium is the message, what does that mean for evangelism?*

We're talking about the role of imagination in proclaiming the gospel. So: who does Mel say that he is? The overriding answer of the film is probably "the suffering servant," with emphasis on the suffering. In restoring the horror and sheer physical agony not only of the cross but of the scourging that preceded it, Gibson successfully de-sentimentalizes the passion.

In other respects, however, his film is an example of what I call a "bad imagination" - "bad" not in a moral sense but in the sense of "poor quality" or "low standard." Put differently: I see three features in Gibson's film that give imagination a bad name: (1) the film invents details and episodes that were not in the text. We call this "fancy": the bringing to mind things that are not real (e.g., unicorns). (2) the film addresses the pictorial imagination. For many, this is what the imagination is: the ability to create images (verbal, mental, or celluloid) that recreate scenes to which we have no empirical access. (3) the rhetorical purpose of Gibson's pictorial imagination of Jesus' passion is to affect our emotions. The prolonged scourging scene in particular is intended not to increasing our understanding of the event but to appeal to our pity. Is this the best we can do? I think not.

It's worth mentioning that the term "imagination" does not get a particularly good rap in the Bible, or at least not in the King James Version. That translation has a tendency to link the imagination with the evil inclinations of the heart (Gen 6:5; Prov 6:18), with vain or futile thinking (Rom 1:21), and with conceiving mischief (Ps 140:2) - not particularly auspicious linguistic company!

As several biblical scholars have reminded me, there is no biblical term in the Greek or Hebrew for imagination. That alone is no excuse for jettisoning it, of course, for

we can say the same about the term “Trinity.” Though there may be no one term, the concept is thoroughly biblical. Other biblical scholars worry that the imagination, in the sense of the manufacture or production of images, issues a license for idolatry. The best way forward is to acknowledge the possibility - nay, the actuality! - of vain imaginings, and then to move beyond the concept of the imagination as a picture-making factory. What follows is an attempt to set forth the contours of a “good” evangelical imagination.

### C. “Good” evangelical imagination

When I lived in Edinburgh, Scotland I heard a story about an American couple who were visiting Greyfriars kirkyard (viz., cemetery). As they wended their way along the path, the wife exclaimed, “Look, honey, two men are buried in this grave.” Her husband asked, “How do you know that?” to which the wife replied, “Because the tombstone says, ‘Here lies an evangelist and a theologian.’”

This anecdote illustrates a couple of things. First, it reminds us of a truth we need to recover today: that evangelists (and pastors) are theologians. It also illustrates how easy it is to slip into habits of thought. It was *unimaginable* to this woman that a person could be both an evangelist and a theologian. While we may smile at her mistake, I wonder whether some modern prophet might say to us, as Nathan said to David, “Thou art the woman.” For we too may have slipped into certain less than healthy habits of thought, not least concerning the imagination and its role in theology.

Let’s remember the problem we mentioned at the outset: the loss of the ability to “read” our world through the interpretive biblical lens of God’s word. At some point in the 18th or 19th century, the educated American, under the influence of German higher

criticism, lost confidence in the Bible: “The assumption that historical process is the bed of human perception, that knowledge is the product of a fluid process, had come to be the hallmark of the modern mind.”<sup>3</sup> Alas, this mindset has taken over a good deal of biblical studies. Even evangelical biblical exegetes are often more comfortable analyzing the text into smaller and smaller bits than they are in tracing the longitudinal lines that hold the testaments together.

An incomplete picture of the imagination - as the power or picturing the absent real or of conjuring up the unreal - has held us captive. It turns out that Western philosophy and theology were too hasty in denigrating the imagination. We do more justice to the image of God in humanity, and to the nature of Scripture itself, when we view the imagination as “the power of synoptic vision”: the ability to see things together; to connect apparently unrelated elements into a meaningful pattern. The imagination is a cognitive faculty, a way of thinking. Its special intellectual talent is discerning the relation between parts and whole. This ability to think synthetically is just as much a form of reason as is the ability to think analytically and break things up into smaller parts. Yes, Virginia, there are vain imaginings. But this no more disqualifies the imagination from serving theology than the existence of logical fallacies disqualifies reason.

The task of theology - interpreting our experience in light of our biblical exegesis - involves reason and imagination alike. The imagination allows us not simply to analyze or “look at” but to indwell and “look along” the biblical text. Christians in all cultures need to develop this skill. Reading Scripture theologically requires imagination, the ability to make sense of things by locating particular bits and pieces within larger

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Wacker wrote in 1982 on “*The Demise of Biblical Civilization*” in Hatch and Noll, eds., *The Bible in America* (1982) p. 125.

contexts. Whereas analytic criticism breaks Scripture up into fragments, the imagination is more synthetic; its business is to grasp the pattern of the whole.

The evangelical imagination perceives features of the world that neither the senses nor reason alone can grasp. The evangelical imagination is not merely pictorial but thoroughly cognitive, by which I mean it enables us to know things we would not otherwise know. Just as metaphors allow scientists to view the natural world in new ways and so make new discoveries, so the Bible's metaphors and narratives allow us to see the natural world as creation and history as the theater of God's glory (Calvin).

The vocation of the evangelical imagination involves much more than re-creating pictures of Jesus' suffering. The true power of the imagination resides not in its being a picture-mill but in its being in the business of constructing frameworks. *What counts is not the picture but the frame.* The imagination is primarily about frameworks for understanding, and only secondarily about the pictures that are framed.

The interpretive frameworks of the imagination engage not only the emotions but the will and the mind as well, what Scripture calls the "heart." 4 The Apostle Paul prays in Eph 1:18 that God give his readers a spirit of wisdom, "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, . . . and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe . . . that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead." Paul hopes that God could use his texts to open the eyes of his readers to theological truths in order to live together in unity and to fight together against the evil around them. The Scriptures, says Calvin, are our spectacles of faith: we don't merely look at but *through* them - at God, the world, and

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4 See A. A. Searle, "'The Eyes of Your Heart': Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically," *PhD. dissertation, University of Sydney, 2005.*

ourselves. Scriptural texts ultimately provide frameworks for living. And this brings us to drama.

#### **D. The drama of the Christ: story-doing**

Story-telling is a powerful means of shaping a person's view of the world. Often it's more effective to tell a story than to give a lesson. It's not merely that the story packages the moral better than a propositional statement might. It's that the story has a more-than-propositional impact. A good story does not only convey information but touches us and, at the limit, transforms us. If this is true of story-telling, how much more is it the case with story-doing? For that's exactly what we have in the gospel: a lived story - a thing done; a word made.

#### The gospel as "thing done" and "word made"

To the question, is the imagination visual or verbal, I want to answer *both*, at least in the case of the gospel. For the gospel is dramatic, involving speech and action. In the first place, the gospel is a thing done (i.e., something seen and witnessed). This is its historical aspect. Yet the gospel is also a word made (i.e., something written down and interpreted). Something has happened, but it must be said in a way that bears true witness and persuades others.

Drama captures both aspects: a drama is a doing. As such, it refers first and foremost to what God has done in the history of Israel and definitively in the history of Jesus Christ. Drama involves doings: not impersonal events, but actions, many of which involve language (speech acts). But a drama is also a "word made" to the extent that the dialogue carries the action.

Scripture, our authoritative script, is also a “word made” (*poema*). Rightly to understand it requires us to know how it is put together. Too much biblical scholarship is spent in taking apart (analysis) only. Moreover, there are multiple “words made” within Scripture. Each of the Gospel narratives, for instance, has its own literary integrity. There are other kinds of “words made” in Scripture besides narrative: apocalyptic, songs, proverbs, prophecies, and so forth. All of these have meaning as parts of the overarching drama of the Christ.

#### Beyond theo-logos: theodrama

As an account of what God has done in Christ, the “theodrama” is the imaginative framework that lies at the heart of Scripture and thus ties together all the things done and all the words made therein. These words and deeds, taken together, serve as the interpretative framework through which Christians think, make sense of their experience, decide what to do and how to do it. The theodrama is the framework for living the Christian life. The goal of the Christian life - to love and know God - is largely a matter of theodramatic understanding.

The first thing faith needs to understand is that God’s speech kicks off the creational and covenantal action: “Let there be” (Gen 1:3); “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3). The theo-drama continues with God making good on his *promissio* thanks to the *missio* (sending) of Son and Spirit.

Unlike narrative stories, however, where the medium is words, or film, where the medium is celluloid images, the medium of drama is the living presence of persons.

Theater occurs when one or more persons “present” themselves to others. <sup>5</sup> Drama involves external, bodily activity that makes known one’s inner life or spirit. But this is precisely what happens in revelation, especially divine revelation in Christ: the living God presents himself through the medium of human words or, in the case of Jesus, through a particular human life.

Human history is a God-driven drama with five acts. Each act of the play is set in motion by an act of God, yet in each there is also either human or satanic opposition to what God does. The first act is creation (Gen 1-3), the setting for everything else that follows. Act II (beginning from Genesis 12 and running through the rest of the Old Testament) concerns God’s election, rejection, and restoration of Israel that begins with his promise to make of Abraham a great nation and by him to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:2-3). The pivotal and climactic third act is Jesus: God’s definitive Word. Act IV begins with the risen Christ sending his Spirit to create the church. The fifth and final act is the eschaton, the consummation of all things. Christians today are living between the first and second comings of Jesus, in the closing scenes of Act IV, poised between memory and hope. The drama enacted in the Bible and retold as narrative is no parochial play but the play or story of the whole world. It is the Christian control story: “The whole of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.” <sup>6</sup> The biblical story is about what God is doing to renew the whole

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970) p. 8

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, pp. 41-2.

creation; it therefore invites us to be participants “in something larger than our sin-defined needs.”<sup>7</sup>

Evangelism is the proclamation that something has been done not only for our good but for the good of the whole world. It is the summons to turn away from other stories falsely called knowledge and to embrace the drama - the thing done and the word made - of the Christ. For there is no other gospel, and no other theodrama.

**E. The theodramatic imagination: following the way; doing the truth; living the life**

The church, too, is something done and made by the triune God: “For we are his workmanship (*poema*), created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph. 2:10). The church does not make the gospel true but it should be evidence of its truth. Theology’s task is to equip disciples who will embody the truth claims of Christian theology. It follows that theology should not be merely theoretical or propositional but practical or *performative*.

That Christians are in a drama rather than a story or narrative makes a difference. By “story” I am referring to the substance of a person’s life or a sequence of events. By “narrative” I am referring to a way of telling the story, usually by recounting it in the third or first person, that is, from the perspective of an omniscient narrator or from one or more of the characters. By “drama” I am referring to a way of enacting the story, usually with others. Story becomes dramatic when one enters into it in an embodied way. And that is precisely what we are called to do. While narratives can be told in the third person at something of a distance from oneself, drama is “dialogue in action” and calls for first and second person discourse, the language of interpersonal relations. As disciples, our

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p. 41.

task is not simply to believe the story but to follow it, not only with our minds, as we would an argument, but with our lives, as we would a script. Drama thus preserves the emphasis on story while better integrating the interpreters into its play.

Thinking biblically with imagination: cultivating canon sense

What does it mean to think biblically? Two pictures have held us captive. The older picture assumes that the Bible's literary form - narrative, for example - is simply pretty packaging, a mere textual shell that contains inside what truly matters: a propositional pearl of great price. At the other extreme is a newer, narrativist picture, which assumes that we don't need propositions (or doctrines) because the story form of biblical text is sufficient.

Alongside this intramural dispute between theologians, there is another, equally troubling, divide: the ugly ditch between biblical studies and systematic theology. Here, too, we can distinguish two types of thinking or reasoning: systematic theology more or less corresponds to what Aristotle called *episteme*: theoretical knowledge. Biblical exegesis, with its analytic tools and its arsenal of lexical aids, resembles what Aristotle called *techne*: technical knowledge. No one really benefits from this stand-off over how to read the Bible, especially the church.

Thinking about Scripture as the church's script leads us beyond the impasse. The paradigm of drama suggests a third model of rationality that Aristotle terms *phronesis*: practical reasoning about what to say or do in a particular situation in which some good is at stake. But this is precisely what we have in Scripture: the epistles, for example, are pastoral letters that address specific problems in specific situations. Our contexts today

may be different - the cultural scene has changed - but what is ultimately at stake, and what we seek to do, is precisely the “good” of the gospel.

Thinking biblically is thus a matter of developing not common but *canon* sense. The canon is more than a list of books. It is a measuring or divining rod that helps us discern what we should say and do today so as to continue and correspond to the way, truth, and life made known in Jesus Christ. It is both source and norm of the church’s corporate identity and witness. Those with canon sense know how the two testaments fit together and are able to locate themselves in relation to the overall creation-fall-redemption-consummation story-line of the Bible. Those with canon sense therefore know where they are in the drama and what scene they’re playing.

The drama of the Christ is both historical and eschatological. It is a matter of what God has already done, of what God is currently doing, and of what God will do in the future. Jesus explained his own person and work in terms of the kingdom of God. We need the *eschatological imagination* to see the kingdom coming, to see God at work in Christ through the Spirit making all things new, because much of what God is doing is not empirically observable. In order to follow the theodrama, we need to see, judge, and act according to what is already/not-yet the case in Christ. The “whole” that the imagination discerns is a unified and complete action: the reconciliation of all things “in Christ.” It takes imagination to grasp this theodrama.

Canon-sense involves the training of our minds and imaginations to see our everyday world as caught up in the drama of the Christ. Canon sense is not merely a hermeneutical concept, however, but a means of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is the process by which the Spirit, ministering the word, conforms us to Christ. Spiritual

and scriptural formation work together when each of the Bible's literary forms helps us better to understand and join in the theodramatic action. It's a matter of having your perception, reason, and imagination trained - or, why not say it, disciplined - by Scripture so that your habits of making sense of your experience are more Christ-like than cultural. Hans Urs Von Balthasar says that Scripture is a "vehicle that impresses the Christ-form in the hearts of men." <sup>8</sup> Well and good. I would only add that Scripture impresses the Christ-mind - the *phronesis* or practical reason of Jesus - upon our minds, wills, imaginations, and hearts as well.

#### The drama of the Christ and Christian understanding

\_\_\_\_\_ Evangelism involves a conversion of the imagination and a conversion of the understanding. Theology is a ministry that deepens and develops understanding. But what is understanding, do we really believe that it is vital for people of faith to seek it, and what is the role of the imagination in getting it?

Understanding is the capacity to discern order and patterns and, in the case of textual interpretation, to perceive an author's communicative intent. It is a somewhat mysterious capacity, as spiritual as it is intellectual. It is especially precious in spouses and book reviewers. Even Plato noted the importance of having a framework for understanding. He called his readers attention to their duty to select the best theory that they could find "and use it as a raft to ride the seas of life." <sup>9</sup> Christians have a holy script as their raft.

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<sup>8</sup> Balthasar, *Glory*, vol. 1 p. 530.

<sup>9</sup> Phaedo 85d.

Paul Ricoeur speaks of a specifically narrative understanding. Narrative, he says, is a cognitive instrument for ordering a heterogeneous set of people, places, and events. Narrative provides a way of perceiving a kind of unity amidst diversity, the ability to see the “one” plot in the “many” events. Indeed, Ricoeur says that we explain history and make sense of life through “*emplotment*”, that is, placing events in the context of a unified story.

Understanding thus involves knowing how to follow a story, seeing how the beginning, middle, and end fit together. This involves seeing the parts in relation to the canonical whole, the unified story of the Christ: “Every part of the Bible - each event, book, character, command, prophecy, and poem - must be understood in the context of the *one* story line.”<sup>10</sup>

I want to say this and more. Christian understanding, the kind that embodies the good news that lies at the heart of our faith, is neither simply theoretical nor even narrative but ultimately dramatic. We demonstrate our understanding of the way of Jesus Christ by following it, by doing the truth. We fail to demonstrate understanding if we remain spectators only: hearers, not doers of the word. Gabriel Marcel distinguishes between the spectator or onlooker and the witness. The onlooker is not involved in reality, but the witness is an active participant.<sup>11</sup> Theology ministers understanding by formulating doctrine for disciples: directions for following propositional arguments, for following plots and, above all, for following the person of Jesus Christ. Theologians are “ministers of theodramatic understanding.”

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<sup>10</sup> *Bartholomew and Hogeem, The Drama of Scripture, p. 12.*

<sup>11</sup> *See his The Mystery of Being, tr. René Hague [Chicago: H. Regnery, 1960] 1:121-24.*

Understanding matters because one's understanding provides the framework for how one lives one's life, for how one indwells the world and dwells with others. The primacy of the drama of the Christ must be both theoretical and practical, not only a lens but the concrete medium which we live and move and have our daily being. As Jesus recapitulates human history, so Christians recapitulate Jesus' history, taking up their own crosses and dying with him daily.

The imagination is a precious means for gaining understanding inasmuch as it enables us to grasp "parts" under larger "wholes." Things fall apart. When we can no longer keep things together, we lose understanding. Awash in data, we no longer see the big picture or how things fit together. To understand the meaning of something is to see how it fits or relates to a larger whole. I submit that the drama of the Christ is that larger whole, a unified action that stretches from creation to consummation, of which our lives are parts. Outside the drama there is no explanation.

The drama of the Christ attunes us to the way things really are. This "attunement" is not only intellectual, but imaginative, affective, and volitional. The drama of the Christ is the Christian touchstone with which we discern, and do, the truth. Christian understanding is the child of word and Spirit alike. We need the word written, the holy script, but we also need the illumination of the Holy Spirit, what John McIntyre calls "God's imagination let loose ... in the world."<sup>12</sup> The Spirit creates the church by ministering the script, enabling believers to see their many stories as embedded in the one story of Jesus.

#### The drama of the Christ and Christian community

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<sup>12</sup> McIntyre, Faith, Theology and the Imagination [Edinburgh: Handsel, 1987, 64.

The drama of the Christ must become the church's "social imaginary." Charles Taylor defines social imaginary as "what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society." <sup>13</sup> Only a select few have the time and ability to produce social theories, but we all have ways of imagining our social surroundings. Taylor deploys the concept of a social imaginary to come to a better understanding of modernity. I want to deploy the notion to come to a better understanding of Christianity, the society of Jesus, and of how Christians can work a revolution in the plausibility structures of modernity and postmodernity alike.

What theodramatic imagination provides is a framework for understanding why the church does what it typically does. Whatever we do - whether eating, working, or worshiping - we do to participate rightly in the triune action whereby the Father is making all things new in Christ through the Spirit. The challenge for evangelism, theology, and preaching alike is to take every imagination captive by displaying the meaning and glory of life *sub specie theodramatis* (from the perspective of the theodrama).

Perhaps the most significant service that the imagining the drama of the Christ gives evangelism and theology is to reorient us to lived wisdom rather than theoretical knowledge. In the final analysis, the theodramatic imagination is about the ability to make right judgments: judgments about how rightly to participate in the drama of

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) p. 2.

redemption, to speak and act in ways that glorify him. We know we have theo-dramatic wisdom when we can employ canon sense to answer the following five questions 14:

1. Where are we? What kind of scene are we playing?
2. Who are we? In what kind of plot are our lives entangled?
3. What time is it? What act and scene of the drama of redemption are we playing?
4. What's happening? What is God doing?
5. What should we say or do?

Together, these questions add up to a single, comprehensive question: why are we (the church) here? And the answer to that question takes the form of a mission statement: we are here to participate rightly in God's triune mission to the world. We are here to demonstrate our understanding of the drama of the Christ.

#### **F. Summary theses: towards a radical evangelical theology and evangelism**

To imagine God, the world, and ourselves biblically is to become radically evangelical (*radix* is Latin for "root"). It is "radical," first, because it is related to the fundamental nature of something: the gospel. Evangelicalism is radical in a second, surgical sense, as a procedure intended to restore the patient to health, in this case, a malnourished imagination. It is radical, in a third sense, in its willingness to advocate for social and political and intellectual reform of the evangelical tradition itself. 15

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*14 I am modifying these from N. T. Wright, The NT and the People of God [SPCK, 1992] pp. 122-23, who in turn got them from J. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View [InterVarsity, 1984]. See also Bartholomew and Goheen, Drama of Scripture, p. 197).*

*15 In this it resembles John Milbank's call to Radical Orthodoxy, which is orthodox in the sense of commitment to creedal Christianity, and radical in its rejection of secular reason's attempt to think about the world and humanity non-theologically [See John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, eds., Radical Orthodoxy (NY and London: Routledge, 1999).*

*1. Spiritual formation (evangelism and discipleship) is happening all the time as the media powers and market principalities that be continue to colonize the popular imagination.*

Intellectual and spiritual formation is happening all the time. There are many stories circulating at present in our society, all clamoring for our allegiance, eager to script our lives for us. Much in contemporary Western culture seeks to form us into capitalist consumers who maximize our individual happiness.

*2. We don't need more pictures (i.e., more information, more knowledge, more data), we need a new frame.*

Theology must not be content merely with stating truth. Most evangelicals know what they are supposed to believe; our problem is not that we don't have the right information but that we don't know what to do with it. We profess Christ but then follow secular scriptures and social canons. The church has too often been persuaded to see things the world's way. The task of evangelism and theology is to take every imagination captive to Scripture so that we can see, taste, and judge the world as it is: made new in Christ. We need a theodramatic framework.

*3. The imagination, as a form of synoptic judgment that relates parts to larger wholes, is an organ of meaning that ministers understanding.*

The imagination is particularly needed in biblical studies as a counter to the fragmenting analytic procedures that presently rule the academic (and seminary) roost. Congregations, too, need to read with imagination in order to gain canon sense, a sense of how the whole canon fits together and where the church is to fit into the action.

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*4. Evangelists and theologians need to communicate an alternative social imaginary, namely, the drama of the Christ: what God is doing to renew creation and to renew his image in the human creature.*

Theology's special mandate is to understand God, the world, and ourselves in light of the whole drama of redemption that is being accomplished in history and has been authoritatively scripted in Scripture. Without the evangelical imagination, we will not be able to see, taste, or do theodramatic truth: the truth of what God is doing in Jesus Christ here and now for our salvation.

*5. Christians will witness best when they understand themselves to be actors in the drama of the Christ and when they demonstrate that understanding in wise and loving action.*

Again, the challenge is so to convert our imaginations that we see ourselves as actors in the ongoing play of the world initiated, kept in motion, and directed by the triune God. The church exists in part to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19), and this means training men and women not only to understand the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do, but to demonstrate that understanding by participating rightly in the action. The church has no more important vocation than this: to be an embodied parable of the kingdom of God.

#### **G. Conclusion: lose the dream, live the drama**

The good life, according to the American Standard Version - the authorized version of the American Dream - includes 2.2 children, a single family home, an SUV, a 401k retirement account, and dinner out once a week. There's room for God too. God is

the giver of the good life, the guarantor of the status quo. This is apparently the God in which America's teenagers believe, the god of Moral Therapeutic Deism - the God who wants you to be nice to others and to be happy - feel good. <sup>16</sup> This is the picture of God that has a lock on the popular American imagination.

Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" is, by contrast, a plea for a different devotion, one marked more by sacrifice and spirituality than by material gain. In what some see as the pivotal scene of the whole film, Christ says to Mary "See, mother, I make all things new" (a line taken not from the Gospels but from Rev. 21:5-6). <sup>17</sup> Yet one reviewer complained that, when all is said and done, Gibson's Christ is as entrapped by suffering, death, and despair as contemporary non-Christians. Gibson's film may help us see the world in a new way but this is not the same as seeing the world made new. <sup>18</sup> In this respect, it falls short of Radical Evangelicalism.

What Jesus says and does - the drama of the Christ - really does change everything (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). To make all things new is to work a revolution. Jesus is the first radical evangelical: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives . . . to set a liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk 4:18). The drama of the Christ is all about setting the prisoners free: free to glorify God and enjoy him forever, free to be

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<sup>16</sup> The term "Moral Therapeutic Deism" figures prominently in Christian Smith's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Wrathall, "Seeing the World Made New," in Jorge Gracia, ed., *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

themselves. When the church participates rightly in this drama, it will be revolutionary and reconciliatory theater.

Here I cannot resist mentioning that Homer uses the word “hero” as a name for each free man who participated in the Trojan war about whom a story could be told. <sup>19</sup> The connotation of courage which we moderns associate with heroes is, of course, already implicit in the willingness to speak and act at all - to assume the role to which we have been called.

To have one’s imagination seized by the drama of the Christ is to accept one’s summons to be an active participant, a player, a “hero” in the ongoing action. This means adopting the pattern of seeing, judging, and acting that was in Christ Jesus. The drama of the Christ involves you and me and the whole church. The church, precisely as a creature of the word, takes every thought captive to Christ by aligning its imagination along canonical lines. Doing the drama of the Christ may make us appear fools in the eyes of the world, but in fact we are wise unto the truth, goodness, and beauty that is in Christ Jesus. The most potent form of evangelism is the church doing the drama: the community witnessing in all that it says and does to the ways in which God has made all things new “in Christ.”

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<sup>19</sup> *Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958) p. 186*