

A SUSPICION OBSERVED CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE IMAGINATION

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ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING
GOSPEL”

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§1. Mapping the terrain of the imaginative

‘I have long been of the opinion that the part played by the imagination in the soul’s dealings with God, though it has always been understood by those skilled in the practice of the Christian cure of souls, has never been given proper place in Christian theology, which has been too much ruled by intellectualist preconceptions’.¹

John Baillie’s remark concerning a neglected (if not entirely lost) theological concern sounded from the gates of New College, Edinburgh in 1939 like a lone piper’s lament. It would drift largely unheard across a European theological landscape then dominated by the sound of Germanic voices, before being drowned out altogether by the imminent conflagration of the second world war and thereafter promptly forgotten, at least for the time being. Baillie himself never returned to the theme in his subsequent writings. Yet, as another Scot was to observe almost half a century later,² Baillie’s words were possessed of a certain prophetic quality, given the significant interest that has developed in the nature and the roles of human imagination in recent decades.

¹ John Baillie, Our Knowledge of God (London: Oxford, 1939), 77.

² John McIntyre, Faith, Theology and Imagination (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1987), 1.

Not all of this interest has been of a theological sort of course, though some certainly has.³ As one recent survey of the relevant territory notes,⁴ the topic ‘sprawls promiscuously’ over a wide range of human intellectual concerns including the philosophy of mind, psychology, aesthetics, ethics, hermeneutics, poetry and literature, and most of the natural and social sciences, as well as theology. The teeming prodigality of allusions to ‘the imaginative’ in contexts as far apart as virology, the construction of economic models, the interpretation of dreams and the critical appreciation of Shakespeare’s sonnets points, I suggest, not to some pathological carelessness in the use of an admittedly flexible and slippery term, but to something (or more likely some set of things related by a ‘family resemblance’⁵) which, while difficult to pin down in any definitive way, is nonetheless identifiably shot through every cell of our distinctively human engagements with the world like so much DNA. In other words, the quality of things or activities to refer to which we instinctively reach for the word ‘imaginative’ and its cognates crops up wherever we choose to look, even though the ‘imaginative’ element may actually look quite different (or appear to be implicated in different sorts of things) as we encounter it in different instances.

³ A representative selection of significant monographs focused explicitly on aspects of human imagination as such must suffice here both to substantiate the point and to provide the interested reader with a starting point for further study of the subject: Paul Avis, God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology (London: Routledge, 1999); David Brown, Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Brown, Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Edward S. Casey, Imagining: A Phenomenological Study, 2nd edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989); Mark Johnson, The Body in the Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Gordon Kaufman, The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); (Richard Kearney, The Wake of Imagination (London: Routledge, 1988); Richard Kearney, Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Daniel Nettle, The Strong Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Mary Warnock, Imagination (London: Faber, 1976).

⁴ See Leslie Stevenson, ‘Twelve Conceptions of Imagination’, British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 43, No. 3, July 2003, 238-259. See 238.

⁵ The principle of the ‘family resemblance’ model of identification or ‘likeness’ is the recognition that things can be quite closely related to other things without having any single feature (or ‘essence’) in common with all of them to which the use of a common term (e.g. in this case ‘imagination’) refers. Rather than seeking any single attribute, or even specifying some set of necessary and sufficient qualities which all examples must manifest in order to qualify as instances, this approach is willing to think instead in terms of a cluster of attributes which can be seen to attach in different degrees and ways to different members of the relevant ‘family’.

We shouldn't, though, exaggerate the differences, as if usage renders the vocabulary of 'imagination' endlessly adaptable, a wax nose to be fashioned to fit any face we choose. It doesn't, and it isn't. In fact, after a very thorough consideration of examples, Leslie Stevenson identifies just twelve discrete members of the relevant linguistic and conceptual 'family': twelve basic ways, that is to say, in which the term 'imagination' is typically used in day to day writing and speech, and twelve corresponding 'things' or sorts of things to which that language refers us.⁶ What produces the intellectual 'promiscuity' to which Stevenson properly refers us, therefore, is not an endless flexibility in the conceptuality itself, but rather its remarkable capacity for migration from one sphere of intellectual concern to another, crossing striking distances and surviving some apparently inclement conditions in the process.

Imagination, then, seems to be a pervasive feature of our humanity, which is to say, in theological terms, of the sort of creatures God has made us and calls us to be. No matter where we slice it and put it under the microscope for observation, humanity turns out to have an 'imaginative' element embedded in its molecular structure. So much so, in fact, that Richard Kearney insists that 'imagination lies at the heart of our existence ... so that we wouldn't be human without it. ... (B)etter to appreciate what it means to imagine' is thus, he suggests, 'better to understand what it is to be'.⁷

That's a philosopher's judgement. But, if it is even close to being true (and it is based

⁶ Stevenson's list of 'the most influential conceptions of imagination' is as follows: (1) The ability to think of something not presently perceived, but spatio-temporally real. (2) The ability to think of whatever one acknowledges as possible in the spatio-temporal world. (3) The liability to think of something that the subject believes to be real, but which is not. (4) The ability to think of things that one conceives of as fictional. (5) The ability to entertain mental images. (6) The ability to think of anything at all. (7) The non-rational operations of the human mind, that is, those explicable in terms of causes rather than reasons. (8) The ability to form perceptual beliefs about public objects in space and time. (9) The ability to sensuously appreciate works of art or objects of natural beauty without classifying them under concepts or thinking of them as useful. (10) The ability to create works of art that encourage such sensuous appreciation. (11) The ability to appreciate things that are expressive or revelatory of the meaning of human life. (12) The ability to create works of art that express something deep about the meaning of life. See Leslie Stevenson, 'Twelve Conceptions of Imagination', 238. We need not suppose that this list is exhaustive (Stevenson himself makes no such claim) or that a different taxonomy might not be provided. But this list goes some way towards mapping the 'grammar' of imagination, and shows that there are clear patterns (and clear limits) to the circumstances of the concept's use. For a different way of carving the same joint see Trevor A. Hart, 'Transfiguring Reality: Imagination and the Re-shaping of the Human', *Theology in Scotland* 8:1 (2001).

⁷ Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 1.

on a very thorough and careful study of the phenomenon), then it compels us first to draw a careful working distinction, and second to revisit John Baillie's lament.

The distinction is between this broader account of the imaginative in human life which recent scholarship has produced, and much more specific and focused uses of the term 'imagination' to refer to certain creative and artistic activities of which human beings are capable. The point of drawing the distinction, though, I should say at once, is not to warrant any separation between these two, but precisely to draw attention to the fundamental connection that exists between a host of fairly mundane everyday imaginative dispositions and activities which we all participate in as human beings (expecting, planning, exploring, fearing, hoping, believing, remembering, recognising, analysing, empathising, loving, conjecturing, fantasising, pretending and so on) and more specialised activities of a self-consciously 'creative' sort. Judgments we make about these latter ways of thinking and acting cannot, therefore, easily be disentangled and isolated from the wider context within which they take their place within the jurisdiction of the imaginative.

And this leads to a further clarification which may perhaps be instructive: Older discussions of our theme often proceeded in terms of a faculty psychology which spoke as though 'the imagination' were a discrete human organ or part to be set alongside others (*the will, the reason, the conscience, and so on*) each having its own distinctive sphere of responsibility. Such hypostatisation fostered the notion that the 'products' of 'the imagination' were of a very specific sort, readily distinguishable and separable from the products of other faculties. That's not how the language of imagination is used any more, in part precisely because authoritative studies of the phenomenon have recognised just how widespread and integrated our 'imaginative' engagements with things are. Imagination is better thought of as *a way of thinking, responding and acting* across the whole spread of our experience, not some arcane 'thing' with a carefully specified and limited remit. And an 'imaginatology' would render us incapable, therefore, not just of certain 'artsy' activities we might (or might not) manage or be better without, but of much (possibly most) of what makes us human at all. The imaginative is the psychological equivalent not of our appendix (which, when it becomes troublesome or painful, we can simply cut out and flush away without loss) but the blood supply which circulate things (both good and bad) around

our entire body. The question before us at this conference, therefore, is not so much *whether* we shall be imaginative as human beings, but *how* we shall be so.

In this light Baillie's plea for careful theological consideration to be afforded to the imagination appears both more substantial and more urgent. For now it occurs not as a call for theologians to take interest in and attend to something entirely proper (possibly even useful and interesting) but nonetheless peripheral to human existence as such. Instead, the plea to take imagination seriously is nothing less than a summons to reckon with something lying close to the core of *what it is to be human*, a feature of our humanity that shapes our essentially human responses to others, to the world and (we may suppose) to God. This being so, Christian theology can hardly afford *not* to get to grips with and afford a proper place to imagination as it attempts to make sense of what it is to be human in the world God has made. For it seems that God has made us imaginative beings, and placed us in a world which calls forth from us responses of an imaginative sort if we are to indwell it meaningfully and well. Life itself, let alone 'life in all its fullness' is from top to bottom, from beginning to end a highly *imaginative* affair. The sooner theologians take imagination seriously the better, then, because anything less is a blinkered denial of what learning across the range of disciplines is telling us is a vital component in the human condition. Apart from anything else, this means that it is a central part of that 'flesh' which, according to Christian faith, the Son of God came into the world to make his own, in which he lived, suffered and died, and which he raised from death and exalted to his Father's right hand.

So, the plea to take imagination seriously, and an insistence upon hearing and getting to grips with what wider studies have to tell us about the imaginative dimensions of our own humanity, is certainly not a bid to allow the particular concerns of Christian faith and theology to be constrained or determined by some 'non-theological' agenda or set of categories. It is precisely to allow the specific insights and the distinctive claims and concerns of theology to emerge more clearly as we think them together with broader patterns of understanding. In short, only when we have a clear idea of what the imaginative looks like and is capable of (as described by the best of human learning in other disciplines) shall we be able to appreciate where the distinctiveness of a Christian understanding and appreciation of it may lie, and what precise shape

that might take. Continued refusal or failure to reckon with it at all in theological terms (of the sort which Baillie's lament identifies) can only place unnecessary and dangerous constraints on our understanding,⁸ and thereby finally on our living and on our ministry and mission as those called to share in Christ's renewed humanity in the world. For, if imagination is indeed basic to our creatureliness and to our living as human beings, then we have reason to suspect that 'life in all its fulness' may involve more, and not less of it.

§2. Imagination: fallen and baptised

To what, then, ought we to ascribe the curious reluctance to acknowledge and embrace the importance of the imaginative in Christian theology to which Baillie refers us? Why is it that something so central and so powerful has been permitted so little space in theological accounts of our shared humanity, or in the Christology and eschatology (accounts of 'redeemed' humanity) which inform these? And what Baillie notes as true of western theologies in general is surely no less true (and perhaps more true) of its Evangelical traditions. We are anxious about the imagination, and perhaps reluctant to admit it into our midst even when it seems that a certain practical advantage (in terms of ministry or mission) may be had from doing so. After all, once the genie is out of the bottle and we have had our three wishes, who knows what chaos may ensue! That's the sort of nervous mood detectable when the word imagination is put on the agenda for discussion in Christian circles (and again, Evangelicals are the exception that proves the rule here). So why is that, and where does it come from? Of course a full answer to this question would necessitate mention of lots of different factors, but I will limit myself here to just four. And each of them has to do with what seems to me to be an unwarranted association of the imagination in particular with human fallenness and sin.

(1) This negative spin is almost certainly inherited in part in the modern period from the single-minded reservation of the term 'imagination' by the translators of the 1611

⁸ It is interesting to note Baillie's distinction here: those who have to deal with the practicalities of pastoral ministry cannot long avoid recognition of the importance of the imaginative in shaping the lives of real human beings for good or ill, and whether it likes it or not. Theology that is divorced from pastoral realities in this regard, can hardly be good theology.

King James Version of the Bible for use in referring to evil plotting, evil motivation, inclination against and even active resistance of God's will, when there were other perfectly good English words available for use (as comparison with any modern translation shows).⁹ From Genesis 6:5 to the 'Magnificat', for 350 years Christians in the English speaking world had 'the imaginations of their hearts' etched indelibly into consciousness in direct association with that which displeases God and incurs divine judgment. There is a PhD topic here for someone, exploring the extent to which the translators' choice was causal and how far it was symptomatic of wider cultural disapprobation vis-à-vis the imagination in Puritan circles at the time. Whatever the answer to that question, it is difficult to overestimate the influence of this version of Scripture in shaping the language use and assumptions of English speaking Protestants (not least Evangelicals) thereafter. Little wonder, then, that they were often disposed to treat the imagination at best with suspicion and at worst with disdain and hostility. After all, didn't divinely inspired Scripture speak of it in uniformly negative terms? The retranslation of the texts in newer and more accurate versions may have addressed this misapprehension at the level of how the autographs are most appropriately rendered into English, but the associations have sunk deep into human hearts and minds (dare we suggest 'imagination'?!) and may take a long time yet to shift without some specific care and effort.

(2) Popular prejudice against the imagination (outside the Church as well as inside it) certainly suffers from a conceptual carelessness which associates it too easily with the illusory and the unreal. This elision is betrayed in our patterns of speech. 'Don't worry', we may say to someone, 'you're imagining it' – which means, in effect, it's

⁹ Using Young's Analytical Concordance to the KJV it is striking to discover that the word 'imagination' is employed to translate a variety of Hebrew and Greek terms, each of which is used in a thoroughly pejorative sense. So, consider the following verses. "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5, *yetser*, NRSV 'inclination', NIV 'inclination'). "Neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart" (Jer. 3:17, *sheriruth*, NRSV "no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will," NIV "the stubbornness of their evil hearts"). "Thou hast seen all their vengeance and all their imaginations against me" (Lam. 3:60, *machashebeth*, NRSV 'plots', NIV 'plots'). "Men .. became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:21, *dialogismos*, NRSV 'futile in their thinking', NIV 'their thinking became futile'). "God ... hath scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts" (Luke 1:51, *dianoia*, NRSV "thoughts of their hearts", NIV "those who are proud in their inmost thoughts"). "Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God.." (2Cor. 10:5, *logismos*, NRSV 'arguments', NIV 'arguments'). See further on this McIntyre, Faith, Theology and Imagination, 5-6.

not real, and there's nothing to worry about. Or we describe a child suffering from night terrors as possessed of an 'over-active imagination', and again the inference is that imagination and illusion are typically related in direct proportion to one another. Nor is it only careless and vulgar use of the language which bears responsibility for popular perception here. Theseus, Duke of Athens in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream (dated 1594, just a decade before Lancelot Andrewes and his team of Jacobean translators began their work on the KJV) offers an ironic paean of praise to imagination which 'bodies forth the forms of things unknown', and 'gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name'.¹⁰ It all sounds impressive and exciting at first blush. But this ecology of the imaginative is, it becomes clear as Theseus proceeds, one in which illusion and deceit triumph, where human sensibility is duped into taking fictions and falsehoods ('airy nothing') for reality, and where irrational or immoral behaviour is the almost inevitable outcome.¹¹ Shakespeare doesn't leave the matter here (how could he do so, being a poet?¹²), but the convenient sound bites have already been lifted from his script before he can continue. 'Strong imagination' bad: 'cool reason' good.

But in fact this popular prejudice, which associates imagination automatically with the unreal or the false, doesn't stand up to the slightest scrutiny. Of course imagination *can* be a source of falsehoods and illusions (a lie is certainly a construct of the imagination, as is pretence, and fiction in all its rich variety). But that doesn't mean that this is its default setting, the extent of its repertoire or its normal mode of operation. Nor, of course, are all fictions inherently unhealthy or unhelpful. That was precisely Shakespeare's point, a point which he explores and drives home in poetry positively dripping with irony! So, the association between imagination and illusion or falsehood, while real enough, is not a necessary or a total one. In fact, as we have already noted, careful studies suggest that the capacity for acts of imagination lie at the root of our most reliable and fruitful ways of engaging with the world, in the

¹⁰ See Act 5, Scene 1, 1-27.

¹¹ In Theseus' account it is indwelt famously by 'the lunatic, the lover and the poet' and, by inference, probably better avoided, therefore, by those concerned for the company they keep and their reputation!

¹² By using poetry to probe the issue of the relationship between reality and falsehood, Shakespeare demonstrates (with deliberate irony) the power of the imaginative to map the true and the real, and thus draws attention to its inherently ambiguous status (as a tool usable for both good and evil ends) rather than its alleged inbuilt bias towards the false.

sciences as well as the arts and humanities, and furnish the conditions under which alone these are possible. In fact, whenever we are dealing with things lying beyond the very limited sphere of our immediate experience, we are compelled to be imaginative, to picture how things are, how things were, and how things may yet be. So, for the sake of clarity we should do what is too often not done, and distinguish straight away between the 'imaginative' and what, for want of a better phrase, we might acknowledge as the merely or the pathologically 'imaginary'.

(3) Protestantism (and Evangelicalism as part of that) has from its birth had a problem knowing just what to do with artists and artistry in its midst. We cannot deal here with the background to that problem, nor the complexity of its manifestations at the European Reformation and subsequently, save to say that in reality the problem was focused on some very specific ways in which the medieval church had been using art in liturgical space, and was not a wholesale rejection of or nervousness about human artistry or 'the arts' *per se*.¹³ John Calvin was a fairly austere critic of some ways of using visual art in church; yet even he could celebrate the human capacity for imagination, and its making of things seemingly designed to delight and to please rather than simply being 'useful'.¹⁴ Indeed, a purely utilitarian or instrumental approach to the arts, he suggests, denigrates God's beneficence, 'robs a man of all his senses and degrades him into a block!'¹⁵ Yet legitimate Protestant iconoclasm has too often developed into a broad brush 'iconophobia'¹⁶ and a deep rooted suspicion of and antagonism towards the arts as such. To be sure, this has not been helped by certain currents in modern aesthetics which have construed the artist as a sort of 'counter-creator',¹⁷ one who, through acts of powerful imagining, calls into being a reality which challenges and seeks to displace the given shape and form of God's own primal creation, who breaks the forms of creation wantonly in order to substitute for them forms of his or her own invention, and thereby breaches divine copyright on the world, offending God's honour and majesty in the process.

¹³ See further on this Trevor A. Hart, 'Protestantism and the Arts' In Marks and McGrath (eds), The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 268-286.

¹⁴ See Institutes of the Christian Religion, I.v.5; III.x.1.

¹⁵ Inst. III.x.3.

¹⁶ See McIntyre, Faith, Theology and Imagination, 7.

¹⁷ On this see, e.g., George Steiner, Grammars of Creation (London: Faber, 2001), 90 et passim.

There is, to be sure, much to be taken seriously and grappled with in all this, but I must limit myself to two comments. First, as indicated earlier, the term imagination has a much wider range of application than its use here in the context of discussing imaginative activities of a ‘creative’ and ‘artistic’ sort. In investigating and weighing the imagination, therefore, the wider context needs to be kept clearly in view wherever our particular focus may lie, and judgments about the imaginative must be made with a view to their wider implications. Second, my concern here has been that the term ‘imagination’ might be tainted by its inevitable (and in itself perfectly proper) association with artistic imagination, something that has a dubious reputation to begin with among many Evangelical Christians; but it remains to be said, of course, that the way to respond to misuses and misconstruals of the *creative* imagination (as any other sort) is not to anathematize or excommunicate it, but precisely to reclaim and redeem it. It is the responsibility of theologians to offer an alternative account and to point to alternative ways of practising artistry which cohere with rather than contradict a Christian understanding of our place as creatures in a world which is fallen but redeemed, and whose end lies in covenanted fellowship with a Creator whose own imaginative vision for the world both dwarfs ours and sets limits to it and, paradoxically, calls it forth as part of our own responsible creaturely nature.

(4) Just as there have been unhelpful and unhealthy appeals to and uses of the creative imagination in the sphere of the arts, so, too, there have been currents in Christian theology over the past two centuries which, in ostensibly commending the imagination as a theological tool have, by their approach, in practice only succeeded in confirming the worst fears of Christians already prejudiced against the imagination, and thereby marginalising it even further. I have in mind that strain of theological ‘constructivism’ which has its roots in nineteenth century Germany (specifically Ludwig Feuerbach’s The Essence of Christianity (1841)) and its most ardent contemporary representative in North America (Gordon Kaufman). Its basic tenet is that God lies wholly beyond the reach of human knowledge and experience, and therefore all religious language (including that of Scripture or any other alleged source of God-given ‘revelation’) must be acknowledged finally as the product of human imagining, something generated (rather than grasped) by the imagination to express something we experience of the world, or something we discern in ourselves. That’s a crude and inadequate summary of course; but in broad terms it will suffice.

The substance of Christian faith (the ways in which faith has traditionally thought and spoken about and speaks to God) have their origin, then, not in God himself, but in the productive potential of the creative imagination.

Revelation and imagination, in other words, are presented to us here as alternatives between which we must choose. Now, were that true, the choice would be a straightforward one for many Christians. But why on earth should we suppose that it *is* true? On the contrary, it might be argued, if the things that the church has traditionally believed about God and the ways in which God makes himself known to us are true, then revelation itself looks like a highly imaginative sort of thing, and our appropriation of and response to it similarly so. In the final section of this paper we will see the extent to which this is indeed the case. Again, therefore, we are dealing here with what I would hold to be a misuse of and false appeal to the relevant categories, and one which should lead us not to reject but to reclaim and redeem those categories.¹⁸ What we certainly should not do is to allow ourselves to be taken in by the way in which the dish is served up to us here, and so have our appetite for its ingredients ruined at the risk of contracting a nasty form of theological malnutrition!

I began this section by saying that the imagination has often been unduly linked to human fallenness. I didn't (and don't) mean, of course, that the imagination should not be linked to fallenness at all. Of course it should, and we need to take the force of observations about its dangers and its negative and damaging influences squarely on the chin. I'm also mindful of the dangers of over-reacting to negative accounts or examples of the imaginative, and slipping into an equally unhealthy denial of its sins, or even leaning towards identifying its activities in some automatic way with the operations of God's Spirit in us. There is, we should remind ourselves, nothing more imaginative than a torture chamber, and, far from being the unalloyed source of whatever is pure, whatever is good and whatever is lovely, the human imagination has been and is complicit in the very worst things of which human beings are capable of being and doing.

¹⁸ For helpful responses to Kaufman see David J Bryant, [Faith and the Play of Imagination: On the Role of Imagination in Religion](#) (Mercer University Press, Macon, 1989), Garrett Green, [Imagining God](#).

Once this is admitted, though (and it must be), my point remains to be heard; namely, although the imagination is fallen, it certainly has no monopoly on fallenness, which is shot through our nature as a whole. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of Evangelicalism (it seems to me) has been its occasional subscription to one or another form of modernist rationalism which places undue trust in the operations of human ‘reason’, as though we were only fallen from the neck down. But we aren’t. Paul insists that we are ‘enemies in our minds’ where God is concerned (see Col. 1²¹), as well as in our wills and our bodies and whatever other component parts we may suppose ourselves to have. That’s the point which the Reformed doctrine of ‘total depravity’ gets absolutely right. So, if imagination were somehow a ‘faculty’ to be disentangled readily from ‘reason’ (which it isn’t – it is mixed up with our activities of ‘reasoning’ from first to last), we should hardly be on safe grounds trusting reason to keep it on the straight and narrow! Because reason is equally fallen, and has issues of its own to sort out. And, if imagination is indeed complicit in the worst things of which we are humanly capable, then so too, it must be acknowledged, it is complicit in the very highest and best. If it is something that Satan can use, we have no business handing it over to his jurisdiction as though he owned it; he doesn’t. Imagination is the driving force behind David’s adultery with Bathsheba to be sure (lust is a decidedly imaginative pastime), but is equally the fount of his repentance (which comes, remember, through Nathan’s parable and David’s response to it).

Where all this leaves us, I think, is at the threshold of the image which C. S. Lewis borrowed to refer to the impact of George MacDonald on his own appreciation of the imaginative. Reading MacDonald, he claimed, ‘baptised’ his imagination. It’s a fruitful and telling image, I think, (and notice that it is precisely an ‘image’, viz, a product of an imaginative engagement with things!), because it reminds us that the imagination, no less so but no more so than any other part of us, needs to be ‘baptised’ when it comes to Christ. That means much more than simply ‘drawn into the fold’. It means that our imaginative capacity, together with our bodies, our minds, our wills, our hearts, our emotions and every other component part of us, needs to undergo the symbolic death and resurrection to new life which is the heart of Christian baptism. Yes, it is ‘fallen’, because it is part of our humanity (and not merely a peripheral appendage to it, but a pervasive and central part as we have seen). Yes it is sinful. But more importantly (*much* more importantly) it is part of that

humanity which God, in Jesus, has taken unto himself, part of the ‘flesh’ which he made his own in the virgin’s womb, which he remade through a life of sustained and sinless obedience, which he offered up to its due judgment and death on the cross in our place, and which, having risen from death, he now bears into the Father’s presence as the firstfruits of a new creation. If we take this seriously, if we follow the orthodox interpretation of Scripture’s testimony to Christ as not just ‘God with us’, but also ‘like us in all things excepting sin’ then we can do no other than acknowledge that human imagination has been redeemed in Christ and is being redeemed in us. More than that faith need not say. This much it must! But this much is sufficient to compel us to offer some meaningful account of it from a theological perspective. Perhaps, if we consider the ways in which Christian faith and life are themselves characterised by imaginative dispositions and activities of one sort or another, we shall want to do rather more than that.

§3 Stock-taking: the imaginative in Christian faith and life

Imagination is essential to Christian believing and living, and to Christian theology. My purpose in this final section, then, is to refer you to just some of the ways in which this is so, ways which, taken together, commend the judicious further exploration and development of the resources afforded by imagination as a natural rather than an unnatural thing for Christian faith and theology to engage in.

In his 1948 Bampton Lectures the Anglican theologian Austin Farrer suggested, provocatively perhaps, that God’s activity of revelation and the faith which it calls forth from us are from first to last matters of imagination. ‘(D)ivine truth’, Farrer writes, ‘is supernaturally communicated to men in an act of inspired thinking which falls into the shape of certain images’.¹⁹ In other words, the way in which God makes himself known to us, and shares his redemptive purposes and promises for the world with us, is bound up with our capacity to imagine; to apprehend and hold in our ‘mind’s eye’, as we would say, things which trespass far beyond the horizons of the things we can see and touch and hear. As heirs to the Reformation, we should note at once that Farrer has in mind here chiefly ‘verbal images’, ways in which Scripture in particular furnishes a stock of such images in terms of which to picture God, God’s ways of dealing with the world, and God’s purposes for it. So, God is variously King,

¹⁹ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 57.

Shepherd, Father, Judge, Husband, Mother, Rock, Fortress; salvation is victory over an enemy, purification from stain, the execution of justice, healing from sickness, redemption from slavery, re-birth, and so on.

Not all of these images have equal weight, and some serve in the canonical pattern to inform our interpretation of others; but all are important, and – our main point here – all are *images* (albeit, as Farrer insists, *inspired* ones), ways of picturing or imagining what God, or God's purposes and actions, are like, drawing from the reservoir of our concrete experiences of life in the world. And the word 'picturing' here is very significant. We shouldn't, in a well-intentioned bid to insist on the priority of the Word for faith, overlook the fact that *visualization* is nonetheless vital to the way in which verbal images work. They are powerful precisely because they stimulate our imagining of concrete and often vivid states of affairs, and hence enable us to have some partial and provisional grasp, at least, on things many of which which, strictly speaking, lie beyond anything we *can* as yet imagine (See, e.g., Eph. 3:16-20). We may see 'through a glass darkly, as the apostle Paul says (I Cor. 13:12), but we do 'see', and such seeing is vital to our faith.

Attempts to define or describe the roles of imagination generally stumble early on across the idea that imagination enables us to 'picture' (in our mind's eye) things that lie beyond the purview of our immediate sensory experience. Thus it is imagination that enables me variously to apprehend the other side of a lectern (which I cannot actually see, but believe exists), to grasp the emotional disposition lying behind some facial expression or gesture, to figure out the probable consequences of something I plan to say or do (perhaps linked to my reading of the facial expression or gesture!), to remember that next week it is my wedding anniversary (and to figure out the consequences of failing to buy a card..), to look forward to getting home from Chicago and seeing my kids, and so on. The list goes on and on, because so much of our daily dealing with the reality of life actually involves dealing with things which, in one way or another, are not the immediate objects of our experience (not, please notice, 'unreal' things, but things the reality of which lies beyond the grasp or the range of what we can see, touch, hear, smell and taste).

Now, the stuff of Christian faith, no less and in certain respects obviously more so than any other, also concerns things lying beyond our immediate experience; so it should come as no surprise that the Bible which lies at the heart of God's dealings with us proves to be a highly *imaginative* text. Scripture is filled to the brim with parable, story, poetry and other explicitly imaginative types of writing, all vital rather than incidental elements of the rich symbolic world which Scripture furnishes for our imaginative indwelling, with a view to our personal reorientation and renewal. This is true of individual portions of the biblical text, but also, of course, to our insistence as Christian readers upon taking it as a whole which is greater than the sum of those parts. Those patterns of meaningfulness to which we appeal in our use of such categories as 'canon', 'typology' and so forth are ones the recognition of which is a highly skilled imaginative exercise. Indeed, more broadly, we might insist that Scripture as a whole (while in fact it contains a wide variety of literary types) constitutes a single and singular trope – an appropriation by God of human realities to capture our imagination and so transfigure the world, granting us access to depths and dimensions of it which otherwise remain hidden and inaccessible to us.

Conversion from unbelief to the life of faith is itself a phenomenon which is difficult to make sense of if we seek to banish imagination altogether from consideration. Indeed, the drama of the gospel, the first two Acts of which are scripted for us in the text of the Old and New Testaments, is one through which God takes our imagination captive and thus draws us actively into the dynamics of his redeeming action on the stage of history. The very gateway to 'life in all its fulness' we might say, is thus precisely the transfiguration of our way of seeing, feeling and tasting reality, bathed now in the light of the Gospel. The world just 'looks' different from the standpoint of faith in Christ, and its realities and events evoke very different responses from us than they did before we believed. Yet the difference occurs, of course, not at the level of the sensory, but through the Spirit's granting of 'eyes to see and ears to hear' it all in a new light. Eyes and ears not of a literal sort, then, but ones which function precisely in the sphere of the imaginative, where we see visions and dream dreams, and where we grasp the deepest and most profound things of all, those which are not available for any easy inspection, measuring, weighing and analysis.

Once we have come to faith, sharing in this new life involves seeing ourselves as part of the drama being played out in history,²⁰ the drama of God's dealings with humankind, most of which (including its most decisive moment) was played out long before we were born, but which moves now towards a thrilling denouement the shape of which we have already received intelligence of and begun to anticipate. It involves living daily in conscious communion with a God who, although he is known in and with and through all sorts of things, is not himself amenable to the physical 'seeing' which our culture so privileges, but must be discerned and 'seen' at work in the world and in our lives in a different sort of way. Similarly, the risen Jesus whom we worship and to whom we pray, though held to be present in our midst, is certainly not so physically, and our communion with him is intrinsically of an imaginative sort, informed by the Jesus we know so well from the gospel stories, the pattern of whose presence the eye of faith is now compelled to identify as a living reality confronting it and calling for a response. In these and many other ways, the life of faith is, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, a matter of dealing with 'things not seen' (Heb. 11:1); and that places it securely within the territory where human imagination functions.

Hebrews 11 also links faith decisively to another fundamentally imaginative human disposition of course; namely, hope. Faith, it tells us, is 'being sure of what we hope for'. And hope, as Paul observes elsewhere²¹, is all about things which are not seen, not yet anyway. Faith has to do with all manner of things which are essentially past and a matter of faithful remembrance, and with lots of other things which, while unseen, are real enough and the regular object of our spiritual apprehension and activity. But Christian faith is above all a matter of hope, of looking forward, of trusting in God's promises for the future and living now in the light of them. And this again drives home the truth that faith is root and branch an imaginative thing. Because our dealings with the future are very obviously and indisputably of an imaginative sort.

²⁰ I use the term 'drama' rather than the more familiar theological category of story or 'narrative' to emphasize that, as believers, we find ourselves not so much as passive 'readers' of a text, but precisely as 'actors', those called to act out their unique part in the continuing story of God's dealings with the world through Christ and the Spirit. I am grateful to my research student Matt Farlow for drawing the usefulness of this distinction to my attention.

²¹ Romans 8:24 :'. hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?'

I could continue (though I won't!), because the list of ways in which God's dealings with us demand and facilitate acts and responses of an imaginative sort is a very long one indeed. But I hope that the instances I have drawn attention to here will suffice to sustain the claim I made above: viz, that imagination, far from being peripheral or dispensable (let alone inherently deleterious) to Christian faith and life is essential to it at more or less every level. That needn't surprise us, if what I indicated earlier in my paper is correct; namely, that while imagination is thoroughly fallen and in need of redemption, this merely reflects its place as something which, like sin itself, is shot through the whole of our humanity, and exercises a profound, shaping impact upon the whole of it. Something so pervasive, so deeply mixed up in our feelings and our perceptions and our understanding and our judgments and our responses to things could, of course, left in the clutches of sin, only be profoundly dangerous and distorting, twisting the whole of our humanity out of shape and putting it at odds with God's purposes for it. But, by the same token, if we were looking for ways to make sense of the biblical claim that the Holy Spirit indwells us and refashions our humanity (first in Christ, and then in us); if we were seeking to identify the actual 'place' or places in our humanity where this same sanctifying work is carried out with such pervasive and transfiguring effect, we might do worse than explore the possibility that one such 'place' (which in a sense is no 'place' at all, because it is so widely dispersed in different ways through our nature) could be the elusive but thoroughly familiar dimension that we call the imaginative. If that were so, of course, then in our approach to evangelism and to Christian ministry and nurture a serious reckoning with the ways of the imagination would amount to much more than mere stock-taking of some useful tools available for us to pick up and use; it would be more a matter of identifying and coming to understand the place where the relevant work is being carried out. Only once we have done that can we decide which tools may be the best ones to take with us, and how to wield them as we get ourselves involved in the task.