



EDITED BY
JOHN PIPER &
DAVID MATHIS

THE ROMANTIC
RATIONALIST

God, Life, and Imagination in the Work of C. S. Lewis

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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM

Randy Alcorn, Philip Ryken, Kevin
Vanhoozer, and Douglas Wilson

 **CROSSWAY**

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The Romantic Rationalist: God, Life, and Imagination in the Work of C. S. Lewis

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INTRODUCTION

Half a Century since C. S. Lewis

DAVID MATHIS

He went quietly. It was very British.

While the Americans rocked and reeled, and the world's attention turned to Dallas and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, one Clive Staples Lewis breathed his last in Oxford just a week shy of his sixty-fifth birthday. Strangely enough, science-fictionist Aldous Huxley passed the same day, and in one calendar square, three of the twentieth century's most influential figures were gone.

It was November 22, 1963—now more than fifty years ago.

C. S. Lewis is known best for his series of seven short fiction books, the Chronicles of Narnia, which have sold over 100 million copies in forty languages. With three of the stories already becoming major motion pictures, and the fourth in the making, Lewis is as popular today as he's ever been. But even before he published Narnia in the early 1950s, he distinguished himself as a professor at Oxford and Cambridge, the world's foremost expert in medieval and Renaissance English literature, and as one of the great lay thinkers and writers in two millennia of the Christian church.

Discovering Truth and Joy

Good Brit though he was, Lewis was Irish, born in Belfast in 1898. He became an atheist in his teens and stridently such in his twenties, before slowly warming to theism in his early thirties, and finally being

fully converted to Christianity at age thirty-three. And he would prove to be for many, as he was for his friend Owen Barfield, the “most thoroughly converted man I ever met.”

What catches the eye about Lewis’s star in the constellation of Christian thinkers and writers is his utter commitment to both the life of the mind and the life of the heart. He thinks and feels with the best. Lewis insisted that rigorous thought and deep affection were not at odds but mutually supportive. And as impressive as he was in arguing for it, he was even more convincing in his demonstration.

What eventually led Lewis to theism, and finally to Christianity, was what he called “Longing”—an ache for Joy with a capital *J*. He had learned all too well that relentless rationality could not adequately explain the depth and complexity of human life or the textures and hues of the world in which we find ourselves. From early on, an angst gnawed at him, which one day he would express so memorably in his most well-known single book, *Mere Christianity*: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”¹

This World and the Other

Such is the heart of his genius, his spiritual genius. So few treat the world in all its detail and contour like he does, and yet so few tirelessly point us beyond this world, with all its concreteness and color and taste, with the aggression and ardor of C. S. Lewis.

And so for many, his impact has been so personal. For me, it was a six-word sentence in Lewis—“We are far too easily pleased”—that popped the hood on a massive remodeling of my soul:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex

¹C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 136–37.

and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. *We are far too easily pleased.*²

Does Jesus really find our desires not too strong but too weak? I had long professed Christianity, but this tasted so different from what I knew. It tasted! This affirmation of happiness and pleasure and desire and delight was, to me, so new in the context of the Christian faith. And Lewis was the chef.

My notions about God and the Christian life were exposed as mere duty driven, and my soul was thrilling at the possibility that Christianity might not mean muting my desires but being encouraged (even commanded!) to turn them up—up to God.

The Language of Hedonism Everywhere

Lewis was conspiring with others to help open my mind and heart to a new angle on God and life—that new angle being joy and delight—but my upbringing determined that there must be a final and decisive test for this freshman discovery: *Will this hold in the Scriptures?* I thank God my parents and home church had so clearly taught me that the Bible is trustworthy and inerrant and the final authority on every seemingly true line of thinking.

And with Bible open, it didn't take long. Equipped with this new lens—the spectacles of joy—the Scriptures began popping like never before. Lewis's hedonism was confirmed on page after page.

In God's presence, says Psalm 16:11, "there is fullness of joy; at [his] right hand are pleasures forevermore." I had no category for that until then. Or for the heart cry of Psalm 63:1: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." Or for the holy longing of Psalm 42:1–2: "As a deer pants for flowing streams,

²C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 26 (emphasis added).

so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." As John Piper says, after Lewis helped open his eyes, "I turned to the Psalms for myself and found the language of Hedonism everywhere."³

At last I was ready to hear Paul say, "Rejoice in the Lord" (Phil. 3:1). And the reprise: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). And Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *in his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44). As well as the glimpse we're given into his very heart at the heart of our faith: "For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2). And on and on.

Lewis's help, just at this one point, has been invaluable.

Feel the Weight of Glory

And there's even a little bit more to squeeze from the six-word sentence. Lewis would say that not only are we "far too easily pleased" when we settle for fixing our soul's inconsolable longing on anything other than God, but also that we're too easily pleased if we see God only from a distance and not soon be drawn into him. This, says Lewis, is "the weight of glory." As a layman, Lewis didn't preach weekly but occasionally had his chance at a pulpit. His most remembered sermon is one he preached under this title—"The Weight of Glory."

The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination [of standing before God], shall find approval, shall please God. To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a

³John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2011), 23.

weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain.
But so it is.⁴

Indeed, we are far too easily pleased when we pine finally for anything less than God—and when we ache only for seeing his splendor from afar, rather than going further up and further in, to being “accepted, welcomed, or taken into the dance.”⁵ The weight of glory “means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things.”⁶

Our Creator has written on our hearts not only to enjoy eternity as a spectator in his majestic stadium, watching happily from the bleachers, but also, being brought onto the field, given a jersey, and adopted as a full member of his team, to live in his acceptance and embrace. We never become God, but we do become spectacularly one with him in his Son and our glad conformity to Jesus (Rom. 8:29). Surely such is a weight of glory almost too great to even consider in our current condition.

No Ordinary People

When Lewis breathed his last and quietly slipped from this life, more than half a century ago now, he took one big step toward becoming the kind of glorious creature in the coming new creation that he speaks about in that sermon:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these over-

⁴Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 38–39.

⁵*Ibid.*, 40.

⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

whelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.

This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously.⁷

For a growing number of us, Lewis occupies a class to himself. Few, if any, have taught us so much about this world, and the next, save the Scriptures.

The Romantic Rationalist

Perhaps that's why you've turned to this book. We hope you've dipped into Lewis for yourself, whether his *Mere Christianity*; *The Screwtape Letters*; *The Abolition of Man*; the Chronicles of Narnia; or his voluminous, brilliant, personal correspondence. You know that his writings are pervasively thoughtful, engaging, provoking, and rewarding and that he only rarely disappoints. And now you want more.

More than any other, chapter 1 addresses Lewis, the man. John Piper explains why it is that we join Peter Kreeft in calling Lewis a "romantic rationalist." Chapters 2 and 3 then tackle two of the larger concerns Reformed evangelicals raise about Lewis's theology: his doctrine of Scripture (especially inerrancy) and his doctrine of salvation. Philip Ryken and Douglas Wilson, respectively, tackle these two tough issues with brilliance and flair.

Next Kevin Vanhoozer turns to Lewis's vision of the imagina-

⁷C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 45–46.

tion, its relevance, and even essentiality, for Christian doctrine and discipleship. Then Randy Alcorn brings us soaring with Lewis into the new heavens and the new earth. Finally, Piper rounds out our study with an exposition of the very “Lewisian” text 1 Timothy 4:1–5 and what we can glean from the apostle Paul and the Oxford don. (Appendix 1 is Alcorn’s treatment of Lewis’s controversial take on the doctrine of hell, and appendix 2 is a lightly edited conversation among the contributors.)

We wouldn’t want this book to keep you from reading Lewis yourself, but we hope that these reflections on his work and vision of the world will deepen not only your appreciation of Lewis but, even more, of his Lord.

IN BRIGHT SHADOW

C. S. Lewis on the Imagination for
Theology and Discipleship

KEVIN VANHOOZER

There are worse insults than being called a “sleeper.” Yes, sloth is one of the seven deadly sins, but when I saw sloth portrayed on stage in a performance of Christopher Marlowe’s play *Dr. Faustus*, it was hard to see what was so deadly about it. The other sins—pride, greed, lust—looked ugly, but sloth, a young girl, came onto the stage, stretched, yawned, and lay down. The audience relaxed with her. What harm is there in a catnap? None at all. Why, then, has the church classified sloth as a deadly sin? We don’t hold someone blameworthy for being anemic or for not taking his five-hour energy drink every five hours. To be sure, drowsiness is culpable in certain situations: none of us wants our pilots falling asleep at the controls. Yet sloth is not mere sleepiness or laziness but rather what Dorothy Sayers rightly identifies as the spiritual condition of despair: “It is the sin that believes in nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”¹

¹Dorothy L. Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 152.

Sleeper, Awake!

If the besetting sin of modernity is pride (an inordinate confidence in know-it-all reason), then that of postmodernity is sloth, a despairing indifference to truth. Someone who believes in nothing and lives for nothing might as well be asleep. Sloth is the ultimate sin of omission: sloth sits still, unmoved by anything real. Sleeping through a movie may not be deadly, but sitting on your hands while the cinema is burning around you certainly is. We must guard against sloth, the temptation to be lulled to sleep when there is something urgent to be done. Is there a cure for this spiritual narcolepsy? There is. Says G. K. Chesterton of Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, that when he was troubled by doubt, he chose to believe in *more* reality, not less. Aquinas has a kindred spirit in C. S. Lewis.

Lewis experienced a powerful awakening and afterwards did everything he could to stay awake, by which I mean spiritually alert to the opportunities, and dangers, that attend the Christian life. For Lewis, waking is a way of describing one's conversion, a coming to new life. The Christian life is all about wakefulness. Theology describes what we see when we are awake, in faith to the reality of God, and discipleship is the project of becoming *fully* awake to this reality and *staying* awake.

The sad truth is that many of us are, at best, only half awake. We think we're engaged with the real world—you know, the world of stock markets, stock-car racing, and stockpiles of chemical weapons—but in fact we're living in what Lewis calls the "shadowlands." We think we're awake, but we're really only daydreaming. We're sleepwalking our way through life—asleep at the wheel of existence—only semi-conscious of the eternal, those things that are truly solid that bear the weight of glory.

We want to believe the Bible—we do believe it, we confess the truth of its teaching, and we're prepared to defend it—but we nevertheless find ourselves unable to see our world in biblical terms, and that produces a feeling of disparity, an existential disconnect. If

faith's influence is waning, as two-thirds of Americans apparently now think, then it is largely because of a failure of the evangelical imagination. We're suffering from imaginative malnutrition.

We typically associate sleep with dreaming, the imagination with daydreaming. But what if what we normally consider wakefulness is actually a kind of sleep? Read from this letter, written by Lewis in 1963, to one of his correspondents, a hospital patient at the time, weighed down with worries of her mortality. Lewis writes,

Think of yourself just as a seed patiently waiting in the earth: waiting to come up a flower in the Gardener's good time, up into the *real* world, the real waking. I suppose that our whole present life, looked back on from there, will seem only a drowsy half-waking. We are here in the land of dreams. But the cock-crow is coming.²

If conversion is the moment of awakening to the reality of God, discipleship is the effort we make to stay awake.³ Waking and sleeping often figure in Lewis's stories at important moments. Consider the scene in *The Silver Chair* when the Queen of Underland is holding Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum captive in her subterranean lair. The Queen tries to convince them that there is no world outside her cavern. She creates an atmosphere thick with a drowsy smell, soft music—and then, like the Serpent in the garden, she lies through her teeth, “There is no land called Narnia.” Puddleglum protests that he has come from “up there,” and the witch makes the idea seem ridiculous: “Is there a country up among the stones and mortars of the roof?” Jill begins to succumb to the spell, saying, “No, I suppose that other world must be all a dream.” “Yes,” says the witch, “There never was any world but mine.”⁴

²C. S. Lewis, letter to Mary Willis Shelburne, June 28, 1963, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 3: *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 1,434 (emphasis original).

³“The real labour is to remember, to attend [to the presence of God]. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.” C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), 75.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), chap. 12.

With the last of her waking strength, Jill suddenly remembers Aslan, but the witch responds that a lion is only a big cat: “And look how you can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world.” Just before they all nod off for good, Puddleglum does something that makes Marsh-wiggles everywhere proud: he stamps his foot in the fire. This clears his head sufficiently for him to give the following speech: “Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun . . . and Aslan. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. . . . I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia.”⁵

Those who follow Jesus Christ have been similarly jolted awake, not by stamping feet in the fire but by having descend on them tongues of fire. Remember the words of John the Baptist: “I baptize you with water. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). The Spirit of Christ burns in our hearts, awakening us to the presence and activity of Jesus Christ. Sleeper, awake! The full quotation comes from the apostle Paul, in Ephesians 5:14: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Lewis wants us to wake up, to live not in the shadowlands but in broad daylight—and he thinks the imagination can help. This, then, is our challenge: to understand *how Lewis enlists the imagination in the cause of wakefulness rather than daydreaming*.

Christianity has nothing to do with make-believe or wish fulfillment. There’s nothing romantic about crucifixion, nothing more nitty-gritty than nails piercing flesh, and nothing airy-fairy about bodily resurrection. I’m a theologian, and I’m the least superstitious person you’ll ever meet. I’m a realist who believes the world to be independent of what I say or think about it—but I’m also convinced that preachers and theologians minister reality. The question is: what’s the nature of reality? How can we come to know the truth about *what is*?

⁵Ibid., 190–91 (emphasis original).

Lewis had a high regard for Plato, perhaps because he too understood men and women to be dwellers in the shadowlands. Plato's famous Myth of the Cave suggests that we are all cave men and cave women, prisoners in a dark place, chained so that we face a wall on which are cast the shadows of the things that pass by the cave's mouth. It's worse than the witch's underworld, because cave dwellers who have never been outside have no way of knowing the reality behind the shadow appearances. In Plato's view, the world that appears to our senses is only a shadow world: we need Reason to see, with our mind's eye, the eternal Forms of which things on earth are pale images. For Plato, reason, not imagination, is the royal road out of the shadowlands into the bright land of reality.

Karl Marx didn't say, "Sleepers, awake," but "Workers, unite!" But he too believed that he could lead people out of their industrial caves into the light of communism. Marx wants us to wake up not to Plato's ethereal realm of "Ideas" but to the material and economic forces that, he thinks, shape our lives and determine history "from below." Marx was suspicious of religion and imagination alike: combined, they comprise the "opiate of the people" because they distract us, with pious fiction, from what is truly real, namely, the class warfare that makes the world go round.

I hope you agree that it is vitally important to awaken to the truth of what is happening in our world. But what is the reality behind the veil of appearances? Is truth "above," as Plato thinks, or "below," as Marx claims? And is the imagination a hindrance or help in waking up to the truth?

In responding to this question, we do well to begin by considering Lewis's own awakening: his conversion to Christianity. Then we'll want to hear what Lewis has to say about the imagination, discipleship, and theology. After that, we'll run a second lap, circling round the same three themes once more, this time from the perspective of how I employ them in my own work as a theologian. We'll conclude with some thoughts about how the imagination helps us

answer two questions: who is Jesus Christ for us today, and who are we for him?

Lewis's Own Awakening: *Phantastes*

"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Eph. 5:14). This is the apostle Paul's rousing conclusion to his exhortation to the church at Ephesus to walk not in darkness but "as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). Note the relation between waking and walking. Conversion is like waking, and walking is like discipleship, and we need the light of Christ for both. We are awake and alive in Christ, the light of the world. Here in Ephesians 5:8–14, Paul describes the process by which those who were once in darkness come to walk in the light.⁶ He's thinking about conversion, and some commentators think this passage was associated with early Christian baptism.

Lewis's own awakening, or at least the first stage of his awakening, began with what he describes as the "baptism of his imagination."⁷ As a child, he had had moments of joy, intense intimations of something wonderful just beyond his reach, a wood beyond the world's end, but he had become, under the tutelage of his rationalist teachers, an adolescent atheist, a teenage Richard Dawkins. In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis declared, "I believe in no religion." Religions are mythologies invented to meet our emotional needs.⁸ In *Surprised by Joy*, however, he explains what happened to him after purchasing George MacDonald's *Phantastes* at a railway station. When he stepped onto the train, he was a split personality: "Nearly all I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."⁹ But as he read MacDonald's book later that evening, he began to experience a radical makeover.

The light of Christ shone on Lewis as he read *Phantastes*. He did

⁶Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 372.

⁷C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), xxxii–xxxiii.

⁸C. S. Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves, October 1916, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 1: *Family Letters 1905–1931*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 230–31.

⁹C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 170.

not yet confess the light as Christ, but whose other embassy could it be? Lewis says he experienced what as a boy he called “Northerness”: a bright shadow, a glimpse of the beauty of another world that awakened a yearning both for that world and for the experience of desiring that world. Here is how he describes reading *Phantastes*: “But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow.”¹⁰ This bright shadow was not quite “Northerness,” but otherness—yet instead of remaining other, this other world leapt out of the story, landing on the Normandy Beach of Lewis’s imagination and invading his sixteen-year-old secular consciousness.

Phantastes did not convert his intellect; other books did that. But it did insert a new quality into his waking life: holiness. That’s the quality Lewis later said he found in *Phantastes*—a holy Northerness that was also a wholly otherness—a quality that refused to remain in the world of the text and instead began to cast a bright shadow over the world in which Lewis lived: “I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow.”¹¹ I want us to understand this dynamic.

For the moment, let’s just say that young Mr. Lewis experienced a spiritual awakening. MacDonald helped him to see a bright silver lining to earthly clouds, a deeper dimension to ordinary earthly things, a world beyond cold logic and physical matter. The bright shadow in *Phantastes* that so intrigued Lewis turns out “to be [a supernatural] quality of the real universe . . . in which we all live.”¹² Thirty years after picking up *Phantastes*, Lewis wrote, “I have never concealed the fact that I regard [MacDonald] as my master; indeed, I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him.”¹³ MacDonald even appears as a character in *The Great Divorce*. You remember

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Lewis, *MacDonald*, xxxiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

the story: it's about not the hound of heaven but a Greyhound to heaven, a bus trip from the "Valley of the Shadow of Life" to the outskirts of heaven. That's where Lewis meets MacDonald, whom he casts in the role of his guide to heaven, the Virgil to his Dante, and tries to tell him how formative reading *Phantastes* had been. It was, says Lewis, "what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life.*"¹⁴

Lewis does well to associate waking and walking in considering new life in Christ. The Christian life is all about waking up and walking out of the shadowlands toward the sun. Lewis's mention of MacDonald as his Virgil recalls Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Virgil—a poet, not a philosopher—leads Dante further up and further in. We Protestants have our own version: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The Christian life is indeed a life of itinerant discipleship, and Lewis's journey began with the baptism of his imagination.

Lewis on the Imagination: From Baptism to Discipleship

We turn now to the imagination's role not in bringing us to but rather in helping us to abide in Christ. Lewis has taught me that the triune God not only baptizes but also *disciples* our imaginations. He has also persuaded me that the imagination is a vital ingredient in doing theology. Not everyone is convinced. When in doubt, define your terms.

Discipleship

We start with discipleship. Walter Hooper says that Lewis was the most thoroughly converted person he ever met. Lewis desired above all to submit not only his thought but also his whole life to Christ. Some of us may not have sufficiently appreciated the extent to which Lewis was a Christ-intoxicated man. It's therefore significant that the opening line of the first volume of Paul Brazier's new trilogy on Lewis is: "This is a book about Jesus Christ."¹⁵

¹⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 66 (emphasis original).

¹⁵Paul Brazier, *C. S. Lewis: Revelation, Conversion, and Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 1.

Christian discipleship is for Lewis the process of becoming Christ-like. God is not interested in making merely nice people (this is the lie of moral therapeutic deism); he wants to make people perfect, like Christ. Paul says in Romans 8:29 that God predestines those whom he foreknew “to be conformed to the image of his Son.” What interests Lewis is how God translates Christ into ordinary mortals.

We may not want to become little Christs, but the Lord will not settle for anything less. Lewis imagines Christ telling would-be disciples to count the cost of following him: “‘Make no mistake,’ He says, ‘if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for.’”¹⁶ Indeed, the church “exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time”¹⁷—and we can certainly add theology to that list.

Theology

And speaking of theology, what exactly did Lewis think it was good for? When Sheldon Vanauken wrote asking whether he should switch from studying English to theology, Lewis replied with some ambivalence: “I’ve always been glad myself that Theology is not the thing I earn my living by. . . . The performance of a *duty* will probably teach you quite as much about God as academic Theology would do.”¹⁸ Ouch.

In fact, Lewis was an amateur theologian in the best sense of the term: one who does something not to earn one’s living but simply for the love of it—for the love of God. Lewis wrote introductions to theological tomes such as Athanasius’s *On the Incarnation*, depicted doctrines such as the fall and the atonement in his fiction, and explained nothing less than the doctrine of the Trinity in the radio broadcasts eventually published as *Mere Christianity*. Think about that—talking

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1955), 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 83 (emphasis original).

about the doctrine of the Trinity on the radio. That's the equivalent of an amateur trapeze artist doing triple somersaults without a net.

Here's how Lewis begins: "Everyone has warned me not to tell you what I am going to tell you. . . . They all say 'the ordinary reader does not want Theology; give him plain practical religion.' I have rejected their advice. I do not think the ordinary reader is such a fool."¹⁹ Lewis goes on to compare doctrines to maps. Maps help orient us, help us find our way in the real world. The doctrine of the Trinity maps out as it were the life of God, and the Trinitarian missions—the Father sending the Son; Father and Son sending the Spirit—enable us to share in the Son's fellowship with the Father. To share in the Son's life is to have a share in something that was begotten, not made, something that has always existed and always will exist.²⁰ Lewis concludes: "I warned you that theology is practical. The whole purpose for which we exist is to be . . . taken into the life of God."²¹

What difference does theology make? Just this: it wakes us up to the reality of our sonship, our adoption into God's family, our being in Christ. Theology uses both prayer and poetry to minister this reality. Prayer is a way of directing the mind to what is ultimately real: our createdness and God's creativity. "Now the moment of prayer," says Lewis, "is for me . . . the awareness, the re-awakened awareness that this 'real world' and 'real self' are very far from being rock-bottom realities."²² Prayer is the preeminent theological act, and disciples do theology when they experience the reality of their relationship to God on their knees.

A disciple is one who prays—and stays awake. This is easier said than done. While Jesus prayed at the garden of Gethsemane, reminding himself of what was real and steeling himself to face death, his disciples fell asleep. Jesus found them, reprimanded Peter, and encouraged him to "keep awake and pray" (Mark 14:38 NRSV). They

¹⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 131.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

²² Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 81.

fell asleep again, and when Jesus returned, Mark tells us, “they did not know what to say to him” (Mark 14:40 NRSV). Jesus went away once more and, you guessed it, the disciples fell asleep again. By failing to stay awake, they effectively denied him three times. *They* literally fell asleep; my concern is that disciples today are metaphorically drifting off, sleepwalking their way through life and thus missing the bright shadows of eternity in the everyday. The imagination can help.

The Socratic Club of Oxford University once asked Lewis to address the question, “Is Theology Poetry?” which he took to be asking, Does theology owe its attraction to the power of arousing and satisfying our imagination and, if so, are we mistaking aesthetic enjoyment for intellectual assent?²³ If theology is poetry, Lewis observes, it is not very good poetry. There is nothing particularly aesthetic about the drunkenness of Noah or the thorn in Paul’s flesh.

On the other hand, theology uses figurative language, and Lewis says we cannot restate our belief in a form free from metaphor: “We can say, if you like, ‘God entered history’ instead of saying ‘God came down to earth.’ But, of course, ‘entered’ is just as metaphorical as ‘came down.’ . . . All language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical.”²⁴ What is metaphor if not a statement that, taken literally, proves false? What are we to make of Lewis’s suggestion, in a chapter called “Let’s Pretend” (in *Mere Christianity*), that when we pray “Our Father,” we are “dressing up as Christ”?²⁵ The answer lies in Lewis’s understanding of the imagination, which involves a “good pretending”—a way of waking up and remaining wakeful and attentive to reality.

Imagination

Wait a moment: how can imagining that we are something we’re not (which is what pretending is) ever help us to come to grips with reality? Should it not worry us that the King James Version consistently

²³C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Fontana, 1965), 42.

²⁴Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?,” 53–54.

²⁵Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 158.

refers to *vain* imaginings (e.g., Ps. 2:1; Rom. 1:21), or that Genesis 6:5 says, “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”? Ironically enough, a *picture* of the imagination—as a faculty for producing mental images, often of things that are not there—holds many Christians captive. Representing things that are absent or nonexistent sounds suspiciously like lying: saying of what is *not* that it is. On the standard picture, the imagination produces false images more conducive to idolatry than theology. Is this what Lewis has in mind: the imagination as a picture-making power? Before I answer that, let’s consider what Lewis’s master, George MacDonald, thought about imagination.

MacDonald did one thing Lewis never did: he came to the States and went on a lecture tour. It was a huge success; there had been nothing like it since Charles Dickens’s visit. In gratitude for his warm welcome, MacDonald wrote and published “Letter to American Boys” in 1878. It’s a long letter and includes a story that begins like this: “There was once a wise man to whom was granted the power to send forth his thoughts in shapes that other people could see.”²⁶ The “power” to which MacDonald refers is the imagination. Elsewhere MacDonald gives a formal definition: the imagination is “that faculty which gives form to thought.”²⁷ When forms are new embodiments of old truths, we say they are products of the Imagination, but if they are mere inventions, however lovely, they are works of Fancy. According to MacDonald, creation itself is the work of the divine imagination. The world is made up of God’s thoughts put into shapes that people can see.²⁸

What about Lewis? Did he ever define the imagination? Like fortification, the process of making forts, or clarification, the process of

²⁶ Cited in George MacDonald, *The Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairytales and Stories for the Childlike*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 11.

²⁷ George MacDonald, “The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture,” in *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspeare* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1895), 2.

²⁸ See Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

making clear, *imagination* suggests the process or faculty of making images. Lewis acknowledges this common use of the term to designate the mental faculty by which we make images or pictures of things, but he uses the term in other ways as well. Owen Barfield suggests that the reason Lewis never developed an overarching theory of imagination was that he wanted to protect it, not subject it to analysis. Analysis is the work of reason, but Lewis is convinced that the imagination has a cognitive vocation of its own.

Reason is the faculty of analysis that seeks objectivity, inspects things, and then breaks them down into their component parts. In his essay "Meditation in a Toolshed," Lewis contrasts looking at a beam of light with looking *along* it. Reason remains aloof, maintaining a critical distance from the shaft of light, observing only the swirling particles of dust. Imagination, by way of contrast, steps into the beam of light and looks along it, tasting and participating in its illumination. Is it possible that Lewis intends his "Meditation in a Toolshed" to correct Plato's "Myth of the Cave," with its high view of speculative Reason? It's possible. For Plato, the world is full of shadows (appearances) and only Reason apprehends the Eternal Forms (truth). For Lewis, the world is full of bright shadows, but it is the imagination that perceives the brightness—the holy otherness—in the shadow. Things on earth are the created form of divine thoughts. Or as Lewis puts it in a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves: "Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things.'"²⁹

Fallen human beings both express and ensnare themselves by making false mental images; our mind's eye suffers the distortion of the astigmatism of sin.³⁰ But we should no more hold the imagination itself responsible for making false images than we hold Reason responsible for logical fallacies. Fancies and fallacies alike proceed from bent hearts, not from the divinely created faculties of Imagination and Reason.

²⁹C. S. Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves, in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 428.

³⁰See his Dec. 14, 1955, letter to Dorothy Sayers, in *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 683–84.

Entire books have been written on the relation of reason and imagination in Lewis. We have time to ponder only one comment: “For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”³¹ This is a hard saying. What is an organ of meaning? I believe it has something to do with the capacity not only to liken one thing to another but also to discover patterns, to synthesize things that initially appear unrelated. Where Reason excels in taking things apart and analyzing individual puzzle pieces, the imagination perceives the whole of which the pieces are a part. Imagination is the organ of discerning meaningful patterns. It is the power of insight, that Eureka moment when all the parts fall into place, transforming what would otherwise be an incoherent jumble into a meaningful whole.

Metaphor reminds us that imagination works with verbal as well as visual raw material. Metaphors describe the unfamiliar in terms of the more familiar. “Chess is war” makes us think about the game of chess in terms drawn from military experience. This association of ideas generates meaning—and power. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson talk about metaphors we live by.³² “Time is money.” Such metaphors color our daily experience. If we walk around thinking “life is war,” that will structure what we do and how we do it differently than if our leading thought was Forrest Gump’s “Life is a box of chocolates” or, for that matter, John Calvin’s “Life is a theater in which to act for God’s glory.”

One factor that kept the young Lewis from embracing Christianity was his inability to understand what it meant to “be saved.” In particular, he could not understand the atonement, at least not when it was formulated as an abstract doctrinal truth. He didn’t know what the doctrine *meant*. He wrote to Arthur Greeves: “You can’t believe a

³¹C. S. Lewis, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare,” in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 251–65.

³²George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

thing when you are ignorant *what* the thing is.”³³ Here is where the imagination, the organ of meaning, comes into its own. The New Testament uses several metaphors to communicate the saving significance of Jesus’s death: sacrifice, penalty, ransom, victory, and so forth. Lewis came to understand the doctrine of atonement only when he contemplated it through those metaphors.

Metaphors minister understanding by forming meaningful associations. Metaphors are the building blocks for the house in which we live, the interpretive framework we inhabit. But the house itself is not metaphor; this honor goes to story and myth. A story “is only imagining out loud.”³⁴ Stories, too, are organs of meaning insofar as they connect the scattered parts of a person’s life and transform them into a unity with a beginning, middle, and end. Myths are stories, too, though what counts is the pattern of events rather than the telling. Myths do not simply communicate ideas but allow us to see and taste the reality of what they are about. The very best stories communicate the “feel” of reality, awaking something deep within us. In Lewis’s words: “What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is).”³⁵ We taste the truth when we indwell the story or when the story indwells us.

Lewis wrote stories not so readers could escape but so that they could *experience* reality, and not its surface either but rather its supernatural *depths*. Lewis did not put reason on the side of truth and imagination on the side of falsehood. No, both reason and imagination can communicate truth, but reason does it in bits and pieces while the imagination grasps the big picture, how things fit together, and allows us to feel as true what reason treats only as abstractions.³⁶ Stories wake us up to the meaningful patterns of life. The imagina-

³³ Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves, in *They Stand Together*, 427 (emphasis original).

³⁴ C. S. Lewis, letter to Mrs. Johnson, March 2, 1955, in *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 575.

³⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 66 (emphases original).

³⁶ See David Hein and Edward Henderson, eds., *C. S. Lewis and Friends: Faith and the Power of the Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 4–5.

tion helps us to taste and see the goodness of God: the brightness in the shadowlands.

In his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis speaks movingly about the desire we all have for something that eludes us. Our experiences of beauty are only the echo of a tune we have not heard, “news from a country we have never yet visited.” Lewis then addresses the congregation: “Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness.”³⁷ Lewis’s imagination is not the opiate of the people but a dose of caffeine that snaps us awake. So are the stories of the Bible. For Lewis they refer “not to the nonhistorical but rather to the nondescribable.”³⁸ And, as with metaphor, so with story: we can’t say exactly what it is about apart from the story itself. In Lewis’s words: “The ‘doctrines’ we get *out of* the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.”³⁹ Scripture is the story that disciples live by. Scripture tells us the true story of the wood beyond the world where mankind fell, the true story of the Word made flesh, who became one of us so that we could become one of him. Disciples need imagination to indwell the story of the Christ—to see, taste, and feel the risen one in our midst.

In Bright Shadow: Faith Seeking Understanding and *What Is* “in Christ”

Let me now restate in my own terms what I have learned from Lewis.

³⁷C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, 98.

³⁸Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality: Spiritual Longing in C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 106.

³⁹Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves, in *They Stand Together*, 428 (emphases original).

Theology, Discipleship, and the Parabolic Imagination

Theology ministers understanding, enabling disciples to act out their knowledge of God. Theology is eminently practical. It is all about waking up to the real, to *what is*—specifically, to *what is* “in Christ.” It takes imagination to see *what is in Christ*, for Christ is the meaning of the whole, the ultimate pattern in whom all things are held together (Col. 1:17).

Disciples demonstrate understanding by conforming to what is in Christ. To be a disciple is to know Jesus Christ and to put that knowledge into practice. There are no armchair disciples; there is no alibi for discipleship. One can’t be a disciple *in theory*. No, *doctrines are what disciples live by*, because doctrines inform us what is in Christ. Creation, incarnation, Trinity, and atonement are not abstractions to be thought but meaningful patterns to be lived.⁴⁰ *The imagination helps disciples act out what is in Christ*. Theology exchanges the false pictures that hold us captive with biblical truth, disciplining our imaginations with sound doctrine. Discipleship is a matter of this “indoctrinated” imagination.

Disciples must beware of having their imaginations taken captive or being put to sleep. Many of Screwtape’s strategies have to do with capturing the disciple’s imagination. If you can control the metaphors and stories people live by, you’ve got them. I want to say, from my perch on George MacDonald’s shoulders, that imagination is the faculty by which God gives created forms to his thoughts and *literary forms* to his words. Jesus used what we can call the parabolic imagination in giving story form to his thoughts about the kingdom of God. Similarly, disciples need the parabolic imagination in order to inhabit the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Parables are extended metaphors. Jesus does not describe what the kingdom looks like; instead, he tells us what kinds of things happen there. The metaphors disciples live by are those that awaken them to the kingdom things God is doing in Christ. I’m haunted by

⁴⁰Hein and Henderson, *C. S. Lewis and Friends*, 8.

what the sociologist Robert Bellah says: “The quality of a culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision.” Surely we can muster 2 percent! Unfortunately, if other sociologists are to be believed, an even greater percentage of Christians live by a quite different metaphor, namely, the moral metaphor of God as Father Christmas. Moral therapeutic deism indoctrinates its adherents to think of God not as worrying about their sanctification but rather whether they’ve been naughty or nice. It’s no good professing to be a Christ follower if your imagination is captive to the image of God as a moral therapist or a celestial handyman whom we call upon only when we have a problem that needs fixing. In stark contrast, Lewis likens God to a savage beast, an un-housebroken member of the great cat family, to be precise: “He is not a tame lion.”

The Nature of the Biblical Imagination

Standing on Lewis’s shoulders, I see the biblical imagination as the organ of theological meaning. The Bible gives us the metaphors and stories disciples live by. However, too many evangelical congregations are suffering from malnourished imaginations that have been taken captive to culturally conditioned pictures of the good life. It is difficult to connect the materialistic, market-driven pictures of the good life with the sound doctrine by which disciples are to live. We want to believe the Bible—we do believe it; we are prepared to defend doctrinal truth—but for the life of us, we find ourselves unable to relate the doctrine we profess to the lifestyle we practice. We feel a discrepancy, a fateful disconnect, between the world in which we live and the system of theology we believe. The imagination can help. I have said that theology is about the new reality in Christ and discipleship is about participating in that new reality. I now want to say that imagination is the faculty that wakes us up to that new reality and helps us to stay awake.

Let me make two points about the nature of imagination as an organ of theological meaning:

First, the imagination is not merely a factory for producing mental images—especially of things that are not there—but a cognitive faculty for creating meaning through making and then verbalizing conceptual associations (i.e., likening). The imagination is a synthetic, synoptic power, a kind of part/whole thinking that enables us to fit things together in meaningful forms, including biblical stories. Call it the “biblical imagination.”

Second, the imagination engages the will and emotions as well as the mind. Paul perhaps has the imagination in mind when, in Ephesians 1:18, he speaks of “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.” The Spirit alone can open the eyes of our heart, but we then have to make the effort to keep them open by maintaining a vital relationship with the object of our heart’s desire: the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Function of the Biblical Imagination

Turning from the nature of the imagination to its function, let me make two further points. I can do it in four words, with two pairs of ideas: *this-that* and *present-perfect*.

The basic gesture of the imagination is the metaphorical invitation to see *this* as *that* (e.g., “This is my body”). We need imagination to understand how marriage (*this*) symbolizes the relationship of Christ and his church (*that*).

Here we do well to recall the possibility of false imaginings, evil spells. Disciples must not confuse the evangelical *what is* and *what will be in Christ* with the satanic *what if* or *what might be* apart from Christ. The Serpent in the garden played on Eve’s imagination, saying that if only she would eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, she would be “like God” (Gen. 3:5). Satan played the same *what if* game with Jesus, showing him all the kingdoms of the earth and saying, “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:7). In each case, the *what if* held out the possibility of a good coming from disobeying or violating the created order—in fact, no good at all.

Contrast the satanic *what if* with the Pauline *what is*. Theology’s

task is to say *what is in Christ*, and it needs the imagination to do so. Paul is not playing make-believe when he says he has been crucified with Christ. He does not say, "It is *as if* Christ lives in me." That would be a case of bad pretending and gets us no further than pious fiction. No, Paul says *what is in Christ*. It requires faith, and imagination, to see it, however, because being in Christ is not evident to the senses. Lewis had the unique gift of writing about *what if* in order to give us a taste of *what was, is, and will be* "in Christ."

And this brings me to the second function of the imagination: seeing not simply *this* as *that* but the *present-partial* as *future-perfect*. It takes imagination to understand Paul when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Yes, Paul is a man "in Christ," but not as a shoe is in a shoebox. Paul *is* in Christ, but as President Clinton put it: it all depends on what the meaning of the word *is* is. The *is* of "what is in Christ" is *eschatological*: it has everything to do with *now* tasting the kingdom of God whose completion remains future. Thanks to the indwelling Holy Spirit, disciples *already* enjoy union with Christ, even though they have *not yet* attained to the full measure of Christlikeness. Doctrine that sets forth *what is in Christ* requires a robust eschatological imagining, a faith-based seeing that perceives what is *presently incomplete*—our salvation—as *already finished*. As Lewis reminds us, we've never talked to a "mere mortal": we are to take each other seriously because even the most uninteresting person "may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."⁴¹

What Lewis calls "good pretending" is not the fictive *what if* but the eschatological *what is*. Though the naked eye can't see it, the eyes of the heart see God's transferring saints from the old age to the new, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). The eyes of the regenerate heart see those who put their trust in Jesus Christ as truly (i.e., eschatologically) united to him. To be

⁴¹ Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 109.

in Christ is to live and move and have our being in a new sphere, “transplanted into a new soil and a new climate, and both soil and climate are Christ.”⁴²

Putting It All Together: With Jesus on the Mountain

I can now state my thesis: *To imagine what is in Christ is not to daydream but to awake to the day of the Lord.* Calvin was right. The Scriptures are our spectacles of faith. We must look not simply *at* but *along* the Bible, especially if we want to see more than specks of doctrinal dust. The imagination is a way of looking along the Bible’s metaphors, a way of indwelling its stories. When we look along and dwell in the text, we are imagining biblically: we are letting biblical patterns organize and interpret our experience. It is only by viewing the world through the stories of the Bible that we see God, the world, and ourselves as we truly are.

The biblically disciplined imagination sees reality as it truly is: not a mechanical universe in perpetual motion but rather a divine creation in the midst of labor pains, where the new in Christ struggles to come forth from the old in Adam. *Doctrine does not tell us to pretend to be something that we are not; it rather tells us who we really are: creatures in God’s image with a mandate to image God.* Doctrine prepares disciples for their vocation, which is not play acting, but *being real*, that is, being participants in the kingdom of God that is really here in the midst of what is passing away, even if it is seen only through the eyes of a faithful heart. The task of discipleship is to act out the truth of Christian doctrine: in acting out what (eschatologically) is in Christ, we become *Christlike*.

Let me now pull together everything I’ve said by focusing on one crucial moment in the gospel story: Jesus’s transfiguration. Once again three disciples accompany Jesus to pray, and once again they fall asleep. They were “heavy with sleep” (Luke 9:32). Meanwhile,

⁴²James S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ: The Vital Elements of St. Paul’s Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975), 157.

Jesus is transfigured: his clothes become dazzling white (a quality laundry-detergent makers promise but never deliver), and his face “shone like the sun” (Matt. 17:2). What’s going on and what does it mean?

Here is what Luke says: “When they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him” (Luke 9:32). There are other accounts of people seeing bright lights and not knowing what to make of it (think of Paul’s companions on the road to Damascus). Yet when the disciples awoke they saw something more than normal light; they saw Jesus’s glory. What exactly did they see? What does *glory* look like? I believe they saw the eschatological *is*: Jesus had just predicted that some with him would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God. This is precisely what Jesus’s transfiguration showed them—a preview of his glorious lordship in the age to come. But the disciples needed a biblically informed imagination to see *this* as *that*. The evangelists go out of their way to make imaginative connections between Jesus’s transfiguration and God’s appearance to Israel on Mount Sinai in Exodus 24. Both incidents involve clouds, God’s voice, and shining faces: Jesus’s and Moses’s. We catch the theological imagination at work in this connecting of the canonical dots.

Others had seen Jesus and watched him perform miracles yet did not know who he was; it takes a biblically disciplined imagination to see Jesus as the summation of the law and the prophets and to grasp how God is summing up all things in him (Eph. 1:10). The disciples who witnessed Jesus’s transfiguration began to grasp the true significance of his person and work.

We are those disciples on the mountain with Jesus. Present-day Christians need to awaken to the glory of the transfigured, risen Christ in our midst, and we need to stay awake so that we, like the disciples, see “no one but Jesus only” (Matt. 17:8). “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see”: disciples see the “fullness of God” (Col. 1:19) in Jesus not with physical eyes but with the eyes of the heart. Jesus

is the bright shadow—not “Northernness” but Holy Otherness—in human form, coming out of the Good Book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things. Here is the marvel: the one whose story the Bible tells is not confined to that story. He is Lord, and he is here. To see the common things of daily life drawn into the bright shadow of the Christ—this is the mark of a well-nourished theological imagination. It is precisely the biblically formed and transformed imagination that helps disciples wake up and stay awake to what is, and will be, in Christ Jesus.

An Edifying Conclusion

I cannot recall a time when I was not living in or acting out stories. Thanks to Alexander Dumas and Roger Lancelyn Green, what would have otherwise been a fairly plain tract of single-family homes was, for me, a kingdom wherein I could exercise chivalry, rescue fair ten-year-old maidens, and defend my honor against the dragon next door (an elderly mean lady, truth be told). It was the imagination that allowed me to inhabit the worlds of novels such as *The Three Musketeers* or *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table*. They were very much part of my early education. They gave me not so much abstract principles of behavior but concrete examples: here is how heroes behave when villains oppress the helpless. I knew, of course, that I could not really harm the neighborhood bully, much less run him through with a sword. Still, I look back fondly on the time spent between the covers—of books and bed sheets—as an important part of my character development. Years later I discovered C. S. Lewis, and I realized that behind the kingdom I had discovered in Dumas, there was *another* kingdom, deeper, more compelling, more exciting, and more real: the kingdom of God. I became a knight of the *Lord’s Table*.

A final illustration. Two stonemasons were hard at work. When asked what they were doing, the first said: “I am cutting this stone in a perfectly square shape.” The other answered: “I am building

a cathedral.”⁴³ Both answers are correct, but it takes imagination to see that you are building a cathedral, not simply making blocks of granite. Two pastors were hard at work. When asked what they were doing, the first said: “I am planning programs, preparing sermons, and managing conflict.” The other answered: “I am building a temple.” It takes the biblical imagination to see one’s congregation as a living temple, with each member a living stone (1 Pet. 2:5) being worked—chiseled, fitted, and polished—in order to be joined together with Christ, the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). It takes the eschatological imagination to look at a sinner and see a saint.

“Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning” (Mark 13:35).

Disciples need imagination to stay awake to the reality of what is in Christ. To be in bright shadow is to live in the shadowlands *as* people with eyes of the heart enlightened, alert to the mystery of grace in the mundane, awake to God in the ordinary. Disciples may live in the shadowlands, but we “walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:8), “as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7). To live as a disciple is to live in the bright shadow of Jesus Christ.

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph. 5:14).

⁴³I am indebted for this illustration to Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 176.

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