

IMAGINATION IN RELIGION.

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“Casting down imaginations (*λογισμὸν*) and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”
2 Cor. 10:5.

St. Paul is explaining to the Corinthians his method with them, and the motive by which he is inspired. He falls back upon a series of illustrations derived from military life. He is out on a great campaign, to destroy fortresses, to destroy the enemy and to capture prisoners for his King. That is the purpose of his ministry, to bring all men to the obedience of Christ, because in that obedience true liberty alone is found. One of the fortresses he attacks is “imagination”, or reasonings; an illicit mental attitude resulting in a false life. It is hardly necessary to say that what we mean by our word ‘imagination’ was not in the Apostle’s mind. His psychology had probably no place for it. But we are entitled to include amongst the things that are to be captured for Christ the power that *we call* imagination, since St. Paul includes in his sweep the whole life of man. We shall therefore be quite in accord with his larger thought if we make a faulty English rendering of his word the starting point for a study upon the need of a consecrated imagination of religion.

I.

It is only by very small people that imagination is held in small esteem. Some of our intellectuals, particularly those who pride themselves upon being ‘rationalists’, are scornful of imagination which they regard as something antithetical to reason; a light and frivolous thing, indeed, which is the source of most of the world’s superstitions. The really great men of the world, however, as

we shall see, are of a different mind. We are all well aware how grossly imagination can be perverted. For many it becomes an instrument of falsehood, creating unreal situations and depicting unreal scenes. Britain will not readily forget the trick played upon her population in the early days of the war when the legend of Russian troops passing through the country en route for France was invented. Sober people in every part of the country were willing to take the oath that they had actually seen the famous Russian troops, and heard their rough speech. But those troops were spectral. None ever saw them in flesh and blood. They were creations of the imagination. Yet despite every perversion of the imagination we have to face the fact that in itself it is one of God's greatest gifts to us. By its means we relive our past experiences, tasting anew the joys and the sorrows through which we have gone. By its means we forecast coming experiences, thereby doubling our joy or our misery. By its means we crystallize vague things and give to them solid mental substance. Imagination is a more wonderful thing than memory. Memory is like a still photograph with its fixed picture. Imagination is like a film of cinema pictures, so rapidly combined as to reproduce the original movements.

Imagination is one of the finest means of education. It is the first, the most natural and the most Divine of teachers. The child develops by means of it, and chiefly by its means. It is difficult to see how a child could develop at all but in this way. The infant mind cannot grasp abstract ideas: it must think in pictures and images if it is to understand anything at all. What we are pleased to call "make believe" belongs, in the esteem of the child, to the world of reality. It is his world: he knows no other. And he can never enter into the world of true thought save through this door of the imagination. The play of the child, so largely dominated by imagination, is the direct way to the practical and suc-

cessful work of life. Many parents and teachers have not yet grasped this very elementary fact, despite all that has been said and written upon it. They still insist upon charging a young child with "lying" when the idea of falsehood is farthest from the infant mind: not understanding that what is lying to an adult person with a developed personality is the most natural thing in the world to the child who is yet guided by his imagination. To attempt to crush imagination in a child, or to punish a little one because he insists upon living in a world of fancy which to him is a real world, is almost a criminal act. Imagination needs directing, not destroying; correcting, not crushing. The transition from the world of fancy to the stern world of fact needs to be made as gentle as possible. There is an immense field open in this direction for parents and teachers.

Imagination is a great means of progress. Without it the scientist and the philosopher would be helpless. Professor Tyndall, "the Sadducee", (as Dr. Parker called him), the man who saw in matter every kind of potentiality, the man who had no room for faith in the Christian sense, was compelled in the interests of his science to defend imagination as one of the greatest allies of science. It is a creative power, he told us; a magician that takes hold of the raw material which science brings to the surface and converts it, by means of invention, into practical forces for human progress.

But chiefly, *by means of imagination we reach the soul of things.* The man without imagination is condemned to play with the surface things of life: he can never reach their depth, their soul. The interpreters of life from the early Hebrew writers downwards, through Bunyan to Maeterlinck, have been men of high imagination. Through their pictures we see reality. We never stumble at their parables, mistaking the form for the essence. We know what they mean. We understand in parable what they teach in parable. And if we are wise men we shall not

trouble ourselves too seriously about translating into abstract terms what may be better understood through pictures. There is a difference between a portrait painter and a photographer. Literalists, and all the fraternity of wooden minds, prefer the photographer. They aver that "the camera cannot lie" and that the instantaneous impression which light fixes upon the sensitive plate must be more exact than anything which a slow working artist can put upon canvass. They forget that any photograph records but *one* impression of a man's features. It is a momentary thing. What we see in the photograph is the expression worn by the sitter at one particular moment. In the next moment his features may wear a totally different aspect. Rarely can a photograph give the normal expression of any man. It is the artist who secures this by careful observation of the sitter's features at different times. The artist seeks the soul of the sitter and tries to express it in the normal expression upon his face. That is why a first class painted portrait must always be greater than the best work of the camera. The camera has no imagination: the painter has. Every artist who succeeds is an imaginative person—whether he be novelist, poet, musician, orator or preacher. No one ever reaches the soul of another person except through imagination. That is why "rationalism" is so sterile, so hard, so repellent. Its devotees lack the magic of seership. They know many things, but they do not know human nature which is one of the best things to know, and they can never warm the human soul, which is one of the best things to do. Imagination, then, is an immense power, for evil, let us say, as well as for good; to depress as well as to elevate. What it will do depends upon the character of its possessor. By means of it we may go to hell or to heaven, even while we live in the flesh, for what we imagine we become. Under proper direction it can give us the freedom of the Universe. For it, time and space are annihilated. All the past is made to live over again and we

can conquer the present, traveling instantly where we will using science as our means of transport. Even the stars become familiar to us by its means.

By it, also, we idealize men and things and thus save ourselves from becoming a prey to vulgarity. The lowliest thing is gilded with glory. In particular, that greatest of all gifts which can ruin or redeem us—*love*—when united to a disciplined imagination, transfigures the most natural functions and renders them sacramental. But when imagination is under a wrong director, then it becomes a weapon for our wounding. It can fling us into prison, narrow our outlook, soil our minds, and poison the very springs of life. If St. Paul were with us today, engaged in writing letters to modern men and women, surely he, with fuller knowledge of psychology, would be more emphatic than ever in insisting that every thought must be brought into captivity to Christ, *for the sake of the captive* and he would most certainly stress imagination, in our sense of the word.

II.

We have to consider how we may use this great power of imagination for the service of the Kingdom of God. God Himself has shown us the way. To begin with, He has reached us through our imagination. He Himself is invisible to us. We can make no worthy picture of Him. As the Absolute He baffles us. The very mystery of His being, at once alluring and tormenting, drives some men and women into Agnosticism. They declare they cannot know Him, the quest for Him is useless. We strongly demur to this attitude, even in the name of that reason, which the Agnostic invokes. Vast numbers of men who disown the Christian revelation yet believe in "God". They conceive of Him differently, and name Him differently, but they strongly affirm His existence. And yet they themselves would be the first to admit that the thought of God, as they conceive Him, is a purely intel-

lectual one. It contains no moral values bearing directly upon the human spirit. It is aloof, frosty, detached. And after all, when we get to the bottom of the idea, it turns out to be only a more refined form of the ancient *Deus in Machina*. A God, however, who can be deduced by the reason is no God for warm blooded humanity needing the love and direction of and fellowship with the Highest. And yet for purely intellectual purposes the God denied by the Agnostic is necessary, and upon intellectual lines His existence can be proved. It is not thus, however, that God makes His appeal to us. He appeals mainly to our imagination. Symbols of Him abound in the natural world and men have been quick to seize upon these. What is animism but a primitive attempt to discover that Spirit of things which is suggested by the imaginative appeal of the material world? In some way or other the "visible things of creation" have always suggested the invisible. The cynic would say, with Voltaire, that this is a pleasing illusion; the creation of God in the image of man. Our reply would be that there is no illusion whatever: it is quite a natural thing to begin with the known and proceed to the unknown. Most of our fuller knowledge is gained in this way. But what makes this method so uncertain is the intrusion into it of the varying human factor. The God that a person discovers through the working of his imagination will be determined by the character of the person who imagines: and that character again will be determined by the ideas upon which the person has fed. Thus Matthew Arnold discovers one kind of God and Jacob Boehme quite another, and both of them used imagination: they could not help it. If therefore the appeal of God to our imagination is to be really successful, it must take a form which will directly impress not one type of humanity, but humanity as a whole. And we claim that the Incarnation does this as nothing else does. It is an appeal to the human imagination *directly* and not through nature symbols only, which are

indirect. Christ images God, St. Paul says. In the midst of the humanity we know best God has really appeared in Christ and we are meant henceforth to conceive of God in terms of Jesus Christ. We are thus absolved from the necessity of wasting our time in abstract reasonings upon the hidden nature of God (of which we can really *know* nothing) and directed to turn our attention to One whose Person strikes our imagination for the purpose of awakening our conscience and commanding our allegiance to Him. When the implications of the whole thing are carefully thought out it will seem to be clear that the religion of the Incarnation is the final and abiding religion forever since it only, in its appeal to Him, follows, *from beginning to end*, the laws of life. No other religion in the world does that.

Now we may best use our imagination for the service of the Kingdom of God by bringing it into line with the purpose of God in the Incarnation which is that we may know His way, see things as He sees them and serve Him **in life**.

1. We know Himself only through personal fellowship. We know His way with man through the study of history. And it is here that we need a well-trained imagination. In primitive times men imagined God to be cruel, hard, awful and a war god. The story of those terrible imaginings is written in many a pagan book and *also in parts of the Old Testament*. Since Christ has come to the world enlightened people have re-imagined God as revealed in Christ. That truer picture of Him cancels at a stroke all the lower conceptions of Him wherever and by whomsoever recorded. We have therefore to re-read the Old Testament in the light of the supreme revelation in Christ. But we cannot do so without the use of historic imagination. The old reading of the Old Covenant was often wooden, uninspiring and at times positively hurtful, simply because people brought to it a literal mind devoid of imagination. Affairs in South

Africa might have been very different at the commencement of the Century had President Kruger—devout and wooden together—known how to read the books of Joshua and Judges. And if William Hohenzollern had only possessed a sanctified imagination and understood the real meaning of the war stories of the Old Testament, he—a religious maniac—might never have developed into the supreme war lord, while certainly he could never have believed the living God to be the special war God of Germany. And if Colonel Ingersoll had possessed imagination he might have devoted his undoubted talents to some better purpose than that of tearing to tatters a book that he did not understand. We need not quote conspicuous instances like these however, in view of the fact that vast numbers of Christian people, through lack of an inspired and informed imagination, are stumbling their way through the Bible and causing others to stumble with them. Is anything more badly needed in Bible study than imagination?

2. If we are to see things as God sees them, we need imagination. It is easy enough to see what all can see—the unfinished things, the confusions, the failures. But if hope is to burn brightly we must see by faith the ending of the day when all will be 'very good'. That was the power of the prophets. They not only saw the sore, the sin, and the shame of their people: they saw what they were yet to be. What marvelous imagination there is in such pictures as Isaiah 61, Ezekiel 37, 47, and Revelation 21! These ideal states are not mere dreams, they are visualizations of the work of God when it is completed. And they possess a marvelous power of lifting the soul above sordid surroundings. To idealize is one way to actualize. The city of the inspired dreams becomes at length the city of solid brick and stone. The Church fails often in her work for the Kingdom because she possesses so many drudges and so few seers. To be sustained to the end we need to see the world, the Church

and individual men as they appear in the light of the Incarnation—fully redeemed at length.

3. The Incarnation commits all men of good will to service for God and man, but for this also, we need imagination. Before we can help our neighbor we must know him, but to know him we are bound to use our imagination. This is what we mean when we say 'put yourself in his place'. Apart from this we can only see the surface of his life and thus we can never really help him. Whatever service we render him will not penetrate to the heart of his life. It is easier to ask 'Who is my neighbor?' than to discover who and what my neighbor *is*. It is by imagination that we enter, as through an open door, into his inner life. Nothing that he can tell us of himself will inform us so much about him as will our own deep sympathy with him. The vast majority of evils in the world continue to exist because the people who try and cope with them lack imagination. Suppose the chaste woman who condemns her erring sister were mentally to live that wanderer's life, to picture her temptations, her slender armour against vice, her squalid surroundings, her misery, her false hilarity, her remorse, would she not obtain a new key to the unlocking of the social question? Or suppose the lady of leisure and wealth could imagine the horrible home conditions of the seamstress who makes her dresses—would there not be a difference in outlook? Or the ardent temperance reformer, anxious to banish the saloon: suppose he put himself in the place of the man whose only parlor is the public house, would there not soon be forthcoming something *constructive* in temperance reform? Imagination might yet help to save the world, but only when it is brought into sympathy with the spirit of the Incarnation.