

## ***Imagine That!***

### ***Can Christians visualize God with their imagination?***

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One of the more curious beliefs that permeates much of Western Christianity is the idea that it is wrong to picture God in our mind. Evangelical leaders of considerable reputation have weighed in on this issue and expressed significant reservations about using our imagination to help us connect with God and experience his work in our life. The “heresy hunters” on the web would have you believe this is a deceptive New Age practice that is a direct violation of the second commandment, and that God is furious with those who try to seek him with their whole mind.

Aside from the fact that the Mosaic Law only referred to the making or worshiping of physical images of God, this well-intentioned but misguided attempt to protect us from harm is completely at odds with the Biblical record! Even a cursory glance through the Psalms should provide enough convincing evidence that the ancient Hebrews loved to imagine God in all sorts of ways. They wrote songs about him, sang these songs directly to him, and made sure that the songs were recorded for all to see, so that those who came after them could be taught this wonderful way of engaging with their Creator. Just listen to a few of these phrases:

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness (17:15)

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation (18:2)

The Lord is my shepherd...he makes me lie down...you prepare a table before me...you anoint my head with oil (23:1-5)

One thing I have asked...to behold the beauty of the Lord (27:4)

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars...shakes the wilderness...causes the oaks to whirl (29:5-9)

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (51:7)

He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge (91:4)

You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment...you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot (104:1-3)

These pictures are absolutely astounding. If they had been written by anyone today, they would have been denounced by certain people as “engaging in fantasy” or some other terrible practice. But these are not the ravings of a New Age cultist. They are writers inspired by God, describing their impressions of God, in ways that were sanctioned by God. If they had been violations of the second commandment, we would not have them in the Bible. If we were to go on and list all of the places where the psalmists and prophets used anthropomorphic language to describe God, this document would fill several hundred pages. Clearly, the biblical authors believed in using their imagination very freely as they thought about God.

What's more, Jesus himself encouraged the use of imagination over and over in his ministry when he used word pictures to describe the unseen realities of the Kingdom to those around him. We call these parables. In

many of them he paints for us an element of his Father's character. If using our imagination is such a dangerous practice, why would Jesus persistently employ it in his teaching? Quite honestly, the biblical evidence is so heavily one-sided it's hard to imagine (irony intended) how this fear of our mental abilities has received such a large following.

While there is certainly such a thing as a misuse of the mind, we need to be careful not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” If we stop and think about it, turning off our imagination is actually quite difficult, if not impossible. You may have just imagined a baby being poured out with the water from a small tub! Or you may have pictured what it would be like to turn off your imagination with a switch.

The truth is that God deliberately created our minds with the capacity to “see” things that are not in our immediate field of vision. Our imaginative capacity allows us to picture better ways of doing things, it allows us to rehearse possible outcomes before attempting something difficult, and it allows us to transmit meaning with stories and metaphors that are far more potent than descriptive prose can ever be. That is one of the reasons why Jesus used word pictures all the time in his teaching.

Bible stories often stir up our imagination and give us a chance to compare our own responses to those of the characters in the text. For example, it is one thing to be told that God forgives us unconditionally and quite another to run a video in our mind of the parable of the Prodigal. The image of the father running out to meet his long-lost son can communicate very powerful meanings to us that penetrate far deeper than any forensic description of forgiveness. Stories are so important that many times in both the Old and New Testaments we are told to *remember* the things that God has done for us (that is, tell the story again in your community). In that sense we are *commanded* to use our imaginations.

The ability to *misuse* imagination does not prohibit our use of it any more than our ability to curse should prohibit us from talking. Aside from the fact that we probably would have to be in denial in order to think we are *not* using our imagination, abandoning our ability to picture holy things would actually make parables incomprehensible, put much of our mind out of reach of God's redemption, and violate the command to love God “with all your mind.” How does one think about whatever is “lovely, pure, true, just, honorable, or commendable” (Phil.4:8) without imagining how those things might look in the real world? How do you “remember the Lord's death” without seeing him on the cross? How do we “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Heb.12:2) when he is no longer here in the flesh?

We could go on. Story telling has been used from the beginning of time to teach important principles to children so they can learn from the experiences of others without having to make all the mistakes themselves. That is most certainly a use of our mind intended by God.

When we read that the psalmist longed to “behold the beauty of the Lord” (Ps.27:4) what are we supposed to think went through his mind, given that he could never really *see* God? When Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would become their new teacher, did he not intend for them to think about how he had been their teacher, and how those conversations would be both similar to and different from the way he had taught them? When the first generation of disciples broke bread together in remembrance of Christ, did not images of Jesus necessarily come to mind? Was it wrong? Is it now wrong for us to imagine him breaking bread because we never saw him in the flesh?

This fear of using our imagination really makes very little sense. Consider the value of seeing God's gift to us as a “treasure in earthen vessels” (2Cor.4:7) or envisioning ourselves as clay in the potter's hands (Isa.64:8). Imagination is a good thing, because it helps us know who we are, where we have come from, and who this God is who cares so much about us. It is a good thing to imagine ourselves having a conversation with God, to imagine his very presence with us, and to imagine his involvement in our life.

So what is the basic difference between holy imagination and New Age fantasy? **In a word – holy imagination actually brings us closer to reality. New Age fantasy moves us away from reality.**

This is not something to be afraid of – it is something we ought to embrace with a passion. When we begin to fill our mind with thoughts of God and seek to connect with him deeply, we put great distance between us and

any cult practice where people try to connect with whatever happens to be flying through the cosmos. All we really need to do is ask God to guard our heart and mind, and trust him to meet us in the process. We can ask him to give us a revelation of his presence, a meaningful image of his relationship to us, or a picture that we need for comfort. And just as Jesus used pictures that were highly relevant to the farmers and peasants who listened to his words, God will give us images and impressions that have substance and meaning for us.

This bears repeating. God gave us the ability to picture things in our mind that are not within our immediate field of vision. Not only is this helpful in the physical world – so that we have the sense to look under the bed for the clothes we wore yesterday – it also helps us to see the unseen Kingdom of God that we have been invited to live in, because it is not something we can behold with our physical eyes.

So when the writer of Hebrews talks about “fixing our eyes on Jesus,” he is referring to the eyes of our heart, that is, our ability to focus our mind in a way that allows us to see this amazing God we get to be with. God created us with this ability, he evoked its use when he walked among us, and his people have made tremendous use of it for centuries in their writings. The enemy of our souls could never have given us this. It was entirely God's idea to help us engage with him more deeply. The only thing the enemy could do was make up some ways of misusing it.

Whoever dreamed up this fear of imagination did not find it in Scripture. He was very likely fighting with his own unruly mind and did not know how to find the healing he needed. So he opted for turning off the whole thing as much as possible. And while we may need some help with learning how to use our imagination in holy ways, we do not need to fear imagination itself or create theologies out of thin air in order to avoid getting the help we need.

The only caution that we might add, is that for those who have had extensive experience in the occult in the past this may be a bit more complex. People who have a history of direct contact with demonic forces may need special help sorting things out in their mind and prayer life. Even then, many may be able to simply trust that God will expose any pictures in their mind that are from the enemy, and engage with him in faith that He will protect them.

The presence of God is an awesome thing. The ways he wants to work in us and with us go way beyond whatever we could figure out from a purely logical application of the principles we can find in Scripture. In order to have an authentic, substantive relationship with God, we need to learn how to see him, sense his presence with us, and envision his work in us. And God has every intention of employing our ability *to see the unseen* as part of that process.

May God give you freedom and joy as he makes use of your holy imagination to help you to experience him more fully!