The aim of this article is to explore a heresy that rules vast segments of evangelical Christianity. That heresy is to defend a neglect of the imagination and the arts on the ground that believers must be busy in God's work, assuming that God's work is never artistic. Yet the Bible itself, to say nothing of the creation in which humankind lives, shows that God's work is partly artistic.

One of my colleagues has several times conducted an informal poll in his art classes. He asks how many students can say that in their families any of the arts was talked about and regarded as important. The percentage of such families is exceedingly small. Then when he inquires into the matter more precisely, he finds that in the overwhelming number of cases either the families in which the arts are considered important are non-Christian families, or the affirmation of art is something that preceded conversion to Christianity.

Of all people on the face of the earth, Christians have the most reason to value the arts and the imagination. The title of this article speaks of the imagination as a means of grace. This does not mean that participating in the arts makes a person more acceptable to God or that the arts explicitly recall God's saving acts. Instead it suggests that the imagination is a means by which God can reveal His truth and beauty and people can respond with due appreciation.
The Doctrine of Creation and the Artistic Enterprise

In countering the heresy that God's work excludes involvement in the arts, three great biblical principles may be addressed. The first is the doctrine of Creation. The Bible begins by stating that God created the world. That world is beautiful and artistically pleasing, as is known simply by looking around and as the Bible confirms.

God looked at what He had created, and, "behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). The psalmist wrote that the creation proclaims God's handiwork (Ps. 19:1), implying that handiwork has value. In the Garden of Eden God made to grow "every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). This is a double criterion—one artistic, the other utilitarian. The conditions for human well-being have never changed since that moment. Can a person justify the time spent reading a novel or writing a poem or visiting an art gallery? In a Christian scheme of things, the answer is yes.

God also created people in His own image (Gen. 1:26). What does this mean? At this point in the biblical record nothing is yet known about the God of providence or redemption or the covenant. The one thing known about God is that He creates. In its immediate narrative context, therefore, the doctrine of the image of God in people emphasizes that people are, like God, creative. A well-known evangelical, when serving as a referee for one of my book manuscripts, wrote a marginal comment about "the trivial view that God's image in people is a matter of creativity." Is this the impression a person gets when reading Genesis 1? The comment is in fact an evidence of the very heresy just mentioned.

What does the image of God in people say about the arts? It affirms human creativity as something good in principle, since it is an imitation of one of God's own acts and perfections. Abraham Kuyper once wrote, "As image-bearer of God, man possesses the possibility both to create something beautiful, and to delight in it."1 Christian poet Chad Walsh has said that the artist "can honestly see himself as a kind of earthly assistant to God ... carrying on the delegated work of creation, making the fullness of creation fuller."2 This applies equally to those who are not themselves creative artists but who delight to enter into the creativity of others. And it stands as a rebuke to those who disparage God's gift of creativity in people.

This then is one foundation for thinking Christianly about the arts: the Christian doctrine of Creation assures mankind that human creativity can be honoring to God. God Himself created a world that is artistically beautiful and delightful as well as utilitarian.

**The Value of Beauty and Artistry**

A second biblical principle is that works of art have value in themselves, simply as objects of beauty and artistry. For one thing, the Bible makes no division of art into sacred and secular. Art has equal value in an everyday setting and in worship. The Bible includes not only songs sung in worship at the temple but also ones sung in the everyday circumstances of work without direct reference to anything religious (Num. 21:16-18; Isa. 16:10; 52:8-9). The Song of Solomon is a collection of love lyrics that keeps the focus on human love and does not explicitly bring God or spiritual values into the picture. The Bible records a patriotic elegy by David about national heroes that does not mention God (2 Sam. 1:17-27).

As an extension of this unwillingness to divide art into sacred and secular, the Bible also refuses to make the value of artistic form depend on religious content in works of art. Consider the many references in the Psalms and elsewhere to instrumental music without accompanying words. Can this be legitimate, even in worship? In Psalm 150 musical sound alone is said to praise God when it is offered to Him as an act of worship.

The descriptions of the visual art that adorned the Old Testament tabernacle and temple are a gold mine of information about the arts, and one of the important things learned is that the art God prescribed for these religious places was not always specifically religious in its content. There was a wealth of realistic or representational art that symbolized nothing specifically religious. The pillars of the temple were decorated with pomegranates and lilies (1 Kings 7:15-22), and the stands for the brass lavers with lions, oxen, and palm trees (vv. 29, 36). Given the stereotyped notions of "sacred art" that often prevail in Christian circles, this might seem out of place. As the Old Testament worshipers stared at the lampstand, they saw, not angels and cherubim, but things of natural beauty-flowers and blossoms.

What should one make of this exuberance over the forms of nature in the most holy places of Old Testament worship? Above all it

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completely undercuts any sacred-secular dichotomy for art. What God created is a suitable subject for the artist. Since God made the flowers and sky, they are worth painting or carving.

Most surprising of all, given current stereotypes, was the presence of abstract or nonrepresentational art in the tabernacle and temple. Nonrepresentational art means art that represents nothing beyond itself, like a Persian tapestry. As the Old Testament worshipers approached the temple, they saw two gigantic freestanding pillars over 25 feet high. These monoliths had no architectural weight-bearing function. They did not resemble anything in created nature. They were simply beautiful and suggested by their very size and form the grandeur, stability, and power of God. They also made the worshipers feel small as they stood beside them, and this, too, made a religious statement in a purely artistic, nonverbal way.

The artistic imagination is free to be itself. What it produces under the guidance of God is good in itself. The robe of Aaron indicates that. The embellishment of Aaron's priestly garment was "for glory and for beauty" (Exod. 28:2). Beauty and artistry are worthy in themselves.

Some of the art in the Old Testament was realistic, but there was no requirement that it had to be so. The decorations on Aaron's garment included blue pomegranates. What's so unusual about that? In nature there are no blue pomegranates. An intriguing artifact in the temple is the molten sea (1 Kings 7:23-26). It was a huge circular basin 45 feet in circumference and holding up to 10,000 gallons of water. Under the brim were engravings of gourds. The whole grand design rested on the backs of 12 statuesque oxen. Nowhere in the real world can one find a sea held up on the backs of oxen. It is an utterly fantastic conception, all the more delightful for its imaginary qualities.

Some of the literature in the Bible is equally fantastic. In a single short chapter of Zechariah, for example, readers learn about a flying scroll that destroys the wood and stone of houses, a woman named Wickedness sitting inside a cereal container, and two women with wings like those of a stork who lift the container into the sky. As Schaeffer wrote, "Christian artists do not need to be threatened by fantasy and imagination.... The Christian is the really free person ... whose imagination should fly beyond the stars."4

An additional reason for believing that works of art have value in themselves emerges from what the Bible says about the vocation and gifts of the artist. Two key passages in Exodus describe how God

4 Francis A. Schaeffer, Art and the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,
called and equipped the artists who worked on the tabernacle (Exod. 31:1-11; 35:30-36:2). God called the artists, filled them with His Spirit, inspired them with artistic ability, and stirred them up to do the work. The impression gained from these passages is that the artist's calling is a glorious calling. Unlike what often happens in Christian circles today, the artist's vocation was not regarded as suspect or second best.

This, then, is a second way in which to think Christianly about the arts: the Bible affirms that the artistic imagination and its creations have value in themselves, not simply for the religious or ideational content they may contain. The arts do not need to be defended, as people throughout history have felt obliged to defend them, as something other than art. They have integrity for what they are in themselves. Christians find a place for the arts as an aid to worship, but not often as an act of worship. Yet 91 out of 107 references to music in the Psalms specify God as the audience of music. The principle that emerges from this is significant for the arts: anything offered to God can become an act of worship. This means that artistic experiences, whether as creators or participants, can be an act of worship—a means of grace.

The value of the nonutilitarian and the dignity of the concept of leisure must also be acknowledged. The Christian community lacks an adequate theory of leisure and play. Regarding recreation, including the arts, as frivolous or ignoble, Christians often sink to mediocrity by default. Yet the wise use of leisure time is part of the stewardship of life. No one could have lived a busier life than Jesus did during the years of His public ministry. Yet He did not reduce life to continuous work or evangelism. He took time to enjoy the beauty of the lily and to attend dinners.

**Truth and the Imagination**

The Bible, then, endorses artistic creativity and encourages Christians to believe that artistic form and beauty have value in themselves as gifts from God. This might be viewed as the nonutilitarian side of the artistic imagination. But the imagination is useful as well as delightful. This leads to the question of truth in art, or the imagination as a vehicle for expressing truth. This too is a value of the arts. The imagination can express truth in its own unique way for the glory of God and the edification of people.

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What is this unique way of expressing truth? Such truth as the arts express is conveyed by means of the imagination. The imagination images forth its subject matter. It does not work primarily by abstractions or propositions but by concrete images and experiences. As Chesterton put it, "Imagination demands an image." The arts take concrete human experience rather than abstract information as their subject.

Can the imagination express truth? Look at the example of the Bible. The Bible is overwhelmingly literary in its form. The one thing that it is not is what we so often picture it as being-a theological outline with proof texts attached. When asked to define "neighbor," Jesus told a story. He constantly spoke in images and metaphors: "I am the light of the world"; "You are the salt of the earth." The Bible repeatedly appeals to the intelligence through the imagination. The prominence of music and visual art in the worship described in the Bible has already been noted. If it is doubted that truth can be embodied in visual, nonpropositional form, look at baptism and communion. They use physical images that allow people to experience spiritual realities.

It is therefore not surprising that Dorothy Sayers links the imagination with Christian theology. In a famous essay on artistic theory, she wrote,

Let us take note of a new word that has crept into the argument by way of Christian theology-the word Image. Suppose, having rejected the words "copy," "imitation," and "representation" as inadequate, we substitute the word "image" and say that what the artist is doing is to image forth something or the other, and connect that with St. Paul's phrase: "God ... hath spoken to us by His son, the ... express image of His person."-Something which, by being an image, expresses that which it images.

"Imaging forth" is exactly what the Bible repeatedly does. Its most customary way of expressing God's truth is not the sermon or theological outline but the story, the poem, the vision, and the letter, all of them literary forms and products of the imagination. Think of how much biblical truth has been incarnated in character and event. To this can be added the poetry of the Bible, including the heavy incidence of image and metaphor in the prose of the New Testament.

The point is not simply that the Bible allows for the imagination as a form of communication. It is rather that the biblical writers

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and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using the resources of the imagination. The Bible does more than sanction the arts. It shows how indispensable they are.

That the imagination is a vehicle of truth is known also from sources other than the Bible. An earlier article referred to the discovery of recent brain research that shows that the two hemispheres of the human brain respond to stimuli and assimilate reality in different ways. The left hemisphere is active in logical thinking, grasping abstract propositions, and dealing with language. The right hemisphere is dominant in processing visual and other sensory experiences, in seeing whole-part relationships, in grasping metaphor and humor, and in experiencing emotion. The arts and the imagination are essentially right-brain media. Believers need to express and receive God's truth with the right brain as well as the left.

In Western culture at large, and perhaps especially in the evangelical subculture, the tendency is overwhelming to assume that truth is conceptual and propositional only. But the arts, with their emphasis on imagination, show that there is another type of truth, or a whole other way by which people assimilate and know the truth. Suppose a person is assembling an appliance. If the directions include a good picture, he may not even use the written instructions. It is a fallacy to think that one's world view consists only of ideas. It is a world picture as well as a set of ideas. It includes images that may govern behavior even more than ideas do. At the level of ideas, for example, a person may know the goal of life is not to amass physical possessions. But if his mind is filled with images of fancy cars and expensive clothes and big houses, his behavior will likely follow a materialistic path. A person might say that God created the world, but if his mind is filled with images of evolutionary processes, he will start to think like an evolutionist. Someone may know that he should eat moderately, but his appetites override that knowledge when his mind is filled with images of luscious food. The imagination is a leading ingredient in the way people view reality. They live under its sway, whether they realize it or not. Advertisers seem to grasp this better than people do in the church.

The Uses of the Imagination in Teaching and Preaching

Thus far three biblical principles have been suggested to combat the assumption that doing God's work excludes a commitment to the imagination and the arts. Those principles are the doctrine of Cre-

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ation, the Bible's endorsement of art as having value in itself, and the Bible's example in confirming that the imagination is one means by which people can know and express the truth. What are some ways these principles may be applied to Christians and especially to teachers and preachers?

In view of the Bible's endorsement of the arts, Christians need to affirm artists and their work much more than they typically do. They need to show from the pulpit and the Sunday school podium and by their conversations and actions that they believe the arts to be important. Everyone has an imagination. Some Christians have sat in the pew for years and never been told that their God-given imagination is good. Art, music, and literature deserve a more prominent place in churches than they currently have. They deserve to be in the bulletin and church services, and Sunday school classes. It would be helpful to have artists' nights when church members display their own visual art or photography, read their own poems or stories, and perform music. Too little of artists' gifts is seen in churches today.

All this is in sharp contrast to what is found in the worship described in the Bible, where the arts were flaunted to a degree almost unheard of today. The idea of the beauty of holiness does not mean much in contemporary worship, and one of the reasons for the attractiveness of high church worship to some evangelicals is that their aesthetic inclinations are either starved or offended in evangelical churches.

There is no reason why the burden for artistic expression within the church should rest solely on the minister. Most churches have a core of people who are interested in the arts. They are the logical people to tap as resources for making the artistic imagination a vital part of church life.

Many Christians have been guilty of a great abdication. They cannot all be artists, but they can all respect and participate in the art that others create. The Christian church must be active on every front in society—in science, in economics, in education, in politics, in the arts, in the media. God gave His followers a cultural command as well as a missionary command. They should not set these up as rivals. To relinquish the presence of believers in any cultural area only weakens the Christian voice in the culture as a whole and makes evangelism all the more difficult.

The attitude of Christians toward the arts says something about the God they proclaim, and often the wrong signal is sent to the unsaved. A missionary who wrestled with the issue of how beauty related to her life in a foreign culture came to this conclusion: "I believe my attitude toward beauty and order, as reflected in my home and lifestyle, says much to the people around me about the God I
serve. Therefore, I want to reflect ... something of the artistry, the beauty, the order of the one I'm representing, and in whose image I've been made."

Christians also need to acknowledge more fully that the imagination is a leading means by which to express the truth. Turning from the pages of the Bible to the evangelical subculture today, one cannot help but be struck by the contrast in this regard. The theological abstraction and outline have replaced the imaginative boldness of the writers of the Bible. People no longer trust the power of metaphor or paint on canvas or musical sound to express the truth. Jesus, however, did not distrust the imagination. He told stories and spoke in metaphor.

The non-Christian world has a better grasp of the power of the arts to persuade people than the Christian community does. For every "Chariots of Fire," there are hundreds of movies that express an untruthful or immoral view of life. Christians need to believe that a painting or piece of fiction can be as truthful to life and to the Christian view of life as a sermon or religious article can be. "Chariots of Fire" is as truthful an expression of Eric Liddle's Christianity as is a biography of him. This is not to suggest that believers displace anything with art, music, and literature. Rather, the point is that these too are ways in which God's truth and beauty can be communicated. The Bible itself communicates the truth in all possible ways. And it does so with obvious artistry. Christians need to lay to rest the heresy that God's work is never artistic.

A final application has to do with the sermon. As a modern-day Puritan who believes in the primacy of the sermon in worship, I find the state of the sermon in evangelical churches alarming. It is in deep trouble in most churches. This is concealed from view because churchgoers accept listening to the sermon as part of the duties of attending church. They theorize that as long as a church is filled with people listening to sermons, the sermon must be flourishing as an institution. But sitting dutifully through the sermon is not the same as being excited by it or strongly impacted by it. The average churchgoer finds something lacking in sermons and feels mildly guilty about not being as interested in sermons as he or she would like to be. It must be remembered that the visual media have transformed what audiences expect in a sermon. Contemporary preaching has captured the minds and sometimes the emotions of people, but not their imaginations.

One problem is the excessive tendency toward theological abstraction in contemporary preaching. If the imagination is a valid

means of communicating God's truth, then the Christian message needs to be imaged forth more than it is. A good starting point is to preach on literary parts of the Bible. There is no defensible reason why preachers should gravitate so naturally to the most abstract parts of the Bible, especially the Epistles. The stories and poems and visions of the Bible are important too.

And when preachers choose a literary text in the Bible, it is important to approach it as literature. A story or poem asks that the readers and hearers enter a whole imagined world and walk around inside it. It conveys its truth by getting the readers to share an experience. Reliving the story or the thought process of the poet should be the first item on the agenda of Bible expositors. To do this will require them to rethink their concept of a three-part sermon. Instead of imposing three propositional generalizations on the text and dipping into the text for supporting data, they must first relive the story or poem. Then they can deduce the principles and apply them to the lives of their listeners.

When expositors make an application, they need to rely on their imagination-their ability to picture the truth in concrete terms. The imagination allows them to identify with people and experiences beyond themselves. Identifying with things "out there" is not something that comes easily to preachers. The voice of authentic human experience with its suffering and longing is not as common as it should be in contemporary preaching. The exceptions to that stricture are the preachers who rather quickly achieve popularity and become celebrities. But the ability to identify with actual human experience is within the reach of every preacher or teacher and needs only to be cultivated.

Expositors tend to look on sermon or lesson preparation in terms of doing research for a lecture or paper. They should view it more like writing a story or poem. According to the usual model, the preacher or Bible teacher spends time reading Bible commentaries and finding illustrations for generalizations. But as poets and fiction writers go about their composition, the key ingredients in their process are memory, observation of life, introspection, reading, and imagining.

Paradoxically the ability to identify with the person in the pew and to picture the truth concretely might begin with introspection. Imaginative writers are not afraid to look within and assume that what they find there is of universal interest and insight. The minister or teacher who sits down to breakfast and who transports children to music lessons or Little League games has the same tensions and triumphs, the same anxieties and longings, that ordinary people have. Not to tap this source is a failure of both nerve and imagination, and it leaves congregations with abstracted theology as their Sunday diet.
Observation is of course needed to supplement introspection. The way to empathize with people is to observe their pain and triumphs, their longings and fears. Pressed for time as they are, preachers can develop a network for gaining insight into how a biblical passage applies to real life. The most efficient means of doing this is to assemble a small group Bible study that studies the passage on which the next sermon will be based. The application part of the sermon is too big a task for one person to produce alone.

In addition to needing more imaging of the truth from the pulpit and Sunday school podium, more innovation is also needed. One of the functions of the imagination is to defamiliarize what has become overly familiar. Its task is to state the timeless truth in perpetually fresh ways. People are temperamentally resistant to change and experimentation. It is easy to forget that in its original setting the Bible was a subversive book. Its writers and speakers challenged conventional assumptions and conventional ways of stating things. Preachers and teachers need to be more daring and imaginative, knowing beforehand that some experiments will work better than others.

What form might such innovation take? Expositors might profitably follow the model of the Bible itself. The Bible takes every possible approach to the truth, much of it literary and artistic. Could some of the street drama of the Old Testament prophets serve as a model? Jeremiah once wore a yoke on his neck as a message to the people. On another occasion he exposed a garment to the elements until it had decayed in order to symbolize the spiritual state of his nation.

What prevents us from trying brief dramatic vignettes and visual imagery as part of a sermon? Equally attractive is the possibility of impersonating a biblical character, either directly or in a pretended interview. The Bible consistently appeals to the right side of the brain as well as the left. There is no reason why sermons and Sunday school lessons cannot feature more visual and aural resources than they customarily do.

And what about the prominence given in the Bible to narrative or story? One of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in the four words, "Tell me a story." Among the findings of two people who made a study of successful American companies was the conclusion that "we are more influenced by stories (vignettes that are whole and make sense in themselves) than by data."\(^{11}\) There is every reason for Bible communicators to tap into the story quality of

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both the Bible and the Christian faith. It is possible to make use of the strengths of narrative preaching without casting an entire sermon in narrative form. But more than the conventional two-minute anecdote is needed to illustrate a generalization. A story is needed that invites the hearers to enter a whole world of the imagination and that incarnates the truth instead of simply illustrating it.

Fiction too has an amazing ability to defamiliarize both biblical material and everyday reality. It uses dislocation to create new angles of vision. It removes hearers from the familiar world so they can see that world with greater clarity. The classic example of this in the Bible itself is the parable Nathan told to David (2 Sam. 12:1-15). By entering a fictional world, David was completely disarmed. Having entered this world of the imagination, he looked out of it to the world of his own life. This is how the imagination works: it first removes the hearers from immediate reality to send them back to it with renewed insight. There is nothing wrong with telling a story that does not carry all its meaning on the surface. Jesus told fictional stories that partly concealed the truth in order to reveal it by delayed action to the thoughtful listener.

To sum up, all people, including Christians, need the truth and beauty that the imagination can impart. That truth and beauty are needed during the week, and on Sunday. The nature of truth is such that it can never be adequately expressed or experienced only as an abstraction or as a set of facts. Truth also requires the story, the poem, the paint on canvas, the sound of music.

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