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A Picture Set Us Free
Preaching to the Imagination in a Secular Age

By
Eric D. Stiller

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2022

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Graduation Date   May 13, 2022

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Abstract

Preaching the Christian faith in the modern West faces many challenges. One of the biggest is a growing inability to make sense of the basic categories that comprise a Christian worldview. The purpose of this study is to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with six preachers from various denominations who have at least ten years of experience preaching in geographic areas with high concentrations of people in the immanent frame, typically city-centers. The interviews focused on gaining data on four research questions: What are some practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame? How do preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts? How do preachers describe the challenges they encounter in helping people in the immanent frame make sense of the gospel? How do preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

The literature review focused on three key areas: a biblical theology of the imagination, the experience of the immanent frame, and the field of imaginative apologetics.

This study concluded that the immanent frame presents three major challenges to preachers in the modern West: the felt distance of transcendence, an instrumental approach to fullness, and the quest for authenticity. To address these challenges, it is crucial to engage the imagination, which is a faculty of meaning making and possibility. There are three primary components for engaging the imagination of those in the

immanent frame: awakening desire, recovery of vision, and narration of stories. Based on an analysis of these findings, this study concludes with several recommendations for preachers to engage the imagination of those in the immanent frame.

For Jenny, my sister and my spouse: who stirs my imagination, awakens desires I never knew I had, leads me into the recovery of an ever-deeper vision of reality, and daily pictures for me the beauty of the gospel story.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

— T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

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To all the members of the Cultural Apologetics cohort: I can't imagine traveling this road without you all. Thank you for making us all better with your presence!

Finally, I want to thank my beloved bride Jenny. I could not have completed this dissertation without your patience, encouragement, prayers, support, listening ear, and feedback. Thanks, and all my love to you!

Chapter One

Introduction

Preaching the Christian faith in the modern West faces many challenges. One challenge is the rapid decline of religious participation and affiliation.[1] Fewer people are present in churches to hear the Christian faith. Another challenge is the growing suspicion of Christianity as harmful and destructive to society.[2] Fewer people trust the Christian faith. An additional challenge is the perception of Christianity as one of many, equally valid spiritual options.[3] Fewer people feel any need of the Christian faith.

But one of the biggest challenges is a growing incomprehension of the basic categories that comprise a Christian worldview: a "sacred order" or transcendent reality beyond this world, absolute moral standards, the reality of guilt and sin, the necessity of spiritual transformation. Modern Western culture is the first culture in the history of the world to reject these categories, and instead "propose a world in which there is no truth and no sacred order."[4] Fewer people today, therefore, can make any sense of the Christian faith.

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[1] "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center* (blog), October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/; Derek Thompson, "Three Decades Ago, America Lost Its Religion. Why?," *The Atlantic*, September 26, 2019.

[2] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity - And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); Tim Keller, Russell Moore, Collin Hansen, "How Sharing the Gospel in Our Secular Age Is Different," The Gospel Coalition, October 3, 2017, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/video/sharing-gospel-secular-age-different/.

[3] Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 30.

[4] Philip Rieff, James Davison Hunter, and Kenneth S. Piver, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), xxi; Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York:

This disconnect has short-circuited typical religious conversion processes and hence the preaching used to gain converts. For someone to commit to the Christian faith as a function of the will, that person would need a working understanding of the inner components of that faith. Such an understanding is a function of reason. But if the basic categories of faith are meaningless, a person's reason has nothing to piece together. That person needs the ability to assign meaning to the basic categories of the Christian worldview, so as to understand them, and that ability is a function of the imagination.

An illustration of the imagination's role in conversion comes from the life of the famous Christian writer C.S. Lewis. When he was in his late teens, he purchased a fantasy book for a train ride: *Phantastes* by the Scottish author, poet, and minister George MacDonald. "A few hours later," he said, "I knew that I had crossed a great frontier."[5] At this point in his life, Lewis was still an atheist. Reading *Phantastes* did not convert him to Christian faith or even theism. It would be many years before he came to a cognitive understanding of Christianity and a volitional commitment to the Christian life.[6] And yet Lewis's experience with MacDonald on that train ride marked a watershed event. The frontier he crossed was the necessary precursor to the frontier of the reason and the will: the frontier of the imagination. "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized. The rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."[7]

Redeemer City to City, 2020), 6; Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1986).

[5] George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology: 365 Readings* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2001), xxxvii.

[6] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956).

[7] Lewis, 181.

A key passage describing his encounter with MacDonald is particularly illuminative:

> The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* was goodness. But now that I know, I see there was no deception. The deception is all the other way round – in that prosaic moralism which confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty, which never lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from "the land of righteousness."[8]

There are several things to note here. It was an encounter with a "quality." This qualitative encounter "enchanted" him but not with vague abstractions; rather he experienced the opposite. This quality "turned out" to be that of reality: the "real universe… ecstatic reality." He "learned" something, unrealized at the time; it was a learning "to love," not merely cognitive learning. Specifically, he learned to love "goodness." And without this experience, he would have been prey to "deception." Even though he could not have articulated it at the time, his imagination was engaged, and he gained a meaningful understanding of absolute moral standards, one of the basic categories of a Christian worldview.[9]

Lewis is describing an epistemological process: a qualitative experience that led him out of deception and into an encounter with reality. The remarkable thing about this epistemology – and, for the purposes of this study, the most crucial thing to notice – is the distinction he makes between two ways of knowing: a false way and a true way.

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[8] MacDonald and Lewis, *George MacDonald*, xxxviii–xxxix.

[9] In his accounts of this experience, Lewis uses a cluster of terms to describe the moral "quality" he "learned to love." In addition to "goodness" and "righteousness," he calls it "holiness" in his autobiography. See Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 179.

The false way is the "deception" of relying on sheer reason: "that prosaic moralism that confines goodness to the region of Law and Duty." The true way begins with the imagination, which "lets us feel in our face the sweet air blowing from 'the land of righteousness.'" Feeling "the sweet air blowing" is the difference between an abstract theorizing about goodness and a concrete experience of goodness. He wasn't just thinking thoughts about goodness. He was experiencing it from the inside.[10] But this experience didn't stand alone. It was the antecedent to the functions of cognitive understanding and commitment of the will.

Noted Lewis scholar Michael Ward provides a helpful summary of Lewis's epistemology. "Imagination, which is good, serves reason, which is better, and both serve the will, which is best of all.[11] For Lewis, surrendering the will to God was paramount, the "best of all."[12] But that surrender could not take place without a reasonable understanding of that to which one surrendered – the "better." And for reason to be about something, to have real content, to mean something, the imagination was essential, for "reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning."[13] According to Lewis, the imagination is a meaning-making faculty.

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[10] In the parallel account of this experience from his autobiography, Lewis uses much of the same imaginative, experiential language, including the notable phrase of "the air of the new region." See Lewis, 181.

[11] Michael Ward, "The Good Serves the Better and Both the Best: C. S. Lewis on Imagination and Reason in Apologetics," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 74.

[12] See, e.g., many of the interactions and accompanying commentary in C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (New York: HarperOne, 2001).

[13] C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 265.

For example, evaluating whether the statement "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" is true, according to reason, is impossible without a meaningful understanding of "the kingdom." Is it a medieval castle? A military operation? A professional basketball team? Something else? Without meaning, derived via the imagination, reason has nothing to evaluate. The epistemological significance of the imagination, therefore, has important implications for religious conversion, and thus for anyone seeking to preach the Christian faith in the modern West.[14] To engage the imagination of Western culture, successful preaching must understand what already shapes the culture's imagination.

The Immanent Frame

Throughout his book *A Secular Age*, renowned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes the experience of living in the modern West. He distinguishes between two common conceptions or senses of secularity before articulating a third sense, which is the focus of his study.[15] This third sense is not so much concerned with conscious belief systems as it is with what he calls "the conditions of experience," or the "conditions of belief."[16] Taylor's goal is to "focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like

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[14] Andrew Davison, ed., *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017).

[15] Secularity 1 concerns public spaces emptied of God or any reference to ultimate reality. Secularity 2 describes a decrease in religious belief and practice. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2–3.

[16] Taylor, 4.

to live as a believer or an unbeliever."[17] His main focus is on the experience of this secular age.

Taylor says that lived experience is a function of "social imaginary." In contrast to a consciously held worldview, a social imaginary is pre-theoretical. It is how people imagine the world before they think about it.[18] In addition, it is carried primarily in images, stories, and communal practices.[19] It's the cultural "soup" everyone swims in.[20]

The dominant social imaginary of the modern West is what Taylor calls "the immanent frame."[21] Christian philosopher and Taylor scholar James K.A. Smith describes the immanent frame as "a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence."[22] One of the immanent frame's most significant characteristics is the advent of a social imaginary in which "a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option… a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing."[23] In the immanent frame, it is difficult, though not impossible, to imagine any significance, meaning, or purpose beyond this world only.

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[17] Taylor, 5.

[18] Taylor, 146; James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 66.

[19] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

[20] Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson, *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 11.

[21] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542–57.

[22] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 141.

[23] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

Thus, a critical question for any preacher in the modern West is, "What is it like to live in the immanent frame?" Two aspects hold particular relevance for this study. First, it is unavoidable. Regardless of whether one believes in God or not, inhabiting the immanent frame means living in a world in which belief in God is only one of many options, and often not the most plausible one.[24] Even if one holds a transcendent frame, it is still conditioned by a world in which the immanent frame dominates.[25] Second, while everyone inhabits the immanent frame, there are multiple ways of inhabiting it. Smith clarifies: "The question isn't *whether* we inhabit the immanent frame, but *how*."[26] Taylor describes different options.

One way is to be "open" to transcendence. People may not consider themselves religious or spiritual. Maybe they grew up "un-churched," without any religious upbringing or instruction, but they can still feel the pull of transcendence in their lives, or at least the possibility of transcendence.[27] They are still moving through life in the immanent frame, but there are times when the frame "cracks," and they find themselves wondering, "What if there's something more?"

For example, Tara Isabella Burton is one of the leading experts on contemporary spirituality in the West. In her book *Strange Rites*, she explores the tapestry of spiritual

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[24] Taylor, 3.

[25] See Figure 1 below. Building on Taylor's work, subsequent scholars have noted that the immanent frame does not necessarily preclude the existence of a transcendent frame for modern people. See Smith, *How (Not)*, 95; David John Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 64.

[26] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 93 (emphasis in original).

[27] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 548–49.

belief and practice in twenty-first century America.[28] In the introduction, she acknowledges her difficulty believing in something beyond this world but also describes "the wrenching terror that this was, in fact, *all there is* and the hope that maybe there was something more."[29] She is an example of someone who inhabits the immanent frame and is open to transcendence.

Another way of inhabiting the immanent frame is to be "closed" to transcendence. To this person the immanent frame appears self-evident and indisputable. There is no possibility of anything beyond this natural world and no possibility of being mistaken about that. This immanent framer is firmly convinced there is nothing transcendent.[30]

Taylor's *A Secular Age* contests the closed immanent perspective's assumption that its view of reality is obviously just "the way things are."[31] Rejecting transcendence requires just as much faith as embracing it, but the closed immanent reading, by its nature, prevents people from seeing this.[32] The renowned New York City preacher and writer Tim Keller describes the challenge succinctly. "Our culture is filled with faith beliefs. And it's the one culture that doesn't believe it's got beliefs."[33]

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[28] Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

[29] Burton, 13 (emphasis in original).

[30] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550–51.

[31] Taylor, 549–51. It is important to note that a closed understanding of reality, which assumes the obviousness and incontestability of its own position, is just as prevalent among religious believers as it is among their secular counterparts. See Taylor, 551; Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 63–64. See also Figure 1 below.

[32] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550–51.

[33] Tim Keller, Russell Moore, Collin Hansen, "How Sharing the Gospel."

Ricky Gervais, a well-known British comedian and outspoken advocate for atheism, illustrated this perspective on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. When Colbert, who is Catholic, asked him about his beliefs, Gervais explained, "Atheism isn't a belief system. Here is atheism in a nutshell. You say there's a God. I say, can you prove that? You say no. I say I don't believe you then."[34] Gervais believes he has no beliefs because no one can prove one to him. This closed way of inhabiting the immanent frame poses one of the greatest challenges for the Christian faith in modern Western culture.

Writer and cultural-renewal entrepreneur David John Seel, Jr. has summarized Taylor's terminology in an accessible framework,[35] and for the sake of clarity and consistency, this study will follow Seel's taxonomy below. The immanent and transcendent frames exist at opposite ends of one axis, as do the closed and open frames, because they are opposite ways of relating to, or "framing," both immanence and transcendence.[36] As noted above, one can believe in God or transcendent reality, thus occupying a transcendent frame, but that belief, if held with honesty and humility, is always conditioned by the immanent frame of the modern West. These four social imaginaries are thus also four possible frames resulting from the intersection of two axes: the immanent/transcendent axis and the closed/open axis.

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[34] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, *Ricky Gervais and Stephen Colbert Go Head-To-Head on Religion*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5ZOwNK6n9U.

[35] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 64; Smith, *How (Not)*, 95.

[36] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 63–64. In fact, Seel uses a number of terms to describe the same phenomenon: "imaginary," "frame," "posture," "take," "orientation to reality." This study will primarily use the language of "frames."
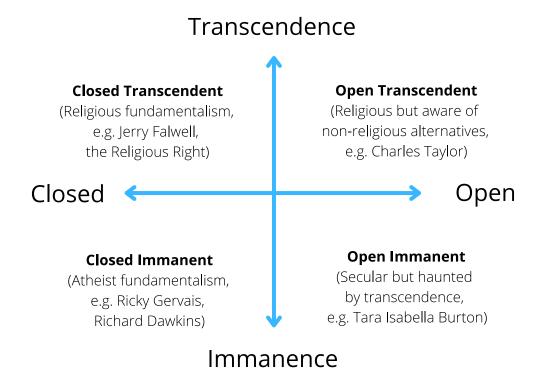
Transcendence

Closed Transcendent
(Religious fundamentalism,
e.g. Jerry Falwell,
the Religious Right)

Open Transcendent
(Religious but aware of
non-religious alternatives,
e.g. Charles Taylor)

Closed ← → Open

Closed Immanent
(Atheist fundamentalism,
e.g. Ricky Gervais,
Richard Dawkins)

Open Immanent
(Secular but haunted
by transcendence,
e.g. Tara Isabella Burton)

Immanence

Figure 1. Four Social Imaginaries/Frames

Taylor himself occupies the open transcendent frame. And although he challenges those in the closed immanent frame, he compassionately and generously describes the many others who inhabit the open immanent frame as well. That number may be far greater, in fact, than those in the closed immanent frame and includes a vast population exploring faith, religion, and spirituality, but still from within immanence.[37] Therefore, the larger challenge is how to help people who struggle to imagine anything beyond this world to feel "the sweet air" blowing and pulling toward transcendence and then to allow themselves to ask, "What would it be like if this were true?"[38]

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[37] Burton, *Strange Rites*; Smith, *How (Not)*, 3–10.

[38] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 54.

Imaginative Apologetics

Over the past decade, a growing number of scholars, theologians, apologists, clergy, and artists have devoted increasing attention to the role that imagination ought to play in the apologetic challenge of the immanent frame.[39] Spiritual progress and Lewis's "best," the surrender of the will to God, cannot occur without the "better" of a mind that can grasp and assent to the truth. But for that to happen, the "good" of the imagination is indispensable.

Traditional models of apologetics have relied heavily on reason, proposition, logic, and an epistemology that elevates rational processes.[40] That model can be effective when communication is happening within the same frame or quadrant. But if someone cannot even imagine what it would be like to "live and move and have their being" in a different frame, no amount of reason or logic will suffice. As Seel points out, "Reason works well within frames, but it is almost useless between them. Frame shifts… happen when the imagination is able to picture reality in a new way – through a new frame.[41] What's needed is an approach that enters the immanent frame and helps its inhabitants

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[39] Justin Ariel Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); Davison, *Imaginative Apologetics*; Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (Yale University Press, 2021); Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019); Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016); Ordway, *Apologetics*.

[40] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 5–6; Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 20–22.

[41] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 9.

glimpse a new vision of Christian faith previously inaccessible, not because they lacked the intellectual capacity to understand it but because they found it incomprehensible.[42]

This challenge is compounded by the closed immanent frame that begins with the assumption that there are no other viable frames, that one's own frame isn't a frame at all, but just the way things are, and that any other interpretation of reality is intellectually dishonest, cowardly, or wishful thinking. There is a connection here between meaning and desire. People cannot desire what they do not understand, and they cannot understand what they cannot imagine and assign meaning to. To awaken the imagination is to awaken desire and is the challenge and the task of imaginative apologetics.[43]

Problem and Purpose Statements

Educating and equipping people to engage the imaginations of others and themselves naturally and often also teaches them to initiate adaptive changes day to day. Imaginative apologetic encounters can unfold in homes, coffee shops, bars, barber shops, nail salons, or gyms. While the body of literature dealing with imaginative apologetics has been growing over the past several years, little of it deals directly with the homiletical aspect of the challenge. The lack of specific resources for engaging the imagination during sermons represents a significant gap. The following study seeks to address this gap.

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[42] The story of British missionary Lesslie Newbigin's return to a secularized England in 1974 after 40 years in India is a paradigmatic example of this challenge. See Tim Stafford, "God's Missionary To Us, Part 1," *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1996.

[43] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 66; Ordway, *Apologetics*, 23.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What are some practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame?

2. How do preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts?

3. How do preachers describe the challenges they encounter in helping people in the immanent frame make sense of the gospel?

4. How do preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

Significance of the Study

This study has several benefits. First, it can help preachers better understand the imaginative challenge in preaching to those in the immanent frame. Second, it can equip preachers with concrete ideas, principles, frameworks, and best practices for engaging the imagination of those in the immanent frame. Third, it can help preachers assess how effective their preaching is at facilitating a frame shift among those in the immanent frame. Fourth, hearing preachers effectively engage the imagination during sermons can help Christians learn how to do the same in their own conversations and encounters with

friends, neighbors, family-members, and co-workers. These conversational skills, in turn, could help them bridge conversations to the gospel. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the findings could inform many preachers so that their ministries eventually help millions of spiritually curious or uncurious immanent framers experience the fulfillment of longings of which they may only be dimly aware.

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Social imaginary – A pre-theoretical way of imagining reality, society, and the good life primarily carried in stories and images.

Closed frame(r) – A social imaginary that privileges reason and logic, prioritizes risk-free epistemological certainty, and rejects the possibility of any other valid interpretations of reality; someone inhabiting that frame.

Open frame(r) – A social imaginary that values dialog between different belief systems, recognizes the elusiveness of epistemological certainty, and acknowledges the potential viability of alternate interpretations of reality; someone inhabiting that frame.

Immanent frame(r) – A social imaginary that frames reality entirely within the natural order and envisions human flourishing as occurring within this world only; someone inhabiting that frame.

Transcendent frame(r) – A social imaginary that embraces the reality of transcendence and envisions human flourishing beyond this world; someone inhabiting that frame.

Frame shift – A movement from one social imaginary frame to another, especially from closed to open, or immanent to transcendent.

Imagination – The human faculty that synthesizes concrete, sensory data into images and assigns meaning to them, upon which reason is then able to act.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. The literature review begins with a theology of the imagination, as discussed by key theologians and scholars. Then, two particularly relevant areas of literature provide a foundation for the qualitative research. These areas focus on the experience of the immanent frame and imaginative apologetics.

A Theology of the Imagination

What does the Bible say about the imagination? What are its various components? How have theologians conceived of it throughout history, and what are the salient aspects that affect human experience and knowing, especially the knowledge of God? This section will explore these questions.

Lexical Foundation of the Imagination

The English word "imagination" has no direct cognate in Hebrew or Greek, as does, for example, the word "heart" (Hebrew: *leb*; Greek: *kardia*). Various English versions of the Bible use the word "imagination" to render a spectrum of Hebrew and Greek words, but they are not consistent. Theologian Alison Searle notes that translations reflect the way imagination was being used at that time in history.[44] Furthermore, English

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[44] Alison Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart: Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 32.

translations have usually referred to imagination in a negative sense, especially the King James Version.[45]

In Hebrew, three words are rendered "imagination," and the words themselves are not inherently negative. The first, and most common, is *yester*, and it describes God's creation of humans and animals.[46] Irish philosopher Richard Kearney comments, "It is of no little consequence that this word derives from the same root… as the terms for 'creation' (*yetsirah*), 'creator' (*yotser*), and 'create' (*yatsar*)."[47] But when describing the activity of people, it is used negatively. The KJV translates Genesis 6:5: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination (*yetser*) of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

The KJV translates other Hebrew words similarly. One is *machashabah*, which means "thought, device, or invention." In Exodus 31:4, it refers positively to the artistic designs in the tabernacle, but in Proverbs 6:18, it refers negatively to the wicked plans of the heart. Another word is *shriyruwth*, which means "firmness or stubbornness,"[48] and is used to describe humans.

A survey of the New Testament yields similar results. Again, three words are translated "imagination." *Dianoia* is often translated as "mind," and the reference is frequently positive, as in Matthew 22:37: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (*dianoia*)." But in Luke 1:51

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[45] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 98.

[46] Genesis 2:7,8,19.

[47] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2002), 39.

[48] Deuteronomy 29:19. Jeremiah 31:17.

(KJV), it is translated negatively, "He hath scattered the proud in the imagination (*dianoia*) of their hearts." Other Greek words translated negatively for "imagination" are *dialogismos* and *logismos*.[49]

In spite of the consistently negative use of "imagination" in older translations such as the KJV and RSV, scholars point out that the original Hebrew or Greek words themselves are not necessarily negative. Evoking theologian Albert Wolter's distinction between good creational structure and the sinful direction in which humans distort creational goods, theologian and apologist Justin Ariel Bailey writes that the "biblical authors are not objecting to the created structure of the imagination… but only to its fallen direction." Thus, far from being a negative feature, the imagination is part of God's good creational design of humanity and a "faculty to be reckoned with!"[50]

With that in mind, several theologians have focused on the connection between the imagination and the biblical concept of the heart, which, rather than denoting only one human faculty, comprises "such things as personality and the intellect, memory, emotions, desires and will."[51] Theologian Garrett Green observes that in the various uses of the word "imagination," it often describes a sinful tendency of the heart, as in Luke 1:51 or Acts 17:29. But the heart is also the locus of potential good, as in Matthew 5:8. The frequent pairing of the imagination with the heart, either for good or sin, leads Green

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[49] Romans 1:21 and 2 Corinthians 10:5 respectively. Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 98; John McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1987), 5.

[50] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 99; Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 49.

[51] Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 368.

to propose the heart as the biblical correlate of what he calls the "paradigmatic imagination."[52]

While affirming the strong connection between the heart and the imagination, other theologians do not venture as far as Green. To preserve the richness of both concepts, Bailey warns that identifying the two so closely "runs the danger of losing the surplus of the meaning of 'heart' in the associated freight of 'imagination.'"[53] Likewise, Searle remarks on the "richly suggestive semantic field" of the biblical heart and urges the necessity of a "more holistic engagement with biblical teaching concerning human nature."[54] To equate the imagination with the heart is a failure to appreciate it as "one significant, inextricable part of the complex that makes up our humanity in biblical perspective." Instead, she cites Ephesians 1:18 and suggests that the imagination functions as "the eyes of the heart."[55]

To summarize, the lexical foundation of the imagination provides a range of words that has been variously translated over the centuries. While narrowing the conceptual scope to a navigable field, the predominantly negative use often reflects the theological and philosophical tendencies of the translators and their historical milieu. This bias limits the helpfulness of a lexicon-based understanding of the imagination. Nonetheless, the connection with the biblical heart locates the imagination within the range of divinely created human faculties that can be used for good or ill. This conclusion

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[52] Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1998), 109–10.

[53] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 99.

[54] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 35.

[55] Searle, 39.

leads to a survey of theological reflection on the imagination and its various components, which is the subject of the next section.

Theological Reflection on the Imagination

There is a long history of theological analysis of and reflection on the imagination. Augustine didn't write on the imagination per se, but he wrote on several of its components. He described the memory as the faculty able to recall and reassemble images of the past, as in, for instance, picturing the city of Carthage from a previous visit. The memory is also able to assemble images based on the reports of others into a picture of something he has never seen, such as the city of Alexandria.[56] Augustine also argued that the Trinity is reflected in image-bearing humanity by means of three faculties that form a kind of inner trinity: memory, understanding, and will. God's created order is a visible "mirror," and when image-bearers gaze upon it, the "eternal and unchanging nature can be recalled, beheld and desired – it is recalled by the memory, beheld by intelligence, embraced by love."[57] Memory supplies the images, understanding contemplates, and the will embraces in love. This description is similar to the epistemology Michael Ward observes in C.S. Lewis.[58]

Thomas Aquinas conceived of the imagination as the power of the soul to take the various data provided by the empirical senses and to retain and recall them. For all animals, the imagination acts in concert with the other inner senses, such as sensation,

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[56] Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 250.

[57] Augustine, 426.

[58] Ward, "The Good Serves."

evaluation, and memory, all of which "present the animal not with a picture to look at, but with a three-dimensional world to walk into, to occupy, and in which to take a stance."[59] The result is a qualitative, immersive experience. Human imagination does more, however, in that people can divide and combine sensory data into new images. In a famous illustration, Aquinas notes that one can combine gold with a mountain to form an image of a golden mountain. He is able thereby to imagine something that he has never seen.[60] As with Augustine's theology of the memory, the human imagination can separate and synthesize various sensory data.

During the Enlightenment, philosophers and scientists began to disparage the imagination as inferior to pure reason and a barrier to true knowledge.[61] The result was what theologian, scholar, and poet Malcolm Guite calls a "cultural apartheid," a division between the "objective" truth of reason, and the "subjective" truth of imagination.[62] The German philosopher Immanuel Kant contested this way of framing knowledge, asserting a role for the imagination alongside sense experience and intellectual understanding.[63] Nonetheless, while he argued for the existence of spiritual reality and reserved a role for the imagination in empirical knowledge, he claimed it could never help humans arrive at a knowledge of God. Kant believed spiritual realities were inaccessible to human

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[59] Timothy McDermott, *How to Read Aquinas* (London: Granta Books, 2007), 24.

[60] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947), 395.

[61] Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 3–4; Alison Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy, and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 32.

[62] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 4.

[63] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1901).

perception.[64] This view contrasts with Augustine's concept of the memory as a window on the divine, creating what literary scholar Alison Milbank terms a "tragic situation" in which "we are cut off… from the noumenal spiritual world."[65]

Into this intellectual milieu stepped Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Along with fellow poet William Wordsworth, he founded the English Romantic movement toward the end of the eighteenth century. He was also a Christian theologian, especially regarding the imagination. In his *Biographia Literaria,* two passages reveal Coleridge's theology of the imagination.

In the first passage, Coleridge divides the imagination into two modes or manifestations: the primary and secondary. The primary imagination is "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception… a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[66] There are two things to note in this definition. First, Coleridge rejects the materialistic view of the universe and human knowledge of his day, as described by Descartes and Newton. They saw the mind as "the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms in a mechanical universe."[67] Coleridge countered that imagination is not merely a passive faculty for receiving and processing sensory data, but an active faculty with creative power and agency.

Second, human imagination is a "repetition" of God's creative imagination. There is a cosmos outside of the human mind – God's created order – and not only is the human

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[64] Kant; Dermot A. Lane, "Imagination and Theology: The Status Quaestionis," *Louvain Studies* 34, no. 2–3 (2009): 119–45.

[65] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination," 32.

[66] Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Company, 1834), 172.

[67] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 167.

mind capable of perceiving that order, but it also perceives and corresponds to the God beyond that order, because the mind is part of the image of God in human beings. The primary imagination, therefore, is a power for perceiving and shaping sensory data, enabling humans "so to read God's works as to glimpse through them the mind of their Maker."[68] It has a "profoundly metaphysical function" of reflecting and participating in God's creative imagination.[69] In its reflection of the image of God and its power to perceive God, Coleridge's primary imagination is an affirmation and an expansion of Augustine's view of the memory.

From the primary imagination, Coleridge moves on to describe the secondary imagination as "an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will… It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create."[70] The secondary imagination is often called the poetic or artistic imagination. As an echo – "identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree" – of the primary imagination, the poet or artist brings forth the deeper patterns and meanings formed by the primary imagination and, in cooperation with the conscious will, creates a new world: a story, painting, poem, song, and so on. When done well this creation can become a vessel for perceiving truth.[71]

In the other passage, Coleridge reflects on his and Wordsworth's experience in writing *Lyrical Ballads*. Guite observes two key ideas.[72] One idea was to "transfer from

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[68] Guite, 169.

[69] Robin Stockitt, *Imagination and the Playfulness of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 64.

[70] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 172.

[71] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 176.

[72] Guite, 163–64.

our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure… that willing suspension of disbelief… which constitutes poetic faith."[73] The characters he created, such as the Ancient Mariner, did not exist in reality. He called them "shadows of imagination." But these stories and images were the means by which "our inward nature" – eternal truths, patterns, and meanings that had been forgotten or suppressed – might come awake and find renewed expression in human consciousness. Guite describes "times when imaginary stories – parables, myths and legends, novels, and films have suddenly awoken our minds to important truths we had missed or had been denying."[74] The story or poem sparks and empowers the perception of divine truths hidden within.

Another important idea appears later in the same passage. Through the "lethargy of custom," humans have hidden the inherent goodness within God's created things with a "film of familiarity" and, through "selfish solicitude," have reduced them to tools for selfish ends. The goal of poetry is "awakening the mind's attention" to this deadening film, enabling humans to see "the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure."[75] This awakening of the mind's attention is what Guite refers to as "lifting the veil… opening our eyes and ears and, most of all our hearts" to the inexhaustible wonders of creation and "also to the one through whom all these things were made and in whom they hold together."[76]

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[73] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 174.

[74] Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books, 2021), 12.

[75] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 175.

[76] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 13.

Coleridge's contribution to the theology of imagination is significant. With Augustine, he affirms the idea of the imagination as a faculty that reflects the image of God in humanity, perceiving and shaping the deeper realms of creation and the divine being of God (the "I AM"). Contesting Enlightenment philosophy, he describes the imagination as the power, when used aright, to take the perceived realities of God's creation and craft something – a poem, a story, a painting, a song – that could re-present spiritual reality so that others are able to perceive it themselves.[77] Especially in his Enlightenment context, when religious skepticism was more widely experienced and openly expressed, these artistic re-presentations can awaken spiritual perception precisely because they are not clothed in religious concepts or symbols. Through their artistic power, they bypass the defense systems of conscious skepticism, creating a new world into which the skeptic could enter and experience spiritual reality without prejudice or resistance. His *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a paradigmatic case in point.[78]

Another major theologian of the imagination during the nineteenth century is the poet, fantasy writer, and minister George MacDonald. He addresses the imagination explicitly in two essays from a collection published in 1893 called *A Dish of Orts*.[79] In "The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture," he defines the imagination as "that faculty which gives form to thought – not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of

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[77] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 167–68.

[78] Malcolm Guite imaginatively paraphrases Coleridge's poetic project thus: "Let me tell you the story, and through the story I'll tell you something you can hear in no other way." Malcolm Guite, *Mariner: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Voyage of Faith*, video, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Bj5YwVI2ic.

[79] George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (London: Sampson Low Marston & Company, 1893).

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being uttered in shape or in sound, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold."[80]

While this is a simple definition, his theology of the imagination is anything but simple

and extends throughout his writings. Surveying his treatment of the subject, MacDonald

scholars highlight several statements.

First, and perhaps most importantly, MacDonald roots everything he said about

the imagination in the triune nature of God. Scholar Kerry Dearborn and theologian

Robin Stockitt point out that his Celtic Christian heritage provided a profoundly

Trinitarian foundation.[81] "The secret of the whole story of humanity is the love between

the Father and the Son. This is at the root of it all. Upon the love between the Son and the

Father hangs the whole universe."[82] For MacDonald, the trinitarian relations express

themselves especially in the creative, overflowing love between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Second, the trinitarian nature of God expresses itself in the act of creation as "the

outflow of divine love which is at the heart of triune being."[83] This divine creativity

forms the basis of one of MacDonald's boldest and most innovative claims: that the

imagination is first and foremost an attribute of God.[84] MacDonald writes, "The

imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God."[85] In another essay,

MacDonald states, "The love of God is the creating and redeeming, the forming and

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[80] MacDonald, 2.

[81] Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 67; Stockitt, *Imagination*, 177.

[82] George MacDonald, *Proving the Unseen* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 67.

[83] Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 67.

[84] Dearborn, 67; McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination*, 14; Stockitt, *Imagination*, 177.

[85] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 2.

satisfying power of the universe."[86] Dearborn, theologian John McIntyre, and Stockitt stress the impact of these essays.[87] What Coleridge hints at, MacDonald proclaims openly: imagination is one of the central attributes of God.

Third, and as a result, MacDonald locates the image of God in humanity not primarily in rationality, sociability, volition, or moral character, but in the imagination.[88] Human imagination can be understood only if "we first succeed in regarding aright the imagination of God, in which the imagination of man lives and moves and has its being."[89] Augustine makes this connection centuries earlier, but MacDonald explicitly associates the image of God with the imagination and gives it unprecedented prominence.

Fourth, MacDonald nonetheless makes a careful distinction between the imagination of God and human imagination.[90] "We must not forget, however, that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes… all that is God's from all that is man's."[91] This distinction leads MacDonald to reserve the act of creation for God alone. Humans can make nothing without using the forms already created by God himself. He illustrates the point by quoting *Adonais* ("Life, like a dome of many coloured glass…"), and commenting: "This is a new embodiment, certainly… but has Shelley created this figure or only put together its parts according to the harmony of

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[86] MacDonald, 213.

[87] Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 67; McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination*, 14; Stockitt, *Imagination*, 178.

[88] Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 68; McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination*, 14; Stockitt, *Imagination*, 178.

[89] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 2.

[90] McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination*, 13; Stockitt, *Imagination*, 178.

[91] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 2.

truths already embodied in each of the parts?"[92] According to MacDonald, human creativity derives from God's creativity. It can work with only what God has already made. Here, Stockitt observes a difference between MacDonald and Coleridge. Although MacDonald was heavily influenced by Coleridge, he emphasizes the difference between divine and human creativity, while Coleridge puts greater emphasis on "the truly creative power that humanity possesses as a gift from God."[93]

Fifth, in spite of its derivative nature, MacDonald still assigns creative power to the human imagination. "Man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own… for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms – which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation."[94] But these little worlds must always abide by the moral laws of God's real world. MacDonald scholar Gisela H. Kreglinger notes, "For MacDonald the fairy tale imaginatively and creatively recasts and re-envisions the old truths of the gospel for new generations. This was his primary incentive for writing them."[95] The creative imagination serves its divinely created purpose only when it points back to its creator.

Moving into the twentieth century, Oxford philologist and acclaimed fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien expands significantly on the theological ideas of Coleridge and MacDonald. In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien offers a simple definition of the imagination: "the faculty of conceiving… images." Then he elaborates on the creative, or

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[92] MacDonald, 6.

[93] Stockitt, *Imagination*, 178–79.

[94] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 314.

[95] Gisela H Kreglinger, "Storied Revelations: The Influence of George MacDonald upon J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis," *Sewanee Theological Review* 57, no. 3 (2014): 303–4.

what he calls the "sub-creative," aspect of the imagination, the highest form of which he names Fantasy.[96]

To understand Tolkien's "theology of Fantasy," it is necessary to clarify the distinction between what he calls the Primary World and Primary Belief, and Secondary Worlds with their attendant Secondary Belief. The Primary World is the "real" world as created by God. Primary Belief is the appropriate response to that world as the locus of reality. In fairy stories or fantasies, a story-maker engages in "sub-creation," the construction of a Secondary World, "which your mind can enter." When done well, which is an important distinction for Tolkien, a Secondary World will achieve "the inner consistency of reality" and foster Secondary Belief: an experience of that world as true and real while one is in it. Engaging Coleridge, Tolkien argues that Secondary Belief is something more than the "willing suspension of disbelief" so famously articulated by Coleridge. In a well-created Secondary World, "You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken." The Secondary World is so real that no suspension of disbelief is necessary.[97] To this sub-creative art, Tolkien gives the name Fantasy.[98]

According to Tolkien, Fantasy generates what he calls Recovery.[99] Recovery is a "regaining of a clear view… I do not say 'seeing things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say, 'seeing things as we are (or were)

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[96] John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 2002), 122–23.

[97] Tolkien, 117.

[98] Tolkien, 123.

[99] Tolkien, 128–30.

meant to see them.'" To explain, Tolkien engages again with Coleridge, specifically his idea that the purpose of poetry is to "awaken the mind's attention" by removing the "film of familiarity" in place because of "selfish solicitude." Echoing Coleridge's language, Tolkien champions this vision as one of the main purposes of Fantasy. "We need… to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness."[100] Humans cannot see or love God's reality because they are blinded by the habitual impulse to instrumentalize creation for their own self-centered ends. For Tolkien, well-crafted sub-creative art can "recover" a true vision of creation and hopefully a true relationship with their creator. Additionally, while prose and poetry can "help in this release," Tolkien believed that Fantasy was best suited for this endeavor.[101]

While differing with Coleridge on the nature of belief inside the Secondary World and which sub-creative art best serves the purpose of Recovery, Tolkien nonetheless agrees with Coleridge and MacDonald on several points. First, he sees the capacity for Fantasy as a reflection of the image of God in humanity. "We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[102] Second, similar to Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination as one of degree rather than kind, Tolkien views Fantasy as a

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[100] Tolkien, 129.

[101] Tolkien, 130; David Russell Mosley, "Toward a Theology of the Imagination with S.T. Coleridge, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien," *Religions* 11, no. 5 (2020): 1–9.

[102] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 128.

"difference of degree in Imagination, not a difference in kind."[103] For Tolkien, Fantasy is still an imaginative activity. Third, Coleridge, MacDonald, and Tolkien esteem the sub-creative aspect of the imagination because it can take the laws, forms, and truths given by God and form something new out of them. Fourth, all three emphasize the sub-creative imagination's power to "awaken the mind's attention" (Coleridge), to "wake things up" (MacDonald),[104] or to engender Recovery (Tolkien). The imagination is a God-reflecting human faculty able to perceive and discover meaning in God's creation and construct new inventions to awaken imaginations dulled by disuse.

One last and especially notable aspect of Tolkien's theology of the imagination is his focus on "eucatastrophe," the unexpected "turn" in fairy tales that leads to a joy made deeper because of the pain and loss endured ("Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief"). For Tolkien, the significance of the eucatastrophe in the Secondary World is its power to become "evangelium," a pointer to how the death and resurrection of Jesus is the true and ultimate eucatastrophe in the Primary World.[105] The literature section on imaginative apologetics will explore this more fully. For now, it is important to note that Tolkien sees this "evangelistic" aspect as constitutive of the sub-creative imagination's nature and capacity. Thus, while there is continuity with Coleridge and MacDonald, Tolkien explicates the concept further.

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[103] Tolkien, 123; Yannick Imbert, "Covenantal Faërie: A Reformed Evaluation of Tolkien's Theory of Fantasy," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 119–41.

[104] MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 319.

[105] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 135–38.

Throughout the twentieth century, several philosophers and theologians discussed the imagination.[106] At a popular level, however, the imagination suffered from a lack of attention and regard, especially among Protestant Evangelicals. Inklings scholar Clyde Kilby lamented in 1967 what he called "the decline and fall of the Christian imagination."[107] Continuing into the twenty-first century, theologian Kevin Vanhoozer speaks of the "malnourished imaginations" of many churches, observing, "If faith's influence is waning, then it is largely because of a failure of the evangelical imagination."[108] Nonetheless, a number of modern theologians are engaging in substantive reflection on the imagination, resulting in something of a renaissance. The following sub-section will focus on a few theologians of the imagination in the twenty-first century.

Theological Reflection on the Imagination in the Twenty-first Century

Because of the work of theologians over the past several centuries, three basic categories for imagination have emerged: its origin, nature, and potential. Therefore, a survey of modern theological reflection will address each in that order.

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[106] Notable figures include literary critic Owen Barfield, philosopher Paul Ricoeur, academic Clyde Kilby, philosopher Mary Warnock, philosopher Richard Kearney, and theologian Jeremy Begbie. The contribution of C.S. Lewis is pivotal and will feature prominently in the literature section on imaginative apologetics.

[107] Clyde Kilby, *The Arts and the Christian Imagination: Essays on Art, Literature, and Aesthetics*, ed. William Dryness and Keith Call (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017), 229.

[108] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Growing Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 109.

The Origin of the Imagination

Modern theologians affirm the imagination as a constitutive feature of humanity's creation in the image of God. Following Coleridge, Guite argues, "Our imagination is part of the *Imago Dei* in us."[109] Searle references the creation account in Genesis and points out that the immediate context is God's creative activity, so when Genesis says that human beings are created in the image of God, "it is reasonable to assume that this forms a part of the likeness."[110] Since God is a creator, to be made in his image is to be a kind of creator. Thus, when she summarizes her findings on the imagination, Searle begins by asserting, "Imagination is a function characteristic of all human beings due to their creation in the image of God."[111]

Bailey likewise locates the origin of the imagination in the image of God. "Any discussion of the divine image ought to include the imaginative capacity."[112] He names George MacDonald as a foundational voice for this doctrine and cites McIntyre's seminal study of MacDonald by highlighting two of McIntyre's key insights. The imagination is a core attribute of God, and the imagination, "rather than rationality, morality, or relationality," is "central to the divine image."[113] From Augustine to Coleridge, MacDonald, Tolkien, and into the modern era, theologians speak of the imagination as having its origin in the image of God.

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[109] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 12 (emphasis in original).

[110] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 51.

[111] Searle, 57.

[112] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 101.

[113] Bailey, 100.

The Nature of the Imagination

One of the core aspects of the imagination is its synthetic power. It takes various sensory data, synthesizes it into a larger whole, and assigns meaning to it. Vanhoozer articulates this concisely, writing, "Analytic reason takes things apart; the synthetic imagination puts things together. Think of the imagination as a 'formative' power: the ability to create or perceive meaningful wholes and coherent forms."[114] Guite likewise speaks of "the forming and perceiving power of imagination" as that "which allows us to grasp the whole, the meaning, the pattern in what we perceive."[115] Bailey uses different language but proposes a similar view of the imagination's synthetic power. "It is precisely through this… imaginative engagement with the world that we integrate experience, belief, and desire to make meaning of our lives."[116] Synthesizing, forming, and integrating are roughly synonymous ways of describing the same function. Furthermore, each of these theologians sees meaning-making as the purpose of this synthesizing activity.

Theologians also note that the imagination is an integrative faculty, functioning in concert with the mind and the will, rather than autonomously. As seen above, Searle rejects equating the imagination with the biblical heart, but she does conceive of the imagination as acting along with the heart, what Paul refers to in Ephesians 1:18 as "the eyes of the heart," a factor so significant for her that it forms the title of her book.[117] The

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[114] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 24.

[115] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 13.

[116] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 114.

[117] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 39.

integrative nature of the imagination is equally important for Vanhoozer. Citing First Chronicles 29:18, which speaks of the "thoughts" of the heart, and Ephesians 1:18, he suggests a close connection between thinking and imagining. "Taking every thought captive involves capturing the imagination… this is why pastors are eye doctors."[118] On this point, Vanhoozer disagrees with Smith, who sees humans as "fundamentally non-cognitive, affective creatures."[119] While he emphasizes their agreement on the power of a picture to shape humans and their vision of human flourishing, Vanhoozer maintains, "This picture, like the imagination itself, is fundamentally cognitive."[120]

Another commonly observed aspect of the imagination is its verbal dimension. Although the imagination is about "conceiving images," or "giving form to thought," that work is visual and verbal. Searle emphasizes that "metaphor is crucial to understanding how the imagination functions."[121] Guite's books focus on literature, and especially poetry, as a primary means of engaging the imagination.[122] Vanhoozer cites Genesis 1 and Jesus' parables, arguing that "the imagination is as verbal as it is visual."[123] Like Searle, he accords special prominence to metaphor.[124]

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[118] Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 108.

[119] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53.

[120] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 25.

[121] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 48.

[122] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*; Guite, *Lifting the Veil*.

[123] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 25–26.

[124] Vanhoozer, 28.

The Potential of the Imagination

A common caveat among theologians is the reality that the imagination, like every other human capacity, is fallen, and can be used for sinful purposes as well as good.[125] Nonetheless, there are greater possibilities inherent in all human imagination, especially for the imaginations of Christians.

First, the imagination makes morality possible. While the full moral flourishing of humanity is possible only in recovering what he calls the "biblical imagination," Vanhoozer acknowledges that even for those who do not profess Christianity, "it is useful to employ the imagination… to cultivate moral sympathy."[126] Guite devotes a chapter to the power of Jesus' parables to activate the moral imagination.[127] Bailey uses a thought experiment. Humans can imagine a world in which "all baby girls are killed at birth." But they "feel incredible resistance" to the possibility of a world in which it feels virtuous to kill them. He summarizes, "While the human imagination can resist and rebel, it can never function fully outside of created structures, since those limits make possible our making sense of the world."[128] Humans can run from moral norms but never fully escape them, in large measure because their imagination will not let them.

Second, the imagination plays a crucial role in faith. Guite consistently points to the imagination – especially what he calls the "poetic imagination" – as the essential link for apprehending and comprehending God's truth revealed in the incarnation, passion,

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[125] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 106–8; Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 12–13; Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 54; Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 37.

[126] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 34.

[127] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 53–78.

[128] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 105–7.

and resurrection of Jesus.[129] Searle cites McIntyre and summarizes, "It is the synthesizing power of the imagination that enables the emotive, intellectual, and volitional aspects of faith to be meaningfully incorporated from a human perspective."[130] The imagination gathers up the host of human faculties and focuses them on God in faith.

Vanhoozer also emphasizes the importance of imagination for faith. It is "a way of looking at things together, a *seeing as* in the mind's (and heart's) eye."[131] As articulated in Hebrews 11:1, faith is a way of seeing how unseen things "fit together in Christ." But it is incapable of doing this "apart from the imagination." This conviction leads to two key claims for Vanhoozer. First, because of its meaning-making capacity, only the imagination "enables us to 'see' God and the kingdom of God at work in the world." Second, it is "faith that enables this imagination."[132] While the imagination makes meaning and comprehension possible, only the gift of faith can enable the imagination truly to see and respond to God. The potential is there, but it requires the supernatural work of God in the human heart and soul.

Third, the redeemed imagination can reveal meaning to help others comprehend Christian truth. The literature review section on imaginative apologetics will examine this in greater detail. Here it is sufficient to note the breadth of theological support for this potential. Guite's books defend this endeavor,[133] and Searle examines the literary aspects

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[129] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*.

[130] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*, 49.

[131] Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 26 (emphasis in original).

[132] Vanhoozer, 26–27.

[133] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*; Guite, *Lifting the Veil*.

of imagination.[134] Bailey explores this potential by examining the writings of George MacDonald and Marilynne Robinson.[135] All three devote significant space to establishing a theological foundation, as this literature section has sought to demonstrate.

Theology of the Imagination: Summary

This section began with a lexical study of the biblical usage of the word, "imagination." This analysis presents a challenge, as "imagination" has no Hebrew or Greek cognate, and the predominantly negative translations carry implicit historical and cultural biases against the imagination. Nonetheless, the lexical study provides some guiding parameters.

Theological reflection on the imagination throughout history reveals several key takeaways on its origin, nature, and potential. Human imagination is a reflection of the image of God in humanity. It is a synthesizing faculty that takes various sensory data and integrates them together to picture reality as a whole and make meaning out of it. It is both visual and verbal and therefore functions cognitively as well as affectively. As part of the biblical heart, it works in concert with other human faculties such as the mind and the will. It is a crucial faculty for moral knowledge and plays a pivotal role in the operation of faith. Moreover, it has the capacity for creative works of art – paintings, sculpture, poetry, literature, music – that hold the potential to awaken the imagination and faith of others.

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[134] Searle, *Eyes of Your Heart*.

[135] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*.

The survey also reveals a few distinctives. First, many theologians of the imagination interact deeply and regularly with secular philosophy, challenging it in places and agreeing with it in others. It is uncommon to see that level of engagement with secular thought among contemporary evangelical theologians. Second, many of the most prominent theologians of the imagination are also artists, writers, and poets. Third, even those theologians and philosophers who are not themselves artists make note of the inherently creative nature of the imagination and affirm its potential for assisting others toward faith. One such philosopher is Charles Taylor, who devotes the last section of his book *A Secular Age* to a deeper exploration of this phenomenon. The next literature section will examine his work in greater detail.

The Experience of the Immanent Frame

Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* has changed how many academics view what it means to live in a secular society. Philosophers, sociologists, theologians, and other scholars have engaged his work in subsequent publications, across a broad spectrum of disciplines.[136] This literature section will examine one of his most prominent concepts: the immanent frame. As noted in chapter one, the immanent frame constitutes the dominant social imaginary in the modern West. It forms the basis for how people make sense of every aspect of their lives and society, including faith and spirituality. To communicate the Christian faith, preachers in the modern West must understand the lived

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[136] Carlos D. Colorado and Justin D. Klassen, eds., *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014); Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig J. Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Collin Hansen, ed., *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017); Smith, *How (Not)*.

experience of their audience. What is the immanent frame? What are different ways of inhabiting it? What are the implications for preaching? This literature section will explore these questions.

What is the Immanent Frame?

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor answers the question, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[137] *A Secular Age* traces the historical forces – theological, philosophical, cultural, ethical, political, social, and economic – leading to this cultural moment and the advent of the immanent frame and its main components.

The Immanent Frame as a Social Imaginary

The immanent frame is a modern manifestation of what Taylor calls a social imaginary. Social imaginaries have existed in every society throughout history, and so Taylor speaks of pre-modern imaginaries as well as modern ones.[138] However, social imaginaries are different from worldviews or social theories, which tend to be more cognitive and theoretical. Social imaginaries are not focused on the "intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality," but rather "the ways in which they imagine their social existence." Therefore, they are "not expressed in theoretical terms" but are "carried in images, stories, legends, etc."[139] For Taylor, the imagination is

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[137] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

[138] Taylor, 163.

[139] Taylor, 171–72.

the meaning-making capacity described in the previous literature section because it provides the "background" picture that "makes sense" of the world and its events.[140] Smith affirms this pre-cognitive aspect, emphasizing that a social imaginary "is not how we *think* about the world, but how we *imagine* the world before we ever think about it."[141] Likewise, in their introduction to a collection of essays on Taylor's work, scholars Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun affirm that it is "only against the background assumption" of a social imaginary that "many of our norms and practices make sense."[142]

Social imaginaries operate at a widespread social level, rather than being "the possession of a small minority" of academic elites, so, because of all this, social imaginaries form the basis of common social practices and give them a "widely shared sense of legitimacy."[143] A social imaginary is a pre-theoretical, collective way of picturing and making sense of the world, especially the norms, practices, and expectations of social life. Understanding the immanent frame as a social imaginary is critical because it forms the meaning-making, narrative-driven nature of human cultures, including the modern West.[144]

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[140] Charles Taylor, "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 311.

[141] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 66 (emphasis in original).

[142] Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., "Editors' Introduction," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 19.

[143] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

[144] Sociologist Christian Smith observes the tendency of many in the modern West to dismiss narratives and stories as truth-bearing sources, preferring instead to locate truth in "modern, scientific information, facts, and knowledge." His research, however, suggests the opposite. "We moderns… not only continue to be animals who make stories but also animals who are *made by* our stories." See Christian Smith, *Moral,*

Human Flourishing and the Pursuit of Fullness

The immanent frame is a unique social imaginary, and Taylor describes it as "the rise of a society in which for the first time in human history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option… a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing." By human flourishing, Taylor means a flourishing oriented entirely within the natural world – the "immanent" – as opposed to any goals or goods for humanity beyond the natural world, or the "transcendent."[145] True human flourishing necessarily includes the pursuit of what he calls "fullness," so that, "We all see our lives… as having a certain moral/spiritual shape… in that place (activity or condition) life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be." Moreover, in the immanent frame, fullness can be accessed or experienced in different ways. It could be experienced as a sense of unity or alignment. Negatively, it could be experienced through an awareness of its absence. Or it might be a kind of "middle condition," in which the sense of exile or ennui in life is held off by a fulfilling experience of the ordinary joys of life, such as family, vocation, and contributing to the common good of humanity.[146]

The concept of fullness can be interpreted across the spectrum of religion to atheism. This intrinsic ambiguity has generated discussion among scholars.[147] While Taylor himself acknowledges the elusiveness of a precise definition, he maintains that

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Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 64 (emphasis in original).

[145] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

[146] Taylor, 5–7.

[147] Colorado and Klassen, *Aspiring to Fullness*.

this is part of what makes fullness such a ubiquitous and therefore crucial idea. Although

many of his interlocuters accuse him of interpreting fullness only in terms of religious

experience, Taylor responds that a wider understanding is necessary to make sense of the

range of human experience.[148] In fact, the multiplicity of options for fullness, especially

those framed within the natural world, defines the immanent frame. In a secular age,

fullness is conceived of primarily within immanence.[149]

However, the quest for fullness within the immanent frame does not mean that

people no longer believe in God. On the contrary, to live in the immanent frame is to live

in a world where "belief in God, or in the transcendent in any form, is contested; it is an

option among many; it is therefore fragile."[150] The lived experience of the immanent

frame includes the awareness, lurking in an unexamined picture of reality, that one's

beliefs are always contested, always optional, and therefore always fragile. Other scholars

agree. Christian writer Alan Noble observes, "The one truth we accept about belief in our

secular age is that there is an endless number of options, and all of them are contested.

These beliefs tend to be more 'fragile.'"[151] Theologian Andrew Root likewise notes,

"Once we had a system that presumed the reality of a personal God. But now… such

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[148] Taylor, "Afterword," 315–17.

[149] Taylor refers to the constantly expanding multiplicity of options as "the Nova Effect." See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299–300.

[150] Taylor, "Afterword," 304.

[151] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 37.

belief is contested at every corner."[152] Among Taylor's commentators, the fragilization of belief is one of the most widely recognized hallmarks of the immanent frame.[153]

The Buffered Self and the Quest for Authenticity

Especially pertinent is Taylor's profile of the inhabitant of the immanent frame: the "buffered self." The pre-modern self was "porous." In a universe enchanted by spirits, angels, and demons, the self is vulnerable to outside forces impinging upon it. For the buffered self, the idea of outside forces – "causal powers with purposive bent" – becomes unimaginable.[154] The buffered self is also marked by a sense of interiority. Instead of seeing meaning inherent in the world outside of the self, "we now conceive of ourselves as having inner depths."[155] Real meaning is located within.

This inner shift leads to an increasing individualism, which began as a greater individual commitment to God but in later centuries evolved into a commitment to authenticity. Authenticity becomes the motivating ideal and goal par excellence of modernity and has "utterly penetrated popular culture" in the last half of the twentieth century.[156] It is the idea that "each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and… it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside."[157] Authenticity, and the freedom

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[152] Andrew Root, "Faith Formation in a Secular Age," *Word & World* 37, no. 2 (2017): 130.

[153] Smith, *How (Not)*, 21–23; Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, "Editors' Introduction," 23.

[154] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 539.

[155] Taylor, 539–40.

[156] Taylor, 299.

[157] Taylor, 475.

necessary to pursue it, is one of the most prominent aspects of the buffered self. It is not

just a goal but an overarching moral absolute that displaces all others. Taylor stresses this

aspect, writing:

> There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to
> live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this
> gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the
> point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*. This is the powerful
> moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords crucial moral importance
> to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature.[158]

First to note here is Taylor's description of authenticity as a "calling," evoking religious

language to denote the existential urgency of authenticity. Living authentically assumes a

"new importance," indicating its displacement of other modes of fullness for the majority

of society.[159] Also prominent is the "moral importance" assigned to authenticity.

Becoming an authentic self is a moral duty in the immanent frame.

The moral ideal of authenticity is another widely recognized characteristic of the

immanent frame among Taylor's commentators. Bailey describes it as a "moral

imperative."[160] Noble asserts that "the quest for authenticity has become a central

narrative of the contemporary West."[161] Root writes that in the modern West, "the job of

the truly authentic person is to subtract all concepts that are blocking the path to

authenticity."[162] Smith complements these observations by pointing out that in a social

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[158] Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003), 28–29 (emphasis in original).

[159] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

[160] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 45.

[161] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 69.

[162] Root, "Faith Formation," 132.

imaginary "crystallized in terms of *authenticity*," the "primary – yea, only – value in such a world is *choice*."[163] Authenticity and freedom coalesce to form a potent moral ideal in the imaginary of the immanent frame.[164]

Authenticity comes through assuming an "instrumental stance" toward the natural world. Since meaning is no longer inherent in creation but in the self, the natural world is seen as a means or an instrument toward human flourishing. All things – science, technology, social and political orders of "mutual benefit," religion and spirituality, material creation itself – help individuals becomes authentic selves, all of which takes place against the "background idea" of a natural or "immanent" order, as opposed to a supernatural or "transcendent" one.[165]

The immanent frame, therefore, is a social imaginary inhabited by buffered selves pursuing a fullness framed within immanence and oriented toward the one goal that alone can claim the status of an absolute: authenticity. Even for religious believers, the upshot is a default approach that sees all things, including God, as so many consumer options whose real value is weighed by whether they "work" for them in the curation of their authentic identity. This consumer-oriented stance has significant implications for

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[163] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 85 (emphasis in original).

[164] Taylor notes: "The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance… this injunction stands alone where it used to be surrounded and contained by others." See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 484.

[165] Taylor, 542. Regarding this instrumental stance, Malcom Guite points out Samuel Taylor Coleridge's contrast between an instrumental view of the cosmos and the older "sacral" view in Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, first published in 1798. "It reflects the shift at the birth of modernism, from the living, sacral view of the cosmos… to the modern mechanistic, instrumental view of nature in which matter is dead, inert and essentially meaningless. Coleridge was living in the midst of this shift and he… turned to resist it with every effort of his being." See Malcolm Guite, *Mariner: A Theological Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 251.

religious experience and faith formation. Root observes that God becomes a "concept." Thus:

> If the concept of God helps you be authentically you, then it is worth keeping. But if the concept makes you feel unhappy, or guilty – or worse, restricted – you then abandon the concept for the sake of your own authentic journey.[166]

Three points are salient here. First, in the immanent frame, the real goal is authenticity. The decision about whether God is "worth keeping" is determined by whether God "helps" someone toward this goal. Second, subjective feelings such as happiness, guilt, or restrictiveness, are gauges for God's usefulness. Third, if God fails to produce the desired results, he is "abandoned" for something else that will. God is a means toward the end of authenticity.

This instrumental approach to God is noted by other scholars. Noble writes that "what is truly important to us is not only or primarily our beliefs but how they affect our identity. Identity formation becomes the central concern."[167] Smith concurs, arguing that in the "Age of Authenticity" (AA), "the spiritual migrates… As a result, AA spirituality is a *quest* for the individual. Nothing is given or axiomatic anymore, so one has to 'find' one's faith."[168] With this basic understanding of the immanent frame, the next sub-section examines the different ways of inhabiting or living within this frame.

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[166] Root, "Faith Formation," 132.

[167] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 38.

[168] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 89 (emphasis in original).

Different Ways of Inhabiting the Immanent Frame

According to Taylor, "the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West."[169] Smith agrees, writing, "We now inhabit this self-sufficient immanent order, *even if we believe in transcendence*."[170] There is no escaping the immanent frame, but there are different ways of living within it. Taylor provides two main options. One is to see the immanent frame as self-contained and not allowing for anything outside of or beyond this natural world. This stance is "closed" to transcendence. The other is to remain "open" to transcendence, or at least the possibility of transcendence.[171] Furthermore, each of these two options can be held in different ways, which Taylor characterizes as either a "take" or "spin."

He introduces this distinction by noting that, whether one leans toward immanence or transcendence, everyone begins with a "take" on the issue. A take is a construal, an interpretation, "something in the nature of a hunch."[172] It is not an incontestable fact about which a person can have ironclad certainty, as with "natural science or ordinary life."[173] Hearkening back to the pre-cognitive, narrative-driven nature of a social imaginary, Taylor likens a take to what the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously called a "picture." It is "a background to our thinking… which is often largely unformulated, and to which we can frequently… imagine no

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[169] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543–44.

[170] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 93 (emphasis in original).

[171] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 544–48; Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 93.

[172] Taylor, 550.

[173] Taylor, 551.

alternative. As he [Wittgenstein] once famously put it, 'a picture held us captive.'"[174]

This "background picture" is not a set of beliefs. It is the mostly unexamined, unacknowledged framework within which the beliefs themselves are formed.[175] Many of Taylor's commentators agree with this assessment.[176]

 In Taylor's estimation, there are three ways to hold this take. Ideally, a person would stand in what he calls the "Jamesian open space," where "you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief."[177] To stand in the Jamesian open space and feel the winds is not just to acknowledge the possibility of either transcendence or immanence as ultimate, but to "feel some of the force of each opposing position."[178] Smith describes this experience: "We recognize the contestability of our *take* on things and even feel the pull and tug and cross-pressure of the alternative."[179] Canadian theologian Paul D. Janz distinguishes the Jamesian open space from a consideration of the reasonability of belief or unbelief, or an experience of "undecidability." That definition would mistakenly situate the Jamesian open space within the realms of reason and rational argument. Rather, the Jamesian open space is an existential space, "the quintessential point of *experiential* scission between two different pre-theoretical 'senses'

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[174] Taylor, 549.

[175] Taylor, 13.

[176] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 27; Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 94; Paul D. Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 39–70.

[177] Taylor, 549. Taylor is referring to a series of lectures he gave on the famous American psychologist William James and his study of religious experience. See Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Vienna Lecture Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[178] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[179] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 94 (emphasis in original).

of the world." In this space, the winds pulling in either direction are "not so much rationally adduced as pre-intentionally *felt*." It is a "supreme *vulnerability* rather than… a supreme undecidability."[180]

Taylor observes that those who can stand in the Jamesian open space are "relatively rare." More common are those who are "capable of seeing that there is another way of construing things," but who still have "great difficulty making sense of it." Finally, some are "completely captured by the picture, not even able to imagine what an alternative would look like." According to Taylor, most people are at either of these levels.[181] But it is this last state, where one is incapable of seeing their take as a take, that it is no longer a take, but "spin." Spin is "a way of avoiding entering this [Jamesian open] space, a way of convincing oneself that one's reading is obvious, compelling, allowing of no cavil or demurral."[182] Smith calls this "an overconfident 'picture' within which we can't imagine it being otherwise and thus smugly dismiss those who disagree." Rather than acknowledge their position as a take, those in this space "see their own 'closed' take as *just the way things are*."[183] Janz notes the difficulty of escaping spin by pointing out that by its very nature, "the immanent frame that we all inhabit is already virtually experienced and known as 'spun' in one direction or the other." What Taylor calls spin

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[180] Janz, "Transcendence, 'Spin,' and the Jamesian Open Space," 60 (emphases in original).

[181] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[182] Taylor, 551.

[183] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 95 (emphasis in original).

"is already always there in the background… one might say that 'spin' is already always 'spun.'"[184]

While there are many religious people whose view is spun toward openness to transcendence, one of Taylor's main projects is to contest the "spin of closure which is hegemonic in the Academy."[185] Closed spins can take many forms, but Taylor highlights a powerful one: subtraction stories. Subtraction stories explain modernity and secularity in terms of "human beings having lost or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge." A modern or secular approach to reality is understood "in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside."[186] Once humans subtract superstitious religious belief, what's "left over" is science, reason, and progress.

Taylor devotes significant attention to showing that modern secularity is not the result of subtraction but a process of addition. New beliefs, stories, and ideas had to be produced and combined in new ways for secularity to arise. Taylor tells this story throughout *A Secular Age*.[187] Other scholars concur. Smith says, "We had to *learn* how to be exclusively humanist; it is a second nature, not a first."[188] What's more, these

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[184] Janz, "Transcendence," 59.

[185] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[186] Taylor, 22.

[187] In the introduction, Taylor summarizes his project by saying, "I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices." See Taylor, 22.

[188] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 48 (emphasis in original).

additions have screened out the plausibility of transcendence. Root writes, "The doorway that once widely welcomed people into experience of divine action… has not been subtracted or removed but rather has been blocked by a pile of additions."[189] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun summarize, "Secular modernity is both more sedimented and more creative than it takes itself to be."[190] Subtraction stories manifest a closed spin, and at the same time, they are themselves the result of new ideas, stories, and beliefs that have been added to Western culture.[191]

Implications for Preaching

With a basic understanding of the immanent frame in hand, along with the different ways of inhabiting it, what are the implications for preaching? What are the issues, challenges, questions, and assumptions anyone preaching in the modern West must be prepared to address?

Recalling Figure 1 in the introduction, one challenge is posed by the closed transcendent frame, what Taylor would call an open spin. Many scholars note the church's tendency to rely on a rationalistic anthropology to downplay the imagination. For instance, Seel writes, "The American evangelical church is heavily committed to rational left-brained Enlightenment ways of thinking," resulting in what he calls "an underdeveloped imagination." The church is ill-equipped, therefore, to communicate to

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[189] Root, "Faith Formation," 134.

[190] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, "Editors' Introduction," 24.

[191] Another manifestation of closed spin that Taylor examines is what he calls "coming of age" narratives. This is the idea that modernity exposes faith as childish, but true maturity is courageous enough to face the reality of a godless world as an adult. Taylor points out that this also is a narrative, an instance in which "one moral outlook gave way to another." See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 561–65.

the culture of the immanent frame.[192] There is substantive agreement among other

Christian scholars. Smith observes that the Enlightenment's "rationalist picture" of the

human being was "absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity… which tends to

operate with an overly cognitivist… overly intellectualist account of what it means to be

or become a Christian."[193] The concept of a "worldview" functions more at a cognitive

level, leading Smith to suggest "a temporary moratorium on the notion of 'worldview'

and instead consider adopting Charles Taylor's notion of 'the social imaginary.'"[194]

Vanhoozer, taking up Wittgenstein's famous metaphor, proposes that the church has a

false picture of "the imagination as a purveyor of false images that hold us captive…

ironically, this picture of the imagination is itself a false image."[195] The church's

rationalistic anthropology is one challenge that must be addressed.[196]

Related to the challenge of the closed transcendent frame is that of the closed

immanent frame, what Taylor would call a closed spin. Taylor devotes considerable

attention to addressing "the illusion of the rational 'obviousness' of the closed

perspective."[197] Theologian and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin confronts this challenge

throughout his writings, contending that the modern West is full of hidden beliefs and

faith commitments that are religious by nature, because they purport to explain ultimate

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[192] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 6.

[193] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 42.

[194] Smith, 65.

[195] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 19–20.

[196] See also Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 4–8; Root, "Faith Formation," 141.

[197] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 556–93.

reality. For this reason, the modern West "is not a secular society but a pagan society…

which worships gods which are not God."[198] Missiologist and Newbigin scholar Michael

Goheen builds on Newbigin's diagnosis, describing the challenge as "an unmasking task

that requires tearing away the presumed mask that hides the religious beliefs of Western

culture."[199] Keller agrees, arguing that preaching in the modern West "must resist

secularity's own self-understanding. Secularity is not simply an absence of belief…

secularism is its own web of beliefs."[200] The closed immanent frame understands itself as

"just seeing things as they are." The challenge is to help inhabitants name hidden beliefs

and faith assumptions that undergird this mistaken understanding.

Another implication for preaching to the immanent frame is the tendency of its

inhabitants to search for fullness entirely within the natural world, rendering them

oblivious to any conscious need for God. Smith describes such people as those who have

"managed to construct a world of significance that isn't at all bothered by questions of

the divine." For them, "matters of spirituality or transcendence just never arise."[201] Noble

articulates this feature as well, writing that the immanent frame leads modern people "to

try to find sources of fulfillment without recourse to any transcendent source… we can

find meaning and a kind of justification without needing a god… to define and verify our

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[198] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1989), 220.

[199] Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 172.

[200] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 126.

[201] Smith, *How (Not)*, vii–viii.

lives."[202] Speaking specifically to the experience of young people, Root observes that many "have constructed their lives in such a way that they feel no need for God… no gaping loss or sense of subtraction in their lives." But that does not mean they are not seeking fullness. "Instead, they have added new narratives, moral codes, and identities beyond God to direct their lives."[203] All of these scholars note the challenge of helping people see their need of God within a social imaginary that frames fullness entirely within immanence.

Related to all the above is the challenge of finding language to describe the experience of the immanent frame for everyone, whether religious or not. Pastor and theologian Clint Schnekloth echoes Smith, Noble, and Root by noting that for both secular and religious people, "we have learned to live and manage our affairs without any reference to God." As a result, the immanent frame creates an unprecedented historical situation in which "the shared dynamic is failure of words." The absence of words to describe the experience of the immanent frame "is not the absence of that for which the words serve notice. A feeling often arrives that is in search of a word to describe it." He likens the situation to finding oneself in a "brand new place" and being given a phone to call one's friends, but being unable to describe that new place in a way that makes any sense. "Not only do our friends have trouble imagining where we are… the reality is that we cannot yet see as clearly as we would like the very place in which we find

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[202] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 62.

[203] Root, "Faith Formation," 130.

ourselves."[204] The absence of comprehensible descriptive language for the shared experience of the immanent frame is a profound apologetic challenge for preachers.

Of the many other implications that could be highlighted, one that generates considerable discussion is the modern quest for authenticity. As previously described, this quest adopts an instrumental stance toward the world. When the subject of God happens to factor in someone's quest, it is also viewed as an optional accessory based on its value in the personal journey of identity formation. The real absolute is an authentic identity. Everything else serves that absolute, including God. For instance, Noble points out that since identity formation is "the central concern" in the modern West, "reasoning about the faith" with people "becomes futile, because their objections to Christianity are not so much logical as existential: the faith… simply does not fit with their conception of themselves." The question people ask themselves is not whether the Christian God might really be true, but "'Would adopting Christianity fit with and improve my authentic identity?'"[205] Similarly, Root argues that "most who continue with a conception of God explain that they *have individually chosen* to keep that… in their lives for their own individual reasons." For such people, "it is authenticity that pushes and justifies them."[206]

However, although God and spirituality can certainly be instrumentalized, and therefore trivialized, in the quest for authenticity, scholars nonetheless affirm a genuine moral ideal at the heart of authenticity. Taylor himself is among them. While there are "debased" and "travestied" expressions of authenticity, he argues, "There is a powerful

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[204] Clint Schnekloth, "Living and Managing Without Reference to God," *Word & World* 37, no. 2 (2017): 157.

[205] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 38–39.

[206] Root, "Faith Formation in a Secular Age," 131 (emphasis in original).

moral ideal at work here."[207] Therefore, Taylor suggests undertaking a "work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal."[208] For Taylor, this "retrieval" is important because one of the benefits of authenticity is the possibility of "a more self-responsible form of life… to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own."[209] Because authenticity invests humans with greater levels of responsibility, it also invests them with greater dignity and freedom, and therefore the possibility of deeper forms of faith.

Other scholars, taking note of Taylor's insights, have also sought a more nuanced way of addressing the culture of authenticity. Seel's research leads him to suggest that some in the Millennial cohort have "a desire for unvarnished spiritual reality." He recommends that "churches need to provide authentic experiences of following Jesus into the arenas of their deepest longings (justice, beauty, love, and spirit)."[210] In particular, Bailey advocates taking up Taylor's work of retrieval. "If the ideal of authenticity is 'unrepudiable' to modern people, the missiological imperative is clear."[211] From the standpoint of a Christian imaginary, there are genuine problems with an uncritical embrace of authenticity, especially the consumeristic, instrumentalized distortions that

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[207] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 15.

[208] Taylor, 72.

[209] Taylor, 74.

[210] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 182–83.

[211] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 49.

lead to the "enthroning" of human emotions.[212] The challenge of preaching to the culture of authenticity is to address and critique the distortions while simultaneously answering the question of how one might legitimately experience the biblical ideal at the heart of it.[213]

Experience of the Immanent Frame: Summary

The immanent frame is a social imaginary that orients the pursuit of fullness entirely within the natural world, and in which the plausibility of transcendence is screened out by the addition of new ideas and stories that provide a powerful background picture against which new beliefs and social practices are formed, especially the quest for authenticity.

However, the immanent frame does not mean that people no longer believe in God. It can be inhabited as open or closed to transcendence. Furthermore, open or closed positions can be held in one of two ways. A take recognizes the existence of other positions and even feels some of their force, as in the Jamesian open space. A spin, on the other hand, cannot imagine the existence, much less the viability, of any position other than its own. One of the primary forces that sustains a closed spin is the influence of subtraction stories that narrate modernity as the process of subtracting religious belief

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[212] Keller, *Preaching*, 134.

[213] The practice of identifying and honoring moral ideals in humans created in the image of God, no matter how distorted these ideals may be, is advocated by other Christian scholars and apologists. Christian scholar Jerram Barrs speaks of receiving the "gifts of unbelievers." Christian scholars Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Charles Langer advocate honoring the "sacred cores" of others. Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 48–49; Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Charles Langer, *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 104–6.

from society, with the result that what is left over is a natural human propensity for science, reason, and progress.

This framework holds implications for preaching in the modern West. One is the tendency of the church to inhabit an open spin, resulting in an overly rationalistic anthropology that discounts the imagination as a valid means of discerning truth. Another challenge presented by the closed spin is the inherent difficulty seeing the hidden beliefs and faith assumptions at the heart of its self-understanding. There is also the default approach to fullness that frames it entirely within immanence, rendering people insensitive to their need for God. Finally, the quest for authenticity adopts an instrumental stance toward everything outside the buffered self, including God. Christian scholars and practitioners affirm a moral ideal within authenticity itself, necessitating the ability to critique the distortions while nurturing a biblical understanding and experience of authenticity.

Imaginative Apologetics

The literature areas reviewed so far reveal factors that bear directly on the task of preaching the Christian faith in the modern West. First, the imagination is a synthesizing, meaning-making faculty essential in apprehending reality as a whole and making sense of it. Second, human societies collectively make sense of the world by means of social imaginaries that frame what is plausible and legitimate various beliefs, norms, and practices. Third, the modern West operates with a social imaginary known as the immanent frame, which situates reality and interprets human flourishing entirely within the natural order, as opposed to a supernatural or transcendent order. Fourth, the immanent frame presents unique challenges to the promulgation of Christian faith,

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challenges that were not present in previous social imaginaries. The last literature area to be reviewed is the field of imaginative apologetics, a field conceived with these factors in mind.

The Need for Imaginative Apologetics

Newbigin states that one of the primary challenges for those seeking to advocate the Christian faith in the modern West is the issue of contextualization. He likens it to the situation of the missionary to a non-Western culture who faces a "cultural frontier, of seeking to transmit the gospel from one culture to a radically different one." The task is even more urgent in the West, according to Newbigin, because "it is this culture that, more than almost any other, is proving resistant to the gospel."[214] Likewise, Keller observes that past evangelistic strategies were able to assume a "shared set of beliefs" in their audience: "God, an afterlife, a standard of moral truth, and a sense of sin." Referring to these as "religious dots," Keller notes that evangelism was formerly a matter of "connecting the dots that listeners already possessed in order to prove the truth of the gospel." Today, Western culture not only does not share those dots; it rejects them.[215] Christian philosopher Paul M. Gould echoes this assessment, describing the modern West as a "post-Christian culture" that is "further and further removed from Christianity's language and worldview," and in which Christian beliefs "appear implausible and

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[214] Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1–3.

[215] Keller, *How to Reach*, 7.

meaningless."[216] In the modern West, Christianity makes increasingly less sense to people.

A growing number of scholars point out the insufficiency of "traditional" apologetics to address this challenge. Bailey notes that in the "particular historical context" of the Enlightenment, which leverages evidence to create "epistemic *obligation*," apologetics could "show that a person *should* believe on the basis of objective and universal grounds." However, this model "also prevented apologists from responding sensitively to the rising ethic of authenticity." It "demonstrates faith's rationality without making clear why someone should care about the demonstration."[217] Scholar and apologetics professor Holly Ordway concurs. She writes that a reliance on rational argument alone risks producing "a deficit of real meaning for the words and ideas that we use, or a failure to see that these ideas are important or interesting," with the result that "belief (or potential belief) is not so much destroyed as starved."[218] Reflecting on his first book of apologetics, *The Reason for God*, Keller says it was more in the traditional mode, because it "provides a case, a set of reasons, for belief in God and Christianity." But he discerned the need to write another book of apologetics, because the first book "does not address the background beliefs that our culture presses on us about Christianity, which make it seem so implausible."[219] Seel explains this insufficiency from a sociological standpoint. "Reason and rational argument work effectively within a

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[216] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 19–20.

[217] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 5–10 (emphasis in original).

[218] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 14.

[219] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 4–5.

frame, but they are ineffective between frames. Moving between frames happens through engaging the imagination."[220]

With this insufficiency in mind, many of the same scholars advocate the need for a different model of apologetic engagement. Ordway calls for "a new approach – or rather, the return to an older, more integrated approach." Citing the gospel of John's frequent call to "come and see" Jesus, she says what's needed is "some sort of imaginative engagement with the idea, or at least the possibility, that there might be something worth seeing."[221] Bailey recalls that contextualization of the gospel to a given culture is a "wider approach practiced throughout Christian history. Traditional apologetics is a recent historical development. Bailey describes this wider approach as one that does not seek epistemic obligation through rational demonstration but rather "seeks to grant epistemic *permission*, to show how a person may believe and how faith makes sense."[222] Keller likewise speaks of the need to show how Christianity "makes the most emotional and cultural sense."[223] Gould defines his apologetic goal as one that presents "Christianity… as true and satisfying."[224] All these scholars speak of the need for an apologetic method that incorporates reason, logic, and rational argument but goes further and engages the entirety of human beings, especially the imagination, as a meaning-making faculty.

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[220] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 5–6.

[221] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 5.

[222] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 7 (emphasis in original).

[223] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 4–5.

[224] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 21.

The Project of Imaginative Apologetics

Several Christian scholars, theologians, artists, clergy, and philosophers are therefore engaging the imagination of the modern West. Not all explicitly refer to their project as imaginative apologetics, but they do share a few characteristics and emphases that will be examined in this sub-section.

The Influence of Tolkien and Lewis

While the field of imaginative apologetics is relatively recent, one of the most common characteristics is the influence of theologian-artists from the past. Coleridge is one such figure. Guite regularly appeals to his work as foundational for the task of thinking about a theological and apologetic engagement of the imagination.[225] George MacDonald's influence can be traced throughout several generations, including the most recent apologists of the imagination.[226] But two figures in particular generate widespread, sustained attention, warranting a deeper look at their own engagement of the imagination and its impact on modern apologetics. These are J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

J.R.R. Tolkien

As was seen in the first literature section, Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories," provides, among other things, an overview of his theory of Fantasy and its chief functions. One function is Recovery, "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them." By this, Tolkien means an experience in a Secondary World that generates a

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[225] Guite, *Mariner: A Theological Voyage*; Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 145–77.

[226] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 119–53.

renewed vision, which is then carried back into the Primary World, transfiguring the way it is seen and experienced to accord more faithfully with reality. "We should meet the centaur and dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses – and wolves." Recovery is necessary because of the failure to see things as "things apart from ourselves." Alluding to Coleridge, Tolkien is referring to an instrumentalized view of the world that is marked by "possessiveness," "appropriation," and "acquiring." He writes, "The things which once attracted us… we laid hands on them, and then locked them away in our hoard, acquired them, and (once) acquiring (them), ceased to look at them."[227]

Imaginative apologists often note Tolkien's concept of Recovery as an important element in the apologetic project. Ordway writes that Tolkien's "analysis is of the utmost importance for apologetics." The modern West is repelled by Christianity but has no clear view of what Christianity is. "People think they know who Jesus is, what the Church is, what it means to have faith. We need to help people recover a fresh view of the truth – to see Jesus for the first time, and really see him." She points to the power of story to do this, especially the Secondary Worlds commended by Tolkien. "Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life."[228] Milbank concurs. Fantasy has the unique ability to "take us to a world of magic… that allows us to find a new quality in our usual experience." This is the function of Recovery. "It is as if endowing [the things of this world] with strange attributes allows us to see them for the first time." Milbank also highlights Tolkien's battle with instrumentalism.

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[227] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 129.

[228] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 88–89.

Recovery reconfigures the things of creation so they are "no longer the dead objects of the Kantian with which we can do what we like but things set apart from ourselves."[229]

However, Recovery can be thwarted by skepticism regarding Secondary Worlds. Tolkien addresses the concern that Fantasy, as an imaginative endeavor, appears "suspect" or "illegitimate." "To some it has seemed at least a childish folly," and therefore useless as a source of truth. In reply to that concern, Tolkien quotes a poem he wrote to C.S. Lewis while Lewis was struggling with the idea of how myths could be in any sense true. Tolkien writes that the imaginative power of Fantasy would be impossible were it not part of the *imago dei* in humans. "We make still by the law in which we're made." Tolkien contends that Recovery, as an act of the imagination, is not opposed to reason, but relies on reason for its proper function. "[Fantasy] certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason. On the contrary… creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun."[230] As will be seen below, Tolkien's ideas, conversations, and poetry had a profound effect on Lewis, and are an example of recovery as part of a larger apologetic ministry. Theologian David Russell Mosley observes, "Tolkien helped show Lewis what myth, and ultimately what imagination, is capable of… that myth and imagination allow us to actually see the world around us."[231]

Another important function of Fantasy is what Tolkien calls "consolation," the highest and most important form of which he terms "eucatastrophe." Eucatastrophe is

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[229] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," 36; see also Mosley, "Toward a Theology of the Imagination with S.T. Coleridge, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien."

[230] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 127–28.

[231] Mosley, "Toward a Theology."

> the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous turn… a sudden or miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal, final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.[232]

There are a few elements of eucatastrophe to note. First, it is a happy ending, a "joyous turn." Second, the quality of this "Joy" is dependent on the presence of "sorrow and failure." The threat of "universal final defeat" makes it a "deliverance," a "miraculous" rescue. Third, this deliverance in the midst of defeat renders it "*evangelium*," which means "good news." But this *evangelium* is not the Joy itself. It is a "fleeting glimpse."

Tolkien further posits that "successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" of the real world, what Tolkien calls the Primary World. This glimpse "may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world," that is, a pointer to the "Christian Story." In calling Christianity a "Story," Tolkien is not saying it is untrue. Rather, the reason that eucatastrophe in the Secondary World can be so powerful is because it elicits the longing for the real eucatastrophe that took place through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation." The gospel is the "Great Eucatastrophe." In glimpsing joy in the Secondary World, humans can taste the true joy of the Primary World, for "such joy has the very taste of primary truth." Fantasy is thus a way of helping people imagine the truth

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[232] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 135–36 (emphasis in original).

of Christian faith in the Primary World by giving them a concrete experience of what it feels like in a Secondary World.[233]

Ordway affirms Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe as a way of making "Christian joy *credible*." "We respond to the happy ending of the story with joy because it echoes the story that God himself is creating."[234] Similarly, Milbank observes that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy does precisely what Tolkien says successful Fantasy ought to do: it "calls the reader to something beyond itself. Our desire is awakened, our longing for the absolute." Such awakening is an example of how imaginative apologetics can function. Thus, Milbank writes, "For me, the whole enterprise of presenting the faith convincingly is aimed at opening this desire in others, rather than offering pre-packaged answers."[235] Tolkien's concepts of Recovery and eucatastrophe as *evangelium* are two oft-noted ways of opening this desire.

C.S. Lewis

Although he never produced a formal theology of the imagination,[236] it shows up throughout his writings in personal experiences, theoretical reflections, apologetic works, and fiction. As a result, his contribution to and influence on the field of imaginative

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[233] Tolkien, 137–38.

[234] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 139–41 (emphasis in original).

[235] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination," 37–38.

[236] "Owen Barfield suggests that the reason Lewis never developed an overarching theory of the imagination was that he wanted to protect it, not subject it to analysis." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow: C.S. Lewis on the Imagination for Theology and Discipleship," in *The Romantic Rationalist: God, Life, and the Imagination in the Work of C.S. Lewis*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 93.

apologetics is one of its most conspicuous features.[237] Several aspects of his thought bear

directly on the project of imaginative apologetics. A few of the most prominent will be

examined here.

First, imagination played a pivotal role in Lewis's conversion. His discovery of

George MacDonald's *Phantastes* is an oft-noted turning point, especially his famous

comment about having his imagination baptized.[238] Lewis explains by reflecting that his

lifelong experiences of Joy – whether in books, poetry, nature, or his own creative works

– had always "left the common world momentarily a desert." The Joy reminded him of

"another world," but that world had no purchase on the ordinary world of "bread on the

table or the coals in the grate." But in *Phantastes*, he encountered a new quality: holiness.

Whereas before his experiences had always left him reluctant to return to the real world,

now he "saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting

there, transforming all common things… or, more accurately, I saw the common things

drawn into the bright shadow."[239]

This experience, and Lewis's description of it, have generated much discussion.

Vanhoozer comments that what Lewis called the baptism of his imagination was an

"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

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[237] Ordway, *Apologetics*; Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*; Guite, *Lifting the Veil*; Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*; Ward, "The Good Serves."

[238] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow," 86–88; Ordway, *Apologetics*, 5–9; Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 190–91; Ward, "The Good Serves," 62–63.

[239] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

matter."[240] Similarly, Ordway writes that even though Lewis was still an atheist, "imaginatively, he had tasted something of transcendence, and gained a glimpse of the Christian vision of the world."[241] Ward notes that *Phantastes* awakened Lewis's imaginative capacity for understanding holiness, enabling him to "attach some meaning to the idea of sanctification."[242] Bailey points out that Lewis's experience is an example of "the way that works of imagination can pull us in with a certain gravity, saturating us in unlooked-for aesthetic sensibilities."[243] All four scholars are pointing to the power of the imagination to help people make sense, even if only pre-cognitively, of something previously opaque by giving them a concrete experience of it.

A second widely discussed aspect of Lewis's thought revolves around his efforts to integrate imagination and reason. In his autobiography, he describes the tension between his imaginative life and his intellect. "The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."[244] Guite notes a poem in which Lewis pictures reason and imagination as two goddesses representing two ways of knowing. In the poem, Lewis longs for someone or something to reconcile the two, since he cannot. "Oh, who will reconcile in me both maid and mother?" he cries. Guite highlights this struggle with the "cultural apartheid" of the post-Enlightenment modern

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[240] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow," 87.

[241] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 6.

[242] Ward, "The Good Serves," 63.

[243] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 191.

[244] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 170.

West and its "war on the imagination." Lewis longed for a healing of this split. "He knows that he cannot deny reason, but neither can he wound nor rebel against the shaping power of the imagination… if truth is one, these two ways of approaching truth must be reconciled."[245]

Once Lewis found a way to reconcile imagination and reason, which will be examined below, what began as a struggle evolved into an integration. One of the clearest and most quoted articulations of this integration appears in a literary essay Lewis wrote entitled "Bluspels and Flalansferes":

> Meaning… is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. 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.[246]

Several writers have analyzed this statement. Lewis scholar Charlie Starr explains that truth "is an abstract statement of correspondence with reality obtained by reason which operates in the abstract." But reason must have something to reason about, and that something must have meaning, which is "a product of imaginative connection through metaphor." Only when it is supplied with meaning by the imagination can reason do its work of adjudicating truth.[247] Vanhoozer observes that "where reason excels in… analyzing individual puzzle pieces, the imagination perceives the whole of which the pieces are a part. Imagination is the organ of discerning meaningful patterns."[248] Ward

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[245] Guite, *Lifting the Veil*, 14–18.

[246] Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes," 265.

[247] Charlie Starr, "Meaning, Meanings, and Epistemology in C.S. Lewis," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 25, no. 3 (April 15, 2007): 177.

[248] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow," 94.

agrees, stating that things "must rise up out of the swamp of nonsense into the realm of meaning if the imagination is to get any handle on them. Only then can we begin to judge whether their meanings are true or false."[249] Ordway summarizes, "The faculty of reason depends upon the faculty of imagination to give it meaningful things to reason *about*."[250]

A third aspect of Lewis's contribution to imaginative apologetics is the power of myth as a medium of truth. As seen above, one of his biggest difficulties with Christianity revolved around his struggle to reconcile his imagination with reason. Specifically, he struggled to make sense of Christianity, to understand what it meant. A major turning point was a conversation with Tolkien and another Oxford friend named Hugo Dyson during which they helped Lewis see that the myths he loved and that "mysteriously moved" him, including myths about dying and reviving gods, were pointing to Christianity. Through this conversation, Lewis realized that "the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*." Whereas before the "doctrines" of Christianity made no sense to him, he was now able to see that "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."[251] The historical events formed the content of the myth, apprehended by the imagination. Only then could it be analyzed by the reason and formulated in theological doctrines.

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[249] Ward, "The Good Serves," 61.

[250] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 87 (emphasis in original).

[251] C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis and Walter Hooper (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 288–89 (emphasis in original).

Throughout his subsequent writings, Lewis commented frequently on the nature and power of myth. In a 1944 essay entitled "Myth Became Fact," he observes that humans can think abstractly about reality, or they can concretely enjoy it. They cannot do both at the same time. "The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think." Myth, however, is a "partial solution" to this "tragic dilemma." He writes, "In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction." In myth, the barrier between the concrete and the abstract dissolves, so that what is "tasted" is a concrete realty, but the tasting "turns out to be a universal principle" that is not "bound" to the particulars of a "direct experience."[252] Myth occupies something of a liminal space between abstract truth and concrete experience.

For Lewis, the essence of myth is the story itself, not the words used to tell it. "What really delights and nourishes me is a particular pattern of events, which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached me by some medium which involved no words at all." Because of this, mythopoeia – the "art" or "gift" of creating myths – has a unique power. "It gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are reopened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives."[253] In the task of apologetics, the "heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be a myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and

[252] C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1996), 342–43.

[253] MacDonald and Lewis, *George MacDonald*, xxxii.

imagination to the heart of history. It *happens*." Other myths, stories, legends, or

Secondary Worlds can shock people awake to the gospel because Christianity, according

to Lewis, is the ultimate myth that became fact.[254] This unique power informed Lewis's

own fiction writing. He comments that he wrote fairy tales because he "saw how stories

of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own

religion in childhood." Doctrines "about God" or the "sufferings of Christ" were

associated with images of "stained-glass" and "Sunday school," preventing readers from

truly grasping and responding in faith. But by "casting all these things into an imaginary

world," Lewis wondered if the writer "could make them for the first time appear in their

real potency. Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one

could."[255] This thought is closely connected to Tolkien's concept of Recovery.[256]

Lewis's emphasis on the apologetic power of myths and stories has had a

formative impact on the field of imaginative apologetics. Vanhoozer states that myths

"do not simply communicate ideas but allow us to see and taste the reality of what they

are about. Lewis wrote stories not so readers could escape but so that they could

experience reality."[257] Citing Lewis's "Myth Became Fact," Ward writes, "Although

apologetics is a 'reasoned defense,' its basis is necessarily imaginative, for reason cannot

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[254] Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," 343 (emphasis in original).

[255] C. S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harvest, 1994), 37.

[256] T.S. Eliot lends support for this concept in his essay "Poetry and Propaganda." In it he describes "esthetic sanction." This is the idea that any "view of life which gives rise to great art is… more plausible than one which gives rise to inferior art. Poetry cannot prove that anything is *true*. It proves… that certain worlds of thought and feeling are *possible*." T.S. Eliot, "Poetry and Propaganda," *Bookman* 70 (February 1930): 595–602 (emphasis in original).

[257] Vanhoozer, "In Bright Shadow: C.S. Lewis on the Imagination for Theology and Discipleship," 95 (emphasis in original).

work without the imagination."[258] Likewise, theologian and apologist Josh Chatraw points to "Myth Became Fact" in support for his observation that "as nonbelievers tell their stories – to explain the world, to hope for a better day, to warn of evils – somewhere in the distance, God's story looms."[259]

Orienting Goals

The previous sub-sections analyzed the construct of imaginative apologetics: the insufficiency of traditional methods to address the challenges of the immanent frame, the need for a method that engages the imagination, the influence of Tolkien and Lewis. This final sub-section will survey some orienting goals shared by several imaginative apologists, within which may be arrayed the various methodologies employed.

Awakening of Desire

One of the main goals articulated by practitioners is to awaken people's desire for what Christianity offers. While traditional apologetics seeks to generate intellectual assent through an appeal to facts, evidence, reason, and logic, imaginative apologetics generates assent by also appealing to desire and beauty. Gould defines his project as "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying." He does not discount the need for truth. Rather, "cultural apologetics must demonstrate not only the truth of Christianity but also

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[258] Ward, "The Good Serves," 68.

[259] Josh Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 15.

its desirability."[260] One of the main ways he advocates for this is the use of arts and story. "We must love those we seek to reach by… speaking in their language, borrowing illustrations, motifs, stories, and metaphors from the aesthetic currency of the culture."[261]

Bailey emphasizes an appeal to desire as well, naming the "aesthetic sense" as one of the essential elements of the apologetic task. He suggests two components for guiding people toward an experience of "the beauty of the Christian faith." First is to "explore what a person *would* find resonant, what *would* strike them as beautiful, and what *would* capture their imagination." The second component is to "inquire in what way the gospel might speak to those desires." While Bailey recognizes that human desire is distorted, he also contends that "the gospel offers something deeper than, but not discontinuous with, human longing." Therefore, the apologist can orient his or her presentation with "confidence that the Holy Spirit is already at work within human longings."[262]

Milbank is another practitioner who prioritizes an appeal to desire. She writes that there is "a kind of homesickness that… we all have: a homesickness for the ultimate truth. This is not so much an idea as an experience: a homeland."[263] According to Milbank, the first aim of apologetics is "to awaken what one might call the religious

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[260] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 24–25.

[261] Gould, 114.

[262] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 229–31 (emphasis in original).

[263] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination," 33.

sense, that homesickness for the absolute."[264] Like her contemporaries, Milbank sees art, myth, fairy tale, and story as effective ways of awakening this desire.

The appeal to desire is also one of the main themes in Keller's *Making Sense of God*. Rather than laying out intellectual arguments for traditional apologetic questions such as the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, the problem of evil, and so forth, he examines core longings of humanity: meaning, satisfaction, identity, justice, and others. In each of these areas, his goal is "to show that Christianity makes the greatest sense in every way – emotionally, culturally, and rationally."[265] For each of these practitioners, appealing to and awakening the inherent desires of their audience is a primary way of engaging the apologetic task. In the seventeenth century, the philosopher Blaise Pascal placed a similar emphasis on desire, although he led with truth. He said the cure for people's fear and hatred of religion is "first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true."[266] Imaginative apologists urge leading with desire. First, make people wish it were true.

Recovery of Vision

A second orienting goal of many imaginative apologists is generating a Tolkienesque "recovery" of vision. Bailey writes that another primary element of imaginative apologetics is what he calls "orienting vision," helping others "see the world

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[264] Milbank, 38.

[265] Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 54.

[266] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 4.

through eyes of faith." A crucial component is generating empathy with outsiders to Christianity, because "it asks others to take on the Christian perspective and experience the world of Christian meaning." Doing this, however, also requires empathy for the outsider. It means "recognizing just how different the world looks to someone on the outside," and the "willingness to translate that vision into an accessible form."[267] The apologist must develop a hospitable spirit as well as the skills to enter someone else's imaginary and translate what faith would feel like using language that person finds comprehensible.

Ordway devotes attention to this goal as well, writing that "a holistic, fully integrated approach to apologetics helps people… first to enter into the Christian perspective, and then to recognize it as true." Through stories, extended give-and-take conversations, and innovative ideas, Ordway suggests ways to assist outsiders to Christian faith in seeing the world from a Christian perspective.[268]

Milbank commends recovery of vision as well. "We want non-believers to understand that Christianity is not narrow but a vision that includes everything, restoring the lost beauty of the world." She calls Christians to "find a language that can show people that they are *already* engaging in religious practice, and assuming implicitly that it is true." As an example, she relates how she once told golfers at a funeral that golf was a "religious" activity. "It accords form and meaning to swinging clubs about. To make rules and see a meaning in actions is to see significance beyond the merely physical."[269]

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[267] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 232–34.

[268] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 79–96.

[269] Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," 37–38 (emphasis in original).

For these practitioners, recovery of vision means helping others see the greater significance of this natural world from within a Christian framework.

Narration of Stories

A third orienting goal articulated by imaginative apologists is what could be called the narration of stories. Recognizing humans as narrative-driven beings who live in social imaginaries shaped by stories, imaginative apologists uncover the various stories that compete for allegiance and place them alongside one another for comparison and contrast. Like recovery of vision, this goal enters the frame of another and translates the Christian faith in terms they might understand. But it also contrasts the Christian narrative with that person's existing narrative, showing its inconsistencies and internal difficulties.

Keller showcases quotes and stories from a variety of sources, including modern atheistic voices, who acknowledge the human longings he addresses, but also the difficulty of attaining them from within an atheistic framework. By appealing to sources that a skeptic of Christianity might find trustworthy, he shows how the skeptic's own worldview or imaginary fails desire. With this foundation in place, he brings in Christian voices, stories, and illustrations that show how the gospel offers compelling satisfaction of these desires.[270]

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[270] For example, in his chapter on meaning, Keller utilizes the television show *Fargo*, modern writers and philosophers such as Kafka, Sartre, and Camus, and literary critic Terry Eagleton. See Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 61–62.

Chatraw recommends a similar methodology that he describes as "an approach to persuasion by way of out-narrating the culture's rival stories."[271] This out-narrating begins "by entering a person's social imagination and engaging their ideas from *within* it." Rather than proceeding with a separate presentation of the gospel narrative, including various arguments and pieces of evidence, Chatraw advocates weaving the gospel story "into the discourse, thus making it the thematic center of how we engage." In doing so, "we contrast the stories they've embraced with Christianity, asking where their stories borrow from the Christian story."[272]

Ordway shares this goal as well. She articulates the necessity of addressing "the worldview question directly, by working on the assumptions that people hold." This approach means "showing that the intellectual framework… doesn't stand up to the weight of reality." Done well and with respect, Ordway hopes this "can lead a skeptic to reconsider whether his worldview is big enough to account for all of reality."[273]

Summary of Literature Review

The literature review surveyed three areas: a theology of the imagination, the experience of the immanent frame, and the field of imaginative apologetics. From a biblical and theological standpoint, the imagination is a God-given faculty that synthesizes and integrates sensory data in order to see reality as a whole and make sense

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[271] Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story*, 50.

[272] Chatraw, 63–68 (emphasis in original).

[273] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 93.

of it. It works together with other human faculties and plays a meaning-making role in moral knowledge, faith, and creative works to awaken the imagination of others.

The immanent frame is a social imaginary that pictures reality and human flourishing as consisting entirely within the natural world. It screens out transcendence through the addition of various beliefs and practices that pursue fullness without reference to God. In addition, the immanent frame can be occupied in various ways, such as closed or open to transcendence. These positions in turn can be held as either a take that recognizes its own contestability and fragility or a spin that refuses to acknowledge the viability of other positions. The immanent frame, and the various possible ways of occupying it, present several challenges to anyone preaching the Christian faith in the modern West.

The recent field of imaginative apologetics seeks to address the insufficiencies of traditional apologetic methods by developing an approach that treats the imagination as a crucial factor in conversion, especially in the immanent frame of the modern West. Building on the work of artists and theologians such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, it orients its project around various goals, such as the awakening of inherent human desires, the recovery of a Christian vision of reality, and the narration of various cultural stories and how they compare and contrast with the gospel story. While the field of imaginative apologetics is developing goals and methods for communicating the gospel in the immanent frame, the lack of attention to the task of preaching necessitates further research. The interviews in chapter four will address this gap.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. The assumption of this study was that preachers have learned principles involved in engaging the imagination that can facilitate such a frame shift.

To address this purpose, the research identified four main areas of focus. These include the practices preachers use during sermons to engage the imagination, the ways preachers think about the imagination and its role in sermons, the challenges presented by the immanent frame for making sense of the gospel, and ways that preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a shift to the open transcendent frame.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What are some practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame?

2. How do preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts?

3. How do preachers describe the challenges they encounter in helping people in the immanent frame make sense of the gospel?

4. How do preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, writes that qualitative researchers "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences."[274] Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research.[275]

First, qualitative research is focused on meaning and understanding. The goal is to "achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives."[276] Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data.[277] Third, qualitative research is an inductive process. Researchers "gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research."[278] Fourth, qualitative research is characterized by rich description. "Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned."[279]

This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant

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[274] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 6.

[275] Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

[276] Merriam and Tisdell, 15 (emphasis in original).

[277] Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

[278] Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

[279] Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

perspectives in the narrow phenomenon of preaching that engages the imagination of people in the immanent frame.[280]

Participant Sample Selection

This research required purposeful sampling of participants able to communicate in depth about preaching that engages with the imagination to shift to the open transcendent frame. The participants were selected according to the following criteria.

First, participants needed to be regularly preaching in geographic areas with high concentrations of people in the immanent frame, typically city-centers. This criterion increased the likelihood of engaging those in the immanent frame. Second, participants needed to have at least ten years of experience preaching in such an environment. This length of experience provides data toward best practices. It also increased the likelihood that they were being thoughtful and intentional about how they engage their listeners, with enough feedback and experience to make occasional adjustments to their methods and practices.

Participants were chosen for a unique type of sample to provide for unique attributes associated with the data collected.[281] Participants varied in age and denominational affiliation within orthodox Christian theological commitments. This variety provides a wide spectrum of experience and also minimizes the theological spectrum variables, which are not a focus of the research.

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[280] Merriam and Tisdell, 22.

[281] Merriam and Tisdell, 78.

The qualitative research was conducted through personal interviews with six

preachers in cities across the United States and the United Kingdom. They were invited

to participate via an introductory email. All expressed interest and gave written informed

consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a "Research Participant

Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Eric Stiller to explore
the role of imagination during sermons for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at
Covenant Theological Seminary.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any
time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can
be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or
destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to explore how preachers engage the imagination
   during sermons to help people in the immanent frame (closed or open) shift toward an
   open transcendent frame.

2) Potential benefits of the research may include helping preachers understand the
   challenges of preaching to the immanent frame, equipping them with best practices
   for engaging the imagination in preaching, evaluating the effectiveness of such
   preaching, encouraging congregants who listen to similarly engage the imagination of
   others, and ultimately assisting many spiritually curious immanent framers to find
   fulfillment of their deepest desires in Christ. Though there are no direct benefits for
   participants, the hope is they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their
   experiences with an eager listener and learner.

3) The research process will include 8-10 interviews of preachers who regularly engage
   secular people in the modern West. These interviews will be recorded, transcribed,
   and analyzed for the purposes of discerning best practices, ideas, challenges, and
   means of evaluation.

4) Participants in this research will take part in a 90-minute interview.

5) Potential discomforts or stresses: none expected.

6) Potential risks: <u>Minimal Risk Level Criteria</u>

   _____Participants are asked to reveal personal information regarding individual
        viewpoints, background, experiences, behaviors, attitudes or beliefs.

_____People are selected to participate based upon particularly unique characteristics (e.g., they all hold the same position in an organization; they have similar training; or, they come from a similar background), or extraordinary life experience.

_____Topics or questions raised are probably politically, emotionally, culturally, spiritually, or psychologically sensitive.

_____Participants are required to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that one might be influenced or affected, and/or anxiety or concern might be raised regarding the subject matter of the inquiry.

_____Participants may have regrets, concerns, afterthoughts, or reactions to the interview.

_____Participants may become tired, weakened, or be mentally or physically impacted in any way from the research interview.

_____The research may inconvenience participants by causing a delay or intrusion into their activities and/or may take more than 20 minutes of the participants' time.

7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.

8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.

9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher   Date

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Printed Name and Signature of Participant   Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build responses toward more complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.[282] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[283]

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[284]

The researcher interviewed six participants for seventy minutes, either in person or via Zoom. Prior to the interview, a brief description of the research topic along with a sampling of protocol questions was sent to each participant. The researcher recorded the

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[282] Merriam and Tisdell, 124–25.

[283] Merriam and Tisdell, 297.

[284] Merriam and Tisdell, 208.

in-person interviews and videotaped the Zoom interviews. One interview was conducted in September, three in January, and two in February.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about a time when you did something in a sermon that helped people exploring Christianity to experience an "a-ha" moment in their thinking about the Christian faith.

2. Describe some methods and practices you've come up with to engage the imagination of your listeners in the immanent frame.

3. What are some challenges you've discovered about preaching to the immanent frame?

4. What are some ways your thinking has changed over the years about how to engage the imagination in sermons?

5. What are some ways you've discovered to get feedback on how effective your preaching is in helping people imagine things differently?

Data Analysis

The researcher had the interviews transcribed using computer software that produced an automated transcript. The software allowed for corrections and editing. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[285]

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[285] Merriam and Tisdell, 32.

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using the color code method. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, and responses across the variation of participants; and congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants.

Researcher Position

Since the researcher was the primary instrument for collecting data, inherent biases that may affect the findings must be revealed and acknowledged.

The researcher converted to Christianity at age 30. Prior to that, he did not profess belief in God or the Christian faith nor consider such belief to have any bearing on the quality or meaning of his life. His conversion process occurred over the course of a year-and-a-half, during which time he alternated between surprising, unexpected, and uninvited experiences that piqued spiritual interest in him, along with more intentional explorations of various faith traditions, through reading, conversations with religious friends, and co-workers.

Twelve years after his conversion, he was ordained as a teaching elder in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. For the past eleven years he has preached regularly to a wide variety of people in the metro St. Louis region, and for the past five years, he has preached exclusively to area heavily populated by the religiously unaffiliated, with high levels of the Millennial and Gen Z generational cohorts.

The researcher has a strong preference for preaching that engages the imagination and addresses the challenge of the immanent frame, along with a familiarity with and appreciation for the preaching styles of many of the participants.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this study were limited to those preaching in larger cities in the United States, with higher populations of secular immanent framers, in churches with high levels of engagement by the spiritually curious but uncommitted.

Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar cities in a Western context such as Western Europe, although the influence of Western secularism is increasingly global, in similar context and situation. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. The assumption of this study was that preachers have learned principles for engaging the imagination that can facilitate such a frame shift. This chapter provides the findings of six interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following questions guided the qualitative research.

1. What are some practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame?

2. How do preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts?

3. How do preachers describe the challenges they encounter in helping people in the immanent frame make sense of the gospel?

4. How do preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected six accomplished preachers to participate in this study. Each participant had between ten and thirty years of preaching experience, and all continue to preach regularly. In keeping with the focus of this study, the six participants have had active ministries in city-center areas with regular exposure to listeners in the

immanent frame. In addition, they are known as preachers who have reflected at length on the experience of preaching. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect their identities.

Jeff is a 40-year-old Asian professor and author with over fifteen years of preaching experience in a variety of contexts, including a large metro area in Southern California. Martin is a 50-year-old minister and author in the United Kingdom with over twenty years of preaching experience, including time at one of London's largest evangelical churches. Walter is a 40-year-old minister with over ten years of preaching experience, including time in a large metro area in the Southeast United States. Gilbert is a 50-year-old minister and homiletics professor in a metro region of the Midwest with over twenty years of preaching experience. He is also an author on pastoral ministry and preaching. Jack is a 60-year-old Anglican priest, theologian, poet, and author with over thirty years of preaching experience in metro areas throughout the United Kingdom. Finally, Bart is a 50-year-old African American minister and homiletics professor with over twenty years of preaching experience in major cities on the East coast and in the Midwest.

Practices for Engaging the Imagination

The first research question sought to determine what practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame. The first question invited the participants to reflect on a time they said something in a sermon that helped someone who was exploring faith come to a better understanding of Christianity. That led to questions about specific practices and methods for engaging the imagination.

Clarifying Distorted Pictures of Christianity

The participants expressed the need to name and describe the false, distorted, unclear, or uninformed pictures of Christianity—and distorted pictures of reality—that exist among their listeners. Three primary methodological aims emerged during the interviews: 1) Clarifying distorted pictures of Christianity, 2) Opening doors to transcendence, and 3) Clarifying the Christian picture. Within each of those aims, shared practices and methodologies were identified.

Naming Distorted Pictures

A primary practice among preachers was naming the distorted pictures common in their audience. Gilbert once preached a sermon called "Is the Apostle Paul a Jerk?" His goal was to present a picture of Christianity people would recognize as their own, even though it might have been based on limited or false information. "Maybe they've read two or three sentences from Paul's letters on the internet, or in someone else's blog. So they're piecing together something and they have this picture." But the result is a false or distorted picture. "There's this picture of Paul as an American Republican who is really committed to limiting everything he can in people's lives."

Bart referred to these distorted pictures as "cultural backtalk." In one sermon for his African American audience, he named the perception that Christianity is "the white man's religion." Naming this was important because his audience already had a picture in mind. "So, you say, 'Hey, maybe some of you read this and you're hearing X.' You want to raise those questions."

Martin spoke of the need to address where the "blockage" might be in a passage. "I'm trying to understand different people's experiences, so I understand what their

obstacles or blockages may be that I can address." For instance, while preaching on the book of Hosea, he named the fact that certain passages "have quite explicitly been used to justify the fact that when there is sexual immorality, it's because the women are loose." To appeal to people who hold these views, "you first have to enter into their world." Similarly, Jack said, "You always start with affirming the visibility of where the person already is and what they see." The simple practice of naming a distorted picture of Christianity was one way these preachers engaged the imaginations of their listeners.

Generating Empathy

In addition to clearly naming listeners' pictures of Christianity, participants emphasized the necessity of presenting those pictures with empathy. Bart said, "You want to be able to state someone else's argument in a way that they would say, 'That's accurate,' versus a straw man argument where you build and then tear it down."

Gilbert talked about the need to enter as fully as possible into the pictures held by his audience. "They're imagining a picture, and I need to see that picture from their point of view, because if I did, I might reject it too." For instance, if someone rejected Christianity because they pictured a God who delights in torturing people for eternity in hell, Gilbert could affirm that rejection. Once people recognized their pictures, he said he proceeds with, "I can see why you're rejecting this God. And I would too." The result is empathy. "The person is startled in a good way. And now there's an invitation coming from their way, because I did not answer the way they expected."

Martin named generating empathy as a primary goal. "The crucial ingredient is being empathetic. You're trying to figure out, 'What have they gone through in the last week that's going to make it difficult to accept what the passage says?'" Reading fiction

and literature was one method Martin used to step into the experiences of others and then relate those experiences to his audience. "Here's the most amazing fictional account of somebody who describes what it is like. And then I can import that, not necessarily verbatim into the talk, but the ethos of it, the empathy."

Addressing Questions

Another way participants clarified distorted pictures of Christianity was to address the questions people have because of those pictures. One way they addressed these questions was by creating a sermon series around them. Walter said, "I tried to do at least once a year, often twice a year, a series that was still rooted in particular texts, but addressing contemporary challenges most people would be bringing to the room." Jeff mentioned this as well. "I just did a sermon series this fall: ten sermons on the questions that get asked in the Bible from humans to God, from humans to each other, from God to humans." He said he does this "intentionally, because I am trying to engage the imagination." For his audience, it's a way of "finding ourselves in the questions, and facing the questions that Scripture asks that we also ask."

Jack emphasized the necessity of being attuned to people's questions. His church used to hold a service called "the Goth Eucharist, which was a church service for Goths." The impetus for this service was a question the Goths were asking.

> I began to discern that this macabre obsession with the dead was a way to explore a fundamental question about life, and an intuition that the immanent frame doesn't give a satisfactory answer to the question, "Why is a person a person and why is their personhood valuable?"

The Goths' question was related to the nature of personhood. But they did not necessarily recognize it as a question. Jack had to do the work of entering their experience,

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understanding the picture they were working with, and responding with an imaginative way of engaging that picture by addressing the underlying question.

Opening the Door to Transcendence

Another common practice among participants was awakening their listeners to the unexamined or unacknowledged tensions within their pictures of reality, and then respectfully opening the door to alternate pictures. A couple of shared practices for doing this emerged during the interviews.

Identifying Tension Points

Jeff illustrated this tension through the narrative of authenticity that is central in the modern West. He said, "We have to grant the premise of authenticity, that it is better to have a life that is deeply owned, that you have fought for it and won the meaning. There's something right about that." The challenge was to help people see that the typical picture of this ideal is a "thin version of authenticity." He said he uses illustrations from Disney movies, "because Disney is the number one pusher of authenticity: 'Follow your heart.'" Jeff said he encourages his listeners to "follow" the narrative to its conclusion, then identifies the tension and advocates for a new way of looking at the picture.

> If we say, "Do whatever you want, whatever makes you feel alive," at some point, don't we make ethical critiques that people who do that are sociopathic and just doing whatever they want and hurting and harming other people? That's where you start to say, "Okay, it can't just be 'follow your heart.' It has to be 'follow your heart within a moral framework.'" Now let's talk about moral frameworks and how others make a claim on my life.

Jeff said he begins by granting the premise of authenticity. He then takes a popular example of that picture, points out the unexamined tension with a larger moral framework

his listeners would share, and uses that as a launching pad for offering them a fuller picture of the ideal that leads to a Christian picture of reality.

Jack said, "You have to be alert to where people are bumping up against the edges of the immanent frame and feeling uncomfortable." He gave the example of medical students dissecting a body. "Many of them feel this sense of 'What is that doing to me? If this body is a thing, am I also a thing? I don't know what it is to be human anymore.'" Facing such tensions opened the door to questioning the distorted picture and considering other pictures.

> I say always look for the overplus, the over-brim, the more-ness, the shining-through-ness of things and train your mind to look at it. I'm not saying rush into chapel and become a Christian. I'm just saying test it and see whether you think there's more than can be accounted for by your materiality and the materiality of the world.

Jack said he is intentional about leveraging the tensions in his audience's picture of things and encouraging them to look for more satisfying answers. He would not demand they accept the gospel at this point. His goal is to expose the tension and open the door to a fuller picture of reality without sacrificing everything in their original picture. "I can say you're onto something, and that something you're onto is not at enmity with science or history or psychology. It [Christianity] takes that in."

Walter said he sometimes uses multimedia to engage the imagination and surface the tensions in his audience's picture of reality. He once showed a picture of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* while playing a recording of Pink Floyd's "Great Gig in the Sky." He was trying to help people think about the tensions within their own brokenness. "That's where we most often put up our defenses and say, 'This isn't a place to be thinking about my wounds.' So, I'll let *The Scream* and Pink Floyd do it because you can't resist it. It works on you in very unexpected ways."

Fostering Permission to Explore a Different Picture

In addition to identifying tensions within their listeners' distorted pictures, the participants also encouraged the exploration of alternate pictures of reality. While not yet presenting the gospel picture, this was an important part of the sermon for several participants.

Jeff called this permission-fostering in the subjunctive mood. "One of the things I always say about the mechanics of preaching is working in the subjunctive for a good part of the sermon." Methodologically, that means alternating declarative statements of truth with suggestive questions such as, "Well, perhaps this, what if this, maybe this." He said he uses this method "because we naturally are primed to process those, not with the critical intellect, but with the imagination that is considering, 'What would life be like if that were the case?'" For Jeff, "The subjunctive is the middle way between the dogmatic 'You must,' and skepticism." Walter also talked about the power of the question: "What if?" He described this as "helping people connect the present with possibilities. It's the sort of eschatological imagination of, 'What if this future could break into the present?'"

Gilbert described this strategy as "giving categories for the conversation." He consciously modeled much of his approach on Jesus' "antitheses" framework from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Once he has named and clarified a distorted picture of Christianity—which corresponds to "You have heard it said"—he can open the door to alternate pictures for his listeners—which corresponds to "I say to you." In his sermon on the Apostle Paul, Gilbert presented the distorted picture in many people's minds. But in examining a passage that presented Paul differently, he did not demand his audience immediately accept the new picture. "I'll say that it doesn't mean that ultimately we will think Paul's awesome, but at least maybe we

can be on a quest to experience Paul as he actually was rather than how we might imagine him." The permission to explore a new picture, rather than a demand to adopt it, was an important part of Gilbert's approach, which was consciously modeled after Jesus' invitational approach. Gilbert summarized it this way: "Invitation without demand. Confrontation, but you can walk away."

Jack spoke of this approach as "looking for ways to liberate people." The Enlightenment philosophy robbed people of "something that was their natural birthright… this intuitive, spiritual way of knowing." The spiritual way of knowing "has been removed from people so effectively that they don't even know it's been removed. But because it has been removed, they experience anomie; they experience alienation." As people become more conscious of this anomie and alienation, Jack said he sees his task as providing liberation: "Helping them to escape, getting them to feel their way around this dark room and see if there's a window or a door." Opening the door and encouraging people to explore a different picture of reality was a crucial factor for Jack and the other participants.

Clarifying the Christian Picture

After clarifying distorted pictures of Christianity and opening doors to transcendence, the participants described ways of engaging the imagination to clarify and present the gospel picture of reality.

Lived-Body Detail

Many of the participants identified the use of lived-body detail to engage the imaginations of their audiences, creating an experiential world for people to step into.

While they indicated such detail occurs throughout the sermon, many of their examples were focused on ways they used it to clarify the gospel picture.

During a sermon on the story when Jesus looks at Peter after he has denied Jesus, Martin invited his listeners to imagine the look on Jesus' face. "I presented a range of options that it could be… that Jesus is furious with him, that Jesus is confused or surprised, or that Jesus is disappointed." Martin referred to this as a "semi-dramatization." The lived detail helped people imagine different ways Peter could have experienced Jesus.

Bart spoke at length of the need for lived detail in sermons. He mentioned a former mentor who did this well and how it impacted his own preaching. It is a way of "taking people to where they can almost feel it and taste it in the way that you describe it." For instance, he said if he is talking about macaroni and cheese, he might elaborate on the lived detail of eating it, the way "you get the fork and you lift it up and the cheese is hanging off, I'll do that. Because people are like, 'Oh yeah, I know what that feels like. I know what that tastes like.'" Lived detail clarified the gospel for people. In a sermon on the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8, Bart invited his African American audience to imagine how the eunuch would have felt when he was denied entry to the temple in Jerusalem. "I was trying to have the people feel what it was like. So, I was just asking, 'You know how that feels.' That idea of not being allowed to come in, people connected with that." Once they were able to imagine an experience, they were able to imagine how the gospel addressed that experience.

Jeff also said the use of lived detail is an important part of his preaching. He said that as he is preparing, he will ask himself, "How do I help people enter the story and

look around and see what's here?" This question helps him pay "attention to detail, the flourishes of storytelling." He gave the example of preaching from the book of Ruth. "You talk about the two-week journey from Moab to Bethlehem, just even that detail evokes a little bit of imagination. They had to stop along the way. This is a dangerous trip." He said his goal in articulating the lived detail is "not for the sake of detail, but for the sake of evoking some sort of larger picture." He tied this attention to detail to his presentation of the gospel, especially focusing on Christ. "I really think about that moment where I'm shifting from this story that I'm telling to move into this kind of Christological moment, where the sermon becomes in some ways an act of worship, but also an invitation."

Jack said his study of poetry led him to see the theological significance of using concrete details in sermons. He quoted a line from Shakespeare: "As imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."[286] The idea of imagination "bodying forth the form of things unknown" became a pivotal concept for him. "It made me think I've got to take the abstract, unimagined, unembodied theology of the church and find one way after another of bodying it forth." He said he is intentional about using concrete illustrations for abstract theological concepts. For instance, he used a news story about a little girl stuck in a well as a way of illustrating humanity's need for a savior. He also took "another hint from Shakespeare, which is to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." That means using local analogies, such as the marketplace in his town, as a way of taking theological concepts and "bodying them forth" in the context of a "local

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[286] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 88.

habitation" that everyone in the congregation is familiar with. Using these analogies is a way "to be incarnate, to be embodied, to be local and to make a shape in your preaching which is a habitation, which people can go in and out of and live in and dwell in."

Subvert and Surprise

The language of subversion and surprise, along with other similar concepts, showed up in the interviews. In his sermon on Jesus' look at Peter, Martin began with a range of possible options for the look on Jesus' face, all negative. Once his listeners had entered this experience imaginatively, he invited them to consider a different option: that Jesus looked at Peter with "love and acceptance," fully knowing that Peter would betray him because Jesus had told Peter ahead of time. Martin made this move because it "subverts the perception of God as some kind of policeman who's just out to catch us out and be angry with us." This subversive element was an intentional way of clarifying the gospel picture. Its function in the sermon was "to get at the heart of a very consistent and real biblical theological theme, which is the grace of God to sinners and failures."

Once he has clarified a distorted picture, or "cultural backtalk," Bart said he seeks to clarify the gospel picture in ways that catch his listeners by surprise. For instance, if preaching on a passage that talks about "sonship" in the Bible, he would first name the backtalk: "You might hear this and think this is another instance of male domination." Then he would clarify: "It's actually showing the benefits that usually would have just gone to the oldest son—[God] is offering that to everybody. It's a thing that's more inclusive, not more exclusive." Bart said this is a way of engaging the imagination to clarify the gospel picture. He noted that if there is something surprising to be found, it can be beneficial to harness it.

Walter said he regularly looks for ways to surprise his audience as well. To illustrate the nature of the Trinity, he once sat down at a piano during a sermon and "played a little bit and illustrated how a chord works." The congregation was surprised by this seeming interruption. Walter paraphrased their surprised reaction: "I thought he was supposed to be on the stage speaking and now he's at the piano?" He got people's attention, and some then asked more questions about God. Walter said, "I love connecting dots for people like that."

Attention to Artistic Elements in the Sermon

The final shared practice that emerged in the interviews was paying attention to artistic elements in the sermon, such as art, poetry, story, and other similar components. Earlier in his preaching career, Jeff was deeply impacted by a congregant who told him that when he listened to the sermon, it was as if Jeff was "weaving a spell." But once this congregant left the church, the effect was lost and "the spell was broken." Jeff gave deeper thought to how he could weave "stronger spells." He said one of the results is that he pays more attention to the artistic elements within the sermon as well as the artistic nature of the sermon as a whole. "I definitely think in terms of weaving a spell now, that in any good story there is a willing suspension of disbelief. And in order to affect the willing suspension of disbelief, the craft has to be solid." For instance, he said he no longer thinks of a sermon in terms of "three points," because doing so "evokes the image of propositions I'm giving you, because all you need is the right propositions in your brain, and then you will know the right things and your behavior will change." He said he prefers "thinking in terms of movements, like the movements of a symphony or the movements of a journey." This shift in his approach was part of paying attention to the

artistic design of a sermon. He said he still organizes his sermons in sections of two or three, but instead of shaping each section around a propositional statement, he shapes them around an image or narrative element from the text. "I think reimagining the sermon as an art form and as a journey, as movement through imaginative space, helps reframe the way you approach it."

Martin said that he has used visual presentations as part of his sermon. "I have shown paintings and art and stuff." He has used movie clips in some sermons, although he offered some caution in using them. "The danger is that can dominate everything because it's such a potent medium. It's going to eclipse everything else unless it's a very well-chosen piece." Nonetheless, if the preacher knows how to do it effectively, showing movie clips can be valuable when done in moderation.

Gilbert said he looks to Jesus as a model for incorporating these kinds of elements in a sermon. "I think of it as a 'sage lane.' The Lord so often asked questions, used metaphor, offered his own proverbs." The use of story, parable, and other indirect forms of speech was an important concept for Gilbert. Along with the invitational nature of his preaching as a means of generating empathy and opening doors to transcendence, using metaphor and story clarified the Christian picture, separately from the modern ways of talking about God. "If we say, 'Who is God?' and we ask that question of our theology, it will answer with communicable and noncommunicable attributes." In contrast with that, "If you ask the question of the Bible, 'Who is God?' let's just start with Jesus: 'God is like a woman baking bread; like a fisherman with a net catching fish.'" While Gilbert affirmed the value of articulating theological concepts like omnipotence or omniscience, focusing solely on these concepts makes it "harder to connect our heart" to God. Gilbert

observed that Jesus named distorted pictures of God and then contrasted them with a true picture as a way of helping people imagine who God really is. When Jesus says God is a father who gives good gifts and not scorpions to his children, "He just set up two perceptions or pictures of God and then said, 'He's the one and not the other.'" The pictures tell competing stories about God, and using similar artistic elements is a way to do the same thing in sermons.

Summary of Practices for Engaging the Imagination

The first research question sought to discover practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame. Three primary aims emerged during the interviews. The first was clarifying distorted pictures of Christianity. This process involved clearly naming the pictures that people hold about Christianity. Participants also emphasized the importance of generating empathy with their audience by presenting those pictures accurately and affirming why they would be troublesome. Once those pictures were named and treated with empathy, preachers addressed the questions that go along with those pictures.

The second primary aim was opening doors to transcendence. This process involved identifying tension points, which are places in a person's picture of reality that cannot fully account for the desires and questions they struggle with. Preachers seek to foster permission to explore a different picture through "What if?" questions, "giving categories" for the conversation, and "liberating people" from the darkness of their anomie and alienation.

The third primary aim was clarifying the Christian picture. Preachers did this by using lived-body detail, by showing how Christianity can be subversive or surprising, and by paying attention to artistic elements in a sermon.

The Role of the Imagination

The second research question sought to determine how preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts. During the interviews, three main themes emerged: 1) Valuing the imagination, 2) The nature of the imagination, and 3) Taking the long view.

Valuing the Imagination

When asked how their thinking about the imagination has changed, participants responded that the change began with a realization that the imagination held value and was worth engaging. Bart began his ministry career in a para-church ministry with a lot of storytelling. When he became a pastor at a church, he was not sure storytelling was a valid method for preaching. "When you move to preaching in a church, you can look at illustrations and things like that from real life that stir the imagination as being somehow a dumbing down." Over time, his thoughts shifted to a more holistic view of human nature. "It's not just your cognitive ability. It's not just your IQ. You have to think about your emotional health. You have to think about your imagination as a part of who you are, as being made in the image of God." He said he now sees the imagination as a valuable component of human nature and an important faculty to engage in a sermon. "That's not a bad thing or a dumbed-down thing. It's a beautiful thing that is glorious to speak to."

Martin experienced a similar shift. "I think about [the imagination] a lot now. I don't think I did at the beginning." He said that when he began preaching, "I would spend all my time digging around in the text. Because that's what I love doing: the exegesis." He said this focus resulted in part from his pietistic, evangelical background. "It would be a very reduced, very utilitarian handling of the Bible. We read the Bible so that we get three bullet points of things, a sort of mental checklist of what I have to do this week." These habits led to a similarly reduced view of application that he calls the "five more's." "You've got to do more. You've got to read your Bible more, give more, go to church more, do evangelism more, and pray more." He realized the limited nature of this approach. "It's so impoverished, stultifying, and legalistic. The thing about having a checklist is that it enables legalism because you can achieve it. You can say I am giving more. I am praying." Over the years, his thinking about application changed to a more holistic approach that speaks to the imagination. "I've evolved into thinking in terms of taking more of a worldview approach."

Jeff said, "The primary shift probably is the decision to engage the imagination." When he began preaching, he "was trying to just kind of play the authority card all the time and say, 'This is what the Bible says,' you know?" While he said he still holds a high view of the authority of Scripture, the way he uses it has changed to a more imaginative manner. He explained, "I don't feel the need to use Scripture as a club or as a trump card." Instead of demanding that people capitulate to the truth of the Bible, Jeff said, "I think that the willingness to move in those other [imaginative] moods rather than just declarative is probably the biggest shift that I've had in my preaching."

Gilbert's thinking about the imagination has changed over the years as well. "As a younger preacher, I would say, 'We need to confess our sins. Repent, turn, put your faith in Jesus.'" Over the years, he has adopted an approach that is more focused on clarifying the various pictures people hold with gentleness and respect and then inviting people to consider those pictures. He said now he's more likely to say something like, "Maybe you've heard a Christian say, 'Believe in Jesus, or put your faith in him.' We've just looked at why Christians talk like that. And now I'm going to ask you, 'Would you put your faith in Jesus?'" Gilbert said he wants to engage the imagination and present the competing stories and pictures before making an appeal. "I'm not trying to win in the message. My first goal is, have they even heard the historical biblical point of view with gentleness and respect?"

Jack experienced a similar change when he was writing a book on poetry and the imagination. "I think the work I did on [that book] had a kind of effect on my confidence and my approach as a preacher." He described his book as a "defense of the imagination as a truth-bearing faculty." While he was working on it, he saw the application to preaching. "I thought I can tell stories. I could do imaginative readings with the Bible. I can include poetry. This is okay. This is actually going to help people." In their various experiences, each of these participants shifted toward engaging the role of the imagination as a worthwhile human faculty.

The Nature of the Imagination

When asked for more specific thoughts on the imagination, participants revealed two facets that played an important role in their preaching. They spoke of the imagination as a meaning-making faculty and as a faculty that is concerned with possibilities.

A Meaning-making Faculty

Jeff said, "I talk about [the imagination] in terms of aesthetics. Aesthetics is the felt experience of meaning." This was an important insight for him, especially in the context of the modern West. "In the immanent frame, we don't start with thinking about what's true. We start with what feels true or what feels right or what feels good." Meaning begins with the felt experience of something before people think about it. Once meaning is experienced, "we backfill with intellectual justifications for the way we feel. You can lament the fact that people don't start with truth, but this is where people are." Jeff said he sees the aesthetic nature of the imagination as an opportunity. "We can still preach the gospel. We just have to be imaginative, because imagination is the faculty with which we have the felt experience of meaning."

Gilbert contrasted the pictures people hold with the ideas or beliefs they hold. This was an important distinction for him. Of addressing listeners in the immanent frame, he said, "I'm not addressing just ideas, but pictures—images we have; how someone imagines Jesus, or imagines Paul, or imagines how a Christian is supposed to live." The images are distinct from the ideas, which are formed because of the images or pictures. "Behind or beneath their idea there's this picture." Gilbert talked about different pictures people might have of the Apostle Paul. "Paul is misogynistic; he's exclusive, intolerant, homophobic." He said that to engage people in the immanent frame, it is important to be aware that people begin with a picture and then reason from there. He said that awareness affects the way he approaches preaching. "Beneath their reasoning is a picture of something. If we go straight at their will, trying to reason, but then don't address the picture, it's kind of futile. We can't reason accurately or helpfully with a person's will till we know what the [picture] is."

When asked his thoughts on the imagination as a meaning-making faculty, Jack

talked about the aesthetic realm of nature as a gateway to transcendence. He called this

"the transcendent possibilities inside the immanence of things." He affirmed the scientific

method as one way of engaging nature but warned, "The reductive, material way of

accounting for this [universe] may be true as far as it goes, but it's not the whole picture."

Nature "speaks" and thus gives meaning to transcendence. He gave an example of

someone who might say, "There was an amazing sunset last night," or, "I was out

walking with my friends and then I suddenly felt there's more, but I don't know what that

more is." Jack spoke of those experiences as entryways to transcendence for people in the

immanent frame. He said he wants to help people make sense of those transcendent

experiences. He said he begins by affirming the reality of nature as the medium, but he

encourages his listeners to pay attention to the message that is coming through that

medium and to ask, "What is coming to me through this? Is there something coming

through that rings a bell or chimes with something deep inside me?" Nature speaks to

meaning beyond immanence, and listening to its voice is an important way of entering

into that meaning.

A Faculty of Possibility

Several participants spoke of the imagination as the faculty concerned with

possibility, the theoretical backdrop for the practice of fostering permission to explore an

alternate picture of reality. Martin said he approaches this faculty in terms of "just

suppose" questions. During sermons, he would say things like, "Just imagine, just

suppose that God really did exist, that Jesus really did walk this earth and get his feet

muddy in the river Jordan. Just suppose that he really did die and that he came back to

life." Martin said he does this because the imagination is designed to conceive of new possibilities. If these things were true, "That's revolution. That just turns everything on its head, and the whole of your life is shaped and perceived differently."

Jeff said he prefers to think about the imagination as the faculty of possibility. He cited a famous journal article that lists thirteen components of the imagination and expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by that number. His reflection led him to seek a simpler yet more holistic way of thinking about the imagination. "I feel like the category of possibility is the most fruitful because it roots us in the real, concrete world. At every moment we are using our imaginations to entertain what's possible." As an example, he said, "So you hear a noise in your house at night. What happens? Your imagination immediately fills in that gap in knowledge with a possibility of what it could be." This capacity is rooted in the image of God in human beings. "The imagination is this faculty that God has given us to live in creation and explore what's possible. It's the very nature of who we are as created, imagining beings." Jeff said this has critical implications for preaching and faith.

> What Christian faith ultimately does is it changes the horizon of what's possible, namely by Jesus entering into human experience, taking our sin upon himself, dying on our behalf, but then rising again. That opens all these new possibilities of hope so that our felt experience of life in the world isn't defined by immanence, and then ultimately cynicism, fear, and despair, but by faith, love, and hope because of the Resurrection.

Jeff explicitly tied the imagination as the human faculty of possibility to the theological distinctives of Christianity exemplified in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The imagination holds the potential for conceiving new possibilities, but when activated through faith in Christ, the imagination changes human experience in the world

from fear and despair to the possibility of hope and love. It is not only the faculty that helps someone come to faith, but it also enables believers to live in faith.

Jack articulated a similar understanding of the imagination, though he expressed it differently. He talked about reading a poem to someone. The poem might contain all kinds of concrete images and pictures, such as grass and daisies, but the grass and daisies the poet imagines are different than the ones the listener imagines. "You are doing more than half the work. You see grass and daisies. They're not the ones the poet saw. They're the ones that you've seen and remembered." The imagined grass and daises are not real, but they are possible because of the work the imagination is doing. The same thing is true with all of God's creation. "God is uttering the poem of the cosmos and of our being within it right now at this minute. But in order to hear it, in order to see where God is, we have to go out to the world actively and imaginatively to perceive it." The active capacity of the imagination made hearing and seeing God possible.

Taking the Long View

The last theme shared by several participants was that engaging the imaginations of people in the immanent frame was a long process. Frame shifts do not typically occur overnight or in one sermon. Gilbert spoke of this process in terms of Jesus taking three years to teach his disciples. Although he said he works hard on each sermon, Gilbert noted, "This is one sermon that matters. But they're going to need sixty-three [sermons] and coffee and conversation and house group. That whole three-year journey."

Walter said, "Part of what I've been learning is being comfortable with the long preaching obedience in the same direction." Sometimes people will have a life-changing experience in a sermon. "It could be very powerful for someone and just what they need

at that point in their journey of faith." But often it takes more time. "Some seed that's planted this Sunday is going to maybe break above ground five years from now." Others mentioned the same thing. Jeff said, "I think that the effect of preaching is not seen so much in individual sermons, but in the cumulative effect on a congregation's imagination over the course of time." Jack commented, "It's part of a long conversation."

Summary of the Role of the Imagination

The second research question sought to understand how preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts. The first theme that surfaced was valuing the imagination. Most participants identified a time early in their preaching careers when they made a conscious decision to begin engaging the imagination. Often this decision was made from within a religious or ministry tradition that might second-guess such an approach.

The second theme concerned the nature of the imagination. Two sub-themes emerged. First, participants viewed the imagination as a meaning-making faculty. People do not begin with truth and reason. They begin with a felt experience of meaning or a picture of something, and then reason from there. Preaching to the imagination involves being aware of this dynamic and preaching accordingly.

Second, participants conceived of the imagination as a faculty of possibility. Its nature is to fill in knowledge gaps, such as finding the cause of a mysterious noise, or to envision new possibilities, such as how life would change if Christ rose from the dead.

The last theme was the necessity of taking a long view on frame shifts. When they occur, it is typically not in one sermon but over the course of several months or years.

Challenges of the Immanent Frame

The third research question explored the challenges of preaching to people in the immanent frame. Participants identified several challenges in their responses. While nuanced in different ways and with different language, these challenges fell within two primary areas: 1) The felt distance of transcendence, and 2) An instrumental approach to life and faith.[287]

The Felt Distance of Transcendence

Martin spoke directly to this challenge. "It's not that one necessarily rejects the possibility of the transcendent existing. It's the fact that if you are confined to the immanent frame, you have no means by which to reach it, let alone comprehend it." He told the story of his conversation with a young man named James. James was a stock trader with a background in physics. Martin asked him if he would ever consider praying, if only as an experiment to see what might happen. James said, "Why would I do that? That's utterly inconsistent. I don't believe that there's a God. There's no point in praying. I'm not going to do that." Martin commented, "He was just so inured in this frame that it wasn't even a matter of taking a risk. It was just stupid." Martin also confessed that the felt distance of transcendence affected his own life. "I might pray. But because of my secularity, even as a believer of now thirty years, I don't honestly, in my heart of hearts, expect God to do something."

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[287] The term "instrumental" reflects the predominant language in the literature, especially Taylor, and emphasizes the objective attitude or posture toward the world and God. This instrumental approach could also be called "utilitarian," which emphasizes the subjective goals of humanity within the immanent frame. Both nuances are reflected in the literature and interviews.

Gilbert expressed similar thoughts. "What are some challenges? Number one: being able to imagine the supernatural is profoundly difficult." He named "apathy" and "boredom" as ways this difficulty manifests itself and elaborated by referring to early twentieth-century author G.K. Chesterton. "Chesterton said we need fairy tales to remind us of the true tale. We have to be helped to wonder again so we can come back to the real world." When the natural world loses its wonder, people have a difficult time imagining any wonder or transcendence beyond it. Gilbert gave the example of a person who denies seeing any evidence for God. "What that means is, 'I discount everything in front of me: a tree, a bird, my nose, my voice, color, the sun, none of that counts. I discount all of that,' and now say, 'Where's God?'"

As a result, one of the challenges is to regain a sense of wonder at the world and recover a capacity for imagining transcendence. Gilbert quoted Chesterton again: "He said the imagination isn't to settle facts, but to make facts wonders again, to see what's in front of us." This view of the imagination wasn't "imaginary" but the opposite. This view of imagination was "to wake us up to what's already there and we don't see anymore, to live as if there's an actual devil, that angels exist, that you and I are seen by more than muscle and bone." Echoing Martin's comments, Gilbert said this challenge exists for himself and other Christians "because I'm in this immanent frame too. And so are you."

Jeff talked about Charles Taylor's conception of secularity and said, "The optionality and triviality of faith makes it really hard to get people to seriously consider it not as something that is surface, but something that is deep." When faith has been reduced to an option, Jesus has also been reduced. Thus, during a sermon, "you might have somebody who really likes what you're saying, but just sort of adds it, in the same

way we might talk about another culture where Jesus gets added to the pantheon of gods rather than being Lord of all."

Jeff expanded on this challenge for preaching. "Whenever I get up to preach, I know that there's these competing things that people are feeling out in the congregation." Many people are looking for an affirmation of the way they are already living without reference to God. "They want to hear, 'Everything you believe is true. The way you're living is right. You're on the right side of history.' It's almost like going to church becomes the self-justifying sociological thing." This is a frame for spiritual experience that is "completely immanent rather than meeting with the living God." As a result, Jeff said he looks for ways to cultivate what he called "holy listening." "You're looking for the voice of God to show up, coming through the crack of the immanent frame. I'm trying to facilitate those experiences." Part of the challenge is the lack of expectation. Transcendence does not feel real. "Breaking through the numbness of [the] immanent frame is the number one challenge. Preachers have to be thinking, 'How do I create a space or handle the text in such a way that the voice of God is heard?'"

Jack mentioned a similar challenge for preaching to the immanent frame. He said that for "people who are really in the immanent frame and a secular age," it is difficult to talk about transcendence. "All that God talk no longer makes sense because they've been told almost before they were born that, 'You can't make sense, you can't use that language.'" As a result, the way people read the Bible is impacted by the way they "read" creation. Jack put it this way:

> What happened with the immanent frame is that instead of reading the world in this multivalent, polyvocal way in which yes, it had its materiality, but it also meant so much more, and the Spirit is speaking through it, we stopped doing that. If we were to think of the world as a

text, we're just reading it literally, right? We're not allowing anything else to happen. And that became the dominant way of reading the world.

People used to think about the world as an enchanted place created by God. The Holy Spirit could speak to people through creation, and people were open to that. Since the Enlightenment, people read the world literally, in a way that no longer admits the possibility of a transcendent voice coming from beyond the world.

Jack said this way of thinking about the world impacts the way people think about the Bible and faith in general. "Once people have accepted the immanent frame, but they still want to keep their faith, they start trying to read their Bible in the immanent frame, as some sort of A-level science textbook dropped from heaven." Therefore, one of the challenges is to help people recapture the earlier way of reading the Bible. "One of the things we have to do is help Christians read the Bible as richly as it used to be read before the Enlightenment."

Poetry is helpful because it trains people to read a text imaginatively rather than simply analyze it. Jack said he believes the Bible is meant to be interpreted symbolically as well as literally. That does not mean rejecting the historicity of miracles or supernatural events. "I'm quite conservative about Scripture. I believe all the miracles happened. I'm not interested in explaining away. I'm not interested in using symbolic accounts of the Resurrection to say there wasn't a Resurrection." Jack referenced theologians like Jerome and Luther who advocated for the historicity of the miraculous events in Scripture, but who also encouraged deeper symbolic readings. He pointed out that in the preface to his Latin translation of the Bible, Jerome called Moses a poet. "The first person who labored to give the Bible to ordinary people prefaced the whole thing by

saying, 'For God's sake, recognize this as poetry,' and fortunately he lived in a world where everybody would go, 'Yay, poetry.'"

An Instrumental Approach to Life and Faith

A few participants explained that the immanent frame produced a self-sufficient, instrumental approach to life and faith. Walter said, "I ran up time and time again against that sort of self-help framework, which I think is part of the immanent frame." Taking a self-help approach to sermons was something he wrestled with, and he often felt pressure from other leaders in the church to take the preaching in that direction. "Even among leadership, [they were] talking about 'How can we have some more felt-need sorts of series?'" This question flows out of the felt distance of transcendence. While he acknowledged the need to "connect God's story to the real needs of people," Walter said this challenge leads to a different starting point oriented around "bigger-picture commitments." He wondered, "Are we showing up to church so our needs can be met, or are we showing up to recognize we have no idea what our needs are—to get help for ourselves or lose ourselves in God?"

Going into greater detail, Walter said the immanent frame creates an instrumental way of looking at life that is oriented around a problem/solution axis. "This isn't just about church. This is about the culture and society in which we participate." Someone might go to work five days a week, and the whole week "they are immersed in problem/solution. 'We are solving for us. I am solving for me. What works best for me?' That is the x in this equation." He explained how this way of navigating life impacts the way people look at all of reality, including God. "If you're immersed in that, it's hard to shift gears into something different. It's not about the problem and solution. It's really

about being with and encountering each other and God." He said the challenge was to shift away from a problem/solution orientation to one that is focused more on "mystery and participation." "How have we been present to one another and to God? What have we paid attention to? How have we encountered or been encountered by mystery?"

Martin said that the immanent frame produces a self-sufficient approach to life. "I'm so used to living day to day without depending on anyone, let alone any God, and life is sort of okay, we sort of muddle through. And I think that's one of the challenges, that we can kind of make it work." He also said this approach affects everyone in the modern West, regardless of their spiritual or religious beliefs. "One of the challenges from [Charles] Taylor is he exposes how even for lifelong churchgoers, and people of any faith, any sort of belief system, if we are fully immersed in the West, then that is how we feel."

Jeff observed that people today are desperate for hope, but it needs to be a "costly hope," rather than a "cheap hope that's found in clichés." He said he saw people putting up signs during the pandemic that said things like, "God's got this." While he agreed theologically, he also doubted whether it was pastorally sensitive. He noted, "You can rarely fit pastorally-sensitive things on signs and bumper stickers." He noticed the presence of questions like, "Is there hope?" and "Where is hope going to come from?" He noted that one of the challenges of the immanent frame is that it produces a self-sufficient basis for life and hope, a "cheap hope… hope based on a calculation of the consequences." People intuitively sense the futility of that hope, Jeff said, and then expressed a desire to help people explore the "idea of maybe there's something better than being able to forecast the future and know everything that's going to happen." This

hope was related to his conception of the imagination as a faculty of possibility. In the immanent frame, transcendence feels distant or implausible, he explained, but human imagination still longs for "a deep hope that is not grounded on [the] calculation of experts, but that is grounded in the character of God and the faithfulness of God."

Summary of Challenges of the Immanent Frame

The interviews revealed several challenges for preaching to people in the immanent frame. These challenges were expressed in different ways, but they fell within two main areas: 1) The felt distance of transcendence, and 2) An instrumental approach to life and faith.

In the immanent frame, God and transcendence may be admitted as possible, but they are felt as distant and implausible. Participants described this feeling in several ways, such as 1) The inability to pray, even as an experiment, because the idea of God was incomprehensible; 2) A lack of wonder at the natural world, resulting in the dismissal of anything beyond the world; 3) The optionality and triviality of belief, which diminishes any sense of God as a being who might break through and speak to someone; and 4) A flat, literal way of "reading" creation, which translates into a flat, literal way of reading the Bible that reduces it to a science textbook, rather than a living encounter with God. They noted that Christians are just as susceptible to these dynamics as anyone else.

They said that the felt distance of transcendence resulted in an instrumental approach to life and faith. This approach manifested as a problem/solution approach to life that conceived of God in the same way, rather than as a mystery to be encountered along with others. It could be a self-sufficient orientation that discounted God's action in

the world. Or it could be a cheap hope based on human calculation and expertise, rather than a hope based on a transcendent God who acts in this world.

Evaluating Effectiveness

The final research question determined how preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners. All the respondents said this question was one of the hardest to answer. Nonetheless, they described ways of getting feedback that came from two primary sources: 1) Meetings with other leaders in the church, and 2) Informal feedback from the congregation.

Meetings with Church Leaders

Bart said he meets weekly with a group of pastoral interns who preach in the church on a regular basis. Whoever was preaching the upcoming Sunday would share ideas and get feedback. They also used that time to evaluate the previous Sunday's sermon. At first, it was difficult for the younger preachers to offer sermon evaluations because Bart is an older, more experienced preacher, the pastor of the church, and a homiletics professor. Bart said, "It was hard for them to give me feedback because they were kind of intimidated. They're like, 'Man, he's been pastoring 20 years.' But once they were doing it for a while, it became more comfortable for everyone." That included Bart, who was not accustomed to having regular feedback from younger people. At first it was hard for him. "Almost always there's something I didn't think about that they will bring up. It's humbling. Sometimes your feelings get hurt, but overall it's great."

Walter met regularly with other pastors in his church, and those meetings included time talking about the sermons. They discussed upcoming sermon series ideas.

If Walter had an idea to try something, he might say, "Hey, I'm going to be doing this in worship services. What do you think?" Even if other leaders were not sure, they would often try an idea out, and then evaluate its effectiveness. This process was helpful for Walter, because the other pastors had insight into the experience of people. "They had a pulse on people that I didn't have. So, hearing from them was also hearing a whole different segment of the congregation." This regular feedback proved immensely helpful. "That kind of iron sharpening iron on a weekly basis was really good."

Gilbert said he gets feedback from his staff as well, not in a formal meeting every week, but he will frequently engage his staff with questions. Sometimes he did this ahead of time, to see how people responded to an idea. He might say, "I'm thinking about suggesting this. What do you think?" Other times, he would ask for responses to a sermon that was just preached. "I'll ask our staff team how they experienced something. Not formal, but just sort of intentional questions with our team. I don't do that every week, but if there's something I'm not sure about, or wondering how they received it."

Informal Feedback from the Congregation

Informal feedback from the congregation was the most common means of evaluating the effectiveness of preaching with regard to frame shifts. Jack described a Good Friday service when a man visited the church with his mother, who was a member of the congregation. This man did not profess to be a Christian, but he made a point of talking to Jack immediately after the service to tell him that the illustration he used to explain Christ's death helped him think about it in a way he had never thought about it before. This experience had a profound impact on Jack, encouraging him to explore similar ways of preaching. While an experience like that was not the norm, he said those

kinds of conversations continue to be the most helpful ways of evaluating his preaching. People might not be very detailed in their feedback at first. Occasionally somebody will say, "That was helpful." If they do not offer anything specific, he would ask whether any particular part was helpful. Jack cautioned that sermons address areas of life that are intimate and often painful for people, and he emphasized the need to respect that intimacy and not push people too hard for information. "The more you deal with the deeply interior stuff in this kind of strange public intimacy of the sermon, the more you have to respect people's need to take that home and do their own thing with it." Sometimes, after sitting with something for a while, people will return for more conversation. He said, "The best comments on sermons for me come casually two or three weeks later when somebody really thought about it, and they want to come back and talk to you about it."

Bart said that sometimes people offered feedback to his interns, knowing that they have his ear and would relay the information: "Sometimes people will tell the guys, and they'll tell me, because they know we meet every week." Other times, people will communicate with him via email. "I get emails on Monday. Oh, yeah. Some people tell me [stuff] straight up. Most of those are encouragements. But then there's also challenges." He mentioned a sermon he had done recently on sexuality. "There were a couple [of] people that challenged some stuff I said. They did it very respectfully and it was so good. It was really helpful."

Walter said that being in relationship with people over time has taught him a lot. "The best feedback has just been through relationship with people over the long haul." Sometimes in those relationships, the talk will turn to the sermons: "As I walk with

people and see how God is working in their lives, often sermons come up. It's a good indication for me of what has really resonated and what has not." Other times, he said, hearing people talk about other things in their lives helps him: "Some of the best feedback is listening in the context of conversations that aren't specifically about sermons, but they're just about life and about how people are growing." While he listened to people, Walter said he is often surprised to learn about things that helped people imagine something in a new way. He said:

> I'm kind of seeing what comes up. And taking note, like, "Oh, this keeps coming up." This is very formative. People's imaginations were engaged in a whole new way, and it wasn't even my intention to do that. But it happened. What is it about that, and how can I incorporate that in fitting ways moving forward?

Walter said he practices listening carefully to the people in his congregation, paying attention to the themes and topics that arise. He said he notices what seems to be forming them and helping them, especially taking note of ways their imaginations are engaged. That helped him be more intentional about improving his engagement of the imagination.

Gilbert likewise mentioned the relational nature of receiving feedback from the people in his congregation: "That's the main way. Conversations with people. Informal questions." This idea connects to his comments about being on a three-year journey with people, following Jesus' model with his disciples. Occasionally, people might reach out with a specific comment. "After I preach, from time to time, folks will text me something." But most of the feedback comes in the context of relationships. "Most of the time it's just conversations on Sunday or through the week." Other times someone might relay a comment or conversation that happened in their Bible study. "Someone will tell me, 'It's like pastor said, 'dah, dah, dah,' and then they're talking about something. That helps to get a sense of people, what are they making of it?"

Jeff said one way he has evaluated the effectiveness of his preaching for a frame shift has been to observe the change in the congregation over time. "I think the effect of preaching is not seen so much in individual sermons, but in the cumulative effect on a congregation's imagination over the course of time." Similar to the way Walter takes mental notes during individual conversations, Jeff pays attention to the whole congregation. "Do I see changes in demeanor, changes in the ways that people talk about God, changes in the ways that faith is narrated and approached? Those are the sorts of things I'm looking for." While he received feedback on individual sermons, he said he finds these long-term changes in the congregation most helpful, especially as he looks forward. He said he asks himself, "What has been the cumulative effect over the last six months or the last year?" He said that reflecting on these questions helps him to plan sermon series accordingly.

Summary of Evaluating Effectiveness

Interview participants identified two main ways they received feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of their preaching to facilitate a frame shift in their audience. One avenue was through regular or semi-regular meetings with church staff, during which they will ask questions and seek feedback on the previous Sunday's sermon. They noted they will also suggest new ideas and ask for feedback as a way of gauging the potential effectiveness for an upcoming sermon. The other avenue was relationships with people in the congregation. That feedback might come through email or text messages. The most common way was to be in regular, long-term relationships with congregants. Sometimes conversations with congregants might address a particular sermon. More often, preachers heard what their congregants were experiencing and how they were

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growing as a result of their involvement at church. This feedback helped the participants to get an idea of how their preaching was shaping their congregations' imaginations, and to evolve and adjust accordingly.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the findings of how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. The interview data was organized according to the four research questions. The first question explored practices and methods for engaging the imagination. Participant responses revealed three primary aims. The first aim was clarifying distorted pictures of Christianity. Preachers reported three practices: naming the distorted pictures, generating empathy with those pictures, and addressing questions that arise because of those pictures. The second aim was to open doors to transcendence. Two methods for doing this were identifying tension points and fostering permission to explore alternate pictures. The third aim was clarifying the Christian picture. Three practices emerged for doing this: using lived-body detail, using subversive or surprising pictures of the gospel, and paying attention to artistic elements in the sermon.

The second research question examined how preachers think about the role of imagination in preaching for frame shifts. Three themes emerged in the interviews. First, the participants each had a point in their preaching career when they became aware of the necessity of valuing the imagination. Second, most participants spoke about the imagination as a meaning-making faculty and as a faculty that is concerned with possibility. Third, participants discussed engaging the imagination as something that takes place over a long period of time, months and even years.

The third research question explored the challenges of preaching to people in the immanent frame. Two primary challenges surfaced in the interviews. The first was the felt distance of transcendence. The second was an instrumental approach to life and faith.

The fourth research question determined ways that preachers evaluate the effectiveness of their preaching for frame shifts. One way was through regular or semi-regular meetings with other church staff. The other way was through long-term relationships with congregants.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. In chapter two, the literature review gained insight into this question by examining three literature areas: a biblical theology of the imagination, the experience of the immanent frame, and the field of imaginative apologetics. In chapter four, interviews with six practitioners revealed common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions.

The following research questions guided the research and interviews.

1. What are some practices preachers use to engage the imagination toward an open transcendent frame?

2. How do preachers think about the role of the imagination in preaching for frame shifts?

3. How do preachers describe the challenges they encounter in helping people in the immanent frame make sense of the gospel?

4. How do preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from six preachers. The literature review examined three primary areas of research: a

biblical theology of the imagination, the experience of the immanent frame, and imaginative apologetics.

The first literature area reviewed was a biblical theology of the imagination. While providing some helpful parameters, lexical study of biblical usage of the word "imagination" is limited by the lack of direct cognates in Hebrew or Greek, as well as the historical and cultural biases against the word reflected in the predominantly negative translations. Theological reflection on the imagination throughout history explores its origin, nature, and potential. Human imagination reflects the image of God in humanity. It is a synthesizing faculty that takes various sensory data and integrates them to picture reality as a whole and makes meaning out of it. It is visual and verbal and therefore functions cognitively as well as affectively. As part of the biblical heart, it works in concert with other human faculties such as the mind and the will. It is a crucial faculty for moral knowledge and plays a pivotal role in the operation of faith. Moreover, it provides the capacity for creative works of art – paintings, sculpture, poetry, literature, and music – that can awaken the imagination and faith of others. The survey revealed three other distinctives. First, many theologians of the imagination interact deeply and regularly with secular philosophy, challenging it in places and agreeing with it in others. Second, many prominent theologians of the imagination are themselves artists, writers, and poets. Third, even those theologians and philosophers who are not artists make note of the inherently creative nature of the imagination and affirm its potential for assisting others toward faith.

The second literature area reviewed was the experience of the immanent frame. The immanent frame is a social imaginary that orients the pursuit of fullness entirely

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within the natural world. The plausibility of transcendence is screened out by the addition of new ideas and stories that provide a powerful background picture against which new beliefs and social practices are formed, especially the quest for authenticity.

However, the immanent frame does not prevent people from believing in God. It can be inhabited as open or closed to transcendence. Furthermore, open or closed positions can be held in one of two ways. A "take" recognizes the existence of other positions and even feels some of their force, as in the Jamesian open space. A "spin" cannot imagine the existence, much less the viability, of any position other than its own. One of the primary forces that sustain a closed spin is the influence of subtraction stories, which narrate modernity as the process of subtracting religious belief from society, so that what is left is a natural human propensity for science, reason, and progress.

This framework holds implications for preaching in the modern West. One is the tendency of the church to inhabit an open spin, resulting in an overly rationalistic anthropology that discounts the imagination as a valid means of discerning truth. A challenge presented by the closed spin is the inherent difficulty of seeing the hidden beliefs and faith assumptions at the heart of its self-understanding. There is also the default approach to fullness that frames it entirely within immanence, rendering people insensitive to their need for God. Finally, the quest for authenticity adopts an instrumental stance toward everything outside the buffered self, including God. Christian scholars and practitioners affirm a moral ideal within authenticity itself, necessitating the ability to critique the distortions while nurturing a biblical understanding and experience of authenticity.

The third literature area reviewed was the recent field of imaginative apologetics, which seeks to address the apologetic challenges posed by the immanent frame. In the modern West, Christianity makes increasingly less sense to people. Preachers can no longer assume a shared understanding of concepts like God, moral truth, sin, or salvation. Apologetic methods based on reason, logic, and rational argument are helpful but insufficient for addressing the background pictures that form the imaginations of those in the immanent frame. Therefore, many scholars call for an approach that treats the imagination as a crucial factor in conversion.

J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have played a significant role in the development of imaginative apologetics. Tolkien's concept of Recovery describes an experience in a Secondary World that generates a renewed vision, which is then carried back into the Primary World, transfiguring the way it is seen and experienced to accord more faithfully with reality. Another important function for Tolkien is eucatastrophe, the unexpected turn in stories that transforms defeat into joy, and points people toward the ultimate eucatastrophe of Christ's incarnation and resurrection. Lewis's contribution centers around the pivotal role of imagination in his conversion, his efforts to integrate reason and imagination, and the power of myth as a medium of truth.

Building on these foundations, imaginative apologetics orients its project around various goals, such as the awakening of inherent human desires, the recovery of a Christian vision of reality, and the narration of various cultural stories and how they compare and contrast with the gospel story. While the field of imaginative apologetics is developing goals and methods for communicating the gospel in the immanent frame, the lack of attention to preaching necessitates further research.

In addition to the literature review, six preachers were interviewed for their responses to four research questions. The first question explored practices and methods for engaging the imagination. Participant responses revealed three primary aims. The first aim was clarifying distorted pictures of Christianity. Preachers reported three practices: naming the distorted pictures, generating empathy with those pictures, and addressing questions that arise because of those pictures. The second aim was to open doors to transcendence. Two methods for doing this were identifying tension points and fostering permission to explore alternate pictures. The third aim was clarifying the Christian picture. Three practices emerged for doing this: using lived-body detail, using subversive or surprising pictures of the gospel, and paying attention to artistic elements in the sermon.

The second research question examined how preachers think about the role of imagination in preaching for frame shifts. Three themes emerged in the interviews. First, the participants all had points in their preaching careers when they became aware of the necessity of valuing the imagination. Second, most participants spoke about the imagination as a meaning-making faculty and as a faculty that is concerned with possibility. Third, participants discussed engaging the imagination as something that takes place over a long period of time, months and even years.

The third research question explored the challenges of preaching to people in the immanent frame. Two primary challenges surfaced in the interviews. The first was the felt distance of transcendence. The second was an instrumental approach to life and faith.

The fourth research question determined ways that preachers evaluate the effectiveness of their preaching for frame shifts. One way was through regular or semi-

regular meetings with other church staff. The other way was through long-term

relationships with congregants.

Discussion of Findings

A survey of the findings reveals several areas of agreement between the literature

and interviews. The most important are discussed below, along with some surprising

findings, findings that surfaced tension between the literature and interviews, and

findings that revealed gaps between the interviews and the research questions.

Areas of Agreement

The Nature and Challenges of the Immanent Frame

This study began with the observation that preaching the Christian faith in the

modern West comes with many challenges. Religious participation is in decline.[288] The

failures of the Christian church are foregrounded.[289] Christianity is seen as one of many

equally viable spiritual options, and often the least desirable.[290] Most of all, the

conceptual categories and theological doctrines of the Christian faith make less sense in

the modern West.[291] These phenomena are a result of the advent of the immanent frame.

It is a testament to the cogency of Taylor's work that there is substantial agreement

between the literature and the interview participants about the nature and challenges of

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[288] "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace."

[289] Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*.

[290] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 30.

[291] Keller, *How to Reach*, 6.

the immanent frame. A few areas in particular hold special importance for the preaching task.

The Unavoidability of the Immanent Frame

The first is the unavoidability of the immanent frame for everyone who lives in the modern West.[292] This is true regardless of the presence or professed absence of spiritual beliefs and practices because the immanent frame is more concerned with the conditions of belief than the beliefs or practices themselves.[293] Authors and scholars such as Smith, Noble, and Root agree on this.[294] This was experientially validated by the interview participants, for their congregants as well as themselves. Christians – transcendent framers – sitting in the pews and preaching in the pulpit are just as susceptible as spiritually uncommitted immanent framers. The immanent frame seeps into every pore of listeners' imaginations. Therefore, the preacher's task is bigger than addressing those who consciously identify as secular. The immanent frame is a powerful picture that takes everyone captive to some degree.

The Impact of the Immanent Frame

A second area of importance is the impact of the immanent frame. The literature and interviews revealed three primary ways this impact manifests itself. The first way is the felt distance of transcendence. Inhabitants of the modern West live in a world that

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[292] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 543–44.

[293] Taylor, 4–5.

[294] Smith, *How (Not)*, 93; Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 56–57; Root, "Faith Formation," 132.

often feels flat, empty, and bereft of mystery and wonder.[295] Even for those who profess

belief in God, there is little expectancy of encountering God or of God intervening in the

world. The preachers interviewed reported similar experiences within their congregations

and among themselves. Jeff said, "Breaking through the numbness of [the] immanent

frame is the number one challenge." Martin admitted, "I might pray. But because of my

secularity, even as a believer of now thirty years, I don't honestly, in my heart of hearts,

expect God to do something."

The second impact of the immanent frame is through an instrumental approach to

fullness. A dead, mechanistic, cause-and-effect view of the universe reduces it to a tool to

be manipulated in the service of goals focused on flourishing in this world only, such as

economic prosperity or the relief of physical suffering.[296] An instrumental approach to

fullness can nonetheless include God, and this was affirmed by the participants. Walter

said he "ran up time and time again against that sort of self-help framework." Jeff spoke

of the need to counter instrumentalism with "a deep hope that is not grounded on [the]

calculation of experts."

A third impact of the immanent frame is the quest for authenticity. While

authenticity represents one of many potential goals in an instrumental approach to

fullness, the literature highlighted it as the goal par excellence, which carries a moral

urgency unequalled in the modern West.[297] Although expressivist ideals have been

present in Western culture since the Romantic period, they were always surrounded by

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[295] Smith, *How (Not)*, vii–viii.

[296] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 370; Guite, *Mariner: A Theological Voyage*, 251.

[297] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 29.

other moral ideals. Taylor says the "new twist" is that the moral ideal of authenticity now "stands alone where it used to be surrounded and contained by others."[298] Identity formation is the supreme, inviolable, and all-consuming project of the modern West, a reality affirmed throughout the literature.[299] This affirmation showed up in the interviews. Even though Western culture is awash in "thin" versions of authenticity, Jeff said, "We have to grant the premise of authenticity, that it is better to have a life that is deeply owned, that you have fought for it and won the meaning." Addressing the quest for authenticity is a primary focus in Jeff's preaching. Gilbert also mentioned that authenticity is part of the "fruit of relativism: 'You do you.'" However, this topic did not come up as much I might have expected in the other interviews, especially given its prominence in the literature. This will be discussed more fully below.

Implications for Preaching

A third area of agreement between the literature and the interviews regards the implications of the immanent frame for preaching. One implication is the challenge of preaching within a closed transcendent frame. Seel writes that "the American evangelical church is heavily committed to rational, left-brained ways of thinking and the apologetic approaches that reinforce it."[300] From a theological standpoint, Christians occupy a transcendent frame, but the influence of rationalist thinking inherited from the Enlightenment infiltrates many Christians, including preachers, more deeply than they are

[298] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 484.

[299] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 45; Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 38; Root, "Faith Formation," 132; Smith, *How (Not)*, 85.

[300] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 6; Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 5–6.

aware. Martin saw this influence in "a very reduced, very utilitarian handling of the Bible. We read the Bible so that we get three bullet points of things, a sort of mental checklist of what I have to do this week." Jeff spoke of the danger of preaching as "propositions I'm giving you, because all you need is the right propositions in your brain, and then you will know the right things, and your behavior will change." Both the literature and the interviews surfaced the need for preaching that goes beyond the rationalism of the closed transcendent frame and helps people shift to an open transcendent frame. Not only would such preaching facilitate deeper spiritual transformation, but it would also help transcendent framers more empathetically and effectively engage their friends, neighbors, family, and co-workers who are skeptical about Christianity.

The literature and interviews also agreed regarding the challenges of preaching to those in the closed immanent frame. Taylor asserts that the closed immanent frame— what he calls a "closed spin"—produces many tension points for its adherents, but they are not usually able or willing to acknowledge and face them. Their core assumptions "remain at the level of a picture." This is crucial because as long as their assumptions remain pictures, "they cannot be challenged; indeed, alternatives to them are impossible to imagine. That's what it means to remain captive."[301] Jack said that Enlightenment philosophy has robbed modern people of "something that was their natural birthright… this intuitive, spiritual way of knowing." This spiritual way of knowing "has been removed from people so effectively that they don't even know it's been removed." As a result, when Jack preaches, he is always "looking for ways to liberate people."

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[301] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 565–66.

The open immanent frame presents a different kind of challenge. While inhabitants of this frame are more willing to acknowledge the tension points in their pictures of reality and are open to faith and spirituality in ways that closed immanent framers are not, they are deeply formed by the instrumental approach to fullness, especially the primacy of authenticity. What matters most is not whether a given religion or spiritual path is true, but whether it "works for them" in their identity formation project.[302] Walter noted the pressure of producing self-help sermons. Jeff spoke about the challenge of helpfully addressing authenticity. Here the immanent frame's various areas of impact come together most clearly. In a world in which transcendence is felt to be distant, faith is experienced as optional. It is therefore reduced to a consumer product whose value lies in its ability to help someone experience fullness and authenticity in this world. As Burton writes, "Consumer-capitalist culture offers us not merely necessities but identities. Meaning, purpose, community, and ritual can… be purchased on Amazon Prime."[303] The transcendence of God, the reality of sin, the necessity of conversion, the efficacy of the Crucifixion, and the historicity of the Resurrection are filtered through this frame, instrumentalizing and trivializing them. What makes addressing immanence even more difficult is the invisibility of the frame itself. It is like a veil that covers or a fog that obscures. A picture does indeed hold people captive.

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[302] Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 38–39.

[303] Burton, *Strange Rites*, 58.

Engaging the Immanent Frame

With the challenges of the immanent frame and some implications for preaching clearly stated, I can examine other areas of agreement between the literature and the interviews that address ways of engaging the imagination within the immanent frame.

The Hidden Power of Pictures

There is substantial agreement on the nature of the imagination: it is a meaning-making faculty and a faculty of possibility.[304] The imagination makes meaning via background pictures that are often unexamined and unacknowledged,[305] although when clearly and empathetically articulated, they can be quickly owned and affirmed. When Gilbert articulates a picture of the Apostle Paul as a "Republican in a suit," his conversation partner can immediately recognize that picture because Gilbert has named something from the background, bringing it forward. While these pictures are visual, there is an unavoidably verbal aspect to them.[306] In fact, it is precisely the verbal articulation of the picture that summons it forth from the hazy background of someone's imagination and makes it come alive in the foreground of their consciousness. Where there is a "failure of words," the picture remains unexamined and therefore difficult to acknowledge.[307]

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[304] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 24; Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 89–90.

[305] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

[306] Vanhoozer, *Pictures*, 26.

[307] Schnekloth, "Living and Managing," 157.

That said, articulating a picture with words does not guarantee it will be recognized as a picture, especially if it is held within a Taylorian spin. For instance, coming-of-age narratives picture religious faith as childish and immature, whereas religious skeptics face the death of God with "courage," because they believe that is the mature or adult thing to do in the face of brute scientific facts. The words articulate a picture, but it is not recognized as such. In describing the loss-of-faith movement during the Victorian era, Taylor writes: "What happened here was not that a moral outlook bowed to brute facts. Rather we might say that one moral outlook gave way to another."[308]

We can see the same dynamic at work today with the catchphrases and slogans that carry vast moral and anthropological visions in a mere handful of words. "You do you." "Just be yourself." "Who's to say what's right and wrong?" "Follow your heart." "The only thing that matters is what you think of yourself." "Trust the science." The words articulate a picture that exerts power precisely because it is not recognized as a picture but simply an expression of something that should be obvious to anyone mature or sensible enough to face the facts. This is the hidden power of pictures. Therefore, those preaching to the modern West must find the words to articulate the pictures of the immanent frame, reveal those pictures as pictures, and counter them with gospel pictures. The emphasis on this need in the interviews testifies to the hidden power of pictures and the necessity of effectively working with them. The next sub-section will explore this more deeply.

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[308] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 563.

The Potential of Pictures

The interview participants identified ways they think about, and practices for engaging, the imagination. The primary practices are 1) Clarifying distorted pictures, 2) Opening doors to transcendence, and 3) Clarifying Christian pictures. These practices overlap with the literature on imaginative apologetics, especially the orienting goals of 1) Awakening of desire, 2) Recovery of vision, and 3) Narration of stories. This section will discuss the findings using the orienting goals of imaginative apologetics, as the participants' practices are demonstrated throughout those goals.

Awakening of Desire

One shared goal between the practitioners in the literature and the interview participants is awakening a desire for what Christianity offers. Humans can only desire what they can imagine. Because the imagination is a faculty of meaning and possibility, it is essential to engage the imagination to awaken people in the immanent frame to the desirability of Christianity. This means working with a picture they already hold that is rooted in creational longings such as beauty, goodness, truth, love, justice, meaning, and hope. Even though they may be distorted, veiled, or clouded by the immanent frame and human sin, these longings remain present in every human being.[309]

Imaginative apologists look for ways to demonstrate the desirability of Christianity, or to "awaken… homesickness for the absolute."[310] These apologists use the media of stories, art, poetry, and film. The preachers interviewed pursue a similar goal in

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[309] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 107.

[310] Gould, *Cultural Apologetics*, 24–25; Milbank, "Apologetics and the Imagination," 33.

a variety of ways. They address questions that arise as a result of the pictures their listeners hold. They also identify tension points between a listener's picture and their experience of reality. Jack held a Goth eucharist service to awaken desire for a deeper understanding of personhood. Walter structured a whole sermon series around the questions people in his congregation were asking about God and humans.

Whatever the method, the focus of this goal is to reach into someone's imagination and stir a desire they already have, a desire that reflects the image of God, and which is held in one or more pictures. The emphasis is not so much on presenting new pictures as on helping people become more conscious of pictures they already have that reveal a desire for the things of God.

Recovery of Vision

A second shared goal between the literature and the participants is generating a Tolkienesque recovery of vision. Bailey writes of the need for what he calls "orienting vision," helping others "see the world through eyes of faith" by translating "that vision into an accessible form."[311] Ordway devotes attention to this goal as well, writing that "We need to help people recover a fresh view of the truth—to see Jesus for the first time, and really see him." People hold distorted pictures of God and the Christian faith. What they need "is to see the idea afresh. Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly when we close the book and re-enter ordinary life."[312] This is what happened to C.S. Lewis when he read MacDonald's *Phantastes*. When he closed the book, the "bright

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[311] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 232–34.

[312] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 88–89.

shadow" of what he encountered there changed the way he looked at the ordinary world, preparing him to receive Christian truth.[313]

This goal surfaced in the interviews. Gilbert spoke of "giving categories for the conversation." This is part of his "You have heard it said, but I say to you" framework. He will name a distorted picture of God or Christianity. "You have heard it said." He will then present a different picture and invite people to explore it. "But I say to you." That might be an encounter with Jesus or a passage from Paul that presents them in an unexpected way and encourages or even shocks someone into entertaining a new picture of Jesus or Paul. Jack talked about being "alert to where people are bumping up against the edges of the immanent frame and feeling uncomfortable." Attending to nature is a particularly effective way that Jack does this. Someone might see a sunset and feel for a moment that perhaps there's "something more." Jack said he wants to help people make sense of these transcendent experiences. He begins by affirming the reality of nature as the medium, but he encourages his listeners to pay attention to the message that is coming through that medium and to ask, "What is coming to me through this? Is there something coming through that rings a bell or chimes with something deep inside?" From the perspective of the person in the immanent frame, this picture feels new and different. From the perspective of the apologist or preacher, it is not new so much as a recovery of a true picture that has been lost or veiled.

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[313] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 181.

Narration of Stories

A third orienting goal of imaginative apologists is what I called the narration of stories. Recognizing humans as narrative-driven beings who live in social imaginaries shaped by stories, imaginative apologists uncover the various stories that compete for allegiance and place them alongside one another for comparison and contrast. Like recovery of vision, the goal is to enter the immanent frame and translate the Christian faith in terms that make sense there. It also contrasts the Christian narrative with the existing narrative, showing its internal difficulties. For instance, Keller compares and contrasts secular and Christian stories about basic human desires throughout *Making Sense of God*.[314] Chatraw employs a similar methodology in *Telling a Better Story*.[315]

There is considerable overlap between stories and pictures. When Taylor talks about social imaginaries, he often does so in terms of pictures that form a background to our thinking and hold us captive.[316] But he also notes that imaginaries are "carried in… stories, legends, etc."[317] So narrating stories also involves curating pictures. Stories are carried in pictures and vice versa. The preachers interviewed showed an inclination to think in similar ways. Jeff talked about using lived-body detail in stories for the sake of "evoking some sort of larger picture." Gilbert observed that Jesus named distorted pictures of God and then contrasted them with a true picture as a way of helping people imagine who God really is. When Jesus says God is a father who gives good gifts and not

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[314] Keller, *Making Sense of God.*

[315] Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story.*

[316] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[317] Taylor, 171–72.

scorpions to his children, "He just set up two… pictures of God and then said, 'He's the one and not the other.'" Gilbert's "You have heard it said, but I say to you" framework is another example of how he thinks in terms of narrating stories or pictures.

Surprising Findings

The Importance of Coleridge

Two findings were surprising to me. The first was the stature and influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in this field. Coming into this study, I expected to discover many theologians, thinkers, artists, and practitioners who had much to say about the imagination. As someone who was relatively familiar with MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis, I was surprised to discover a figure who exerted such a powerful impact on all three of them but had not appeared in any of my earlier studies. Many of their contributions to the field of imagination can be traced directly to Coleridge, and it is hard to imagine their contributions having the same vitality and impact without his influence.

Coleridge was a towering imaginative apologist of his time. Most everything this study has revealed and might seek to accomplish, Coleridge was doing in the early nineteenth century. First, he confronted the zeitgeist of Enlightenment rationalism with a deeply theological and Trinitarian imagination that was all the more effective because of his brilliant mind. Second, he created Secondary Worlds that awakened desire, generated recovery, and narrated stories that subverted the distorted stories of the Enlightenment and invited his readers into a fresh retelling of the gospel. While *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* contains Christian symbolism and themes, they are embedded in non-Christian narrative forms and portrayed with innovative pictures that prevent the poem from being

Christian propaganda but instead re-present the gospel in a unique, beautiful, and unexpected manner. In many ways, *The Rime* is the forerunner of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Third, Coleridge embodied the often tortured and always haunted search for God that characterized the lives of those he was trying to reach in his own time, and those imaginative apologists hope to reach today. His significance is not merely as a distant influence on MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis, but as a giant in his own right and an equal of theirs. He is worth much deeper study for anyone interested in making sense of the gospel in a world in which the gospel no longer makes sense.

Missing Authenticity

The biggest surprise was the absence of more focus on the quest for authenticity in the interviews. Apart from his countless references to it, Taylor devotes a whole chapter to authenticity in *A Secular Age*.[318] It is the primary subject of *The Malaise of Modernity* (also published under the title *The Ethics of Authenticity*).[319] Bailey, Noble, Root, Seel, and Smith all pay considerable attention to it.[320] In light of its prominence in the literature, I expected to hear more from the participants about this aspect of the immanent frame and how they address it in their preaching.

That said, Jeff not only focuses on authenticity in his preaching, but he also approaches it with Taylor's retrieval perspective in mind. In *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor writes that "boosters" and "knockers" are arguing about a debased form of

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[318] Taylor, 473–504.

[319] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*.

[320] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*; Noble, *Disruptive Witness*; Root, "Faith Formation"; Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*; Smith, *How (Not)*.

authenticity; the boosters defend it, and the knockers decry the narcissism and hedonism they see in it.[321] Taylor suggests the whole debate needs to be reframed. Rathan than arguing about the worst manifestations of authenticity, he proposes a work of retrieval. This means that "we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal."[322] There is a worthwhile ideal at stake in authenticity: "a more self-responsible form of life… to live (potentially) a fuller and more differentiated life, because more fully appropriated as our own."[323] Jeff has embraced this work of retrieval and Taylor's view of authenticity. He seeks to highlight the thin versions of authenticity in order to argue for "thicker versions of authenticity." I will examine this topic more fully in the recommendations for practice. At this point it is important simply to note that this was a surprise in the findings.

An Area of Tension

There is a tension that surfaced somewhat within the literature and even more so between the literature and the interviews. It relates to Tolkien's concept of Recovery and to Lewis's memorable phrase, "steal past the watchful dragons." Lewis writes that fairy tales have a unique capacity to bypass certain inhibitions against religion because they are not explicitly religious. Doctrines are not being set forth. The symbols are not Christian symbols. By taking Christian ideas and casting them "into an imaginary world,"

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[321] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 15–16.

[322] Taylor, 72.

[323] Taylor, 74.

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Lewis wondered if the writer "could make them for the first time appear in their real potency. Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could."[324]

As Christian artists, Coleridge, MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis saw poetry, fairy tale, and fantasy as ways of stealing past the watchful dragons. In other words, readers were not necessarily intended to know that the author was picturing aspects of Christianity. But the pictures encountered in the Secondary World were intended to awaken desire and generate recovery of vision in the reader, with the hopes that they might be moved, however slowly, toward Christian faith. In the literature, imaginative apologists make much of this idea as a means of awakening desire, and especially as a means of Recovery. They note the power of art, story, fantasy, myth, poetry, film, and other media to advance the apologetic task. But apologetic conversations have one significant drawback: they are apologetic conversations. That means the subject of Christian faith inevitably arrives at center stage, even if it might wait in the wings temporarily. While the practitioners in the literature advocate a gradual, relational approach, at some point the topic of God and Christ is broached. Before, the watchful dragons may have been slumbering as to the apologist's real intent, but the moment God is introduced into the conversation, they snap to attention.

Thus, there is a tension here for the imaginative apologist. This tension is exacerbated for the preacher. Although there was considerable conversation about stories and pictures, none of the interview participants talked about this tension or ways of addressing it. This could be due to the context and nature of sermons. Preachers expect and are expected to present the Christian faith. Listeners arrive knowing that Christianity

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[324] Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories," 37.

is going to be presented, explained, and advocated. It could be impossible to do any dragon-stealing. Participants did speak about subversion and surprise as ways of presenting, or re-presenting, the gospel to their listeners. But these elements were presented explicitly within a Christian context. This includes, for example, Martin's invitation to imagine the look on Jesus' face, or Bart's encouragement that sonship is more inclusive, not less.

In contrast, how many thousands or even millions of people have read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* multiple times without having a clue that the author was presenting them with the gospel? No one opens a book of fantasy or walks into a Pixar film expecting to be presented with the gospel. People do walk into church expecting that. Most people sitting in the pews, unless they were dragged there against their will, are perhaps at least open to the Christian story. But they may also be bored, jaded, hurt, cynical, smug, or disillusioned with Christianity, so the dragons are on high alert. This will almost certainly be the case for any skeptics in attendance, which presents a different challenge. I will discuss this further, but it is important at this point to name the tension.

A Gap in the Findings

Throughout the interviews, the participants displayed a wealth of wisdom and practical insight as to the challenges of the immanent frame, the role of imagination in frame shifts, and practical ways they attempt to engage the imagination during sermons. Their comments provided an abundance of data regarding the first three research questions. However, there was a gap with regard to the fourth research question: How do

preachers evaluate the degree to which their preaching cultivates a frame shift in their listeners?

While they were able to describe how they get feedback on sermons in general, there was not much information as to how they evaluate whether frame shifts were taking place from the open or closed immanent frame to an open transcendent frame. This is a significant question and represents a major knowledge gap for this study. Jeff said he looks for changes in his congregation over a period of time, say six months. "Do I see changes in demeanor, changes in the ways that people talk about God, changes in the ways that faith is narrated and approached?" Walter noted that conversations with congregants would sometimes surface new questions or ways they had been helped in imagining things differently. Gilbert mentioned conversations and even text messages he will receive that indicate people are processing things differently. There was very little discussion of specific, concrete indicators that a shift had taken place or was in process. What changes might preachers expect to see in the way of behavior, attitude, responses to the preaching, and interactions with others that might signal a frame shift? This kind of information was lacking. If they have no way of evaluating whether a frame shift is occurring or has occurred, it is difficult to know if their theoretical framework and practical methods are making a difference in the imaginations of their listeners. The next section gathers all the data together and offers some recommendations for practice.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings discussed above, I offer the following recommendations, with two provisos. First, none of the recommendations are intended to diminish or replace the necessity of the historic essentials of preaching: accurate exegesis, faithful

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hermeneutics, a holy life marked by the love of Jesus, and unceasing prayer, especially for the presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Second, these recommendations represent nothing new, but I hope they can be an act of retrieval. Ordway calls for a "new approach—or rather, the return to an older, more integrated approach."[325] Bailey looks back to apologists such as Justin, Augustine, Aquinas, and Pascal as reminders that every cultural context confronts the apologist or preacher with "the question of intelligibility."[326] Jack said he wants to recover a mindset, such as existed in Jerome's day, that exclaims, "Yay, poetry!" The need for a contextualized apologetic that engages the imagination is not new. What is new is the immanent frame, a unique social imaginary with questions of intelligibility that have never been faced before, because a "purely self-sufficient humanism" has never been imagined before.[327] With that in mind, the following practices are recommended for preachers seeking to engage the imaginations of listeners in the immanent frame.

First, pastors can learn to think in pictures, not just in theories. Imagination and reason work together. As Lewis wrote, "Imagination… is not the cause of truth, but its condition."[328] Theories, beliefs, worldviews, frameworks, and so on must be engaged, formulated, and advocated. But underneath them, giving meaning and shape to them, are pictures. Every idea, theory, truth claim, slogan, aphorism, tweet, doctrine, or creed has behind it a picture. This includes distorted, deceitful, and false pictures in the immanent

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[325] Ordway, *Apologetics*, 5.

[326] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 7.

[327] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

[328] Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes," 265.

frame as well as true, pure, and honest pictures of the Christian faith. When exegeting an idea in the immanent frame, they can look for the picture behind it. An angry white man in a suit. A courageous skeptic. Likewise, when exegeting a biblical text, pastors can look for the picture informing it, which is often written right into the text. Jesus used pictures all the time. A woman looking for a coin. A seed falling into the ground. Even Paul used pictures throughout his letters. For instance, in Romans 6:1–7:6, he offers pictures of new life in Christ. In 6:1–14, the primary picture is death. In 6:15–23, it is slavery. In 7:1–6, it is marriage. Pictures are the medium of the imagination, so to engage the imagination preachers must learn to look for and think in pictures.

Second, pastors should address the pictures before the theories. Because pictures constitute the "unacknowledged background"[329] within which people form theories, ideas, worldviews, and beliefs, it is important to deal with the pictures before addressing the theories and beliefs behind them. Gilbert emphasized this, saying, "If we go straight at their reason, but don't address the picture, it's kind of futile." Seel noted the tendency of evangelical Christianity to unhelpfully prioritize "rational left-brained ways of thinking."[330] This does not mean preachers should abandon reason or not address intellectual issues. Nor is it an ironclad rule. Addressing the pictures first means giving epistemological priority to the meaning-making function of the imagination as prior to analytic reason.

Third, church leaders should learn to identify the tensions between background pictures and conscious worldviews. People may consciously profess a specific

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[329] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

[330] Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 6.

worldview, but there can be tension between a professed worldview and the various background pictures that animate their imagination. For instance, this could be a closed immanent framer who asserts that human beings are the result of a mindless, unguided, natural process, yet is passionately committed to human rights. Or it could be an open immanent framer who believes that a spiritual path should be freely chosen based not on truth but on "what works for you," yet longs for the rootedness and assurance of a transcendent reality bigger than oneself.

Such people may be completely unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that their conscious thinking is animated by contradictory pictures. Taylor describes the Jamesian open space as a space where one can "feel some of the force of each opposing position."[331] They can recognize their take on things as a picture and grapple with the tensions that arise as a result. The thinking of those who cannot do this "is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one seeing important aspects of reality."[332] The closed immanent framer is not facing the tension between the impersonal indifference of a random universe and personal regard for inherently dignified beings. The open immanent framer is not facing the tension between the subjective instrumentalism of human "free choice" and the objective reality of a transcendent God. At the heart of these tensions are pictures. The resulting worldviews are incoherent but rarely recognized as such. Learning to identify the tension between the picture and the worldview is an important step toward a coherent reconciliation of the two.

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[331] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

[332] Taylor, 551.

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Fourth, when preaching, pastors must labor for the words to articulate the pictures. Because the immanent frame is more concerned with the conditions or lived experience of belief rather than the beliefs or theories themselves, it is inherently inarticulate. The picture remains in the background. Schnekloth describes this challenge when he says, "What is frustrated in the shift to secularity is the opportunity to adequately articulate the complex culture that makes up our new milieu." This is highly technical language. What does it mean? Schnekloth continues, "It's like we have found ourselves in a brand new place, and have a phone available to call our friends, but then can't describe where we are in language anyone can fathom."[333] He has labored for words to describe the picture. Preaching involves a profound laboring for words. As preachers learn to think in pictures, one of the most crucial skills they can cultivate is the ability to find words that clearly, succinctly, and evocatively articulate both the pictures their listeners already hold and the pictures that would help them make sense of the gospel.

Fifth, preachers can learn to distinguish and speak to the various frames in one's audience. Everyone there is an inhabitant of the immanent frame, including the Christians and other transcendent framers. But as Taylor has shown and this study has affirmed, there are different ways of inhabiting the immanent frame. Is someone closed or open immanent? Closed or open transcendent? These are different frames and come with different pictures. Although the immanent frame tends to produce a picture of faith as optional, instrumental, and focused on identity formation, those components are not uniformly experienced in equal measure. Someone in the closed immanent frame might look at anyone who entertains belief in God as insufferably backwards and ignorant.

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[333] Schnekloth, "Living and Managing," 157.

Someone in the open immanent frame could be very open to spirituality but might look at those who identify with a particular religious tradition as dangerous and oppressive. These are different pictures and need to be addressed differently. The open immanent framer does not need endless arguments about why they should believe in God. They do need help understanding the picture they hold of God and what a different picture might feel like. Conversely, the closed immanent framer might simply need to see that they have a picture in the first place and that it is not as obvious as they assumed.[334] Those are different challenges and should be distinguished and addressed accordingly. Learning to think in pictures, to address them first, to identify the tensions, and to labor for the best words will help in that endeavor.

Sixth, pastors can learn to excel in the art of retrieval. In the orienting goal of awakening desire, both the literature and the interviews affirmed the goodness of creational longings that are present in human beings by virtue of being made in God's image. All these longings are debased by sin. However, God's solution through the gospel is not the rejection of these longings, but their redemption. Rejection leads to a gnostic despising of the world and God's creation. Redemption is another way of talking about retrieval. Something can only be debased because there is a worthwhile ideal from which it has fallen. Sickness is debased health. Adultery is debased faithfulness. Slavery is debased liberty.

The Christian gospel is a work of retrieval. Therefore, faithful preaching of the gospel should embrace and model a retrieval mindset. This is a time-honored tradition in

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[334] Seel describes the trap of trying to engage someone in the closed immanent frame on their own terms, rather than seeking to move them toward an open immanent frame. See Seel, Jr., *The New Copernicans*, 68.

Christianity. Bailey, Barrs, Muehlhoff, and Langer are contemporary practitioners.[335]

Retrieval means identifying the moral ideals at the heart of the pictures held by those in the immanent frame, honoring those ideals, and critiquing the distorted forms from the standpoint of the most exalted form of that ideal. For instance, this study identified authenticity as perhaps the most cherished ideal in the modern West. Critics refer to it as narcissistic and hedonistic and dismiss it out of hand.[336] It would be easy, in light of the self-absorbed worship of individual autonomy and self-definition so prevalent in the modern West, for Christian preachers to similarly dismiss it on the basis of such pictures.

Instead, the art of retrieval would suggest looking for the moral ideal animating that picture. At its best, authenticity means being as true as possible to the vision of what one was created to be and taking responsibility for God's call to pursue that vision. The gospel, especially the doctrine of the incarnation, affirms the unique personality and dignity of every individual. Jesus' ubiquitous calls to follow him and "lose your life to save your life" are calls to individuals to take responsibility for the ultimate trajectory of their lives. There is a need to "listen to your heart," but the voice to which each person must attend is that of another, not of self.[337] With this in view, the preacher can begin by naming and affirming a moral ideal that everyone agrees on, or at least can feel the pull of. This opens the door to exploring the picture, including its distortions, rather than simply discarding the ideal along with the distortions. Because the deepest longings reflect the image of God, the art of retrieval can and should be applied to most every ideal

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[335] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*; Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*; Muehlhoff and Langer, *Winsome Persuasion*.

[336] Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*, 16.

[337] Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 50.

held in the modern West, no matter how debased. Such an approach honors and empathizes with the immanent framers in the audience, avoids the divisive rhetoric of "us vs. them," and leads everyone to a deeper level of spiritual understanding and transformation.

Related to retrieval, the seventh recommendation could be called "progressing backwards." This means learning to show, subversively and surprisingly, that Christianity is the historical source of many of culture's most sacred moral ideals, including those that are considered most progressive. LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, consent-based sexual ethics, and other movements and ideals are all considered, or pictured as, modern moral innovations. They are new, unprecedented, and unique. The notion of being "on the right side of history" is a potent moral picture that animates the imaginations of many in the immanent frame. In addition, immanent framers often have a picture of the church as an institution opposed to these things, sadly for good reason. The resulting picture is of a barbaric Christianity being rejected for an enlightened progressivism.

The first way of progressing backwards and engaging the imaginations of those with this picture is naming their picture of the church and honoring their complaint as justified. "You have this barbaric picture. You're right. This is wrong!" Second, progressing backwards means introducing them to some of the many places where the Bible echoes their complaint. "And guess what? This God thinks that's wrong too. Look at what Amos says here. Or what Isaiah says here. Or what Jesus says here. One of the counter-intuitive things about many of our complaints about the church is that God already beat us to the punch." Third, progressing backwards means articulating the moral

picture and asking an historical question about it. "We have this moral ideal that values the inclusion of all ethnic groups, or a woman's right to say 'No' to a man's sexual advances. Have you ever wondered where those ideas come from? How did our culture get here?" Fourth, progressing backwards means inviting the audience to look once again at what Amos, Isaiah, Jesus, or Paul says about the subject. Fifth, it is helpful to enlist any of the many recent historical sources, pointing out if they were written by a non-Christian and therefore someone who is not promoting a Christian agenda. These sources can speak to the audience on behalf of the Christian foundations for personal dignity, human rights, universal ethnic inclusion, care for the oppressed and marginalized of society, consent as a moral requirement for sex, honoring women's dignity and empowering them for leadership, and a host of other "progressive" moral ideals.[338]

Progressing backwards means showing that to get to the highest moral ideals, one must go backwards to the Bible. Doing this subverts the elitist tendency to think of moral innovation as the product of enlightened minds with no connection to the past. It is also a work of Recovery. It generates a new picture of the Bible by showing old things in an unexpected light.[339]

The eighth recommendation is to become a narrator of stories told in pictures.[340]

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[338] For an excellent recent example, see Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

[339] In his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton likens his "discovery" of Christianity as the satisfaction of his deepest moral longings to an English yachtsman who sets out to discover a new island in the South Seas and ends up landing at Brighton Beach in England. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 13–14.

[340] As seen in the literature and interviews, stories and pictures function similarly, but with important distinctions. Stories are more explicit, while pictures form the frequently unacknowledged background. The phrase "a narrator of stories told in pictures" reflects my desire to hold the narrative aspect together with the pictorial aspect, integrating the nuances involved in each.

Addressing and articulating pictures, identifying tensions, doing the work of retrieval, and progressing backwards are important skills that should be developed. But more is required. Suppose a preacher empathetically articulates the picture behind a cherished ideal, retrieves that ideal, critiques some of its distortions, and even shows its historical roots in the Bible. The immanent framer could very easily agree with all of this, perhaps even be deeply moved, and yet remain indifferent to Christianity. There are two reasons for this, both connected to the felt distance of transcendence.

First, while they may accept Christianity as the historical source of the ideal, they may not recognize it as the only possible source due to the background picture of faith as optional. Second, the ideal could still be held within a picture that instrumentalizes it in the service of a greater, unacknowledged ideal: their own identify-formation project. In other words, the ideals are not seen as being in the service of a transcendent God who makes claims on his creatures and sets the goals for their transformation, but in the service of subjective selves who have already determined their own goals for this-world flourishing. Within this picture, even if someone adopts Christianity, it could be simply because "it works for me." "Works" indicates they have instrumentalized it. "Me" indicates they have subjectivized it.

All the recommendations discussed above are focused on working with the pictures of the immanent frame. But as the literature and interviews show, it is also necessary to compare and contrast these pictures with those of the gospel. In addition to effectively and imaginatively articulating the immanent frame's pictures, preachers need to present culturally intelligible pictures of the gospel and weave it all together in the

sermon as part of a larger narrative. Narrative approaches to preaching are not new.[341]

Nor is the idea of narrating competing cultural stories.[342] But one of the biggest findings

of this study is that unacknowledged pictures form the imaginative background from

which conscious worldviews and narratives arise. This recommendation advocates

integrating narrative approaches with a greater awareness of and focus on the

unacknowledged background pictures of the immanent frame. Preachers must give a

great deal of thought to the culturally intelligible pictures that would erode the felt

distance of transcendence and help people in the immanent frame make sense of the

gospel.

   For instance, Taylor argues that part of the background to the modern

instrumental approach to fullness is what he calls "the affirmation of ordinary life." This

includes things like prosperity and the relief of suffering.[343] Economic and social justice

are modern extensions of this. The roots of the affirmations are thoroughly biblical, as

Taylor notes. Preachers can look for ways to frame the gospel as the deepest and best

fulfillment of these affirmations. Another example is authenticity, which has its roots and

fulfillment in Christianity as well. These are two of the biggest questions of intelligibility

in the immanent frame. They should be addressed, but framed in ways that name and

subvert the felt distance of transcendence and awaken desire for the mysterious,

transcendent God who calls people to a fullness that is beyond them. Creation is good,

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[341] Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2002).

[342] Keller, *Making Sense of God*; Chatraw, *Telling A Better Story*.

[343] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 12–14.

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but the center of the new creation is the God who dwells in its midst. Authenticity is good, but the truest self is the one who has lost their obsession with self and is united with Christ. Ordinary life is taken up into eternal life. Mere authenticity falls into the ground and dies but is reborn as a fruitful tree. Preachers' pictures must speak to the old pictures, yet call people "further up and further in" to the true pictures.[344]

The ninth recommendation regards evaluation for frame shifts. While this represents a gap in the findings, I have some recommendations. One way frame shifts become known is when people self-report. C.S. Lewis self-reported when he talked about the baptism of his imagination. The preachers I interviewed had received some valuable information from their congregants in personal conversations. This information helped them evaluate what helped congregants make sense of the gospel. Therefore, when someone tells a preacher, "I appreciated that sermon," the preacher could ask follow-up questions. "Was there anything specific that helped you?" A couple of the participants also told me in post-interview conversations that they have convened smaller groups of people, usually including a meal, for more dialogical discussions outside of Sunday worship. This could be a way of gaining more clarity on what people are thinking about, how they are thinking, and potential ways their thinking may be changing. During such discussions, preachers could ask questions that invite people to share these kinds of things. Another way of evaluating for frame shifts is through various evangelistic or exploratory classes. If participants in those classes are attending worship, this could be a way of learning more about how their lives, thoughts, and behaviors are changing, if at all. Lastly, the standard mark of conversion for centuries has been baptism. In an

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[344] C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1984), 216.

increasingly post-Christian culture, an adult baptism is a powerful sign that someone has experienced a frame shift. Many baptisms are preceded by some level of instruction or conversation. These would make excellent opportunities to learn more about how the baptismal candidate's thinking has changed, what made that change possible, and the degree to which the preaching contributed to that change.

This leads to my tenth and final recommendation: preachers should strive for pictures that generate "esthetic sanction." I have discussed the difficulty of "stealing past the watchful dragons" during a sermon. Preachers do not have the luxury of speaking to an audience oblivious to the preacher's intentions. All the artistic means available of illustrating the gospel inevitably reach ears and hearts that are on high alert. Preachers can try not to poke the dragons and unnecessarily rile them. Through empathy, compassion, humility, respectful language, acts of retrieval, and so forth, they can try to engender as much goodwill as possible. But there is no way to genuinely steal past the dragons without their awareness of the apologetic purpose.

Tolkien writes that Secondary Belief inside a Secondary World is so "enchanted" that no willing suspension of disbelief is necessary. The Secondary World is so real that "you therefore believe it while you are… inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed."[345] Preachers are not in a position to situate their art in such a way as to generate this kind of Secondary Belief. Based on this study, however, I do not believe that means they cannot initiate a frame shift. First, the true power to change a person's heart lies with the Holy Spirit, not the preacher's art. Second,

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[345] Tolkien, *A Tolkien Miscellany*, 117.

the better the art and the more beautiful it is, the more persuasive power it will have, even if it lacks the advantage of a "surprise attack."

Taking Coleridge at his word, "willing suspension of disbelief" does not have to mean begrudging concession. If willing suspension is sought and granted, it may be enough. T.S. Eliot offers encouragement here. In his essay "Poetry and Propaganda," he speaks of the "temporary suspension of disbelief" that someone may grant to a poem or a course in philosophy. If that happens, there is a possibility that understanding could lead to belief. Meaning leads to possibility. This is how the imagination works. In such a case, the more beautiful the poem, the greater the plausibility of belief. This is what Eliot calls "esthetic sanction." It is "the partial justification of… views of life by the art to which they give rise. Any way or view of life which gives rise to great art is for us more plausible than one which gives rise to inferior art or to none."[346]

This is the power of true beauty. It disarms and carries people out of themselves, despite their protests. Beauty surprises people, even when they are on their highest guard. There may be no greater surprise than being surprised at their surprise: the alarming discovery that the defenses they thought were so invulnerable could topple so easily. Beauty generates wonder: the experience of awe in beholding something one never imagined could exist. This is simply another way of describing worship. Beauty makes things more real to us. To paraphrase Eliot, "Beauty doesn't prove that something is true; it proves it is possible." If imagination is the faculty of possibility, beauty is the spark that kindles it.

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[346] Eliot, "Poetry and Propaganda," 601.

Thus, preachers should strive for ways to make Jesus and his gospel as beautiful as possible for their listeners. Even if the dragons remain on alert, this gives esthetic sanction to the gospel and creates possibilities for belief. There are innumerable ways of making the gospel beautiful. Preachers engage the imagination of their audience by first engaging and activating their own imaginations. Preachers can ask themselves, "What if this…?" or "What if that…?" In light of this study and the nature of the gospel, I would also recommend looking for eucatastrophic pictures of the gospel—the sudden turn or low point when all seems lost and defeat is certain, but through some great disaster or sacrifice, beauty wins out and joy shines through. There are countless real-life stories, films, TV shows, poems, and other examples that portray eucatastrophe. I would also recommend paying close attention to the placement of such pictures in the structure of the sermon. Where in the sermon might the dragons least expect it? Martin pictured a loving look from a condemned Jesus when listeners might have expected to see a frown. What if preachers capitalized on the moments in a sermon when the focus is more on struggles or unfulfilled desires, the failures of traditional religion, or the endless tragedies of living in an evil world? Magic works by misdirection. Positioning eucatastrophic pictures in unexpected places might at least distract the dragons even while they remain watchful.

Most of all, preachers should trust the inherent beauty of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus beautiful wherever he is simply and lovingly portrayed before the eyes of the world. Preachers should trust the power of true pictures to awaken desire, open doors to transcendence, and remind people of the true story they may protest, deny, or even detest, but which lies buried in their hearts, awaiting recovery. C.S. Lewis provides the perfect picture for this. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy

courageously volunteers to help some friends in need of rescue by recovering a spell from a magician's book. While searching through the book, she comes across a spell "for the refreshment of the spirit." It is simply a series of pictures that are more like a story than anything else. Not more than a few pages in, "she was living in the story as if it were real, and all the pictures were real too." The pictures tell her "the loveliest story I've ever read or ever shall read in my whole life." But because this is a magical book, she forgets the story as soon as it is over. All she can recall is that it was about a cup, a sword, a tree, and a hill. "And ever since that day what Lucy means by a good story is a story which reminds her of the forgotten story in the Magician's Book." When she sees Aslan later, she asks if she might ever hear the story again. Aslan says, "Indeed, yes, I will tell it to you for years and years."[347]

Everyone tends to forget the true story of the world—the "refreshment" of which involved a cup, a sword, a tree, and a hill—and be taken captive by other pictures that tell false stories. Everyone needs the Lord Jesus to tell the story again, "for years and years." We meet him most directly in the pages of the gospels. But even there, the story can become blurred by a film of familiarity. Thus, in the mystery of his grace, he often gives pictures that "clean our windows," reawakening us to the forgotten, but real, story. Pictures don't only take people captive. The right picture can set someone free.

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[347] C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1980), 167–71; I am indebted to Rowan Williams for his insights into the deeper significance of this episode. See Rowan Williams, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (London: SPCK, 2012), 123–24.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how preachers engage the imagination during sermons to help people in the closed or open immanent frame shift toward an open transcendent frame. In any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for those interested in the imagination, the immanent frame, frame shifts, imaginative apologetics, preaching, or any combination of these.

First, there needs to be more research into evaluating for frame shifts. Interviewing preachers proved to be a difficult way of assessing this. To obtain this kind of data, it might be helpful to interview people who are willing to report such a frame shift. That would provide the researcher with opportunities to gain firsthand information and ask follow-up questions that could yield more qualitative data. This data would be tremendously helpful to preachers and anyone else seeking to engage the imagination.

Second, it would be interesting to do more research in the field of neuroscience and the imagination. I am aware that such research is being done and is a growing field. This could be very helpful for preachers and for anyone who wants to learn more about how the imagination works and its implications for evangelism, apologetics, preaching, frame shifts, conversion, and spiritual formation.

Third, while this study gave more attention to engaging the imaginations of those who do not profess Christian faith, the immanent frame affects those in the transcendent frame as well. There are many conversations happening around the current "crisis" within American evangelicalism, especially related to areas of race, sexuality, gender, political

ideology, and Christian nationalism.[348] As the literature review revealed, much of American evangelicalism inhabits the closed transcendent frame. I would recommend more research on how to engage the imaginations of those within that frame toward an open transcendent frame. While many of the same principles may apply, this study did not address that explicitly.

There are more areas connected to this field that could fruitfully be explored. One especially intriguing area is virtual reality, also known as VR. During my studies, I listened to some podcasts that talked about this technology. While I listened, it occurred to me that in many ways VR is a Secondary World. The podcasts were focused on churches that meet via VR, complete with special headsets and avatars. This is somewhat different from what Tolkien was talking about, in that people are entering and acting as themselves in these worlds. They are not all intended to be fantasy worlds. VR church is a fast-growing reality, and its implications should be considered, including any potentially negative effects and how to engage in the healthiest and most fruitful ways. Not only will this technology continue to grow and develop, but the implications and effects will not be fully realized for years, if not decades. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to research the overlap between VR, the imagination, frame shifts, and Christian formation, along with deep theological reflection. Retrieval means looking for the creational good in VR. However, it is important to think about its nature and purpose as a Secondary World, and about not getting lost in a disembodied existence, but instead tapping its imaginative power to cast a bright shadow in the primary world

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[348] Peter Wehner, "The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart," The Atlantic, October 24, 2021; David Brooks, "The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022.

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