

Imagination & Artistic Human Expression:

Toward A Beginning Theology

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To craft a theology of imagination and artistic human expression I believe there are six basic – but foundationally important – theological principles that both church and mission leaders in general, and worship, music, and arts-ministry practitioners more specifically, need to understand. It's necessary to establish these six principles if we are going to responsibly and energetically help church and mission leadership around the world better re-engage and integrate imaginative expression specialists into ministry strategy development and missional ministry practices.

To begin, such a theology must stand on the foundational conviction that worship is central to all of life because God is supreme. But since God is wholly other than his Creation – he, being infinite, non-created, ever-existing, and we being finite creatures with many limitations – God created us with the capacities to engage his mysterious, transcendent reality. He did this by giving us one mind with at least three dynamics of intelligence:

1. Rational intelligence
2. Imaginal intelligence
3. Emotional intelligence

He also created some of us with an unusual capacity for wisdom in imaginative design and expression. Those of us gifted in this way are able to lead individuals and communities into touching the transcendent reality of God himself. As the specialists specifically equipped to lead Christ's Body into the worship of God, it's imperative, then, that we be particularly attuned to the biblical theology that forms the foundation of our specialized assignments in imagination and artistic human expression.

So, with all this said, the six basic biblical-theological issues to consider when forming a foundation for the important place God has designed for artists, musicians, and other creatives to play in the life of the church are:

FIRST, we need to establish the biblical definition of imagination and imaginal intelligence. We know from Genesis 1:26, 27 that humans are made in God's image. As such, we possess imaginal intelligence. Dogs, for instance, have instinct; people have imagination. The Hebrew term used here is *yatsar* / *yester* or

“to fashion in the mind before forming something in time and place.” This is the term that is often used to describe the work of a potter (e.g., Isaiah 29:16; Jeremiah 18:14). God imagined humankind in his mind, like a potter with a lump of clay, and then actually created us in time and place.

Here we see two capacities: To see what can be before it is and to look through real and observable realities into what is deeper and transcendent. This capacity of imaginal intelligence involves the ability to look at some sort of metaphor or symbol (as we do in any Christian liturgy) and then actually look through these expressions into the underlying reality.

In the Hebrew scriptures the sacrificial system was filled with metaphors, symbols, and expressions – all of which allowed Israel to express their faith in and commitment to the real and living God and his provision and purposes. In the same way today, when we take communion we look through the observable bread and cup and into the deeper reality of Jesus Christ and the giving of his body, the pouring out his blood, the covering over of our sin, and the purging of our guilt.

SECOND, we must establish the biblical role of imagination and imaginal human intelligence. It is this role and ability that allows us to engage transcendent reality. Rational intelligence informs us about what is real:

- “This is a bicycle.”
- “Here are the pedals.”
- “These are the handle bars.”

This is valuable information, but you still cannot ride a bicycle until you are fully engaged in the activity. Simply telling someone about a bicycle is not enough to help them ride it. Informing someone of something does not at all mean that a person is engaging in whatever they’ve been informed about.

The same is true when we approach such transcended realities as . . .

- “God exists.”
- “His name is Yahweh.”
- “He is Creator of all.”
- “Humans rebelled against his rule.”

- “Humans experience God’s judgment when not rightly related to him.”
- “He loves us in spite of us ignoring him.”
- “He provides a way to return to him through Jesus.”

All these things are absolutely and objectively true, but it isn’t enough to just “tell” people about him. Imaginal intelligence allows us to engage with the transcendent realities of these statements. I can tell my wife I love her, but unless I express my feelings imaginatively then I’m simply using hollow words. I need to do things like take her to dinner, bring her flowers, and listen to her. These are the actions that truly represent the words I use. Telling her I love her is not enough. We need to use our imagination to actively engage transcendent reality.

THIRD, we need a biblical definition of what an artist is – especially from the standpoint of the Hebrew term for craftsman. There is a family of Hebrew terms for this designation including:

- *Machashabah* (makh-ash-aw-baw’) or *machashebeth* (makh-ash-eh’-beth) which means “master craftsman” from Exodus 35:35: “He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer.”
- *Chashab* (khaw-shab’) which is rendered “to devise cunningly, to think up, to imagine” (also from Exodus 35:35).
- *Chakam* (khaw-kawm’) or “a skilled person” from Exodus 36:2: “And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work.”
- *Shiyr* (sheer) or (the original form) *shuwr* (shoor) meaning “singer or musician” as found in 1 Samuel 18:6: “As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments” (ESV).

Each of these labels are modified by five additional specialized terms:

1. Wisdom, or *chokmah* (khok-maw'), from Exodus 35:31: "... and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship."
2. Knowledge, or *da`ath* (dah'-ath) (also from Exodus 35:31).
3. Understanding, or *tabuwnah* (taw-boon') and (feminine) *tebuwnah* (teb-oo-naw') or *towbunah* (to-boo-naw') (also from Exodus 35:31).
4. Ability, or *melakah* (mel-aw-kaw') (also from Exodus 35:31).
5. Skillful, or *yatab* (yaw-tab'), from Psalm 33:3: "Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts."

FOURTH, we must understand the biblical role of artists and artistic expression. As we have noted, when you look at how the terms are used in the Hebrew scriptures you see that craftsmen, musicians, and singers are creating environments wherein people touch the transcendent realities of life and, even, God himself.

It is my conviction, then, that the primary role of imaginative expression specialists is to create environments wherein other people enter, and then engage, the transcendent phenomenon of worship. They undertake the work of reverencing and interacting with the transcendent God.

FIFTH, we should embrace the biblical purposes of artistic expression, or the arts, in life and in ministry. As I've noted, the purpose of artistic expression is to provide finite humans with the capacity to engage the transcendent. Some examples of this from scripture includes . . .

- God drew Moses to himself via a burning bush.
- God used the Tabernacle as the physical context wherein his transcendent, invisible presence dwelled in the midst of his chosen people.
- God directed his chosen people to express their real-but-non-material faith and trust in him by presenting offerings, observing special days, and engaging in appointed feasts.

- Believers, like Moses, David, Asaph, and the Sons of Korah who expressed their praise to God through prayers set to music and led the community of believers into “song-environments,” do the same in worship today.
- Jesus directed his New Covenant followers to repeatedly express gratitude and trust in his saving work through the rituals of “The Lord’s Supper” and “Baptism in his name.”
- The Apostle Paul instructed believers to regularly meet together for biblical instruction, prayer, and community hymns and spiritual songs.

And, along with the centrality of worship, God has provided artists, musicians, film makers, story tellers, playwrights, novelists, dancers, potters, textile artists, songwriters, singers, directors, producers, sculptors, and many others with the gifts to create environments for the community-at-large to interact with goodness, virtue, beauty, and other transcendent realities. Again, the biblical purposes of artistic expression are to provide finite humans with the capacity to viscerally engage with the transcendent.

SIXTH, we must relate imagination and artistic expression to worship. Worshiping the true and living Triune God, at its core, is participating in the mystery of reverentially approaching the morally beautiful, supreme and transcendent God through the work of Christ as energized by his Holy Spirit.

Worship means to bow before God, to honor and acknowledge his supremacy, primacy, and majesty; confessing in awe, wonder, fear, and delight our absolute need of his gracious mercy and provision. Worship is responding with both adoration and action to his self-revealed glory, holiness, love, forgiveness, and purposes through our worship-motivated service on his behalf every day of our lives.

And, since winning worshipers to the true and living God from every tongue, clan, and people is the ultimate agenda he’s given us to pursue until he comes again, then those God has gifted with unusual wisdom in imaginative design and expression are absolutely to be front and center in creating contextualized environments and leading others into those environments. In fact, worship will

not be effective without musicians and artists working toward those ends because God's Word has revealed this to be the case.

So now, a final encouragement to each of us: we should repeatedly and prayerfully reaffirm before God our request that he deepen each of us in our private and personal worship of God. I am confident that, if we do go deeper as worshipers ourselves, we will have little trouble in seeing our "Theology of Imagination and Artistic Human Expression" align itself with biblical revelation. And, at the same time, we will become a great asset to Church to the carry out the artistic good works of revealing God's truth, beauty, and goodness for which God prepared in advance for us to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Know this: If we can capture the *Imaginative-Human-Expression-Specialists* of a culture then we can capture the imagination of that culture. We can help them imagine and engage the realities of God's love and salvation and healing, provided through our Lord and savior Christ Jesus.

May God's Spirit give us growing passion for worshiping him. In this way we will fall more deeply in love with the person of Jesus. Then God will pour out through us his creative spirit in ways that will ignite the hearts of church leaders and cause them to fully embrace each artist's vital ministry and role. Then, together, we can far more creatively and effectively "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).