

It's *Not* a Small World, After All:  
A Defense of the Christian Imagination

By Timothy G. Enloe

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard version.

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## Introduction

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What do we Christians have against the imagination? Are stories with myth, magic, monsters, wizards, and epic battles between dark lords and heroic knights to be shunned as “pagan,” as the products of “compromises” with “the world”? In some quarters of the Christian world to even ask such questions is off-limits, for the answers are “obvious” and this book and its author are “obviously” way off in left field somewhere. If you are reading this book you are either not of those quarters or you are burned out on their inability to handle the *mysteries* and *messiness* of real Christian living in the real world.

*Life* is an odd thing when you think about it. It is a weird amalgam of spiritual and material things that seem to depend on each other and affect each other profoundly. Whether one is a Christian or not life is a matter of basic faith commitments working themselves out into a world that is sometimes wonderfully, sometimes tiresomely *physical*. Life seems a bewildering array of seeming opposites—philosophy and farming, eating and prayer, Bibles and Humanist Manifestos, faith and science, theology and music, logic and emotion. But let’s not forget that greatest of all ubiquitous phenomena—*body odor*. Even saints stink to high heaven sometimes.

What this means is that life can’t be stuffed into the nice, neat categories that inward-looking modern Christian “spirituality” so often demands it conform to. As Evangelical Christians, we so often want

nothing more than to spend all our lives in “evangelism” so that *souls* can be saved. We have little concern for, and often resent, mundanities like washing the dishes and “secular” employment and novel-reading, and often consider those things a distraction from the really important *spiritual* stuff.

We act as if we think that “holiness” is what is left in the world after all the “weird” things have been abstracted out of it. Too often we zealously pursue a vision of life that is, as the old saying goes, “so heavenly minded it’s no earthly good.” Perhaps this is why for nearly a century we have let slide cultural matters outside our own narrow circles. As a general rule art, literature, poetry, and music are simply too *earthy* for our hyper-spiritual tastes. Unless they have an “evangelistic” purpose they are mostly “irrelevant” to our daily lives as Christians.

This brings us to a major outlet of myth and magic—fiction. Most Christian bookstores have multiple shelves of fiction. Nearly all of it reflects our modern sensibilities—our love for the trite, the sentimental, the sensational. We have no concept of what good storytelling is or what themes we ought to be writing about and reading. Consequently, what we produce and read is ninety-percent kitsch—on the best seller list today, in the landfill tomorrow.

Good literature is something we either don’t recognize when we see it, or else it gets thrown out because it has elements that offend our delicate “spiritual” concerns. We’ll support the shallow storytelling and awful theology of the *Left Behind* novels because they are “Christian fiction”, but we want nothing to do with truly great literature such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or C.S. Lewis’

*Chronicles of Narnia*. Never mind that Tolkien was a Christian; his stories have *dragons* and *wizards* and *magic* in them. Therefore they are *evil*. Never mind that Lewis portrays a broad and compelling *Christian* view of the world; his stories have *witches* and *goblins* and *fauns* and *magical* passages to other worlds. Therefore his stories are *evil*. Our deep worldview analysis done, we pride ourselves on our “discernment” while depriving ourselves of true wisdom.

This short book is not meant to take the place of deeper study into these issues, and so a bibliography of essential readings is included at the end. I do not pretend to be a scholar of these matters. I am merely a concerned Christian layman whose mind has been mulling over these matters for several years. Having once held the sort of modern Evangelical views described above, I understand the mentality. I have even had some spirited discussions with those who remain in that framework of thought.

There are numerous authors and books who have been influential on my thinking about these matters, and some of their works which are not quoted herein are listed in the Bibliography. I encourage the interested reader to obtain as many of them as possible and work through them—and hopefully, as I plan to do myself someday, begin to apply the lessons learned from such books to original works of fiction.

Although many authors have influenced me, throughout this short work I will mostly quote Lewis and Tolkien at key points. This is not because they are the final words on these subjects but because together they provide enormously helpful outlines of the proper Christian concept of the role of the

imagination in our faith. The riches of the writings of these two men are, in any case, beyond my feeble abilities to adequately explore in print. I can at best hope that the glimpses I provide here and there will spur the reader to engage with them himself. Reading Lewis and Tolkien is a most rewarding experience. Though not perfect, they help to show us the way out of our sterile, ever-so-Modern prejudices and back into the full-orbed Christian faith.

I hope that my efforts here help show that we as Christians need not be afraid of the imagination. I also hope they show that many things we have been conditioned to simply *react* to are fundamentally Christian concepts that we *must* recover in the midst of our shallow and dying modern culture.

May God be pleased to raise up a generation of creative Christians not afraid to explore His world and put C.S. Lewis' sage advice to work:

We must attack the enemy's line of communication. What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent... (“Christian Apologetics”, in *God in the Dock*, pg. 93)

Soli Deo Gloria,

Tim Enloe

June, 2020

## Chapter 1

### Christians Against the Real World

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I might as well start this book with a really incendiary claim: *At its root, an attack on the imagination is an attack on reality.* Specifically, it is an attack on the reality that God made and into which He has put us and commanded us to live for Him. This seems an odd thing to say since we so often associate the imagination with *fiction*, which we (falsely) think means “that which is not true.” Since we are Christians, we think that we must shun whatever is not true. So we shun the imagination because we think it stands in opposition to Truth.

But when we reject the imagination outright, we do so at a terrible price. For instance, whenever we are not feeling deeply (and self-righteously) pious about our denunciation of myths and dragons and wizardry, we know that God gave us our imaginations as part of the original creation He said was “very good.” Nevertheless, we frequently forget this in our zeal to appear “holy.” We forget that the human imagination is not a bad thing—*God* made it, after all. We pretend that the only proper way to use it is to ignore it unless we are reading or writing stories about some “spiritual” purpose such as evangelism. And, since we are dogmatically convinced that such things as *myth* and *magic* are evil and have nothing to do with “true spirituality,” we reject them wholesale. We throw out the baby with the bathwater and consider ourselves wise and pleasing to God for doing it.



Later we will examine the concepts of magic and myth (as well as several related subjects) in some detail and see how they are intimately wrapped up with our imaginations. We will see how rejecting them amounts to fighting against the *goodness* and *beauty* of the real world that God Himself has made. For now we will focus on understanding the nature of the world we live in and how the imagination is a major tool God has given us for functioning in that world—a tool we reject at our own peril. Intriguingly, *when we devalue the human imagination, we make war on reality.*

### **For the Faithful, Wars Never Cease**

*War*, like the imagination, is another thing that is not in and of itself evil. The moment God decided to make a world in which there were creatures who could (and did) rebel against His will, He committed Himself to fighting a war to overcome the evil that would come of that rebellion. God necessarily committed Himself to war with evil because God is holy and cannot stand evil. If there is evil in God's world, you may be sure that God hates it and is warring against it in His time and by His own perfect, omnipotent counsel.

As people who believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word, Christians know all of this. We may not often speak of the matter in terms of God *warring* against evil, but we would accept this as being an accurate description of biblical teaching. The main problem arises, however, because today we believers have an anemic concept of spirituality. We have forgotten how deep and all encompassing is this principle of the divine war against evil. Let us see

how we have done this—how we have become a Church that is ineffective in the world we say we are trying to win for Christ.

At first glance it does not appear that we have forgotten the deep truths about the Great War. We know that the Old Testament overflows with stories of the *warfare* between God's people and God's enemies. We know lots of verses from the New Testament about "spiritual warfare." We read about putting on *armor* and *struggling* "against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). We read about wielding "weapons of righteousness" (2 Cor. 6:7) that are "divinely powerful for the *destruction* of fortresses" (2 Cor. 10:4). We know that our *adversary* the Devil "prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). We know about *fighting* against "fleshly lusts, which *wage war* against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). At the end of our lives we would like to be able to say with Paul that we "*fought* the good *fight*" of faith (2 Tim. 4:7).

So we *do* know that the life of faith is a life of constant warfare. So far so good, we think. We have not forgotten the Great War against evil, nor are we cowards and ineffective troops. After all, we read our Bibles and pray and go to Church and plaster our cars with Christian bumper stickers and buy all the latest Jesus trinkets that we find at the local Christian bookstores! Why, we have even been known to heartily sing, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to *war*"!

But this is all only surface-level. Where we start losing track of reality and (ironically) living in a

strange fantasy world of our own making is in the way we identify the nature of the war and the identity of our enemies. Despite our affirmations that we believe what Scripture says (and *all* of what it says), we have several serious problems that we have imported into our “Christian” thinking from that nasty place of darkness we *say* we reject, “the world.”

Let us work through these problems and their ramifications. We are concerned with three main areas, three broad principles of thought that work their way out into our daily lives in many ways and with such an appearance of natural-ness that it is no wonder we are nearly blind to them.

### **Rationalism**

The first problem is that too often we think like modern rationalists. Rationalism can have many faces and angles, but the one that concerns us here is the propensity to *compartmentalization*. Rationalists divide reality up into compartments that are airtight and soundproof. In other words, the various compartments of reality cannot communicate with each other. They are separated from each other and do not mean anything in and of themselves. They must be justified by external criteria or risk being judged “irrelevant” to the drudgery of daily living.

Unbelievers do this in many ways, but the most pernicious one is their division between things “religious” and things “factual.” This usually comes out when they are talking about the relationship of science to faith, but it is always in the background of their minds regardless of what they are talking about. Unbelievers posit a sharp division between faith and reason and say that faith deals with “*subjective beliefs*”

while reason deals with “*objective facts.*” Matters of morality and beliefs about God have nothing to do with “the real world” and “the real world” has nothing to do with them. To each his own truth and a merry old time for all!

We expect unbelievers to have such flawed ways of thinking. But the problem is that we Christians also often have this flawed way of thinking ourselves! One way we do this is by positing a rigid division between the “secular” and the “sacred.” Do we not often tacitly demean everything from employment to education if it does not conform to a purpose that we have pleased ourselves to call “spiritual” (such as evangelizing the lost)? Do we not love to be jealous because So-and-So is in “full time ministry” while we have to content ourselves with the “useless” mundanities of “worldly employment”?

Under this scheme a believer cannot be both a Christian and a doctor, because he is “supposed” to be a *Christiandocor*. All his medical knowledge must serve a desire to use his profession as a means of witnessing. Although being a good doctor and saving *bodies* is (in some nebulous way we can’t really explain) important, it is nowhere near as important as saving *souls*. Another believer cannot be both a Christian and a student of art, because he is “supposed” to be a *Christianartist*. All his artwork must serve the purpose of witnessing or it is useless. The same goes for *Christianauthors*, *Christianteachers*, *Christianpilots*, and so forth.

Other examples of this rationalistic division of reality abound, but the common thread in all of them is that the word “Christian” is being used as an *adjective*, not as a *noun*. In other words, it is not being

used in its proper sense of denoting “one who follows Christ,” but rather to artificially separate certain areas of life from the rest of life and make them subject to something else that is thought to be “higher” and “better” than they are. Being a doctor or an artist or a writer or a dancer or a plumber is not justifiable apart from some “spiritual” (or, “Christian”) concern that alone can make such things truly meaningful.

This rationalism shows up with a vengeance in the “Christian” war on the imagination. Borrowing a page directly from our agnostic neighbors, we brazenly assert that there is a radical difference between “the real” and “the imaginary.” “The real” is the world of “objective facts”—facts like evangelism, taxes, two-party political systems, and body odor—and oh yeah, did we already mention *evangelism*? “The real,” we say, is the sole location of truth and must be the sole focus of our efforts to win the world for Christ. “The imaginary,” on the other hand, is the world of “subjective beliefs”—beliefs in such things as wizards, dragons, hobbits, and jabberwocks. It is a superfluous addition to “real life,” and if not rigidly controlled it can become “escapist.” This sharp division between real and imaginary, good and evil, is what lies behind attacks on the issues we will examine in subsequent chapters.

### **Sentimentalism**

A second problem is that we also too often think like modern sentimentalists. Secularists understand that life is hard, but we Christians want it to be all sweetness and light. Unfortunately for us, the Bible is not a book that is all about love stories and people who don’t offend others. Rather, it is a

book full of bloody battles, deep emotional distresses, national disasters, the horrible deaths of infants and others who do not seem to deserve such fates, and, to top it all off, the horrific, bloody, agonizing torture and murder of the very Son of God!

But we often forget this in our mad rush to fulfill our unspoken wish that life would not be so *imperfect*. We want life to be full-to-the brim with Precious Moments and paintings of quiet woodland cottages and baskets of warm, furry bunny rabbits and fields of beautiful flowers and whatever else strikes our sentimental fancies. We want church services where we hear about a kind, loving Heavenly Father who has a special plan just for our very own lives and does not want us to endure any undue hardship. We want to proudly display our advocacy bracelets and bumper stickers to remind us of our own personal piety. But we seem to forget that the Jesus these trinkets refer to is the Jesus who has been seated at the right hand of God the Father and is presently engaged in a *war* that will continue “until all His enemies are made His footstool” (Psalm 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:24-26).

These words may seem harsh, but they are true. Take a stroll through the average Christian bookstore and spend a little time skimming the books written by the popular preachers and personalities. Look at the shelves full of kitschy artwork and statuettes. Listen to the pretty, non-offensive music playing softly through the overhead speakers. See the endless variety of Bibles made for every conceivable demographic and packaged in bright, attractive colors with bargain prices—just like any other consumer-oriented commodity.

Where is the sense that Christianity is a *full-orbed* faith that does not run from the hard realities of everyday life, but embraces the world *as it is* and works ceaselessly to *conquer* it through the power of a *dominating, victorious* Gospel of the Cross? Where is the humility that reminds us that God is not just our Father, but the *Sovereign King of the Universe* who upholds all things by the word of His power and who is not a man that He should be mocked? Where is the stout-hearted, square-shouldered, courageous outlook of past generations of Christians—the world-conquering faith of the martyrs, missionaries, and medievals?

We are too busy, it seems, constructing a nice, *fair*, inoffensive world to bother with such trivialities as these. We have more disembodied souls to save through our niceness and our tolerant sensitivity to the felt needs of our spoiled rotten age. Consequently, our weak-willed Christianity goes out into the world and gets pummeled into submission by God-hating heathens who at least understand enough about *biblical* religion to know that if we Christians started taking it seriously, their shallow empire of “Reason” and Unbelief would, like a modern day Philistine Dagon, soon lie prostrate at Christ’s feet.

### **Materialism**

A third problem we modern Christians often have is that we think like modern materialists. Now, “materialism” here does not refer to the common malady of seeking as many material possessions as one can. Rather, here it refers to an attitude that we unconsciously borrow from secularists—the attitude

of always implicitly looking for “natural” explanations of strange events.

This problem is really a subset of the problem of rationalism discussed above, but it deserves its own treatment because it is even more subtle. All Christians affirm that God has acted within the natural world in the past and that He can and still does act within it according to His own plans. One does not have to be a fire-breathing charismatic televangelist to believe that God still performs miracles today. We all know stories of God answering someone’s prayer for immediate financial help, healing someone with terminal, inoperable cancer, protecting someone from serious injury in an automobile accident, and so forth.

The problem I am here calling “materialism” is not that we modern Christians do not believe in the supernatural (we do), but rather, that we import into our faith the secularist notion of an *unbridgeable divide* between the natural and the supernatural. It is one thing to *distinguish* between God and His creations, but something else entirely to *separate* them, to swallow hook, line, and sinker the mythology that drives the modern world—the mythology of the fully discoverable and controllable “scientific explanation”.

We must tread with care at this point. As Christians we must take care not to vilify science or the amazing progresses it has made over the last few centuries. Nevertheless, we must recognize that what started out as a very good and very proper use of human rational powers grounded in faith to investigate what our forebears in the faith called the “ordinary” powers of God, or the “secondary causes” that God Himself uses to do things within His



creation, has become a soul-killing, mystery-banishing, all-encompassing substitute for faith.

It is with sorrow that we Christians must accept the responsibility for this shallow age of mockery of all things “unscientific.” As has often been the case in the long history of Christian cultural endeavors, the faith begot a certain daughter and the daughter proceeded to devour the mother. Christianity is responsible for the rise of what we call “modern science,” but *we* live at the tail end of a long process of unbelievers taking over because *we* ceased being faithful to our world-embracing religion and started withdrawing into isolated enclaves of “spirituality.” At some point in the recent past, we began to disdain the created world and to elevate a false concept of the “spiritual,” and the unbelievers, who already wanted all religion to be confined to the realm of the private, emotional, non-rational “soul” were only too happy to let us do so while they took over the “facts.”

It is one thing to seek to understand the natural operations of the world, but something else entirely to reduce what happens in the natural world down to impersonal, abstract “laws.” The world is not like a watch that God simply wound up at some point in the distant past and then released to run its course by its own internal energies and processes. The world is not an autonomous Machine filled with impersonal cogs that we can use to crank out endless widgets in our quest for domination of our own destinies. Rather, the world was created by a Personal Being and it is both populated and governed by personal beings under the Lordship of God.

We will discuss this last point in Chapter 7, but here it will suffice to note that we modern Christians

betray our lack of faith, our lack of biblical moorings, precisely in our failure to properly distinguish between *science* and *Science*, between *reason* and *Reason*, between *knowledge* and *Knowledge*. We are so caught up, for instance, in our frantic crusade against “evolution” that we do not often see the larger issue at hand—our own capitulation to the unbiblical view of the world that divides the “secular” from the “sacred” and leaves the former to be stripped of all meaning and personality that the latter gives it. We implicitly *hate* the physical world that God made, so we abandon it to faithless upstarts who have no sense of artistry, no ability to appreciate the harmonious interaction of every sphere of life.

### **Without a Vision, My People Perish**

These problems are not the only ones that we modern Christians have in connection with our intense lack of vision and imagination, but these three in particular undermine our ability to read Scripture properly and apply it thoroughly to our lives. Instead of reading Scripture as a description of the *war*, our responsibilities in it, and the battle plans for it, we read Scripture as a book full of pious platitudes about morality and the utterly *urgent* needs of our personal, intensely individual spiritual lives. Scripture must be “relevant” to whatever we deeply *feel* that we are going through—and we will make it so even at the expense of its real message.

But without a vision the Lord’s people perish (Prov. 29:18). What we lack in our day is a vision of the world-embracing, world-transforming power of the Gospel. The Gospel is about so much more than “saving souls.” Indeed, it could be argued biblically

that it is not even about “saving souls” at all, since the ultimate end of our redemption is not the “immortality of the soul,” but the resurrection of the *body* (1 Cor. 15). In our day of sentimental, private, rationalistic religion, we desperately need a *vision* so that we will not perish.

### **The Inescapability of Cultural Activity**

It is fitting to conclude this opening chapter, titled “Christians Against the Real World” with some brief notes on the inescapability and necessity of cultural activity as a way to embrace the real world. For the problems enumerated above are nothing if not representations of our deep and abiding failure to engage the world we live in with the truths of God’s Word, transforming it as He gives us the wisdom and ability to do so.

*Transformation* is, in fact, what culture is all about. It is in this connection that we can see why all Christians are called to constantly engage in biblically-informed cultural activity. God placed man in the Garden to work it, to *culture* it. As David Hegeman points out in his fine book *Plowing in Hope*, the very word *culture* comes from the Latin verb *colere*, “to plow” (pg.13), which shows us that farming is an intrinsically transformative and productive activity which takes the existing raw materials of the world and reshapes them. “Culture” also can convey religious connotations, as the word *cultus* (“cult”) shows. As societies progressed, “culture” came to refer to the entire mode of life pursued by a given group of people. Such modes of life are surely influenced—even *controlled*—by the religion people believe in.

If culture is a religious activity, no one can escape it, for all men are incurably religious—either towards or away from God. We don't have to look far to see what kind of culture unbelief produces, but what may come as a shock to many modern Christians is that our own culture is little better. Many authors (see the non-fiction section of the Bibliography) have shown that the reason modern "Christianity" makes so little lasting impact on "the world" is because modern Christians are every bit as worldly as those they are trying to reach!

In other words, we aren't making an impact because we are saying the same things the world is already saying—only we are saying it less effectively than they are. In everything from our incessant mimicry of pop-culture to our "theology-lite" sermons to our unthinking reliance on modern American principles of democratic, "don't-tread-on-me" individualism, we Christians are often worse cultural enemies to ourselves than the "secular humanists" we love to complain about.

It is not so much that we don't like culture and don't participate in it. It is that we haven't thought out in any great detail what a truly *biblical* culture might look like, and so we have no idea how to create it. Ironically, the problem here is that for all our talk about "the Gospel" (usually under the banner of "evangelism"), the "gospel" that most of us preach and live simply isn't the biblical one. If, as Reformed author Douglas Jones has well said, "...Christian culture is *the Gospel in bodily form*. It is what happens when we live the Gospel," (*Angels in the Architecture*, pg. 213), what does it say about our modern Christian "gospel" that we have no real, lasting impact on the

world around us? The early Christians literally “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Today it seems that the world has turned *us* upside down instead.

This book is not meant as a defense of the general notion of biblical culture—no one book could ever adequately cover that subject. Rather, this book is meant as a defense of one particular aspect of Christian cultural endeavor—fiction-writing. Narrower still, it is a defense of certain aspects of fiction-writing—certain general principles that, while they will not necessarily appear in every fiction story nevertheless underlie many of them.

Some forms of fiction will not be concerned with magic and dragons and monsters in the literal senses of those terms. But what we learn as we explore these particular subjects in this book have broad applications to all Christian fiction-writing, and perhaps even to many other forms of Christian cultural work as well. The principle we will explore might be summed up this way: *If we do not understand our own biblical story, how can we tell it to the world?*

As we enter into these discussions about particular ways we modern Christians do not understand our own biblical story, we must keep the central point about the imagination in mind. Being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good, we do not understand the way in which the *imagined* helps us face the *real* by giving us the intellectual and emotional resources to handle the trials life throws our way. This subject will be taken up under various headings in the remainder of this book.