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Shaping Practical, Scriptural Imagination in Communities of Faith

Abstract: In Acts 10, Peter experiences an imaginative conversion with regard to the inclusion of the Gentiles. I suggest that educators interested in the imagination's role in Christian formation can glean profitable insights from Luke's account of this event. The first section foregrounds a broad definition of imagination that integrates theories about its function on both conscious and preconscious levels. After analyzing the biblical text through this pedagogical lens, I move toward suggestions for reading biblical narratives for imaginative formation.

Defining Imagination for Christian Formation

Imagination often appears in educational arguments without definition, yet the connotations and comprehensions of the term can vary considerably. For much of the modern and late modern era, imagination was relegated to the realm of fancifulness, that which stands opposed to the cold, hard, and infinitely more valuable facts.¹ When adults apply the adjective “imaginative” to children, this is typically what they mean. In other permutations, imagination came to be associated almost exclusively with artistic creativity, the “image making” capacity in the most literal sense of the term. In some philosophical treatments, imagination is defined in terms of traditional “faculty psychology” as a discrete sphere of mental operation that exists alongside of and clearly differentiated from reason, intuition, the will, and so forth.² In much common usage, then, imagination refers specifically to a discrete, creative faculty for image-making, which people possess to various degrees.

More recent literature in a variety of fields, however, has more broadly defined imagination as a fundamental, creative and constructive capacity that integrates the understandings held by both the body and the brain, the conscious and unconscious, and the personal and social, and gives rise to a whole way of being in the world. The “way of being” that arises from the work of the imagination includes not only what we might describe as comprehension, but also ways of seeing, construing, and acting. In this way, imagination serves as helpful shorthand for the holistic way of knowing that has been the concern of epistemic proposals hoping to move away from strict, Cartesian paradigm.³

Trevor Hart and Garret Green, two Christian theologians, both make imagination central to their respective projects. Hart, working out of a theological framework of the incarnation of

¹ Garrett Green traces the challenges to imagination's value through Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Marx. Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 9-27.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

³ Thomas Groome's appeal to “conation” comes to mind as another way of referring to a holistic way of knowing, though his discussion of conation does not discuss the sense of operation here as “preconscious construal.” Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 30.

Christ, defines imagination as a “way of thinking, responding and acting across the whole spread of our experience.”⁴ Green explicitly rejects the faculty psychology approach, employing the broadest definition of “faculty” as the “ability to do something.”⁵ He places particular emphasis on the role of the imagination in the gestalt perception, the ways which we come to a sense of the whole, a process that is largely preconscious. Imagination has a paradigmatic function, helping us to “perceive and represent likenesses” that help us categorize and interpret experience.⁶ The function of religious imagination, then, is to tell us “what the world is like” in its broadest and deepest sense.⁷ Scripture, in Green’s proposal, helps to shape the lenses through which we interpret the world; the scriptures shape the Christian imagination.⁸

Discussions among Christian educators echo this broad definition. Both Paul Avis and Sarah Arthur see the role of the imagination as perceiving connections and constructing meaning.⁹ Maria Harris’s *Teaching and Religious Imagination* is now a landmark text in the conversation. She describes imagination as the capacity that “binds into one (*einbildungskraft*)

⁴ Hart explicitly resists definitions that conceive of imagination as “some arcane ‘thing’ with carefully specified and limited remit.” He draws out the organ or faculty analogy in arguing against the faculty psychology approach, suggesting that “the imagination is the psychological equivalent not of our appendix (which, when it becomes troublesome or painful, we can simply cut out and flush away without loss) but the blood supply which circulates things (both good and bad) around our entire body. The question facing us, therefore, is not so much *whether* we shall be imaginative as human beings, but *how* we shall be so.” Trevor A. Hart, *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements With Imagination, Language, and Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 5. (emphasis original).

⁵ Green, *Imagining God*, 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79. Green employs Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the function of paradigms in the sciences in discussing how the imagination functions in Christian theology.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸ Green identifies his debt to John Calvin for the metaphor of Scripture as lens. *Ibid.*, 107. In a later work on imagination and hermeneutics, Green makes connects imagination with the hermeneutical imperative, the conviction that all experience necessitates interpretation. See Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ Paul Avis defines imagination as “the faculty that perceives connections, creates combinations, and extrapolates from those to new insights.” Paul Avis, *Theology and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol, and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 41. Avis appears to use the term “faculty” here in the sense of faculty psychology, for he distinguishes imagination as something separate and apart from either “analytical reason” or “moral consciousness.” He draws heavily on both Newman and the Romantic philosophers in making this distinction. As stated above, I want to reject this compartmentalization in favor of an understanding of the broader, integrative understanding of the imagination. Sarah Arthur’s concludes that imagination refers to fundamental integrative capacity by which persons “discover, process, and creatively express coherent meaning . . . [and] make connections between thought and experience, word and image, self and other, seen and unseen.” Sarah Arthur, *The God Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007), 53.

the intellectual, conceptual, and mental powers associated with the mind and the incarnational, corporeal, and physical capacities associated with the body.”¹⁰

Harris’s insight about the importance of the body and the body’s ways of knowing to the imagination’s work has been developed more recently, and from different theoretical bases, by James K.A. Smith. Smith connects imagination to our bodily-based, implicit “take” on the world, a preconscious construal that becomes the basis for all subsequent thought.¹¹ By emphasizing the role of bodily ways of knowing in how we come to see and engage the world, Smith’s work adds a critical emphasis on bodily practices to these broad definitions of imagination.¹² Smith identifies narratives and practices as being particularly capable of operating on the pre-conscious register in addition to the conscious, and thus both are particularly capable of shaping the imagination.¹³

Christians claim, however, that the imagination is deeply ambiguous, and thus in need of direction or redirection. Even what operates under the label of “Christian imagination” must again and again be evaluated according to the norms provided by the Christian tradition and the wisdom of reflective practice.¹⁴ The question then becomes how Christian educators might contribute to the transformation of the imagination. The intersections at which the imagination operates and the ways of being that arise from that work are highly suggestive. First, if the imagination resides at the intersection of body and mind, then the corporal elements of human

¹⁰ Harris is following William Lynch in this broad definition. She explicitly states her objection to overly precise definitions of the imagination, fearing that too much technical precision obscures the paradoxical and mysterious ways in which the imagination operates. Harris gives her account of the imagination in her text aimed at expanding the ways that teacher’s conceive of their task to include the imaginative, the sacramental, and the aesthetic. Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 9.

¹¹ Smith draws on Mark Johnson, Pierre Bourdieu, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in claiming that both practices and narratives are particularly capable of operating on the pre-conscious register, and thus are especially capable of shaping the imagination at the tacit level. As our “emotional perception apparatus,” imagination includes the affections and the tacit or preconscious knowledge (Pierre Bourdieu’s “feel for the game”) in the construal of a whole way of being in the world, including our thinking, acting, relating, and hoping. James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 36.

¹² Smith responds to critiques of his work, who feel that his approach is insufficiently rational, with the caveat that the formative nature of practices is facilitated by conscious attention to them. *Ibid.*, 188.

¹³ Smith sets out to offer a Christian philosophy of action that “1) recognizes the nonconscious, pretheoretical ‘drivers’ of our action and behavior, centered in what I’ll call the imagination; 2) accounts for the bodily formation of our habituated orientation to the world; and thus 3) appreciates the centrality of story as rooted in this ‘bodily basis of meaning’ and as a kind of pretheoretical compass that guides and generates human action. In short, the way to the heart is through the body, and the way into the body is through story.” *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴ See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010).

experience need to be taken as seriously as rational aspects of meaning.¹⁵ Second, if the imagination operates at the intersection of the personal and the social, attention must be paid to corporate aspects of our experience, the social bodies big and small in which people participate.¹⁶ Third, and following from these two claims, narratives and practices become central to the task of transforming the imagination, due of the deep ways that both integrate the corporal and corporate elements of human life along with closely held convictions and cognitive understanding. Practices, like imagination, do their formative work at both conscious and preconscious levels, and their formative function benefits by careful reflection on their shape even while reflection cannot replicate the tacit learning those practices can bring about. Narratives, for their part, shape the way individuals interpret the world, assisting in human capacities to interpret individuals as intentionally oriented characters within a complex narrative world, as cognitive scientists studying narrative have noted.¹⁷ Given the definition of imagination proposed above, the fact that storytelling aids in our capacities to “make sense of past experiences, map out the course of future events, or assess how wider cultural assumptions and norms might have shaped or been shaped by one’s own or another’s conduct,” places it at the center of the discussion of the imagination.¹⁸

I argue, as have Smith and others, that these components of the imagination’s formation and potential transformation make communities of faith especially well suited to the work. Christian communities confess the need for imaginal transformation, gather in corporate bodies that engage bodies in common patterns of practice, and claim a narrative of God’s action in and for the world communicated principally through the Christian Scriptures. Though Christian communities fail and falter in this work at best, or actively foster a deeply distorted “Christian” imagination at worst, they still offer profound contexts for counter-formation. Smith focuses on the power of the liturgy in this work, but I contend that the practices of engaging the Scriptures in communities of faith can be also be constructed in ways intended to facilitate the Scriptures formation of the readers imagination.

Though potential avenues for exploring this claim about the potential of scriptural study to shape the imagination of readers are many and varied, the Acts of the Apostles provides one interesting option. This narrative text in the New Testament functions as a sequel to the gospel by the same unnamed author, providing an account of the life of the early church as it negotiates

¹⁵ This includes the concrete practices and postures of the body, including patterns of relating, as they occur in particular historical and social contexts.

¹⁶ This level of attention includes the broader sense in which imagination, those broad ways of making meaning and coming to construe the world and those who inhabit it, is tacitly acquired through participation in broader social practices that conscript bodies in patterns of behavior that instantiate meaning. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23-30. Smith claims that practices “conscript” or bodies into broader patterns of meaning. *Imagining the Kingdom*, 137.

¹⁷ David Herman draws on the broader theory of “folk psychology” in proposing that stories scaffold our understanding of the actions of human agents because stories support our capacity to relate intentions, beliefs, and behaviors within a contextualized individual. Crucially, this capacity depends precisely upon the imagination – the understanding generated by the intersubjective experiences of an embodied-person-in-relation. David Herman, *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 297.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

its identity between its historical identity in the story of Israel, its Greco-Roman context, and the identity and ministry of its Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. The Acts narrative, I contend, is interested in shaping the imagination of its readers by providing an account of “narrativized ecclesial practices” that come to constitute the distinctive “Way.”¹⁹ I further suggest that using the lens of imagination to attend to the ways in which Luke imaginatively narrates the Christian Way of being in response to God’s action in Jesus Christ might both illuminate important features of the text and inform the broader pedagogical conversation.²⁰

Moving to the Text: Acts 10:1-11:18 as Imaginal Transformation

Acts 10:1-11:18 records the encounter of the apostle Peter with the Gentile Cornelius, a story that narrates a critical moment in the development of the Way as Gentile believers in Jesus are welcomed into the community that had been constituted only by Jewish believers. In this story, Peter undergoes an imaginal transformation, prompted by divine action and realized in cooperation with divine agency. Peter comes to a new way of construing the identity of the people of God in a way that is intimately related to the concrete and narratively situated practices of the community. After briefly summarizing the plot of this extended encounter, this section highlights what the discussion of imagination brings into clearer focus and which of those features are most suggestive for the task of facilitating imaginal transformation when Christian communities of practice gather around biblical texts.

The story unfolds in a series of roughly parallel scenes:²¹

- I. Cornelius’s vision during a time of prayer: an angel confirms his good standing before God and instructs him to send for Peter. He sends messengers (10:1-8)
- II. Peter’s vision during a time of prayer: a collection of ritually clean and unclean animals appears before him, while a divine voice commands – “kill and eat.” Peter resists eating unlawful foods, and the vision/command repeats three times. (10:9-16)
- III. Cornelius’s men arrive at Peter’s house: after arrival customs, Peter – with prompting from the Spirit – welcomes the messengers to stay and prepares to return with them. (10:17-23a)

¹⁹ “Narrativized ecclesial practices” is terminology coined by Kavin Rowe in *World Upside Down*. Rowe draws on Charles Taylor in arguing that narrativized practices are the means by which the author communicates the distinctive “social imaginary” of the community comes into being. He states, “The point is rather that Taylor’s description of the coinherence of practices, normative notions, and a larger moral or metaphysical framework is interpretively advantageous because it helps to uncover the deeper matters that are at stake in the way Luke tells the story of the Christian mission.” C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.

²⁰ The “Way” is a uniquely Lukan designation for the followers of Jesus. See Acts 9:2.

²¹ Beverly Gaventa discusses the parallel scenes and the novelistic format of the encounter in *From Darkness to Light*. The story comes as the final in a series of conversion stories, which include sometimes surprising figures like a eunuch and the greatest enemy of the church in Saul of Tarsus. Key figures have appeared for a brief series of stories in the text thus far, and Peter has stepped out of the wings as the main character of the plot at the end of the previous chapter. Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 108.

- IV. Peter arrives at Cornelius's house: Cornelius bows before Peter and is rebuked; Peter articulates his new conviction about the appropriateness of his presence among Gentiles (10:23b-28)
- V. Cornelius speaks: he recounts his vision and asks Peter to say what the Lord has commanded (10:29-33)
- VI. Peter speaks: confirming that he "truly sees" that God shows no partiality but accepts all who call, he preaches the news about Jesus (10:34-43)
- VII. The Spirit interrupts Peter by falling on the Gentiles: Peter commands that the Gentiles be baptized as response to God's action. He remains as their guest.
- VIII. The community's concerns: some circumcised believers take issue with Peter for eating with Gentiles; Peter recounts the events, along with his reasoning about them. The objections are silence (11:1-18)

This account narrates Peter's imaginal transformation regarding who can constitute the community of Christ's disciples, and attending to it through this theoretical perspective brings critical features of the text into clearer focus. First, Peter's imaginal transformation is intimately connected with his bodily practices, as the prominence of hospitality practices makes evident. The cultural resonance of hospitality practices, such as their ability to communicate messages of social association, is well established, and those cultural practices provide an essential background for understanding the passage.²² Critically, the concrete markers of hospitality in this passage are not simply the result of a change in Peter's understanding, but the crucible in which a vision about dietary practices comes to be associated with the inclusion of Gentiles in the community. The practice cooperates with Peter's ongoing reflection on events in facilitating a move beyond initial cognitive dissonance to a newly formed construal of the shape of the community.²³

The broader cultural import of hospitality in the Greco-Roman world already points to role of corporate human experience in the shaping of the imagination, but the social force of the Christian community also pertains. Within the text of Acts, hospitality is a fundamental practice of the community, both with regard to standard gatherings of the community and the reception of traveling missionaries. In the Gospel of Luke, the related "first volume" to Acts, hospitality practices frequently separates those who receive Jesus as Lord and those who do not.²⁴ Jesus' practices of dining violate social protocol with some frequency, and his instructions about hospitality aim to bring about practices that reflect the power dynamics of the kingdom of God (Luke 14:1-24). Peter participated in the inner circles of Jesus' ministry, bearing witness to and closely participating in Jesus' controversial and boundary breaking practices of hospitality. Though Jesus in his ministry never engaged in direct hospitality with Gentiles, it is implied that

²² For more information on hospitality customs see Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield : Sheffield Phoenix, 2005). and Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers in Luke-Acts: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). The prominence of hospitality is signaled by a heavy concentration of key terms, including references to houses, greeting, welcoming, and going in.

²³ Following the cognitive verbs reveals Peter's progression from dismay and confusion to new conviction.

²⁴ See Luke 7:36-50.

Peter has been shaped by participation in that distinctive community of hospitality practices, formation that, I suggest, is central to the ways in which he responds to the situation with Cornelius.

The centrality of the practice of hospitality in the unlikely and divinely prompted encounter between Peter and Cornelius implicates both narratives and practices in the transformation of Peter's imagination.²⁵ Importantly, it is Peter's practice of hospitality, not his preaching to Gentiles, that becomes the source of the Jewish Christian community's objection – that he “went in” to the Gentiles and “ate with them” (Acts 11:2). In response to the objection, Peter offers a first person narrative account in which he summarizes the series of events and adds indications of his reasoning about them.²⁶ His retelling of the conclusion appears to solidify his own understanding, rather than simply reiterating what took place.

In this story, Peter, functioning as a representative of the Christian community, undergoes an imaginal transformation with tremendous import for the life of the Christian community. When this story is read through the lens of this broader discussion of the imagination's formation, key features identified in the literature become apparent. The imaginal transformation comes about through the confluence of the embodied and socially constructed practice of hospitality, Peter's formation in the ministry and teachings of Jesus, his ongoing reasoning on the basis of that experience, and the ongoing activity of divine actors. Attending to the ways in which these elements of the imagination's formation coalesce in the text leads to further suggestions about how communities of faith and practice might engage biblical narratives, like this one, as imagination forming stories.

Teaching Biblical Narratives for Scriptural Imagination

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest makes some initial suggestions about how a contemporary community of faith, gathered around a biblical narrative like this one, might instantiate analogous formative dynamics to those that operate in this text.

First, Peter's prior knowledge of the broader tradition, though implied rather than explicitly stated, performs a critical role in his imaginal transformation. It is first apparent in his resistance to the vision's command as a radical departure from his prior understanding of what is lawful. It is also apparent in his own account of events in which the teachings of Jesus are specifically recalled, though recontextualized in light of recent events. Information based approaches to Christian formation have been subject to appropriate critique as being overly rational in their orientation. Still, for Peter to arrive at a new way of construing the meaning of that textual tradition, he must first actually know it. While not explicitly indicated in the narrative, it is apparent that Peter has been instructed – catechized – and is thus able to bring that

²⁵ Hospitality is not the only practice playing a critical role in the development of the story. Prayer functions at the opening of the story in two ways: as a distinguishing mark of a godly person, applied to both Peter and Cornelius, and as a context in which divine actors enter the story. Prayer does not function mechanically, as it *causes* divine intervention, but there is a broader pattern in Acts in which prayer serves as a location in which God speaks or acts definitively.

²⁶ He integrates a statement of Jesus into the account, along with his conclusion: “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).

robust knowledge to bear as he makes unprecedented yet still traditioned steps in response to divine initiative. With regard to increasingly biblical illiterate contemporary communities of faith, the point is well taken.

Second and subsequently, for knowledge of the scriptures to be formative for the imagination, rather than simply filling the coffers in our memory banks with textual information, then it needs to be connected to the world in which we live. I would point to Thomas Groome's praxis reflection and Chuck Foster's "eventful education" as two clear, strong examples of proposals that take the integration of text and tradition with ongoing praxis seriously.²⁷ Both of these pedagogical approaches begin somewhere besides the biblical text, but similar dynamics could still be brought to bear when a biblical narrative rather than a practice or event is the centerpiece of the community's study. The Acts of the Apostles contains many descriptions of the community's practice that serve as interesting sites of exploration; other texts may require more creative connections. The intent is not to work from text to practical application, but rather to facilitate a conversation among learners in which contemporary practices or postures function or could function in ways analogous to the biblical text.

Third, divine initiative and action play an undeniable role in Peter's transformed understanding here. Not only does Peter receive divine revelation in the form of a vision, but the Spirit further prompts him to accept the messengers from Cornelius and then interrupts his sermon by unexpectedly coming upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:11-16; 19-20; 44-47). Peter recognizes that his actions can either be in cooperation with or in (presumably ineffective) opposition to God's purposes. At the same time, Peter is not a passive figure or a particularly animated puppet; he reasons, decides, proclaims – he imagines. The cooperation of divine and human agents here is highly suggestive for the ways that teachers conceive of their task. Without so tightly defining the work of the Spirit that the community misses the signs of the Spirit's sometimes surprising action, educators can still do better than only assigning to divine agency only those outcomes of an educational encounter for which our own efforts do not account.²⁸ Space does not permit the exploration this topic requires, but an account of whether and how God acts in the transformation of imagination is needed.

Finally, hospitality provides a helpful framework for thinking of the community's engagement with the biblical text. The text is both familiar, known through congregational culture and study, and yet strange, a collection of disparate texts from historical periods quite different from the present one. In that way, current communities greet the text as stranger and guest. Critically – the biblical term for guest and host is identical. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus has a way of entering a home as a guest and sometimes emerging as host. Communities of faith may benefit by simultaneously regarding the biblical text in both senses - as guest, even as stranger, to be charitably welcomed and understood, but also as the host that sets the table for the community.

²⁷ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 135-154. Charles R. Foster, *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 47-50.

²⁸ Carol Lakey Hess, "Educating in the Spirit" in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 119-131.

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