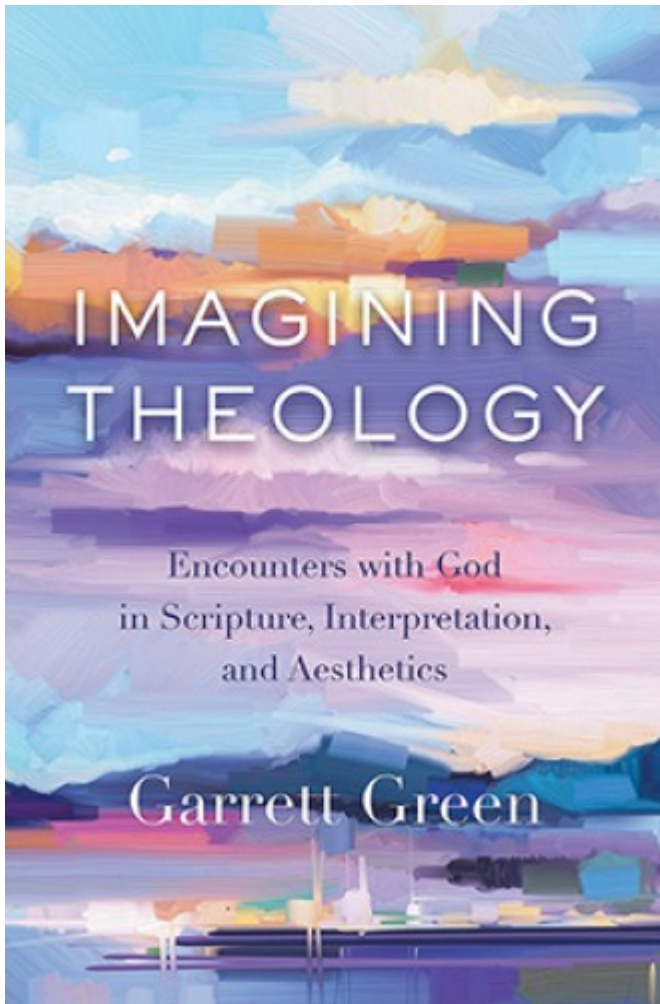


Imagination as a lens for making sense of the world

Cultivating a shared Christian imagination

by [Zen Hess](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Imagining Theology

Encounters with God in Scripture, Interpretation, and Aesthetics

By Garrett Green

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Imagination has recently become a buzzword in theology, but Garrett Green is not new to the conversation. The essays collected in *Imagining Theology*, which span three decades of Green's work, show how a "normative Christian imagination" enables Christians to grapple with faith and the world with brighter and clearer vision. On a broader level, the essays beckon Christians to allow God to captivate our imaginations.

Green uses the word *imagination* in a particular way. Instead of "fantastic" or "fictive" imagining—like what a child does while roaming the woods looking for dinosaurs—he seeks to employ imagination "realistically." He explains: "The realistic imagination functions throughout human experience, enabling us to envision the whole of things, to focus our minds to perceive how things are ordered and organized—in other words, it allows us to see what is really there, rather than just a blooming, buzzing confusion."

In other words, the imagination produces a frame, a lens, or a paradigm that prepares a person to make sense of the world. The realistic imagination, Green writes, provides "a means of gaining a better understanding of reality."

The roots of Green's concept can be found in Paul's letters. Richard Hays has artfully restated Paul's phrase "the renewing of your minds" as "the conversion of the imagination" (Rom. 12:12). If we were to translate 1 Corinthians 1:10 in a similar way, it might look something like this: "I exhort you, family, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions in you, but that you be made complete in the same imagination and in the same discernment." (The NRSV translates the final phrase as "united in the same mind and the same purpose.")

This substitution gives the passage a strikingly different sense. While *mind* implies assent to a set of doctrines, *imagination* suggests a more generous kind of community—one that makes room for people in different seasons of faith and understanding. A body with a shared imagination creates space for variance and disagreement, but not division.

Imagination is more capacious than *mind*, and I think it's a fair translation given the context of 1 Corinthians 1. Paul's main purpose in writing to the believers at Corinth is to quell their schismatic behavior, and being of the same imagination means seeing the world from the same starting point. For Paul that starting point is Christ,

who has been crucified and raised from the dead.

A reasonable question arises, however. How does one set boundaries to ensure that imagination does not become a form of self-serving fiction? To address this concern, Green provides several norms for the shared imagination in Christian theology.

He offers a beautiful theology of scripture, leaning on heavy hitters like John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Katherine Sonderegger. Green writes, “The Bible embodies the concrete paradigm on which all genuine Christian theology is based, enabling the faithful to rightly imagine God.” Such a claim raises questions about inspiration and interpretation. Following Sonderegger, he resists divine dictation theories of inspiration because they obliterate human freedom. Instead, he writes, “God speaks not by putting words into the mouths of passive ancient authors but by capturing their imagination and enabling them to utter truthfully . . . the mysteries of the One Eternal God, Creator of the heavens and the earth.”

Regarding interpretation, Green provides a thoughtful reminder in the spirit of Calvin. Scripture is not to be looked *at* but rather should be looked *through*—“in order to see the world and its relation to God in a new way.” In short, God captured the imaginations of the biblical authors so that the Holy Spirit might also capture and convert our imaginations as we look through scripture at the world.

Green’s creative use of scripture is most clearly depicted in his essay on eschatology. Seeing the future through the scriptures, Green articulates an eschatological hope that counters what he describes as the emptiness of future hope in a secular age. The language of this chapter reveals the extent to which Green’s own imagination has been captured by the Spirit through scripture.

In a chapter on divine gender and the use of metaphor, Green challenges the modern impulse to reject masculine metaphors and pronouns for God. If we want to repudiate biblical justifications for patriarchal abuse, he argues, we need “to correct the distortions of male-centered readings.” I mostly agree with him here. He concludes, however, that “Christian theologians need to insist on a subtle but important distinction: God is not male; yet the appropriate language in which to describe, address, and worship him is nevertheless masculine.” I suspect that Moses, who sings of God giving birth, or Job, who describes creation coming from God’s womb, would be surprised by this claim. If the whole witness of scripture is “the concrete paradigm” on which Christians base their theology, then surely we are

obliged to allow the Bible's feminine language about God to capture and form our imagination too.

Paul tells the Corinthians to be of the same imagination just before he describes how God turns wisdom and foolishness inside out: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God" (NIV). *Imagining Theology* tells the story of one theologian who allows his imagination to be captured so that he may see the power of God at work in the world.

Green bears witness to the kind of intentional, prayerful, and self-reflective work Christians must do to prevent our imaginations from becoming or remaining diseased, as Willie Jennings puts it. Forming a Christian imagination is a journey. Green offers us insights from his own journey as a guide to ours. Even if we don't agree with him at every point, he is a wonderful companion.