

# The Baptized Imagination

BY KERRY L. DEARBORN

**Rather than leading us to escape from reality, stories from the baptized imagination address our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community. Washing away blinding scales, they give us a new vision of the enduring goodness at the heart of all things and our fundamental connection with all of creation.**

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**A**s a young atheist, C. S. Lewis purchased a book in a train station bookstall. He was seeking a hint of joy in life, life which he believed to be merely a “meaningless dance of atoms.” Like many of us who read novels to escape the mundane realities of life, Lewis was seeking a reprieve from the grim rationalism he had embraced. He yearned to enter through myth into the “mirage” of beauty.<sup>1</sup> Reality is a barren wasteland, he believed, and myths, though they touched the deepest yearnings of the heart, were after all only “lies breathed through silver.”<sup>2</sup>

The book he read, *Phantastes* by George MacDonald, had a profound effect on his life. He later wrote that it converted, even baptized his imagination. Rather than leading him into an escape *from* reality, it washed away blinding scales and gave him a new vision *of* reality. Rather than providing mere ornamentation for a life which for him held no lasting significance, it led him to sense the enduring goodness at the heart of all things. Instead of feeding his sense of being alone in the vastness of the universe, *Phantastes* began to draw him out of himself to feel a fundamental connection with all of creation. It is from this experience of Lewis’s that the idea of “the baptized imagination” derives. “I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing of being washed as to read MacDonald,” Lewis affirmed. Through MacDonald’s fantasy he encountered “good Death,” which began to cleanse away cynicism and awaken him to “cool morning

innocence." A myth was able to show him "the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying and ecstatic reality in which we all live," so that eventually he could come to believe in the 'true myth' behind all myths—the story of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

In this article I will explore more fully the nature of the baptized imagination. After briefly contrasting the twisted imagination with the baptized imagination, I will articulate three ways in which stories can aid in the process of dying and rising to newness of life. These ways relate to what John Stott has called the three deepest hungers of the human heart: the hungers for transcendence, significance, and community. First, fantasy can transform our vision so that our cynicism and fear are cleansed away and we see the real universe with all its tragedy and glory held fast by the God of grace. Second, the bracing waters of fantasy's baptism can awaken us from the numbness of plodding through what seems a meaningless life. It can ignite a sense of the significance of our own life and of each life we encounter, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. We can see more clearly through story that people's lives and actions have lasting impact. Third, fantasy challenges the lie that ultimately we are each alone, alienated and autonomous. Resembling the sacrament of baptism, stories plunge a person into a reality where the alienated self is left behind. In a sense, as we enter into the story of others we must die to ourselves and rise with awareness of the fundamental connections within all of creation. Stories from the baptized imagination enlarge our sense of community and connection with other people, creatures, and nature.<sup>4</sup>

### **GOD'S SPIRIT AND THE IMAGINATION**

Not all stories have such an effect. Rather than taking us through cleansing waters to baptize the imagination, some stories leave us feeling covered with grime and muck. Others are so purely escapist that we feel we have bathed in sugar syrup which afterwards crystallizes to blur our vision, blunt our sense of purpose, and inhibit us from wanting to get anywhere near the authentic realities of people and creation.

George MacDonald understood well the destructive possibilities of a twisted imagination. "If the dark portion of our own being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition of such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel—only declare—a slow return toward primeval chaos."<sup>5</sup> In *The Lord of the Rings* we find this 'sickness of decay' in Saruman who fashions his own Orc-creatures, the Uruk-hai, and brutally destroys the environment around him.

As with every gift from God, the imagination can be warped for destructive purposes. The problem is not with imagination per se, but with the way it is employed. Isaiah describes those who are rebellious, deceitful, and unwilling to listen to the Lord's instructions: "who say to the seers, 'Do not see'; and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right;

“speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions,...” (Isaiah 30:10). There are always false prophets who will cry “‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 8:11b). There is always the temptation to turn the stones of reality into the bread of illusion in order to gratify human craving for self-indulgence and self-deification. Lilly Sammille (or Lilith) in *Descent into Hell* is Charles Williams’s profound depiction of such a temptation. Lilly is the teller of soothing and sensuous tales who entices: “Cross my hand with silver, and I’ll not only tell you a good fortune, I’ll make you one,” and “Give me your hand, then come and dream.... You’ll never have to do anything for others anymore.”<sup>6</sup> Prophesying such illusions has become lucrative business. It is appealing to hear stories that keep us from having to die to ourselves and to rise to a new life in which we are no longer the center.

One can imagine King David hoping for such soothing words from the prophet Nathan after his violation of Bathsheba, Uriah, and his relationship with God. However, the baptized imagination operates in a cruciform manner. It does not soothe with smooth words that would cover over festering wounds. It lays bare the bruising realities of human fallenness, while simultaneously offering a way of cleansing and exaltation to newness of life. God used Nathan’s story to confront David’s blindness to the evil in his life, to cleanse away the slime of guilt and to open him up to healing forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:1-14).

What makes it possible for a story to challenge so incisively and inspire so profoundly? George MacDonald saw a wise imagination as the “presence of the Spirit of God.”<sup>7</sup> Our imaginations were created in the image of God’s imagination—the source of all creativity. Because Christ’s death and resurrection operate on the entirety of our person, our imaginations too have been “crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:19). As they are redeemed from the distorting influences of our fallenness, they also may draw their inspiration from the “imperishable flame” of God’s own creativity, and offer light to the world.<sup>8</sup> Clark Pinnock exclaims that God’s “Spirit is essentially the serendipitous power of creativity, which flings out a world in ecstasy and simulates within it an echo of the inner divine relationships, ever seeking to move God’s plans forward.”<sup>9</sup> This is not to equate our creativity with God’s, but to admit that inspiration comes from the fount of all wisdom, truth, and beauty. Human creativity is a gift of participation in God’s creativity. For this reason, MacDonald thought it best to call us “makers” and Tolkien employed the term “sub-creators,” rather than claiming that we are creators. Because our “making” can by the Spirit share in God’s creativity, stories from the baptized imagination are able to address the deepest hunger of our hearts for transcendence, significance, and community.

### **TRANSCENDENCE**

“The Elves may fear the Dark Lord, and they may fly before him, but never again will they listen to him or serve him,” Tolkien writes in *The Lord*

of the Rings. "They do not fear the Ringwraiths, for those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power."<sup>10</sup> The Elves have what I would call "bi-focal" vision. They are acutely aware of the anguish and evil in their midst, but they do not live in fear. They have great power because they are able to see the harsh realities of Middle-earth in light of the more enduring reality of the Blessed Realm. Stories from the

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baptized imagination are able to offer us that bi-focal perspective as well.

Entering into a fantasy world like MacDonald's *Phantastes*, we are able to perceive the brokenness in our lives and our world, while simultaneously being drawn into the wonder of goodness and grace at the heart of all things. The power that evil wields when operating on one who is proud and self-preoccupied, like the young protagonist Anodos, be-

comes a sobering alarm, alerting us to our own weakness. Yet, we vicariously experience grace, which not only confronts but also bathes, caresses, and heals. We discover the pervasive realm of holiness that offers an ocean of divine love to bathe and restore Anodos.<sup>11</sup> Grace rescues and redeems from times of failure and capitulation to temptation. Thus we are invited alongside Anodos to relinquish our desperate grasp at control and survival at any cost. Trust becomes more feasible, trust that there is One at the heart of all creation who would extend the blessed realm to all creation. In this way we are invited to see with Lewis the "bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things" and drawing "the common things...into the bright shadow."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly in *The Lord of the Rings*, we are offered the gift of bi-focal vision urging both greater realism and deeper hope. We become more acutely aware of how easy it is to be seduced by a thing of beauty and power, like the One Ring. The struggles of Boromir and Frodo to resist that allure, at times woefully unsuccessful, awaken us to the weaknesses in ourselves. Even so the grace, wonder, and glory behind the harsh realities of Middle-earth remind us that joy, celebration, and music are possible in the midst of it all. We gain a vision of the blessed realm through the lives and visions of the Elves in Rivendell and Lothlórien. And we sense the power of such a vision when we read of Sam battling his way forward with Frodo deep in-

to the putrid and barren land of Mordor. In the midst of great dreariness and impending darkness, Sam looks up: "Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach" (901).

It is difficult for us to walk through each day and sustain a vision of the blessed realm of God's Kingdom, while also remaining poignantly aware of human agony and significantly engaged with the suffering of those around us. Either we tend to become consumed and overwhelmed by present realities and lose sight of God's kingdom that Jesus proclaimed to be in our midst, or we try to abstract ourselves from life's struggles in escapism. Gifts from baptized imagination offer a renewing perspective on the wonder of God's grace that penetrates into the darkness and rests on even the most common things. We are emboldened to come out of our comfort and fears and to participate in God's purpose of drawing all things into God's "bright shadow."

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

Cynicism and escapism are both ways to flee from accountability for our behavior. Lewis's earlier materialist nihilism allowed him to be self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing. What did it matter what he did, since objective reality was utterly meaningless? Similarly, if meaning can only be found in the subjective realm of dreams and emotions why bother leaving the comforts and securities of life to confront problems in the world around? Why go forth to adventure and suffering, if we can remain secure in the cozy Shire of our protected existence? A baptism of the imagination splashes cold water on such cynicism and illusion and awakens us not only to a bi-focal vision, but also to a call. It not only reveals the interpenetration of the material and the spiritual realms, objective and subjective realities, but it also catalyzes responsive self-giving action.

Once it becomes clear that there is more to life than the material realm, we are gripped by the truth that there is also more to each person than meets the eye.<sup>13</sup> Like Frodo, I may feel very small and insignificant in the face of the challenges and wonders of life. I too may feel like I was not "made for perilous quests" (60). But when I read that a halfling is central in the battle of good against evil, it is as if I emerge from the baptismal waters and am anointed with oil to fight the good fight. Stories of the baptized imagination not only awaken us to this sense of significance, they clarify three aspects of the very nature of significance.

First, the way of significance is often hidden and inglorious. This does not naturally appeal to a culture mesmerized by celebrities and superstars, where even fifteen minutes of fame sounds like a worthy goal. Through *The Lord of the Rings* we comprehend that the "least and the lowliest" are

more apt for such a pilgrimage. Self-giving rather than self-aggrandizement sustains a servant commitment to truth. When Frodo learns of the nature of the One Ring, he offers the Ring to Gandalf rather than claiming its power for himself. When he hears that it is a danger to the Shire, he offers to leave, though he knows it means “exile, a flight from danger into danger” (61). “I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable...” (61). He is willing to go alone and incognito, knowing his sacrifice might never be appreciated, known, or even effective. It is fitting that Sam Gamgee, Frodo’s gardener, is the one who is “chosen” to go with him. The last shall be first and the least shall be the greatest of all.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the baptized imagination exposes the destructiveness of one who like Boromir would take the more expedient road of power and glory to defeat evil. Boromir’s sense of entitlement as a great warrior and great leader does not serve the Fellowship of the Ring well, nor does it strengthen the battle against evil. One who yearns for the glory of commanding “all men” becomes blinded by his lust for power, and cannot sustain the kind of commitment or bi-focal vision it takes to remain a servant (391).

*Phantastes* presented Lewis with this emphasis, also. After a long pilgrimage, Anodos finally does something significant when he gives up trying to be noble, heroic, and glorious. He proclaims: “Then first I knew the delight of being lowly, of saying to myself, ‘I am what I am, nothing more.’... I learned that it is better...for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and fancied innocence. I learned that he that will be a hero will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work is sure of his manhood” (166).

Second, the way of significance requires endurance and commitment. This challenges the efficient mechanistic ways of our age. Inspired stories reveal that pragmatic solutions are less important than personal character formed through discipline and determination. Frodo and Sam move through many hindrances and obstacles in their journey to Mount Doom. This can wash away unrealistic expectations for easy resolutions and instant gratification and reveal the need for “sheer dogged endurance” (1 Thessalonians 1:3, Phillips). Attempted short cuts to our desires create long detours. Perseverance is revealed as possible through the presence of a greater power who gives strength for the disciplining of the desires, and redemption and healing when we temporarily lose ground.

Third, significance is tied to responsibilities assumed in humility rather than roles asserted in pride. At a time when image is so important and roles are sought for the entitlement they bring, the call of the baptized imagination is to humble responsibility. This may seem utterly foolish.<sup>15</sup> Why should Aragorn, the heir of kings, have to be cloaked in the humility



of a Ranger? Why should he wander throughout Middle-earth to protect people and receive no acclaim? His role entitles him to power, majesty, glory, and honor. Yet Aragorn does not cling to his rights. In humility, he serves, guides, and offers his own life even through the Paths of the Dead.

Similarly, Eowyn does not cling to her role as a protected noble woman, chosen to govern her people. Rather than being imprisoned in that role, she responds to a deeper call and faces the worst dangers that the Enemy can hurl her way. In doing so she shows the way of grace to move within the ancient prophecies to defeat evil. Truly “no living man” would hinder the Lord of the Nazgûl (822). It would be a woman who would defeat him instead.

Stories’ clarification of the way of significance cautions us against misjudging a person who takes the way of servanthood, long-suffering endurance, and humble responsibility. We will be reminded to see the dignity in others no matter how seemingly lowly their work. And we will be wary lest we react in self-protective fear to crush a pathetic enemy, having seen that even a creature like Gollum can make a significant contribution.

None of these ways of significance should surprise those who follow Jesus. His way among us was hidden and inglorious. His was a long-suffering way of endurance. And he too relinquished his rights as the Son of God to bring liberation and the defeat of evil. The baptized imagination is able to convey these truths as newly enfolded so that the old truths shine with greater radiance and relevance for our own lives.

## **COMMUNITY**

The baptized imagination not only offers a cleansed vision of transcendence and a clarified way of significance, it also offers a bridge toward community. In revealing

the interconnectedness of all of creation it propels us to die to a sense of isolation, individualism, and autonomy. Through the sacrament of baptism we join with others to become part of the One Body of Christ. In like manner, baptism of the imagination means recognition of our

common humanity, that all are created in God’s image. It can also free us to see our common creatureliness, whether through trees like Treebeard in *The Lord of the Rings*, or animals like Mrs. Beaver in the Narnia tales.

Three aspects of viable community become apparent in such stories. First, community functions best as unity with diversity. Though Christians

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may in principal believe that one of the great treasures of the kingdom of God is its diversity of peoples, our social relationships often are quite segregated.<sup>16</sup> Knowing the Spirit of God reaches out through the Church to baptize people from every language and ethnic group, we are often still wary of the stranger and those who are “other.” The baptizing imagination is needed as a solvent on our underlying assumptions. New vision of both the inadequacies of homogeneity and the promise of diversity is required for true community to emerge.

When we experience the contrast in *The Lord of the Rings* between the nine Ringwraiths and the nine members of the Fellowship, a cleansing takes place that leaves a deep imprint on the mind and heart. Whereas evil aims at colorless sameness, the Fellowship expresses the richness and power of a diversity of gifts and perspectives. It is clear that such relationships do not come easily or naturally. The Elven prince Legolas and Gimli the Dwarf must work through the enmity from generations past before they learn to trust and value each other. But the reader can see how both characters are crucial to the quest. The Holy Spirit’s work to create and call forth the uniqueness of each creation becomes more evident through engagement with this story. Furthermore, the power of grace to unify the Fellowship gives courage to those who would act on these truths in their lives. As hobbits, humans, elf, and dwarf are all clothed with elvish cloaks, Christians can be reminded that in the midst of our many differences we are all clothed in Christ, and need one another on the frontlines to which we are daily called.

Second, vibrant and enduring relationships require sacrifice, for relationships thrive with self-giving not self-aggrandizement. Though it is obvious to our minds that the power of love expressed through sacrifice strengthens community and the love of power destroys it, we need this truth baptized into our hearts and imaginations for it to be enacted in our lives. Sam is willing to give all that he has to serve Frodo, and even Sauron with all his might and terror cannot thwart the power of such love. The baptism of the imagination can serve to remind us that dying to oneself is the foundation of every relationship and every healthy community.

Third, inspired stories reveal that community is sustained by grace. Hope makes self-giving possible when we can see the resources that are available for a cruciform life. We need not attempt to go it alone, as Frodo assumed might be necessary. Just as grace transforms even the most common things, drawing them into its “bright shadow,” even so grace is depicted as pervading, sustaining, and strengthening community through battles, apparent death, separation, and loss.

## **CONCLUSION**

Stories from the baptized imagination preserve us from the dreary banality of materialism or the disconnected bubble of escapism. They liberate



us from viewing life mono-focally and call us to lives of true significance and rich community. Central in this process is the restoration of bi-focal vision in which we see all of life in light of the blessed realm. The Spirit of God who inspires such creativity can use these resources in our lives in ways that resemble the impact John's visions have on him as conveyed in the book of Revelation.<sup>17</sup> As he is taken momentarily out of his realm and into heaven, he is able to see beyond the ordinary world of his circumstances. He becomes bi-focal. "He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of his time and place," Richard Baukham writes. "He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God's ultimate purpose for human history.... It is not that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence."<sup>18</sup> The power of this vision gives John a sense of enduring significance in the midst of his exile and a sense of lasting community in his isolation. John brings courage to others in the midst of the perilous realm of Nero's persecution, for he reminds them of the blessed realm that is present and will one day prevail. He gives them hope that cannot be curtailed by suffering and death.

Similarly, the baptized imagination creates stories which confront the dominant ideology of our time and empower us to be people who plunge hopefully into the challenges of our day. We are reminded of the presence of the God of the bright shadow and the blessed realm. And we can say with the elves: "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater" (339).

## NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis tells this story in Chapter XI, "Check," *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955). The materialist universe, he complains, has this severe drawback: "one had to look out on a meaningless dance of atoms..., to realize all the apparent beauty was a subjective phosphorescence, and to relegate everything one valued to the world of mirage" (173).

2 Lewis quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien, A Biography*, revised edition (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 197.

3 C. S. Lewis, "Preface", *George MacDonald, an Anthology*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 21. Lewis felt a debt to George MacDonald in all of his writing: "I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him" (20). For a description of Tolkien's conversation with Lewis in which Lewis came to believe in the story of Jesus Christ as the "true myth," see Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, 197-198.

4 With the belief that literature fosters community and reduces crime, Mexico City offers free books to its subway commuters. "The idea emerged from discussions with Leoluca Orlando, former mayor of Palermo, Italy, and former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's consulting firm on ways to cut crime in Mexico's capital...." Tokyo

has also adopted a subway library system and "Japanese commuters say the libraries foster a sense of community." Morgan Lee, The Associated Press, in *The Seattle Times*, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003, A8.

5 George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, (London: Sampson Low Marston & Company, Ltd., 1895), p. 25.

6 Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 60, 110.

7 MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, 28.

8 The imperishable flame is Tolkien's image of the source of all creativity in *The Silmarillion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

9 Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love, A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 1996), 21.

10 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, new edition (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 216. I will use mainly two texts to develop an understanding of the baptized imagination: George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (Tring, England: Lion, 1986), because it was the one to which Lewis attributed the baptizing of his own imagination, and *The Lord of the Rings*, as most readers will be familiar with this narrative.

11 C. S. Lewis describes the bright shadow that rests on the travels of Anodos as "Holiness" in *Surprised by Joy*, 179.

12 Ibid., 181.

13 Gandalf says to Bilbo and Frodo, "There's more about you than meets the eye" (319).

14 Mark 10:31 and Luke 9:48. Cf. Elrond's observation: "The road must be trod but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is off the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (262).

15 In fact, foolishness surrounds the entire venture to defeat evil. "Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy!" Gandalf advises the Fellowship of the Ring. "For he is very wise, and weights all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. In his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it" (262).

16 See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

17 Because the Spirit is the fount of all creativity, though such stories are not authoritative in the same way as Scripture, they can work upon us in parallel ways to those in the Bible. Tolkien acknowledged that his work was discovered and inspired rather than invented. See *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, revised edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 399-400, and Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, revised edition (London: HarperCollins: 2002), 129.

18 Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7-8.



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