



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Baptized Imagination  
(*Inklings of Glory*,  
pp. 11-20)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# The Baptized Imagination

How do stories transform moral vision? The stories of Tolkien, Lewis, and Sayers enable us to see “the enduring goodness at the heart of all things and our fundamental connection with all creation.” They nourish our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community.

### Prayer

O God, we are grateful for the gift of friendship and the grace it confers and the grace it inspires. We thank You especially for the friendship of the Inklings, whose coming together grants a model by which brothers and sisters can come together in reverent awe and unabashed praise.

Thank You for the agility of their minds and hearts that challenges us even today to look within and without for new means of seeing and believing. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 14:15-24

### Reflection

As Jesus enjoys a sabbath banquet with a leading Pharisee (Luke 14:1), a guest announces in a haze of self-righteousness, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Jesus tells the parable of a great dinner, which exposes the fellow’s pride, yet extends to everyone the gracious invitation to join God’s feast. Like all parables, this one has two levels: a fictional tale and an underlying reality that it reveals to an attentive listener. “In effect,” Kline Snodgrass keenly remarks, “parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”<sup>†</sup>

C. S. Lewis said about his experience of reading the fantasy stories by nineteenth-century pastor George MacDonald, “I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing of being washed as to read MacDonald.” Stories can “baptize our imagination” and transform our moral vision when they feed the deep hunger of the human heart for:

- ▶ *transcendence*, by encouraging a “bi-focal” perspective 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.” This counters our tendency to avoid life’s struggles, because we are overwhelmed by human suffering and have lost sight of God’s kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, or because we retreat into escapism. With “gifts from baptized imagination,” Dearborn writes, “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*, as they “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.” Stories help us see that truly significant actions often occur out of the spotlight. Significant actions require endurance and commitment, and “inspired stories reveal that pragmatic solutions are less important than personal character formed through discipline and



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determination." Finally, these stories reveal how significance involves taking up humble responsibilities, not acting out of pride. "None of these ways of significance should surprise those who follow Jesus," says Dearborn. "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 en fleshed so that the old truths shine with greater radiance and relevance for our own lives."

► *community*, as the imagined rational creatures that populate the Inklings' fantasy stories clarify the nature of our common humanity. In their fellowship we see diversity and the power of grace that sustains their unity. In *The Lord of the Rings*, contrast the dreary sameness of the nine Ringwraiths to the rich diversity of gifts among the nine members of the Fellowship. "As hobbits, humans, elf, and dwarf are all clothed with elvish cloaks, Christians can be reminded that in the midst of many differences we are all clothed in Christ, and need one another on the frontlines to which we are daily called." Further, we see their enduring fellowship requires sacrifice, "for relationships thrive with self-giving not self-aggrandizement.... The baptism of the imagination can serve to remind us that dying to oneself is the foundation of every relationship and every healthy community."

Not every story, of course, takes us "through cleansing waters to baptize the imagination." Morally discouraging and purely escapist stories can "blur our vision, blunt our sense of purpose, and inhibit us from wanting to get anywhere near the authentic realities of people and creation." Human imagination rises to be incisive and inspiring. George MacDonald believed, only by the "presence of the Spirit of God." That is why he preferred to call us "makers" rather than "creators"; at its best, our storytelling is done in prayerful dependence on God's creativity.

### Study Questions

1. What does Dearborn mean by "bi-focal" moral vision, and why is it important in the moral life?
2. Using examples from C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, or other favorite writers, illustrate how stories can remind us of the significance of each human person and call us to true community.
3. Do you have a favorite parable in the Bible? How does it "baptize your imagination" or enrich your moral vision?
4. In addition to satisfying our deep hunger for transcendence, significance, and community, can stories enrich our moral vision in other ways?
5. What kind of stories do you enjoy reading? Which recent television dramas and movies have been your favorites? Why are these valuable to you?

### Departing Hymn: "Imagination's Stream"

<sup>1</sup>K. R. Snodgrass, "Parable," in Joel B. Green, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 594.

# The Baptized Imagination

## Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 4 or 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how some stories can “baptize the imagination” and enrich our moral vision.
2. To appreciate how important a sense of transcendence, significance, and community are in the moral life.
3. To reflect on our personal reading and viewing habits, and the moral formation that occurs as we read or view stories.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Share the story, recounted in the first two paragraphs of Dearborn’s article, about C. S. Lewis reading a fantasy by George MacDonald. It begins: “As a young atheist, C. S. Lewis purchased a book in a train station book-stall...” (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 11-12).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 14:15-24 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

How can stories, even the fantasies favored by Lewis and Tolkien, shape the way that we perceive our responsibilities to one another? Dearborn employs C. S. Lewis’ rich term, “baptizing the imagination,” to describe the connection between stories and moral vision. Stories can “cleanse” our imagination, helping us: (1) to see beyond the suffering and distortion in the world to the underlying goodness and love of God that gives us the hope we need in order to persevere in the moral life; (2) to perceive the value of each individual and the importance of our everyday interactions with them; and (3) to sense the value of community with all human beings, with their diverse gifts and perspectives. Without these insights into “transcendence, significance, and community,” we become discouraged because we fear that the moral life depends only on us as individuals, and that what we accomplish is of little value.

Jesus’ parable of the great dinner illustrates Dearborn’s point. *Transcendence*: In the story are hints that this is not only a mere dinner party, but also an invitation to the joy that we all desire; the host is not God, but in the host’s gracious and undeserved invitation we glimpse God’s attitude toward us. *Significance*: The smallest actions—the slave’s invitations and the cavalier rejections—snowball into immense consequences; the rejection of the host’s hospitality is a sign of deeper ingratitude. *Community*: The invitation extends to everyone, because the goal is a great get-together for which the host will not be denied.

Illustrate the final warning—that some stories ‘muddy’ the imagination—with novels, movies, or television shows that make us afraid of one another, despise the world, or distrust God. George MacDonald’s view that

we are “makers,” not “creators” (or, as Tolkien puts it, we are “sub-creators”), is a theme in the hymn “Imagination’s Stream.”

### **Study Questions**

1. By “bi-focal” moral vision, Dearborn means the ability to keep our eyes on two things at once: the suffering and distortion in the world, but also the deeper reality of God’s love that gives us hope and confidence. About the elves in *The Lord of the Rings* she writes, “They are acutely aware of the anguish and evil in their midst, but they do not live in fear” (p. 14). The “escapist” way is to close our eyes to the suffering in the world; the “disheartened” way is to lose sight of God’s love and coming kingdom. Both the escapist and disheartened person are tempted to neglect the serious and difficult moral engagement to which God calls them.
2. You may start the discussion with the examples that Dearborn presents from Lewis, Tolkien, and George MacDonald. Members may mention other examples of stories from novels, movies, or television programs. If they are fans of the Inklings, members may draw upon many other works by Lewis or Tolkien.
3. Why do they recall the parable? What does it show about human beings, God, or the world? If appropriate, relate their comments to the categories of transcendence, significance, or community. Some memorable parables are:
  - Sower (Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15)
  - Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12; Matthew 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19)
  - Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7)
  - Faithful and Unfaithful Steward (Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-46)
  - Talents and Pounds (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27)
  - Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)
  - Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35)
  - Laborers in Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)
  - Wise and Foolish Maidens (Matthew 25:1-13)
  - Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)
  - Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
  - Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)
  - Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)
  - Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)
  - Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)
  - Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
  - Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)
4. Stories can help us to imagine how people live in other cultures or historical times, to sympathize with their suffering, and to appreciate and share their joys. They can make us more aware of the mysterious complexities in human beings. In some stories we may imaginatively experiment with solutions to personal or social problems.
5. Those who enjoy novels or short stories may mention their favorite authors or genre (mystery, romance, history, science fiction, fantasy, etc.). Some members may prefer movies by particular directors or on certain subjects, and those who watch television may mention a favorite drama series or reality series. Why do members enjoy these fictional works? Are they primarily escapist literature? Do they give insight into moral character or into issues of the day? The point is not to denigrate escapist fiction (for sometimes we may need to relax and escape), but to inventory the roles that reading and viewing stories play in our lives.

### **Departing Hymn**

“Imagination’s Stream” is on pp. 52-53 of *Inklings of Glory*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.