

DISCOVERING A FAITH BEYOND  
CONSUMER CHRISTIANITY

THE  
**DIVINE**  
COMMODITY

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## INTRODUCTION

When I have a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion, then I go out and paint the stars.

*Vincent van Gogh*

Not long ago I was attending a ministry conference at a very large church. The setting was impressive by any measure. The mammoth auditorium sat thousands in cushioned theater seats rising heavenward. Wherever I looked a dozen flat-panel displays crammed my field of vision with presenters flashing their high-definition smiles. And the stage was alive, a mechanical beast to behold. It was moving fluidly, breathing smoke, and shooting lasers through its digital chameleon skin. The band members were spread across the platform as jagged teeth in the beast's mouth, and the drummer was precariously suspended from the ceiling like a pagan offering. But even this spectacle could not hold me. In fact, with each passing minute I felt a growing need to escape.

I should disclose that sitting through an entire church service has always been difficult for me. As a child I would tell my mother I had to use the bathroom. Then I would slip out of the sanctuary to sit under the crabapple trees. That kind of behavior was excusable for a child, but I still do it, and now I'm a pastor. Sitting through a worship service is a basic requirement for ordination, but sometimes I still slip out—usually to sit under a tree or visit with the children in the nursery. I suppose I'm not setting a good example, but I don't do it too often and I'm always mindful to get back in time to preach the sermon.

*The man suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder* might be your first assumption. But I don't have ADD, though at least that would be a face-saving explanation for my behavior. It was something else that compelled me out of my theater seat and past the other worshipers attending the ministry conference. I left via the back entrance, walked through the mezzanine, and outside to a lonely balcony.

It was dusk. The moon was low on the horizon and the first stars were appearing. With the beauty of creation unfurled before me, and the glitz of American Christianity behind me, I began to ponder: *Is this what Jesus envisioned? Is this why he came, and suffered, and died? Is this why he*

*conquered death and evil, so that we might congregate for multimedia worship extravaganzas in his name?* On that balcony, taking the chilled air into my body and watching the stars appear, I met with God in silence—my questions filling the space between us.

Over a century ago another struggling Christian fled the church to find God in the stars. Vincent van Gogh is remembered for his volatile mental health, severing his ear, and later taking his life. But the tortured artist also had a volatile relationship with Christianity, oscillating between devotion and rejection. At one time his fervor was so intense he became a missionary. Later he announced, “That God of the clergymen, he is for me as dead as a doornail,”<sup>1</sup> and called himself “no friend of present-day Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> His paintings and letters show us a man wrestling to synthesize his faith with modern thought. But his struggle was primarily with the institutional church, not Christ. In his final years, as his mental illness became more severe, van Gogh reveals a profound devotion to Jesus while remaining disillusioned with the church. His most celebrated painting from this period, *Starry Night*, captures this sentiment. (See color insert, Image 1.)

The scene of a quiet hamlet beneath a churning sky of stars was composed from his imagination. For this reason *Starry Night* depicts the vistas of van Gogh’s soul more than the countryside surrounding Saint-Rémy, France. The deep indigo of the sky was used by Vincent to represent the infinite presence of God, and the heavenly bodies are yellow—van Gogh’s color for sacred love. The divine light of the stars is repeated in the village below, every home illuminated with the same yellow warmth. For Vincent, God’s loving presence in the heavens was no less real on the earth.

But there is one building in van Gogh’s imaginary village with no light, no divine presence—the church. Its silent darkness speaks van Gogh’s judgment that the institutional church was full of “icy coldness.” Like many people today, van Gogh struggled to find God in the confines of institutional, programmatic religion. Instead, he found himself drawn outside the respectable piety of the church to commune with peasants and prostitutes. And his devotion to Christ was inspired by nature—the radiance of sunflowers, the knuckled contortion of olive trees, and the silent providence of the stars. Rather than visiting the church, van Gogh said, “When I have a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion, then I go out and paint the stars.”<sup>3</sup> Were he alive today and attending the same ministry conference, I might have met him on the church balcony that night.

Like Vincent a century earlier, I fear the contemporary church is losing its ability to inspire. In a world churning with God's wonders, designed to inspire our imaginations and draw our souls heavenward, the programmatic church is dark by comparison. A more recent painting by pop artist Ron English captures the church's condition today. A parody of van Gogh's work, *Starry Night Urban Sprawl* replaces the original French village with the architecture of consumerism—fast food restaurants and Hollywood icons. The church steeple is crowned with McDonald's golden arches and King Kong straddles the roof. (*See color insert, Image 2.*)

Unlike van Gogh's *Starry Night*, in Ron English's composition the church is not dark. Light diffuses through every window and door, but it is not the sacred yellow light of the stars above. Instead, the church repeats the electric white light of the franchised stores and restaurants around it. It reflects the values of the earth, not the values of the heavens. This church is a corporation, its outreach is marketing, its worship is entertainment, and its god is a commodity. It is the church of Consumer Christianity.

Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the United States Senate, is said to have observed that:

In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centered on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And, finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

Van Gogh, English, and Halverson capture the question that drove me to that lonely church balcony. Has the contemporary church been so captivated by the images and methods of the consumer culture that it has forfeited its sacred vocation to be a countercultural agent of God's kingdom in the world? And if it has, what are we to do about it?

History has shown syncretism to the culture is a chronic ailment of the church. Solutions have tended to fall into two categories—return or retreat. Some will argue that the church simply needs to return to its first-century roots. There is a bias among Christians that somehow the early church had it right, and everything after the patristic age has been a corruption of what God intended for his people. But the notion of return has two fatal errors. First, it isn't possible. As much as we might like to experience first-century Christianity, time marches forward and not backward. Secondly, the early church's problems were just as significant as ours. In

fact, most of the problems addressed by the letters of the apostles in the New Testament were the result of cultural syncretism. Returning to an earlier era of Christianity simply isn't the solution, no matter how romantic it may sound.

The other common answer to a church overly syncretized to the culture has been retreat—abandoning the church to establish another, supposedly more faithful, community. The Qumran sect, authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, took this approach around the time of Christ. Some monastic orders originated in this manner, and a number of Protestant denominations were born from schisms with other churches in pursuit of ecclesiastical purity. But the retreat solution simply won't work in response to Consumer Christianity. Not only is escape incongruent with the mission the church has been given, it is also impossible. We live, and move, and have our being in a consumer cosmos. The global economy and interconnection of markets and resources means every time we eat a meal, listen to music, put on clothing, or read a book (like this one), we are being consumers.

But there is a difference between living in a consumer society and adopting a consumer worldview. Our faithful Christian predecessors lived within the Roman Empire, but their minds and hearts were not beholden to Caesar. Their citizenship was not to Rome. Likewise, we must learn to exist in a consumer empire but not forfeit our souls at its altar. This means addressing the issue at a level beyond mere behaviors.

Christian critiques of consumerism usually focus on the danger of idolatry—the temptation to make material goods the center of life rather than God. However legitimate and commonplace the evil of materialism may be, it misses the real threat consumerism poses. Consuming goods (a behavior) is not inherently wrong; as contingent beings our Creator has designed us to consume resources to survive. Rather than a behavior, this book will approach consumerism as a set of presuppositions most of us have been formed to carry without question or critique. More than merely an economic system, it is the framework through which we understand everything including the gospel, the church, and God himself. Consumerism is the dominant worldview of North Americans. As such, it is competing with the kingdom of heaven for the hearts and imaginations of God's people.

I hope to tackle the problematic union of consumerism and Christianity in three ways. First, each chapter will show how our formation

as consumers has distorted an element of our faith. For example, how we've turned God into a consumable product, or the breakdown of community through market-driven individualism. The pervasive influence of consumerism must be revealed and critiqued before we can hope to move any further.

Secondly, the book seeks to energize an alternative vision of faith. The values of consumerism have captured the imaginations of both the religious and irreligious in our day. Our minds are so captivated by these ideas that we've lost the ability to think an alternative thought. As a result, the imagination has become the critical battleground between the kingdom of God and consumerism, and before we can hope to live differently we must have our minds released from consumerism's grip and captivated again by Christ. As Thomas Kelly contends, before we can live in full obedience to God we must be given a flaming vision of such an existence. This burning image comes to us through our intuitive faculties. "Holy is imagination, the gateway of Reality into our hearts."<sup>5</sup>

To accomplish this, I have approached the structure of each chapter the way we encounter a van Gogh painting. Like other post-Impressionist artists, van Gogh used brilliant and contrasting colors applied with short, staccato brushstrokes. At close range the subjects of his paintings were indecipherable, a formless abstract of color and texture. One must step away from the canvas for the colors to fuse and the eye to discern the subject. Likewise, the chapters that follow are impressionist in form. They are comprised of short, seemingly incongruent scenes of personal narrative, biblical exposition, and cultural observation. But with distance and reflection they fuse in the mind's eye to construct a discernable theme. My intent is for the reader's imagination, and not merely his or her intellect, to be awakened and nourished with an alternative vision of faith from the one we've inherited from our consumer formation.

Toward this end, I recommend reading the book in community. I have found the discipline of godly conversation to be indispensable to my growth, and processing the concepts in each chapter with others may ignite your imagination into a fire that the single spark of your mind could never muster alone. Similarly, the content of the book is drawn from my experience and setting, not yours. While I hope there is considerable congruency, each reader must still wrestle with the implications of each chapter for his or her own life. If reading a self-help book is like being served a meal, this book is like being invited into the kitchen. Here you are encouraged to pull



from the cupboards and apply the concepts yourself. This creative work is best done in community with friends.

Of course, I do not want my readers to have to fend for themselves entirely. So, the third way this book will try to address the challenge of consumerism is by prescribing actions of re-formation. With our imaginations freed from the confinements of consumerism we still require the means to implement our faith—methods of manifesting in the world what our illuminated minds have envisioned. Within each chapter I will explore a spiritual practice that can aid us, individually and communally, in living a post-consumer Christianity.

Consumer Christianity, while promising to strengthen our souls with an entertaining faith, has left us malnourished with an anemic view of God, faith, church, and mission. Van Gogh sought Christ by painting the stars, a divine distraction from the institutional religion of his day. I have found my divine distractions to be sitting under a crabapple tree, playing with a child, or standing under a starry sky on a lonely balcony. (In the epilogue you will hear how my evening on the church balcony ended and the unexpected lesson I learned.) I hope this book will be a divine distraction for you, one that rekindles your dormant imagination and helps us all reimagine what our faith can be.

## SLUMBER OF THE IMAGINATION

Do not quench your inspiration and your imagination;  
do not become the slave of your model.

*Vincent van Gogh*

### WALTOPIA

Soaring above the wetlands of central Florida, like an iridescent pearl on green velvet, is Spaceship Earth. The massive geodesic sphere is the heart of Disney's Epcot Center, and an architectural monument to Walt Disney's greatest dream. The sublime beauty of the silver orb is matched only by its colossal failure.

The final years of Walt Disney's visionary life were consumed with the goal of solving the problems facing the world's cities by utilizing advances in science, industry, and urban design. After building Disneyland in California, Walt purchased forty-seven square miles of Florida wilderness not simply to reproduce his West Coast theme park, but to build a fully functional city of the future. He called it E.P.C.O.T.—Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

In his final film, Walt Disney revealed his plans for Epcot that included schools, residential neighborhoods, parks, churches, advanced public transportation, even skyscrapers and a sports arena. He said Epcot would be a showcase that will “always be in a state of becoming. It will never cease to be a living blueprint of the future where people actually live a life they can't find anywhere else in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

In Walt Disney's imagination every detail of Epcot was already real. He even envisioned how the garbage would be collected. But others believed Walt's vision was so fantastical, so beyond convention, that it couldn't possibly be realized. Behind his back company managers referred to his dream as “Waltopia”—from the Greek word *utopia* meaning “no place.”

After Disney's unexpected death in 1966, his successors didn't know how to proceed with Epcot. Rather than an advanced city unlike any in the world, company executives who lacked Walt's ability to see beyond proven formulas retreated to a more conventional concept. The new president of the Disney Company said Epcot was now being reconsidered "from the point of view of economics, operations, technology, and market potential."<sup>2</sup>

By the time Epcot opened on October 1, 1982, little remained of Walt's dream. Rather than a stream of residents commuting to their first day at work, it was an ocean of tourists who walked beneath the reflective belly of Spaceship Earth ready to buy souvenirs and consume prefabricated experiences. The grand city of tomorrow never lived beyond Walt's imagination. Instead, Epcot became a theme park—a pragmatic and proven idea Disney's managers could execute and stockholders could embrace.

Today, Epcot is the least popular amusement park in Disney's vacation kingdom. Incapable of inspiring the citizens of the world as Walt had dreamed, it has become a subject of ridicule and mockery. Comedian P. J. O'Rourke has remarked, "With Epcot Center the Disney Corporation has accomplished something I didn't think possible in today's world. They have created a land of make-believe that's worse than regular life."<sup>3</sup>

The gleaming pearl on the horizon of central Florida's wilderness is a reminder that imagination is in a battle with conventionality, and conventionality is a powerful foe.

## TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

In July 2003, not far from the shadow of Epcot's silver sphere in Orlando, ten thousand Christian retailers gathered for the fifty-fourth annual Christian Booksellers Association convention. The CBA represents the \$4.2 billion industry that sells Bibles, books, bubblegum, and bracelets to Christian consumers. The economic power wielded by the CBA has grown so rapidly that President George W. Bush has even taken notice.

Bush, whose ascent to the presidency would not have been possible without conservative evangelicals, addressed the 2003 CBA convention via video. "You know as I do the power of faith can transform lives," he said. "You bring the Good News to a world hungry for hope and comfort and encouragement."<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bush was praising Christian retailers, not churches, for spreading the light of Christ. The fact that the president

of the United States, the most powerful political figure on the planet, would address the merchants of Christian books and baubles reveals the economic and political influence Christian consumers have attained.

The other memorable appearance at the 2003 CBA convention was actor/director Mel Gibson. The Hollywood hero and devout Roman Catholic gave a preview of his upcoming film *The Passion of the Christ*. Gibson's movie was promoted as a way for Christian retailers to leverage the Easter holiday. The CBA's president said, "We want to play a role in reclaiming the holiday for Christ. We want to draw people into our stores and drive seekers into the church."<sup>5</sup> Of course, *The Passion of the Christ* became one of the most profitable films in history, grossing nearly \$700 million worldwide and triggering a new wave of Christian-friendly Hollywood productions.

The presence of both political and pop-culture royalty at the CBA convention would have been unimaginable just a few years earlier. In the mid-twentieth century some feared America would follow the path of Europe, where the church atrophied to become an emaciated shell of its former glory. That fear drove evangelical Christians to seek cultural, political, and economic influence as a way of ensuring survival. The 2003 CBA convention represented the culmination of their cultural revolution. Like Epcot's beautiful geodesic sphere, the church had soared to become a powerful icon on the horizon of the American cultural landscape. But like Epcot, the church's stunning ascent has been matched only by its colossal failure.

Christian researcher George Barna concludes, "American Christianity has largely failed since the middle of the twentieth century because Jesus' modern-day disciples do not act like Jesus."<sup>6</sup> During the same half century that evangelicals were climbing to the pinnacle of cultural influence, the church has largely lost its ability to transform lives and teach people to practice the values championed by Christ. Research conducted by sociologists and pollsters shows that "evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general."<sup>7</sup> Despite the influence of Jesus Christ over Washington, Hollywood, and Wall Street, his power over the hearts and minds of people in America is far less evident.

Along with suffering a deficit of qualitative distinctiveness, the church is also losing ground quantitatively. The percentage of Americans engaged in a local congregation has been declining for years. In 1990 approximately

20 percent of the population attended church on any given weekend. By 2004 the figure had dropped to 17 percent. If the trend continues, by 2050 only 11 percent of Americans will attend church. Although megachurches have multiplied across the fruited plains, the numbers show that Christianity in America has been consolidating and not expanding.<sup>8</sup>

## PARALLEL UNIVERSE

The challenge facing Christianity today is not a lack of motivation or resources, but a failure of imagination.

Walt Disney's successors wanted to honor their founder's dream. That laudable motivation is what kept the Epcot project alive. The problem was not their motivation; it was their lack of imagination. They did not possess Disney's ability to see beyond what was conventionally possible. They simply could not see the city he wanted to build in their mind's eye. As a result they reinterpreted Epcot through the only framework they could comprehend—pragmatics, economics, and market potential.

Likewise, the paradoxical rise of Christian political/economic influence and decline of Christian moral influence is not the product of devious or ignoble motivation. Christian leaders in America are largely admirable men and women who passionately love God and genuinely desire to honor Christ. Many sacrifice time, income, and emotional energy giving themselves to what they believe matters most: Christ and his kingdom. And we certainly do not lack resources. In fact, based on the CBA's own numbers we have spent more money equipping the church than any other Christians in history.

Our deficiency is not motivation or money, but imagination. Our ability to live Christianly and be the church corporately has failed because we do not believe it is possible. Like Disney's successors we simply cannot imagine how to carry out the fantastical mission of our leader. Wanting to obey Christ but lacking his imagination, we reinterpret the mission of the church through the only framework comprehensible to us—the one we've inherited from our consumer culture.

Many books about the crisis facing the American church have been added to our shelves in recent years. Most of these well-intentioned reads suggest a new model of church, a new method of cultural engagement, or a new strategy for missions. Certainly there is a place for models, strategies, and methods, but before a solution can be implemented it must be

imagined. Without imagination any solution we conceive will be rooted to the very system we must transcend. How can a prisoner plot his escape if he doesn't believe a world exists outside the prison walls? The prisoner's imagination must be free before his body can follow. As Albert Einstein observed, "Problems cannot be solved with the same consciousness that created them." And Walter Brueggemann declares, "Questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing."<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of a Christian subculture that parallels the secular culture in every way reveals the captivity of our imaginations. With a speed matched only by the Chinese black market, Christian merchandisers produce knockoffs of every secular phenomenon virtually overnight. Whether a new music genre, diet program, or fashion trend, you are sure to find a Jesus version in your local Christian store in time for Christmas. (I was recently given a poker chip that said, "Jesus went all in for you. So ante up and give your heart to him.") If imitation is the highest form of flattery, than Christians have become pop culture's most devoted admirers.

This bizarre parallel universe is not limited to kitschy Christian knickknacks. We also manage our churches with repackaged secular business principles and methodologies pioneered by marketers. A prominent pastor was asked what was distinctly spiritual about his leadership. The pastor responded, "There's nothing distinctly spiritual. . . . One of the criticisms I get is 'Your church is so corporate. . . .' And I say, 'OK, you're right. Now why is that a bad model?'" Justifying his use of secular business models the pastor said, "A principle is a principle, and God created all the principles."<sup>10</sup>

In his defense, for decades ministers have been conditioned by books, conferences, and seminaries to revere how secular corporations accomplish their work. It is assumed that the way Home Depot or Starbucks reacts to consumers' desires is how the church ought to react as well. Whether one is selling Chryslers, Coca-Cola, or Christ is irrelevant, the principles of marketing and persuasion apply equally to all. So, why not learn from the biggest and best? Lyle Schaller, one of the most popular church consultants, has said, "The big issue . . . is not whether one applauds or disapproves of the growth of consumerism. The central issue is that consumerism is now a fact of life."<sup>11</sup> In his book, *The Very Large Church*, Schaller goes on to coach pastors on how to appeal to spiritual consumers, but he never expects the

church to transcend or transform these cultural values. This posture of resignation to consumer culture reveals the utter captivity of our imaginations.

The eagerness to defend conventionality found in both church leaders and lay people explains why sociologists can no longer differentiate the lives of Christians from non-Christians, or the behavior of churches from corporations. We have lost the ability to imagine. We have abandoned the vision that Christianity is an alternative way. We cannot see our lives, our households, or our churches operating any differently than the world around us. As Brueggemann says, “The key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of our imagination so that we are too numbed, satiated, and co-opted to do serious imaginative work.”<sup>12</sup> Our spiritual imaginations have fallen asleep on the comfortable mattress of the consumer culture, and before any remedy for the church can be prescribed our dormant imaginations must be stirred from their slumber.

## A CHILD WILL LEAD THEM

“Come on. That’s a good girl. Come on.” I peeked over the screen of my laptop. Alone in the family room with Zoe, my four-year-old daughter, I wondered who she was talking to. I had been checking my email while she entertained herself with the dolls and paper and crayons strewn on the floor. “Come on, you’re almost there,” she said.

“Who are you talking to, Zoe?” I asked. She was walking slowly through the room holding one hand behind her.

“Sandy,” she replied. I scanned the dolls on the floor. There was Baby Blue, Baby Pink, Baby Red, and the most beloved Baby Too (a name Zoe assumed for the doll because her mother and I would frequently ask, “Would you like your baby too?”). But I saw no doll that might be a new Baby Sandy.

“Who is Sandy?” I asked.

“Daddy!” she sighed and rolled her eyes with the condescension of a teenager. “Sandy is my horse.” The *dub* at the end of her sentence was implied as she motioned to the invisible filly in the middle of our family room. “I’m taking her to the barn so she can eat her lunch.”

“And what are you going to feed her?” I was happy to play along.

Zoe shook her head. “Horses eat hay, Dad.” A fact so well known that my question was clearly out of line even in Zoe’s imaginary world. She proceeded to the kitchen/barn where Sandy enjoyed her lunch.

My brief encounter with Zoe's imagination resurrected memories of my own. A photo album opened in my mind, and I saw faded scenes from a friendship long ago. Wanda and I playing on the swing set. The two of us gazing at the fish bowl. And, of course, Wanda and I discovering the endless joy of Legos. She was my imaginary friend. "Wanda from Toronto" is what I called her when I was four years old. (To my knowledge I've never been to Toronto, and to this day Wanda remains my only friend from the city.) Her unannounced appearance at a family gathering or dinner party was always a point of conflict. My older brother and cousins loved to tease me, but I learned how to defend my unconventional relationship with Wanda. That's what friends do.

With Sandy eating her lunch in the kitchen/barn and Zoe brushing her mane, I reflected on the distant joy of a childish imagination. *What happened to Wanda?* I thought. She returned to Toronto many years ago and never visited me again. She probably sensed that she was no longer welcomed. Like the disciples who tried to keep the children away from Jesus, most of my adult life has been spent repressing my imagination. *Such things are childish and have no place in the serious Christian life*, I thought. The fertile land of imagination is a terrain we pass through, not a field we cultivate. Didn't the apostle Paul say, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."<sup>13</sup>

I have been told many reasons for keeping the imagination out of my Christian life. *The imagination is for New Age spirituality. Imagination is sinful. Imagination leads to heresy. You don't need imagination, you have the Bible.* But then I remember Jesus calling the children. "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them,"<sup>14</sup> he said. I so easily forget that Jesus welcomes all of me, even my childishness. I wonder what that boy felt when Jesus put him in front of those men bickering about who was the greatest. I wonder how he felt as Jesus placed his hand on his shoulders and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>15</sup>

Jesus' adult followers suffered from a chronic lack of imagination. Their minds were shackled by conventionality. When a storm threatened their safety on the sea they panicked. After calming the wind and waves with just a word, Jesus rebuked their lack of faith. Shortly after seeing Jesus feed four thousand people with just a few loaves and fish, the disciples started whining about not having any food for their journey. "Do you not yet



perceive or understand?” Jesus chided. “Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?”<sup>16</sup> And when they bickered about who would be greatest in God’s kingdom, Jesus put a little boy before them and said, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest.”<sup>17</sup>

Consider the servant girl Rhoda. The Christians in Jerusalem gathered in Mary’s home to pray fervently for Peter’s release from Herod’s jail. During the night as the believers prayed, an angel appeared and sprung Peter from his cell just hours before his scheduled execution. But even while following the angel through the streets, Peter believed the entire event was a dream. When he reached Mary’s house and knocked on the door, Rhoda joyfully announced to the adults, still in their prayer meeting perhaps, that Peter had arrived. (Rhoda herself was so surprised that she forgot to let him in.) The adults replied, “You are out of your mind!” Despite Rhoda’s insistence that it was Peter, they refused to believe her. In this humorous account not a single adult could imagine God actually intervening and rescuing Peter, not even Peter himself! Obedience led them to pray for Peter’s rescue, but their imaginations could not follow. Only Rhoda, a young girl, had the capacity to believe the unbelievable.

A child is precious in God’s kingdom because her imagination has not yet fallen asleep. The culture’s conventionality has not yet hijacked her ability to believe. To a child the world is still full of mystery and possibility. A word can calm a storm; a few fish and loaves can feed thousands; a touch can heal the blind. A child can readily imagine the alternative reality of God’s kingdom that adults struggle to see.

## A RAY FROM ON HIGH

In the 1800s art and technology clashed. For centuries Western art had been on a journey toward realism. Through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, artistic techniques had steadily progressed. The flat two-dimensional illustrations common before the Renaissance gave way to realistic scenes that showed an understanding of perspective, shape, light, and color theory. By the mid-nineteenth century the most celebrated artists were Realists who produced paintings in a style referred to as *trompe d’œil*—literally able to “trick the eye.”

But in the late nineteenth century a new technology was attracting a lot of attention in Europe and America—photography. With a device now able to produce realistic images in seconds, the reliance on painters to present

reality was undermined. Slowly the artistic school of Realism declined and a new one emerged. A group of artists known as Impressionists leveraged the one significant advantage paint still held over photography—color. Artists like Monet and Seurat used advances in light and atmospheric theory to paint with dots or small strokes of color. (Their works were the forerunners of the pixilated displays that dominate our digital society.) But Impressionism did not shake the central tenant of Realism; it still sought to present the world as seen by the human eye.

Then came Vincent. Van Gogh had little respect for photography. He considered it a lifeless and abhorrent art form. He said the same of painting that sought to precisely mimic what the eye saw. Instead, he admired the more interpretive paintings of Millet and Lhermitte. In their works, he said, “All reality is also at the same time symbolic. They are different from what are called realists.”<sup>18</sup> Vincent believed art should do more than present reality; it should *represent* reality by uncovering the truth that is not apparent to the naked eye. But unlike his friend Gauguin, van Gogh was not in favor of total abstraction either. He preferred the tension between realism and abstraction, what some have termed Expressionism.

Commenting on this middle way, he says, “I exaggerate, sometimes I make changes in a motif; but for all that, I do not invent the whole picture; on the contrary, I find it already in nature, only it must be disentangled.”<sup>19</sup> His paintings were not flights of fancy without any basis in reality; neither were they literal reproductions of nature. Unlike abstract paintings, van Gogh’s works have discernable subjects: a tree, a farmer, a vase of sunflowers, a church. But van Gogh did not present these subjects as they actually appear to the eye. Instead he painted them as he experienced them; he sought to “disentangled” the essence of his subject from the literal scene. As a result, Vincent’s paintings were the synthesis of what his eye saw and what his imagination perceived. He made the invisible visible. Usually this was accomplished with the symbolic and emotional use of color. While painting in the countryside of Arles, he wrote:

I am always in hope of making a discovery there, to express the love of two lovers by a wedding of two complementary colors, their mingling and their opposition, the mysterious vibrations of kindred tones. To express the thought of a brow by the radiance of a light tone against a somber background. To express hope by some distant star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance. Certainly there is no fake realism (*trompe d’œil*) in that, but isn’t it something that actually exists?<sup>20</sup>

Vincent wanted to express ideas in his paintings such as hope, love, and grief. He sought to make these invisible realities visible through color. He understood the way colors could trigger different emotions, how each one carried its own personality. Vincent saw red as passionate and dangerous. Blue he associated with the mysterious and the infinite. But the color Vincent preferred most of all was yellow. As the brightest hue on the color wheel, it arrests the eye. Van Gogh recognized something divine about yellow's loud magnetism. As the eye is drawn to the vivid warmth of golden light, so the heart is drawn to the radiant warmth of God's love. He used the color to represent sacred love in many of his compositions, and to Vincent yellow symbolized the presence of the *rayon d'en haut*—French for “the ray of light from above.”

In many of his canvases yellow light pours down from the heavens like golden rain. The light itself appears to be a tangible object, a physical presence in the scene that illuminates the faces it touches. Given van Gogh's association of yellow with God, we shouldn't be surprised that many of the biblical scenes he painted are dominated by the color. For example, in *The Raising of Lazarus*, Jesus is noticeably absent. (*See color insert, Image 3.*) Instead, Vincent flooded the entire composition with yellow light, a ray from on high, implying Christ's presence and divine power. But it is van Gogh's use of yellow in nonreligious paintings that is most intriguing. Whether a sky saturated with sunlight, gold harvest fields, or yellow stars swirling in the heavens, Vincent saw God's invisible love in virtually everything he painted.

During his lifetime some mocked Vincent's work as childish. Those beholden to Realism didn't understand his desire to paint the unseen realities of the world. Like the crowds who dismissed Jesus' words, they had eyes but they could not see. Vincent believed the ability to perceive the unseen was achieved only by the grace of God. He wrote, “You need a certain dose of inspiration, a ray from on high, that is not in ourselves, in order to do beautiful things.”<sup>21</sup> He believed there was more to the world than what science could detect, more than what the camera could capture. In this way van Gogh was a painter-prophet. He revealed visions and interpreted hidden truths. He didn't merely present the world as it is; he *re*presented it as one full of God's presence and love. But to see this world a person needs more than eyes. He or she needs a ray from on high, an imagination awakened and illuminated by God.

## DISENTANGLING REALITY

Van Gogh did not abandon reality, but he was not shackled by it either. He saw the world through an illuminated imagination, with a light that he

believed came from God. Without this light we are confined to a *trompe d'œil* existence, one in which we see only a facsimile of the world in two dimensions. What most people call “real” is only a piece of reality because the real-real remains hidden to them. What’s missing is the ray from on high to awaken the imagination and enable us to perceive more than the eye sees. This ray is the grace of God that, as van Gogh says, empowers us to disentangle reality.

Learning to see the world as it truly is—saturated with the presence and love of God—should be the essence of Christian discipleship, or what many call spiritual formation. Unfortunately, most ministries and churches have focused their efforts at spiritual formation upon two areas—knowledge and skills—and have neglected the vital role of the imagination. This amounts to teaching deaf students how to read sheet music. Until their ability to hear sound is restored, their capacity and motivation to produce music will be severely limited.

The neglect of the imagination is not a recent development. Since the Enlightenment’s coronation of knowledge, the church has poured enormous energy into communicating facts about God through sermons, classes, Sunday school, and small groups. It was relatively recently that an increasing number of voices began challenging the effectiveness of information-based formation. Generations of Christians had brains full of biblical knowledge and doctrine, but their lives showed little evidence of the transformation Jesus called forth in his Sermon on the Mount.

In response, during the late twentieth century, many churches and ministries began to shift their focus from dispensing knowledge to teaching skills. This model focuses on training people how to \_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank). Preaching moved away from expounding entire books of the Bible and unpacking doctrines to presenting the pragmatics of living a Christian life. These sermons are easy to identify by their numeric qualifiers: 5 Principles of Parenting; 7 Habits of a Happy Marriage; 3 Biblical Blessings for Businessmen. Outside the church an astounding number of conferences, seminars, workshops, and curricula have been developed with the “how to” perspective.

While necessary components of spiritual formation, both knowledge and skills miss the imaginative aspect of the human spirit that Jesus frequently targeted. Without an imagination illuminated by God and caught up in the alternative reality of his kingdom, skills and knowledge are severely limited in their ability to transform because we can still only see a two-dimensional *trompe d'œil* world. We remain trapped in whatever

delusive reality our culture presents to us. Oswald Chambers understood this danger. He knew that if “your imagination of God is starved then when you come up against difficulties, you have no power, you can only endure in darkness.”<sup>22</sup> The critical role of the imagination is affirmed by how Jesus constructed his own ministry.

The Gospel writers show Jesus very infrequently teaching skills, and only periodically conveying didactic knowledge. Instead the Gospels are dominated by Jesus telling stories and weaving parables. He used these verbal Trojan horses to sneak radical truths past his listeners’ defenses and into the chamber where their imaginations slumbered. And as they began to awaken, Jesus’ stories illuminated a new vision of the world. They disentangled reality for his listeners, and his disciples slowly perceived the kingdom of God that Jesus saw all around him. It was a kingdom that defied the conventionality of his day. A kingdom where rebellious criminals are embraced by God like a loving father; where the poor and the weak are welcomed to God’s table; where the servant is honored and the powerful are brought low. It was a radical vision not everyone could accept. Some were too enslaved by the cultural conventions, too entangled in realism for their imaginations to be awakened. These people heard Jesus tell stories about trees, fields, treasures, or seeds—but nothing more. They could hear, but not understand. They could see, but could not perceive.<sup>23</sup>

But those whose imaginations were set free, those illuminated by the ray from on high, saw with new eyes. They understood the radical vision of Jesus and went on to transform the world. The book of Acts shows them overcoming kings and subverting empires, raising the dead and healing the blind, living in unity and loving the unlovable. But they did not achieve these things through the wisdom or methods of the world, but through the foolishness of God. And like Jesus, their ability to see the unseen and speak of a more *real* real made them incredibly dangerous people. They were a threat to the fake reality, the *trompe d’œil* deception, established by the powers and authorities of the world.

Stephen was a man whose imagination had been awakened by Christ. He was no longer enslaved by the conventionality of first-century Judea, and he saw a world illuminated by the light of God’s kingdom. So he was marked as a dangerous man, someone who would not conform to accepted practices and ideals. Surrounded by those still imprisoned by conventionality and entangled in delusive realism, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, announced the real reality he saw: “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and

the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”<sup>24</sup> The others, in vigorous defense of a two-dimensional world, cried out and covered their ears. Then they rushed at Stephen and killed him.

If we are to effectively make disciples of Jesus Christ and teach them to obey everything he commanded, we cannot neglect the imagination. Knowledge and skills are important, but neither will be employable if the mind is still imprisoned by the conventionality of the surrounding culture. Like Jesus, we must find ways of getting past defensive walls and enter the chamber where peoples’ imaginations are sleeping and stir them from hibernation. The alternative is the creation of nominal Christians—people possessing knowledge about God but lacking the eyes to see him in the world or practice the alternative values of his kingdom.

Vincent van Gogh warned other artists, “Do not quench your inspiration and your imagination; do not become the slave of your model.”<sup>25</sup> By constructing a Christian subculture that mimics the consumer culture, we have become slaves to our model. We have diminished our ability to imagine the fuller reality presented by Christ. But awakening our imaginations is not something we can accomplish unilaterally. We need the ray from on high that is not from ourselves. We need a childlike faith that surrenders wholly to the grace of God and awaits his illuminating touch. Without this humility our attempts to follow after Christ and advance his mission, although pure in motivation, will be fruitless.

## CRYPTO-CHRISTIANS

In 1549 the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier introduced Christianity to Japan. As the church grew rapidly to 300,000 believers, the shoguns became uneasy with the European influence over their country. In 1641, the missionaries were expelled from Japan, and Christians were required to register as Buddhists or Shintoists. Those who refused were pursued and executed. The brutal persecution cleansed Japan from virtually all Western influence.

The shoguns, however, were unaware that some continued to hold to their Christian faith. Known as Crypto-Christians, or Kakure, their external lives were indistinguishable from other Japanese. They adopted the practices, form, and appearance of non-Christians to ensure survival. The Crypto-Christians even constructed Buddhist shrines in their homes with secret compartments where Christian icons and statues were hidden and where prayers were offered to the “closet god.”

The strategy of adopting Japanese cultural forms to mask their Christian faith continued for 240 years, but if their intention was to preserve the faith they had been taught by the missionaries, the plan backfired. Over time the Crypto-Christians confused their Christian beliefs and their Japanese disguises. The result was the emergence of a hybrid religion no longer adhering to the doctrines of orthodox Christianity. When Europeans regained entrance to Japan in the nineteenth century, they were astonished to see communities of hidden Christians living in the hills around Nagasaki. This amazement waned, however, when they discovered the faith of these forgotten Christians was hardly Christianity. “Although the faith followed by the underground Christians had the outward appearances of Christianity, the vital content and spirit of the religion evolved into something entirely different. . . . It would be more accurate to call it a folk religion altogether Japanese in spirit and content.”<sup>26</sup>

Thousands of Kakure still exist in Japan today, and at least eighty house churches continue to worship the “closet god” by reciting rituals in an indecipherable amalgam of Japanese and Latin. When Pope John Paul II visited Japan in 1981, he met with the leaders of the Kakure community to welcome them back into the fold of the Catholic Church. “We have no interest in joining his church,” one Crypto-Christian said. “We, and nobody else, are true Christians.”<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, it is often our zeal to protect our faith that leads to its loss. Abram was called to leave his country and follow the alternative ways of Yahweh. But when feeling threatened, Abram disguised himself by adopting Egyptian practices, allowing his wife to be taken into Pharaoh’s house. Later, God called Israel to be separate from the other nations—to be an alternative people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. But in time they felt threatened and asked God for a king to protect them. The peoples’ desire was innocent enough. They still wanted to follow God; they just wanted to do it in a way more “like the nations around them.” The Lord warned that a king would rule over them just as Pharaoh had in Egypt, but the people refused to listen.

The record of the Old Testament affirms what the Lord predicted. Even the kings who desired to follow the ways of the Lord found it difficult not to act like the pagan nations. In time prophets denounced God’s people for becoming indistinguishable from their neighbors—not caring for aliens, orphans, and widows; failing to act justly; cheating their countrymen; amassing gold and silver; exploiting the poor; and all the

while hypocritically honoring God with their festivals and songs. They had become Crypto-Hebrews. Ultimately, Israel's imagination became so captivated by the nations and their idols that God allowed their bodies to be captivated as well. First the Assyrians and later the Babylonians destroyed the remaining symbols of Israel's commitment to God and took the people into exile.

In our cultural quest for survival, driven by our fear of irrelevance, have evangelicals become Crypto-Christians? Have we clothed our faith with the forms of our American culture to the point that our Christianity has morphed into something entirely different—a folk religion altogether consumerist in spirit and content? Like the Kakure of Japan, are we holding so tightly to our faith that we cannot sense it has already slipped between our fingers? By yielding its imagination to the forms around it, has the church, like ancient Israel, lost the ability to be an alternative people of God? Is Walter Brueggemann correct: “The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act”?<sup>28</sup>

## WELCOME BACK, WANDA

From Abraham to Israel, the apostles to the Kakure, since the beginning the imagination of God's people has been under attack from cultural conventionality. And the evidence suggests that the contemporary church, seeking survival and relevancy, has surrendered its alternative imagination as well. Rather than pursuing our calling to present a vision of a world filled with God's power and love, the contemporary church merely presents the world as people already know it. It is a two-dimensional facsimile of the consumer culture, albeit with a Jesus fish imprint. The result is an impotent church at home in our world, a church that poses no threat to the powers of conventionality and with no prophetic voice to awaken the imagination.

Like my friend Wanda from Toronto, the Christian imagination left the church many years ago and took with it the childlike joy of faith—the joy of believing in a God without limits. But there is a way to get it back. This way is not discovered by church business consultants, marketing gurus, or how-to experts. It is not found by people who only see the world as it appears, but by people who see the world as it truly is—a cosmos filled with the light of God revealed to those who have eyes to see. This



way is illuminated by children, those whose imaginations have not yet fallen asleep. This way is illuminated by Rhoda, a little girl who believed in God's power when no adult could. This way is illuminated by van Gogh, an artist who ventured to capture more than what was seen. This way is illuminated by Stephen, a disciple whose vision of reality was so threatening he became a martyr. Inspired by their example, in the chapters that follow we will explore how our views of God, worship, community, formation, and mission have been captivated by consumer conventionality and dare to discover an alternative way.