

The Conversion of the Imagination

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We are working through Paul's letter to the Corinthians in order to become a mature community, to live as saints together. Last week we looked at how God uses the foolishness of the cross to determine the kind of people we become. In this passage, Paul takes us deeper to show us a wisdom that truly changes us.

Age of Cultural Elites

To become mature, to ripen into a better version of ourselves, *we have to know where to live. Where you live influences who you are.* How so? Paul says: "[Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away](#)" (6). So there is a wisdom of this age, and a wisdom not of this age that determines your maturity. We tend to think of ages as discreet periods of time. But this isn't how Paul uses the word. Instead, he's referring a *world order*, or *sphere of living*. *There is a sphere of living where what you see shapes who you are, and there is another sphere of living where what you don't see determines who you are.* Depending on where you choose to live, you'll act like a child or an adult. How do you know the difference? Each sphere has its own rulers and wisdom, Paul says. The first we might call the **Age of the Cultural Elites** (historically Rome, Herod, Jewish establishment). Recall that Jesus stood on trial before Herod, a political-cultural elite, and verse 8 says that if he had known who he was dealing with he would not have "crucified the Lord of glory." Which points us to the other age, the Age of the Lord of Glory. In the sphere of cultural elitism, there are people in power, whose ideas sway the culture, and influence the public. The elites can be politicians, Hollywood stars, philosophers, athletes, musicians—people who make it onto Colbert Report, and their messages are broadcasted through the machines of Rupert Murdoch, Mark Zuckerberg, Ted Turner. Cultural elites are constantly broadcasting advice for life. If you're *cool liberal*, you'll listen to this music, watch this show, buy these clothes, vote this way, read this newspaper. If you're *conservative commoner*, you'll do the opposite. Now, at Corinth, there were different elites, people in the church were favoring different personalities, preachers, and ways of saying things (rhetoric). The power to persuade others was particularly prized. This is why Paul uses "wisdom" so much; he's playing with their idolatry of rhetoric, pushing back on them, saying: Oh you want wisdom, I'll show you wisdom. The Corinthian Christians picked up on this cliquishness and idolized the rhetoric of different teachers. Now we don't idolize rhetoric (or maybe we do with podcast preachers), but we do align ourselves with the messages of cultural elites. Today, it's so easy to uncritically take on the views of the culture, without really weighing the wisdom from another age. In this letter, we are going to consider some of this cultural messaging: the purpose of gender, meaning of sex, the institution of marriage, the role of singleness, the nature of community. We'll see that, often not always, cultural convention and the hidden wisdom of God don't mesh. The way you live in the sphere of the Cultural Elites and the way you live in the sphere of the Lord of glory are at odds. Here's where maturity will come in. *You have to make a decision*, where to live? Under the rulers of this age or under the Lord of Glory?

Conversion of the Imagination

If where we live shapes who we'll become, then *what* determines where we live? What governs our choices? The traditional options are 1) your beliefs do. If you get right thinking, then you'll have right living. But have you ever noticed when you're presented with an opportunity to eat out or get a new outfit, your beliefs about your budget suddenly vanish? Somehow you go *against* your beliefs? 2) your discipline. If you have the right actions, and gut it out, you'll determine who you are. But then conflict arises, and you lose your cool. Your virtues snap. Neither right beliefs or actions are enough. Temptation and suffering are too strong. So what determines how you'll live? I'd like to, perhaps surprisingly, suggest your **imagination**. Paul refers to imagination in 2:9, "[What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him](#)" (9). The phrase here is literally "conceived or hatched upon the heart." What he's saying is that nobody, pulling all their senses together, can hatch the gospel upon their heart. Later, he asks, "Who has the mind of the Lord?" (16) In the Hebrew worldview, the mind and the heart work together. In English, *mind + heart = imagination*. What do you typically think of, children's stories, Tim Burton or Wes Anderson movies. It taps into the heart through the mind and awakens alternative ways of seeing things. **Ros**. Alternative Society. Richard Bauckham says imagination "*enables us to transcend the boundaries in a quest for something more.*" You might use your imagination to conceive of a better marriage, a better set of relationships, where people get you, anticipate your needs, and as you think about that desire gets turn on, and hatch a fantasy on your heart. It's not a fleeting thought; it's an imagined alternative. How do you know? You come back to it. The imagination is very powerful and can be used for good or bad. You can imagine a *better* marriage or community and judge the one that is, or you can imagine a better one *and create it with the one that is*. Which are you doing? Are you looking across the room and saying, "Come on. Give me a break." Or are you saying, "We can unite to be a community of glory!" To use Paul's later language, there are natural communities and there are spiritual communities. Natural communities don't resist the messaging of the cultural elites. Spiritual communities resist and work as saints together. [CHART] Where we live shapes who we are, and our imagination determines where we'll live. How can we live as spiritual communities? How do we live in the sphere of the Lord of Glory? We need a **conversion of the imagination** (to use Hays' phrase). Our heart *and* mind has to be converted. It's not enough to have right theology or nice actions towards others, to smile and read the Bible. More. **Our imagination has to be converted, willingly shaped and enthralled by the Lord of Glory**. But alas, we are captivated by cultural elites. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis imaginatively depicts our imaginative predicament. The problem in Narnia is the White Witch. She has cast a spell on the whole country, and under her rule it is always winter but never Christmas. Mr. Tumnus can't conceive of a different Narnia. It is a faint memory and Narnia's beauty, goodness, and truth can't hatch on his heart. Like Tumnus, we cannot imagine a better country, conceive of the beauty of Christ or picture how good holiness would be. Because we're under the spell of the White Witch, our imaginative capacities shrink in this age, where beauty is reduced to losing a few pounds or a new wardrobe. Goodness is doing whatever you want. Our imaginations have not only be captivated; they have been corrupted, enchanted by spell. How do we get out? Lewis reminds us that spells not only create but also *break* enchantments. We need a spell to break our enchantment with this age. We need a conversion of the imagination. He writes:

And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth" (WOG). How on earth do we break the spell?

The Spirit of Glory

The Spirit of Glory breaks the spell: "these things (the things we couldn't imagine) God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (10). What could not be imagined is now imaginable, revealed, through the Spirit. The word for "reveal" means to uncover. Here, the Spirit uncovers something that breaks our enchantment with the wisdom of this age. Before telling us what that is, Paul tells us why the Spirit is uniquely able to break the spell. 1) Because he *knows* God, searches, actually investigates, the depths of God. The word depths is *bathus*, which literally means deep, but metaphorically, here, means the secret, unrevealed purposes of God. The Spirit overturns every thought of God himself. He knows the mind of God. 2) He is *intimate* with God. The Spirit can intuit God the Father. We get this. We all know there are no true mind-readers. In the heat of an argument, you might say, "You can't read my mind!" We, alone, know our thoughts best. So it is with the Spirit. He knows God best, like we know ourselves, *but better!* 12: *Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God* The Spirit is literally "out of God" and therefore intuitive about where God lives, what he wants, how he works. He is in touch with where God lives! Where does God live, the sphere of Glory. Paul is saying we have this Spirit in us, if we love Christ, we have the Spirit, we know the mind of God. Why? *So that we might understand, the word is see, the things freely given to us by God.* **The Spirit of God is given to the people of God to imagine the vision of God.** So what is it, the thing, the wisdom not of this age, that is so powerful it breaks the spell of the elites and converts the imagination? 13: *And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*" Don't get caught up on the spiritual/natural dichotomy. The word spiritual refers to every Christian (because they have the Spirit). What is this that is imparted? It's a better ruler and a better message (words and truths). Who's the ruler? The crucified Lord of Glory. In his age, there is a true glory that orders the world. In the other age, there is no true glory. Anything goes. Cultural elites decide what's moral, and it changes from time to time. But in his age, there is a constant, a north star for true goodness and beauty. What is it? Him, his infinitely glorious Self. See, nothing is **truly beautiful or truly good unless there is an ideal of that good or beauty.** There's no basis to assess it. That ideal exists in God's forever glory. If you want to be truly beautiful, and truly good, you have to see Glory and step into his sphere, allow him to convert your imagination...how? With his words and truths revealed in Scripture. **His words break the spell.** We have to spend time with his words, contemplate them in his presence, and his imagined alternative will pull us into true beauty and goodness, even in conflict and temptation. Why? Because you see something better. Now, how do you do this, break the spell and live in the sphere? It requires personal and communal response, he switches back and forth from I/person language to we/us. 1) Develop a relationship with the Holy Spirit 2) Read the Bible (in person and community) and ask for the conversion of your imagination, every day. Help one another see the Lord of Glory. 3) Immerse yourself in



environments where you are taught Spirit-ual truths. *Revalue* Sunday gatherings, the preaching and teaching of His words. **We gather to break the spell and see his glory.** *Imagine* what your City Group could become. Imagine a better society, and instead of judging it or drifting from it, work with it, them, to be a truly spiritual community. **If we are living in an age of “starved imagination,” we need to feed it, convert it, and submit it to the spell of Glory, together.** Now, remember, everything that God has prepared is for *those that love him*. Its not enough to see him, Glory (true beauty and goodness in all your ethics) comes because you love him. You love your way out of the worldly age into the age of glory. The other age will allow your imagination to shrivel, and your character to go dim, as you slide onto the path of ruin. But the Lord of Glory does something that age can’t. He forgives—crucified Lord of glory—willingly snuffed out for us, for all our delusive compromise. **Elites mock you if you don’t keep up, but Jesus dies for you when you don’t keep up with his glory.** We need a better ruler and a better message; we need the crucified Lord of Glory.

	NATURAL COMMUNITY	SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY
1	Individually Oriented	Community Oriented
2	Distracted	Alert
3	Judges/Demands	Give/Serves
4	Seeks My Benefit	Pursues “Our” Glory
5	Immature	Mature