

We believe; help our unbelief!

Robert J. Suderman

Spiritual imagination is likely the most powerful yet underused resource of the Christian church. The anemic imagination is most evident in the way the church understands (or doesn't understand) its witness as a communal calling in which the medium of its life in the world is also the message of its proclamation to the world. Consistent failures of imagination have led to church splits, intransigence on issues, power struggles, and the perception that the church is an irrelevant institution in today's world. But in thousands of small ways, imagination has also sparked renewal movements, creative ministries, and dynamic faith. Imagination

Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, incarnational, reconciling/saving vocation of God's people is God's foundational strategy for the transformation of the world?

generates hope, because it suggests that things don't need to be the way they are. And hope generates energy and effective ministry.

Evidence in the Bible, in our history, and around us makes it clear that the world and human life are not yet what they were meant to be. The biblical witness is framed by two images of God's intentions for creation. The Garden of Eden is a glimpse from the beginning of time, and the New Jerusalem come down to earth offers a glimpse from the end of time. If we compare these two images with our reality and the reality of our history, we

note a gulf between where we have been, where we are, and where God wants us to be. This gulf includes the persistent presence of violence, poverty, racism, war, crime, greed, ecological exploitation, abuse, injustice, and hunger. These realities characterize neither how we once were (Eden) nor how we will one day be (New Jerusalem). We live in the in-between time in which God is working to restore the world to the designs for which it was intended.

The people of God in God's restoration project

Our scriptures tell us—and in faith we believe—that we are witnesses to and participants in an enormous, cosmic, divinely orchestrated restoration project. But if the world is being restored, what are the strategies God prefers to use to accomplish that restoration? What participation, involvement, and contribution does God expect from us?

The answers to these questions are succinctly and profoundly articulated in the letter to the Ephesians. The primary strategy God wants to use to restore the world is incarnation, God becoming flesh in and through human history. This strategy means that a people of God needs to be formed and nurtured (Eph. 1:22–23; 3:10; 3:19; 4:1). This people has proved to be an interesting assortment of apostles and apostates, saints and sinners, losers and winners empowered by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who try to model their life after Jesus of Nazareth. They lurch forward and sometimes backward, seeking to reflect the intentions of God's reign and the person—Jesus—whose life and witness provide a glimpse of what was and what is meant to be.

Making the church's vocation our priority

What does God require of us in this restoration project? Again, Ephesians gives us remarkably clear guidelines.¹ First, we are to believe that God's strategy of incarnation will actually succeed in the struggle against evil and in the restoration of all things. This trust requires that our imaginations work overtime, because it is not readily apparent that this plan will work. As Ephesians puts it, the eyes of our hearts will need to be enlightened (1:18).

But believing is not enough. This biblical vision of the church's vocation suggests that we should respond to God's invitation to participate in the reconciliation of the world by making it our highest priority to imagine and work toward establishing, nurturing, and being incarnational “communities of salvation.”² We must commit ourselves to the primacy of God's people, to mobilizing this reality in every cultural context. That way, God's restoration and reconciliation become alternatives that can be seen, touched, and felt.

We need to imagine the possibility that each geographical, social, political, economic—human—context in the world should

be blessed with mature and discerning incarnational communities of salvation; that is, we should see the strengthening of God's people as our number one priority for ministry. This kind of imagining would lead us to believe that encouraging and strengthening such assemblies of salvation should be our absolute highest priority in deciding where to put our energies, how to spend our dollars, how to administer our assets, and how to develop our strategic plans.

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And what do assemblies of salvation look like? They are deeply rooted in every imaginable context; indigenous in character; living, applying, and contextualizing the values, teachings, and incarnation of our Lord; continually discerning the signs of the times and their context from the perspective of

God's will and way for the world; spiritually mature, with the capacity to discern life-giving options based on the lordship of their Master; creatively equipping and responding with the gifts that God has showered on them; profoundly prophetic, yet compassionately priestly; deeply connected to what God is doing beyond their assemblies through other strategies and instruments; wildly hospitable and invitational; and humbly and meekly committing their lives to the new paradigm for life that, ironically, may lead them to suffering.

Help for our unbelief

Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, incarnational, reconciling/saving vocation of God's people is God's foundational strategy for the transformation of the world, a strategy that should in turn inform our priorities? It's obvious that we find it difficult to believe. We have seen the poor performance of the church and the way it has missed opportunities. We have experienced its tragic flaws and reduced vision, and these contribute to our cynicism and scepticism about the church's potential in God's plan for the world's transformation. So the church has experienced a loss of nerve. We have replaced the ecclesial vision so foundational in the Bible with other strategies that appear to be easier to implement, defend, and measure.

What is the antidote to our loss of ecclesial nerve, to our failure to trust God's primary strategy for the restoration of all things? It is imagination, the eyes of the heart enlightened, that has the power to enable us to get past our guilt, shame, and failure and get on with actually being the church as God intended.

Creatively imagining what it means to be the church has its beginning in the New Testament itself. In those sacred pages we have no fewer than ninety-six images for what it means to be the church. There is no one dominant image of the church but rather an astonishing array of images, each one trying to capture something of the importance of the ecclesial vocation. The New Testament uses word pictures, describing the church as a boat, a bride, a lamp, a letter, a field, and a flock. And there are ninety more. No single image communicates the full range of the simplicity and complexity of the church's unique genius. Each image contributes to our understandings of the shape of the church: its structure, its composition, its purpose, its strategies, and its soul.

What is so striking about these word pictures is that we cannot derive from them a precise definition, an authoritative shape, or any one organizational structure for the church. This may be disconcerting for some. Therefore we are tempted to select only a few of the images and generate our structures around those, while we ignore what the other word pictures are trying to teach us about being the church. Or we are tempted to suggest that if ninety-six images are good, then more must be even better. We thereby grant ourselves license to organize the church in ways that don't take seriously the images that are there, and thus our imaginings go beyond critique and careful discernment about the profound vocation of the church.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened

The church is most faithful when it tries to understand and implement what each image points to. The church is least faithful when it uses the abundance of images to justify inactivity or unaligned priorities, or when it uses the multiplicity of images to pretend that it doesn't matter what any one in particular means to communicate.

The system of images in the New Testament takes for granted that the Holy Spirit is the permanent guest of the church. It is this Spirit of God that enlightens the eyes of the heart, gifts the church

for ministry, educates it for discernment, empowers it for resistance, and nourishes it for discipleship to Jesus. The Spirit is welcome in our boardrooms and our bedrooms; it is welcome in our bank accounts and in our recreational activities. The church's ministry of hospitality must be extended first to the Holy Spirit, opening all doors, structures, and discussions to its presence.

These images ultimately are trying to express and understand the mystery of God. They are an attempt to encourage our belief in the vocation God has given the church. Those who first imagined these word-picture descriptions of the church did so out of elation at having discovered something of the mystery of God for the church.

This imagination language is useful to us only insofar as we also try to connect to the reasons for the excitement and the elation of the writers. To recapture the cause of the excitement is to recapture a grand design for our calling and ministry. The church, as God's people and as the prolonged presence of Jesus on earth, is depicted as a vital instrument to promote God's justice, compassion, grace, and salvation to the world.

The biblical writers had caught on to an exciting vision, and they tried to communicate contagiously what they had come to understand via images and the use of word pictures. As the church today, our task is to connect our imaginations to those of the scriptural writers in order to discover, discern, and delight in God's intentions for church today.

Notes

¹ This article has been adapted, by permission of the publisher, from two chapters—"The Calling of the Church" and "Do We Really Believe?"—of my book, *God's People Now: Face to Face with Mennonite Church Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2007). The original text spells out how Ephesians focuses the vision and strategy of peoplehood.

² "Paul sees these assemblies as communities of salvation. . . . They are participating in the divine craziness that transformed the suffering of Jesus into the means of reconciling a hostile world (1 Cor. 1:18–31)." Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Are You Saved?" *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 8.

About the author

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