

The Mind of Christ In His World: Part 2

Renewing the Mind Part 7



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A ReVision Resource

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Mind of Christ in His World: Part 2
Renewing the Mind Part 7
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Welcome to *The Mind of Christ in His World: Part 2*

Of all the forms of culture that have the power to confront us with the mind of Christ, great Christian art is surely the most effective.

Yet how many of us have any familiarity with this precious treasure and resource?

The creation around us declares the glory of God with beauty, diversity, power, wisdom, and goodness. It makes sense to pay more attention to creation, for what we can learn about God and His ways and will.

This is just as true of culture, and especially of the arts – and in particular, great Christian art. In this installment of our *Renewing the Mind* series, we will consider some aspects of Christian art that can help us grow into the mind of Christ. We'll meet masters and samples of their works which have stood the test of time, proving their ability to confront us with glory and stretch our minds more to fit the mold of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Mind of Christ in His World: Part 2 is part 7 in our series on *Renewing the Mind*. In this study, we are seeking to grow in the mind of Christ with increasing maturity and consistency.

The studies in this series will encourage and guide you to take a more active, purposeful, and satisfying approach to renewing your mind in the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Means Something

Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. Acts 10.17

God and culture

We need to say a bit more about the role of culture in the renewing of our minds for maturity in the mind of Christ. Human beings are made for culture. Culture consists of the things we make and use to define, sustain, and enrich our lives. Perhaps most of us don't give much thought to how culture affects our thinking, or whether God reveals Himself in or through the culture of our lives.

Culture is everywhere. We can't do without it, and we can't escape it. And, as we have seen, God can leave a witness to Himself in the culture of our lives (Acts 14.17), and can *dwell*, after a fashion, even in the culture of those who despise and deny Him (Ps. 68.18; cf. Eph. 4.8).

But this is not the place to take on *all* culture and how it can contribute to the renewing of our minds. In this study in our series on *Renewing the Mind*, we'll focus on those forms of culture that lend themselves less to practical use and more to contemplation, reflection, and training our minds for beauty, goodness, and truth. I want to consider the role of the arts in helping us grow to maturity in the mind of Christ.

Art and meaning

In these days of "art after the end of art" (to borrow Arthur Danto's apt phrase), it is fashionable to speak of works of art as having no meaning beyond themselves. Works of art – poems, paintings, performances, and so forth – are their own meaning. Art does not need to *say* anything; just by *existing*, art matters and should be honored.

This gets dangerously close to making a religion out of art, as Jacques Barzun warned in his book, *The Use and Abuse of Art*. There he explained, "art is power. It influences the mind, the nerves, the feelings, the soul... Art is deemed universally important because it helps men to live and to remember."

No work of art can be completely devoid of meaning, for all art comes from an artist, and all artists are people with perspectives, points of view, and axes to grind. Art, therefore, can be a way of getting at meaning and truth, and thus, of renewing our minds. Obviously, for maturing in the mind of Christ, some works of art do this better than others. Art uses science, reason, and logic to create meaning, and in many ways, it can do more than other media in shaping our minds to think like Jesus.

This means something

Let's consider Peter, as he ponders the vision God has just sent him. Whenever I come on this passage, I think of Richard Dreyfus in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, sculpting away at his mashed potatoes and muttering, "This means something." *All* art means something; the more we know about art and the harder we work at understanding art, the more art can shape the way we see the world. This was certainly the case with the "artistic" vision Peter was shown in Acts 10.

Art has always played an important role in human experience, as even the most primitive cave paintings and rock carvings testify. As Paul Johnson argued in his book, *Creators*, human beings cannot help making art, because we are made in the image of God, the Great Creator. In the vision Peter saw, we can detect some of the aspects of art that can shape our minds for Christ and His Kingdom.

Why didn't God just speak to Peter in an audible voice and say, "Go to Caesarea and lead this Gentile to Jesus: it's OK"? Why this elaborate vision, with its images and frame, colors and textures, repetition and

mystery?

Because works of art – like God’s vision to Peter – can make profound and lasting impacts as they lead us into the mind of Christ by many and varied means. Peter was stunned by what he observed. He didn’t understand it all, but he was persuaded that what he’d seen meant something, and that whatever it meant, it must have had something to do with will of God.

So he pondered the vision, allowing it to unsettle his settled thoughts, reflecting on what he’d seen, associating that with what he knew about God’s truth, and waiting for the Lord to unfold and unpack the details over time.

This is the way great art engages our minds and shapes them in new ways. We see or hear a powerful work of art; it makes a profound impression on our hearts and minds; then we take up further reflection, thinking over what we’ve seen, read, or heard, considering any ways it may interface with the Scriptures, and waiting on the Lord in prayer.

Many people will testify that some work of art made a profound impact on their lives – made them *see* the world differently, *think about* life from a new perspective, and *reconfigure* their worldview accordingly. Dare we, who seek to be renewed in the mind of Christ, fail to make use of this “universally important” resource? Given that so many great works of art have been created by powerful Christian thinkers, and that these works are readily available for our reflection, any program for renewing the mind into the maturity of Christ’s mind must include some engagement with this aspect of the revelation of Jesus Christ in His world.

For reflection

1. Has any work of art – painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, or literature – made a profound impact on how you think or see the world? Explain.
2. Can you think of some ways God used the arts in Scripture to communicate Himself, His mind, or His will? Why did He do that?
3. With which forms of art are you most familiar, or do you find easiest and most profitable to engage? Why?

Next steps – Preparation: Study the vision God sent to Peter in Acts 10. Ponder it until the details are sharp in your mind. How did God intend this vision to shape Peter’s thinking? Talk with a Christian friend about this exercise.

2 Big, Sweeping Visions

Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. Acts 10.10, 11

Why not just a word?

I don't want to pass lightly by the fact that, when God came to Peter on that rooftop, He had a very simple message to communicate: Go to Caesarea and lead this Gentile to Jesus: it's OK.

Surely just that simple word would have been enough for the Apostle? Isn't that how most of us seek to know the mind of the Lord, by looking to His Word? But when God wanted to change Peter's mind – indeed, his whole worldview – He didn't just speak. Instead, God treated that apostle to an elaborate vision, large and spreading out over all the earth, to guide him into a new way of thinking about the peoples of the world.

One of the powerful devices by which art arrests our minds and hearts, and leads us into new perspectives and new ways of thinking, is through big, sweeping visions of reality. The artist will often paint or write a grand scenario of characters, themes, colors, images, and artistic devices of various sorts, just to make a single statement of truth that matters to him or her. Think of Michelangelo's Cistine Chapel ceiling. Or Handel's *Messiah*. Or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Grand, big, sweeping visions provide a setting of majesty and significance in which a kernel of new meaning can be planted with powerful effects.

God wanted Peter to think differently about the Gentiles and their place in the Kingdom. So He sent a big, sweeping vision of *all* creation, and sent it *three times*, to make sure Peter didn't miss the point.

Can a work of art affect the way you think about even the most everyday aspects of your life? Help you to see the glory and wisdom and beauty and goodness of God in ways you never have before?

The Task

Indeed, it can.

Consider, for example, William Cowper's (1731-1800) grand epic poem, "The Task" (you can read the entire poem at the [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#)). Cowper was challenged by a lady friend with the daunting task of writing a poem about a sofa. Now, as a poet, I can assure you, this is hardly an inspiring subject. I mean, what can you say about a sofa that would affect the way *anyone* thought about such an everyday item? We might think that, given such a task, a poet could probably exhaust everything that could be said about a sofa in a sonnet of 14 lines.

Cowper's "The Task", however, glides along in perfect iambic pentameter blank verse for thousands and thousands of lines in a grand *tour de force* of creation, culture, and the glories of God available on every hand.

Cowper had a single thought he wanted to convey, something like "A sofa is a wonderful convenience provided for the comfort of men by the manifold goodness of a loving God." Cowper, however, wanted to make that point with great emphasis. He wanted to make sure that readers thought about more than a mere sofa whenever they sat on one. So he positioned his object in a poetic statement of Christian worldview that is almost without peer in the world of Christian verse.

Beginning with a meditation on the history, character, and use of the sofa, Cowper branched out into a sweeping survey of the glories and benefits of country life, remarking the presence of God and His many gifts to humble people of all sorts. Along the way, he celebrated the glories of honest work, marveled at the

diverse people who populate a country village, frowned upon the evils of city living, chided parsons who do not take seriously the task of preaching, and wondered at the intricate beauty of clocks, the nobility of patriotism, and the proper place of governments, armies, and newspapers. Here's a brief sample of his verse, as he reports an observation most of us will have seen:

*Nature inanimate employs sweet sounds,
But animated nature sweeter still,
To soothe and satisfy the human ear.
Ten thousand warblers cheer the day, and one
The livelong night; nor these alone, whose notes
Nice-fingered Art must emulate in vain.
But cawing rooks, and kites that swim sublime
In still-repeated circles, screaming loud,
The jay, the pie, and e'en the brooding owl,
That hail the rising moon, have charms for me,
Sounds inharmonious in themselves and harsh,
Yet heard in scenes where peace forever reigns,
And only there, please highly for their sake.*

And over all, God

Through all the many other vignettes and observations of his poem, Cowper set a context of the sovereign rule of God over men, Who, out of the enormity of His grace, provides them with even the humblest of everyday comforts and delights.

Sure, Cowper could have tossed off a sonnet and let the matter go, but the task before him gave him an opportunity to magnify the glories of His subject – and of God – in a way that no catalog narrative describing a sofa could ever accomplish.

Cowper's sofa – and his poem – challenge us to see everyday things in a different light, and in new ways, so that the glory of God can impress and transform us, even right where we sit. And even where we sit can cue up grand, sweeping visions of the greatness, goodness, beauty, and power of King Jesus.

For reflection

1. Would you say that you see all aspects of your life within the framework of one coherent, overarching, thrilling vision of life? Why or why not?
2. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 10.31. Choose an object in your immediate purview. How much can you say about the glory of God by observing that object? Do you think reading a poem like "The Task" might help you *see* everyday things differently? Explain.
3. Few people read much poetry these days. As Czeslaw Milosz explained in his book, *The Witness of Poetry*, a lot of the blame for this falls on poets and poetry. But much great Christian poetry exists that can help to shape our minds toward the mind of Christ. Can you think of a Christian poem – or a hymn lyric – that has particularly affected your view of life and the world?

Next steps – Conversation: Use your answer to question 3 above to engage a fellow believer in a conversation about the power of poetry or hymn lyrics to contribute to the renewing of our minds.

3 Everyday Glory

In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. Acts 10.12

Glory in the mundane

The Divine Artist had a message for Peter, but He wanted to sink it deep into his soul, because He intended to change the way Peter thought about the Gospel, the Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God.

So instead of a message in a bottle, or a simple word from heaven, God gave Peter a grand, sweeping vision as a window through which to view all the important facets of His message. Included in this vision were all kinds of animals, but not just any old animals. These were animals that Jews considered common, unclean, and beyond the pale of what good Jews would think of eating. There was nothing good about these animals, since they had no practical use for the Jews, especially not for eating.

But this is precisely what God told Peter to do: kill and eat whatever he saw on the blanket before him. By so doing God was saying to the apostle that His glory is destined to radiate through even the most common, ordinary, and beyond-the-pale of situations and people – even from among the Gentiles. It took a grand artistic vision to set Peter’s mind for what God was about to do.

Great artists from the Christian tradition have understood this truth, that the glory of God can be discovered even in everyday, familiar situations and things. One of my favorite expositions of glory in the mundane is the [Four Seasons cycle](#) by Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi. Vivaldi uses the unique voices of a small orchestra to evoke the sounds, moods, and activities of the seasons of the year, in four concerti originally written for a young girls’ ensemble. Here is music that can teach you to appreciate the seasons of the year even more than you already do.

Or take Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, perhaps the greatest composer of the Baroque period, and a devoted Christian. Bach began many of his compositions by putting the initials “JJ” at the top of his sheet. By so doing, he used Latin shorthand for “Jesus, help!” to invoke the Lord’s presence for his work. When a piece was finished to his liking, Bach would put the initials “SDG” at the end – *solī deo gloria*, or, “for the glory of God alone.”

One might expect to discover in such compositions music to lift our minds to new heights of renewal.

But not all Bach’s music was “spiritual” in nature. He wrote a good bit of what is referred to as “secular” music, in which his theme had nothing directly to do with Kingdom matters. But those themes were nonetheless garbed in such glorious music, that it can be difficult to tell the difference between music from these two categories.

Bach often used music to emphasize the beauty and glory of God in everyday things. He loved coffee, and considered it one of the great joys of his busy and active life. When Bach died, his personal possessions included at least two coffee pots, one of silver and another of brass, as well as some coffee services.

Bach frequented the coffee houses in Leipzig and, on occasion, wrote a “secular” cantata for the enjoyment of his friends. The cantata was a brief oratorio sung by usually four voices. Bach wrote scores of these for use in the morning services at church, but he also penned a fair number of cantatas that had no explicitly spiritual purpose.

One of the most delightful of these is the [“Coffee Cantata,”](#) a little comedy relating a dispute between a father and his daughter, Lieschen, who loved coffee. Her father insisted that she stop drinking coffee and get

married. The wily waif went out and brought back for her father the village idiot, professing her love and intending to marry him. Astonished, the father rejected her plans (just as she knew he would) and insisted that he would find her a proper husband.

Great! She agreed to his proposal on one condition: the husband he secured for her had to allow her to drink coffee. You can guess who got her way in the end.

The high point of the cantata comes with Lieschen singing “[Heute noch](#),” in which she urges her father to rush right out and find that beau.

Glory in the music

I once played excerpts from this cantata – in German – side by side with excerpts from a Bach sacred cantata for a group of scholars and theologians. None could tell the difference between them. And this is precisely the point of Bach’s art: all music, as Bach composed it, is a testimony to the grandeur and pleasure of God. His secular cantatas are as rich in all the wonderful melodies, lyrics, and musical devices of baroque culture as any of his great sacred pieces. And when he immerses secular themes in glorious music, it’s just his way of reminding us, and teaching us to see the glory of God in everyday situations and things.

For Bach, even the most ordinary things of life could convey a message of divine glory and pleasure. Great art functions like this, using common, even unclean subjects to celebrate the grace and majesty of the living God. And great art, carefully considered, can shape our minds to see the world and think about everyday life against the backdrop of heaven’s glory, with the result that our minds become increasingly mature in the mind of Christ.

For reflection

1. Can you think of a piece of music – a hymn perhaps – that has had a powerful effect on how you think about life and the world? Explain.
2. Part of the power of music lies in its ability to appeal to our affections – delight, joy, dread, fear, and so forth. How do the affections, in turn, affect our minds? Does how we *feel* about something shape the way we *think* about it? Can you give an example?
3. If there is glory to be found in enjoying a cup of coffee, what else in our everyday life can open a window to the glory of God? Give some examples.

Next steps – Transformation: Listen to either Bach’s “Coffee Cantata” or Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” (you can link to either via YouTube). As you listen, let your mind engage with the story or images suggested by the music. Can you see how music like this can affect the way you think? Share your experience with a Christian friend.

4 Pop Art

This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. Acts 10.16

Three times, for emphasis

The first time Peter was treated to the Divine Artist's vision, he may have responded something like, "Wow! That's interesting."

The second time God unfolded this grand scenario before him, Peter might have scratched his head and said, "What the...?"

The third time God showed it to him, the images were unmistakable, and the message began to assault Peter's thinking. This was unlike anything Peter had ever seen, or ever been instructed to do by the Lord. But, after three takes, the vision and its message were clear – though the *meaning* would yet unfold – and Peter began to understand that God was speaking to him through this bit of visionary art. As he followed the Lord's leading into the home of the Gentile Cornelius, his mind, awash with this vision, adjusted to God's plan for the Gospel, the Gentiles, and the Kingdom, and a new chapter in Church history began to unfold.

When, a chapter later, he reported his vision to the Church, he had no doubt about its content or meaning. That vision was strong, memorable, and mind-changing, even when Peter related it to his colleagues in Jerusalem.

Art that serves truth becomes clear after repeated viewings, readings, or hearings, and can shape our minds to expand into or otherwise conform to the mind of Christ. When it's in a form we can readily share with others, art's impact on minds can be greatly multiplied.

And for seeing or hearing things over and over, by many viewers or audiences, there's nothing quite like pop art.

Pop art and the Reformation

We tend to think of pop art as a uniquely 20th or 21st century phenomenon. But it's not. Even during the Protestant Reformation, great artists, like Albrecht Dürer, put art to widespread use in challenging people's thinking about important spiritual and ecclesiastical matters. In Dürer's case, it was woodcuts.

Woodcuts are made by etching an image on a block of wood, then rolling or painting a layer of ink over the surface. Paper is then pressed onto the ink to transfer the image from the block of wood, which works like a big stamp. During Dürer's lifetime, woodcuts were relatively inexpensive, could be widely circulated, and were easily incorporated into books, especially, pamphlets.

Peter Matheson writes concerning the many inexpensive pamphlets circulated during the Reformation, "The availability of the printed book and pamphlets allowed the private scrutiny of public verities" (*The Imaginative World of the Reformation*). Pamphlets, and their woodcut images, could be read and viewed over and over, and by many people. They were passed around among friends and discussed in private meetings in homes. The power of the printed word, coupled with the woodcut, for criticizing ecclesiastical powers, exposing ecclesiastical foibles, and pointing toward a new conception of the Gospel played a significant role in helping to solidify in the public mind the more scholarly and theological arguments of the reformers.

Matheson writes that, back of the very public work of the reformers was "the quiet, creative leadership by poets and pastors, activists and dreamers, little groups that had been meeting for years...From them flowed a fresh language of realism and hope; they provided much of the human leadership, the disciplines, the

symbols, the songs.”

Pop art and the mind of Christ

Pop art is at its best when it is consciously employed in the service of truth, working to change or nurture the mind toward maturity in Jesus Christ. The psalmists understood the power of pop art, and frequently drew on apparently well-known folk songs or neumes to surround their psalms with a setting or mood. Ancient pop art thus could make even more compelling to the mind the message of the psalmist’s poetic verse.

For example, David selected what appears to be a pop song of his day to carry the words of Psalm 22. That psalm begins in the darkness of suffering and death (vv. 1-21b), with the familiar image of the suffering Christ being set upon by His enemies.

But in the last clause of verse 21, the Suffering One reports that His prayer has been heard by God. Now the psalm takes a completely new turn, as if one had suddenly emerged from a dark forest, or the blackest night, into the dawn of the new day. The remaining verses of the psalm grow brighter and brighter as the Suffering One looks through His agony to the coming new day of His Kingdom and glory.

When David set this psalm to a melody called, “The Deer of the Dawn,” he was using pop music, and the image and mood it suggested, to heighten the intellectual and emotional impact of one of his most important psalms.

There’s more to pop art of all kinds – music, film, television programming, games, sports, and more – than we may at first appreciate. But if we can remember that God can inhabit even these forms of culture, our minds may be piqued and stretched by pop art into new dimensions of understanding the mind of Christ.

For reflection

1. Pop art is not entirely bad. How can we tell the difference between pop art that does *not* help us grow in the mind of Christ, and pop art that *does*?
2. Have any expressions of pop art particularly affected your way of seeing the world, or thinking about your life? Explain.
3. Do you think the church should teach its members about pop art – its character, power, and capability for helping to renew our minds? Why or why not?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about questions 1-3. What do they think about pop art as a resource for growing into the mind of Christ?

5 Founded on Revelation

And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." Acts 10.13-15

A proper lens

Peter would undoubtedly still be sitting somewhere scratching his head over the vision sent to him by God were it not for one thing: God provided an *explanatory text* to help the apostle understand His meaning.

As Peter would later understand completely, the words of the Lord instructing him to eat unclean foods, and advising him that these had all been made clean, explained the vision as a whole, and freed him to enter the home of a Gentile and preach Christ to him.

Great art serves the purposes of truth when, like so much excellent Christian art, it is grounded in God's revelation; such art can only be fully understood when the revelation of God in Scripture provides the lens through which we seek to understand art. The better we understand God's Word, the more we'll be able to appreciate, and grow from, those works of Christian art created from within the framework of a Christian worldview. It simply is not possible to understand or benefit from the works of artists like Cowper, Bach, Vivaldi, Dürer, and scores more unless our minds engage *both* the art *and* the Word of God at the same time.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the 19th century English poet, understood this truth quite well. We often find in his poems direct links to images, thoughts, and even quotes from Scripture. These remind us that Hopkins' point derives *from* the Word of God and can only be fully understood when we read the poem *in that light*. He may be using an ordinary, everyday image to communicate his meaning, but he will surround that image with so much Biblical allusion that getting our minds around his point is not difficult. And once we *get* his point, the image used to convey that point makes a permanent stamp in our minds, and stretches them in the direction of the mind of Christ.

A wonderful poem like "God's Grandeur" might be shoe-horned into the service of some political movement, except that Hopkins insists it be understood in the light of God's purposes in Scripture.

The references to the way human toil blears and smears the beauty of the earth, and how men have become insensitive to the damage they inflict on the environment, could easily make this a poem that environmentalists might latch onto for political purposes. The hopeful words, in the final stanza, about the renewing powers of the creation would seem right up the environmentalist's alley.

But if we take the poem as a whole, we note that Hopkins, following Scripture, is not interested in environmental causes; His objective is far greater and more gloriously transcendent.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" declares the opening line, as if echoing Psalm 19.1-4. That transcendent beauty is visible on every hand. It flares or oozes out at us from many quarters. Yes, men by their sinful employments have lost sight of that glory, and wrought damage to the creation. But there is always hope of seeing the glory of God in it, for the creation every day renews itself afresh.

Why? Because it is a power to be revered and preserved for its own sake? For itself alone? No, as Hopkins explains in the concluding lines: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

Here Hopkins points us to the first verses of the Bible, insisting that the glory of the creation, and the proper understanding and care of it, can only be accomplished in the light of God's purposes and Word, and by the power of God's Spirit. Here, indeed, is art in the service of truth.

Exercising the mind through the world

Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wendell Berry, and Richard Wilbur are adept at taking everyday objects and suffusing them with mind-expanding truth, by connecting them with Biblical teaching or imagery. Their poetry has the double benefit of helping us to see familiar truths in a new light, and of connecting truths and ideas with everyday objects, so that, when we encounter those objects during the day, our minds can be piqued for a Biblical worldview all over again.

Jesus was the Master of using everyday objects, cast into stories, as vehicles of truth. His use of coins, farms and farmers, plants, animals, kings, businessmen, seeds, fields, and more challenged people to think about profound *ideas* according to familiar, everyday objects and situations. This would have had a double effect. First, it would have helped make difficult ideas such as the Kingdom of God more readily accessible to the minds of schooled and unschooled people alike. Second, it would have set a prompt in people's thinking which, when they saw those objects at other times, would recall the truth Jesus taught.

Christian artists in all genre and every generation have understood that ideas connected with art forms can make deep and lasting impressions on how and what we think. Their work can serve us still today, like the story-form art Jesus used, to help us grow in our understanding of truth and mature toward the mind of Christ.

For reflection

1. Take five minutes and jot down as many everyday items or situations you can think of that Jesus used to teach about the Kingdom of God:
2. Take one of those items and explain how Jesus suffused it with *mind-expanding truth* to enlarge our thinking about the Kingdom of God:
3. Look around you, right where you are. Choose one item in your purview, and think about how you might use that item to explain the Kingdom of God to someone. Jot down your thoughts.

Next steps – Conversation: Using the item you focused on in question 3, talk with a Christian friend today about how this item helps you think about the Kingdom of God. Explain how you connect this item with the teaching of Scripture.

6 Link to Unseen Things

Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth... This was done three times. Acts 10.10, 11, 16

A mind for things above

There was one aspect of the vision of the Divine Artist concerning which there could be no mistake on Peter's part. This thing was *from* heaven and *went back* to heaven. Thus, he must have concluded – at the very least – this thing has something to do with God and what He wants to see happen.

The great art of the Christian heritage has never lacked for means of connecting viewers, readers, or hearers with the heavenly realm. Indeed, much of the great art of that heritage is deliberately intended to equip and enable men to set their minds on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in the heavenly places at the right hand of God (Col. 3.1-3).

We think of the intricate and beautiful artwork of the Book of Kells, and its lavish and lovely depiction of [Jesus exalted in glory and beauty](#). Hymns can lift us into the heavenly realms as well. I think especially of that rendering of [Psalm 148, "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah!"](#), where the highest note in the hymn is fixed to the word, "glory." Even [C. S. Lewis' marvelous story, *The Great Divorce*](#), can help us get our minds around the mysteries of heaven and their connection with the things of earth.

Just like the vision Peter saw, one cannot engage such art and not be immediately referred to transcendent truth.

Bringing heaven to earth

Additional examples abound of art deliberately crafted to bring heaven down to earth, and point earth-bound humans to the heavenly realms. This was one of the primary purposes of Gothic architecture, to expand the mind of worshippers into the majesty and mystery of the unseen realm. As Abbot Suger, the pioneer of Gothic architecture, explained in his detailed notes guiding the construction of the cathedral at St. Denis, every wall, door, window, beam, and buttress of a Gothic church witnesses to and calls the minds of worshippers to rise to the heavenly realms.

Earlier, Byzantine church murals had a similar purpose and effect, creating a sense of movement on the part of worshippers toward the throne of Christ. The somber, mysterious, and sometimes eerie [chants of medieval monks](#) were also designed to engage the heavenly realm through the medium of the ear. Monks were taught to breathe at different times while singing, so that there would be no cessation of the music, once the worship of God had begun, thus mirroring the continuous singing of saints and angels in heaven.

Or think of the many baroque churches and chapels with their painted ceilings that lift the worshiper out of the mundane realm into the heavenly places, into the very presence of the risen and exalted Christ Himself.

Celtic carved crosses are yet another example of art made to serve the purpose of establishing a tangible and dramatic link to the unseen realm. Erected late in the period of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD), these magnificent carved crosses encouraged worshippers to envision themselves in the very presence of Christ, and to preserve the images from those crosses in their minds.

Sanctuaries from the mundane

Of course, the sacraments of the Church, especially the Lord's Supper, have the same effect, for the Supper enables us, through the elements of bread and wine, to participate directly in the risen Christ and to engage

the unseen realm through an act of liturgical drama. As we commune with Christ, His body and blood, He makes His presence known to us from His throne in heaven, in a way more intense and personal than we normally experience, and we are reminded that, even as He is with us always, so we have been seated with Him in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6).

Great Christian art can engage our minds for transcendence, can lift us out of our momentary experience and allow us to enter a realm of reality we do not normally know. As Peter observed the vision God sent him coming down and going back to heaven, he was lifted beyond the limits of his mundane thinking, and his previous theological convictions, into a new realm of possibilities, which he would only fully realize as he rose to act on what God showed him.

We should note that it was as Peter was beginning to experience hunger, that God brought this vision of “new cuisine” to his attention. Each of us has a hunger for the knowledge of God through aesthetic encounters. And God is in great art, especially great Christian art, ready to make Himself known.

Have you ever noticed how quiet it is in an art museum? Or at a symphony? Even in a library? People seem to know, almost intuitively, that such places are sanctuaries from the merely mundane. There they expect to encounter something larger than the merely everyday, and they prepare themselves and one another through silence. For in the silence, in the presence of great art, one may expect to pass beyond the veil into the unseen realm, and the presence of Christ in glory. And while we are here, the Spirit can work on our minds to renew them into the image of our Lord (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

For reflection

1. Have you ever experienced what you would describe as a moment of transcendence, either before a work of Christian art, or during a service of worship, or the Lord’s Supper? What did you experience at that moment? How did this affect the way you think about your life?
2. Meditate on Hebrews 12.1. In what sense are we in the presence of saints and angels? Should we expect to experience this in some ways? Explain.
3. What does it mean to set your mind on the things that are above (Col. 3.1-3)? Do you think Christian art could help you in doing so? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about any experiences of transcendence – of connecting personally and intimately with unseen things – they may have had. How did this affect their understanding of the life of faith? Of what it means to follow Jesus.

7 Rise and Go – Where?

While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.” Acts 10.19, 20

Imagine

One of the great powers of the mind is its ability to imagine, to create and hold in place visions of things not present, never experienced, or not yet realized. As Leland Ryken observed, “The Bible repeatedly appeals to the intelligence through the imagination” (*The Liberated Imagination*). He adds, “Studying the world of the artistic imagination will tell us things that are just as crucial to human well-being and to God’s glory as any exploration of the physical world around us.”

The problem with imagination is that, for too many of us, we’re not so inclined. That is, we either do not know how or do not care to allow our imagination to range much beyond what is already familiar to us, whether in terms of our experience, our self-image, or the prospects for our world. Or, as Dr. Ryken more graciously put it, “Christians have much to learn about the uses of imagination.”

One of the most exciting powers of the imagination is its ability to move our souls and to set us on a course for a better life, a better day, a better world. The renewing of our minds into the mind of Christ will surely require that we devote more attention to the role of imagination. And in strengthening this ability of the mind, the arts can be a powerful motivator and resource, because, as Dr. Ryken explains, “the artistic imagination creates imaginary worlds that allow us to see reality with heightened clarity.”

Vision and action

God did not send His vision to Peter so that he could spend the rest of his days contemplating the wonder and mystery of it. The vision which the Divine Artist crafted for the apostle was ultimately designed for practical ends. God wanted Peter to *do* something. He engaged Peter’s *imagination* to move him to *action*.

We see the same thing with many other examples of art in the Bible: the tabernacle, the pillar of stones by the Jordan, the temple, the vestments of the priests, and even the psalms. Art in the Scriptures typically has a practical purpose; it existed so that viewers, readers, or listeners might do something in response. The great art of the Christian tradition – art in service of truth – has never been very far from this purpose, either. Art does not exist for art’s sake alone. Art is for God, for truth, and, therefore, to aid us in knowing the One and living the other.

Art can create new vistas and possibilities in our minds, leading us to formulate plans and strategies and ways of thinking, to realize that which our imagination projects. Jesus continuously challenged the minds and imaginations of His hearers with His images and parables about the Kingdom of God. Indeed, before His ascension, He regaled His disciples for forty days with such visions, and the result was a group of erstwhile cowards transformed by the Spirit to seek a world they’d never known, but which Jesus promised could be theirs.

A world perfect at last

The late Nobel prize-winner Czeslaw Milosz demonstrated this same conviction in his art. One of the greatest poets of the 20th century, Milosz insisted that poetry can perform a redemptive work. It can give us new visions and move us to courageous action. Milosz had lived through the horrors of World War II, and saw many of his friends and acquaintances cut down in the Warsaw uprising. The horribleness and evil of war never left him, and he sought to use his poetry to reconstruct a world of beauty, in which not only human life, but all the small everyday wonders of life are appreciated and enjoyed because of their intrinsic, God-given beauty.

He explained this purpose of his art in a section of his lengthy poem, “Diary of a Naturalist.” At the end of a reverie, in which he looked back on himself as a child, carefully observing the people, landscapes, and goings-on of his childhood, he came to understand as an adult what he could only glimpse as a child: He was being prepared by God to use his art to help make the world anew.

Here’s how he put it:

*My generation was lost. Cities too. And nations.
But all this a little later. Meanwhile, in the window, a swallow
Performs its rite of the second. That boy, does he already suspect
That beauty is always everywhere and always elusive?
Now he sees his homeland. At the time of the second mowing,
Roads winding uphill and down. Pine groves. Lakes.
An overcast sky with one slanting ray.
And everywhere men with scythes, in shirts of unbleached linen
And the dark-blue trousers that were common in the province.
He sees what I see even now. Oh but he was clever,
Attentive, as if things were instantly changed by memory.
Riding in a cart, he looked back to retain as much as possible.
Which means he knew what was needed for some ultimate moment
When he would compose from fragments a world perfect at last.*

Reading Milosz we get the urgent sense that he wants us to *do* something: be grateful for life! Look at the beauty all around you! Don’t take your neighbors for granted! Consider your own place in the grand, divine scheme! Be renewed in your thinking, and let your imagination move you to rise and go for a world made perfect at last!

Great art moves us to act because it connects us with truth, and truth, once encountered, must be heeded. When we know the truth, Jesus said, it sets us free from the constraints and deceptions of sin, liberating even our imaginations, so that we might live as God’s “poems”, to cite the Apostle Paul (Eph. 2.10) – works of art ourselves, who, as we live out our callings in obedience to truth, rising up and going, become God’s works of beauty and joy (Ps. 48.1, 2), pointing beyond ourselves to the glories of Christ and His Kingdom – and a coming new world, made perfect at last.

For reflection

1. How would you describe the role of imagination in your life?
2. How can you see that Jesus *challenged* the imaginations of those who heard Him? How did He do that? What did He intend by doing that?
3. Why do we become so easily stuck in our experience, rather than let our imagination lead us *beyond* our experience into realms of possibility we’ve never dared to ask or think (Eph. 3.20)? How can we break through the blinders which keep our imaginations from envisioning a world made perfect at last?

Next steps – Transformation: Spend a half-hour this week reviewing the Scriptures you’ve read during your time with the Lord. How do they challenge you to enlarge your imagination of what God might do in you and through you? Share your observations with a Christian friend.

The Mind of Christ in His World: Part 2

For reflection or discussion

1. What is it about art, in its various forms, that can affect our thinking, enlarge our imagination, or stretch our minds? Can you share an experience?
2. Think of some ways the Bible uses the arts. How are these designed to affect the way God's people think? Or to enable them to think more clearly?
3. Are you presently engaged with or making use of any art forms in your walk with and work for the Lord? Do you think being more consistently engaged with Christian forms of art would aid in the renewing of your mind? Explain.
4. Why do you suppose Christians don't make more use of the arts for growing in the mind of Christ? How could Christians encourage one another in this effort?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about the role of Christian art in the renewing of the mind? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

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Thank you.