

DENNIS STOKES, RALPH ENNIS  
JUDY GOMOLL with CHRISTINE WEDDLE

# Worth a Thousand Words

The Power of Images to  
Transform Hearts

# Worth a Thousand Words:

## *The Power of Images to Transform Hearts*

By Dennis Stokes, Ralph Ennis, Judy Gomoll  
with Christine Weddle  
2015 Revised Edition

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## *Dedicated to ...*

Our emerging generations  
who deeply experience the power of images.

And to our families, friends, and co-workers who stood  
with us and encouraged us throughout our writing journey.

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For easy reference, see “Resource Links” that occur within the book at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/W1000\\_Resource\\_Links.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/W1000_Resource_Links.html)

# About the Authors

**RALPH ENNIS** serves with The Navigators seeking to bring Gospel innovations and transformational insights for younger generations.

Ralph and his wife, Jennifer, have ministered with The Navigators since 1975 in a variety of arenas, including at Norfolk military bases, Princeton University, Richmond Community, Glen Eyrie Leadership Development Institute, and with The CoMission in Moscow, Russia. Ralph has a Master's degree in Intercultural Relations. Some of his publications include *Searching the Ordinary for Meaning*; *Breakthru: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts and Primary Roles*; *Successfit: Decision Making Preferences*; *An Introduction to the Russian Soul*; and *The Shame Exchange*.

Ralph and Jennifer live in Raleigh, North Carolina. They have four married children and thirteen grandchildren.



**JUDY GOMOLL.** Before joining The Navigators, Judy was an educator with a specialty in curriculum development. Judy served with The Navigators as a missionary in Uganda and Kenya for fifteen years, helping pioneer ministries in communities, churches, and at Makerere University. Judy led in leader training and designing of contextualized discipleship materials and methods.

Judy has assisted in the research, planning, development, and implementation of spiritual transformation training tools and resources. Judy has an MA in Curriculum and Instruction and an MA in Organizational Leadership. She lives in Parker, Colorado.



**DENNIS STOKES** serves with The Navigators' NavNeighbors Mission as Director of Staff Development and New Staff Training.

Dennis has been serving with The Navigators since 1980, ministering with the Collegiate Mission, as well as being a collegiate trainer and training consultant. Dennis has designed, developed, and led seven Navigator summer training programs, and was the Training Coordinator for The CoMission project. Dennis has done gospel ministry in Lebanon, Russia, Ukraine, Mexico, Canada, England, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Israel. He is ordained and has been a speaker at training events, conferences, and in church pulpits both in the U.S. and overseas.



Dennis and his wife, Ellen, live in Erie, Colorado, and have three children, Christopher, Cheryl, and Amy.

**CHRISTINE WEDDLE** has been Associate Director of National Training and Staff Development and has been on staff with The Navigators from 1997-2012. Christine first connected with The Navigators when she joined The CoMission Training Team. In this role she assisted in the planning and organization of staff training events in the U.S., Russia, and the Ukraine.

While ministering with The Navigators, she directed numerous national training and staff development events. She specializes in developing adult learning environments and visual resources.

Christine now lives in the beautiful State of Oregon.



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For other resources and services from the authors see:

[www.leadersandinfluencers.com](http://www.leadersandinfluencers.com)

[www.ralphennis.com](http://www.ralphennis.com)

[www.leadconsulting-usa.com](http://www.leadconsulting-usa.com)

# Acknowledgments

Mike Miller, our friend, recognized the tremendous need to articulate the impact images can have and how to use them more effectively. He strongly encouraged us to write about what we as a team have been using for years in ministry. His insight and vision for this project has been invaluable.

Although not listed as an author, Christine Weddle has given input all along the way. She provided critical insight on our writing. She also spent many hours finding and designing the great images you will see. Our hope is that the images will energize your discovery process more than the text. Getting the right images to do this has been critical—thanks, Christine!

The authors are on staff with The Navigators. For many years, Cheryl Meredith, along with other Navigator leaders, helped create empowerment and space for us to be able to focus on using images within our spiritual transformation training.

Dr. Christopher Morton has field tested with the younger generation and given guidance to our image-based resources for years. More recently, as a team associate, he has given great insight into the use of images, especially from a theological and historical point of view.

Dr. Mark Overstreet, with T4 Global, Inc., has encouraged our book's completion. He gave great theological and historical input on chapters 5-7.

Our process of using images in life and ministry has been greatly enhanced by many Navigator colleagues and others in the Body of Christ. They have done numerous field tests and have given much constructive feedback.

And, most importantly, we acknowledge our Lord's guidance over the years as He has helped us begin understanding the "language" of images. God has been using them throughout His creation (see Psalm 19:1-6).



# What Others are Saying

An image tells a story. A story alters a trajectory. How will we be influenced? We take in images all day and are battered by demeaning messages. With "Worth a Thousand Words," the authors not only help the reader understand why we are so affected by image, but guide us in real-world ways in the use of image for the sake of the kingdom coming. I commend this book to every parent, leader, and Christian interested in seeing spiritual transformation take place in our fractured world.

**Clyde Taber**

Director Visual Story Network

Many books unearth the mindset of the generation. I'm aware of only one book that is effective in telling us how to reach into the hearts of this brokenhearted generation and see those hearts transformed. This is that book. If you read only one book about disciple-making this year, it should be this one.

**Rick Howerton**

Author of *A Different Kind of Tribe*

The power of images has never been so clear as when I finished reading, "Worth A Thousand Words". This book is a must read for anyone in ministry or who has a ministry heart - both domestic and international. It is also a must read for anyone who wants to walk with God in our generation. It unpacks wisdom of decades of study of cultures and ministry to people. Mission organizations and ministries seeking to reach those who do not read or choose not to read will glean much wisdom for outreach and discipling ministries from these pages. Let's face it, our younger generations are now visual in their learning styles. We need to retool our approaches to reach them. This book is relevant globally to anyone in ministry. I am reading this on my return flight from Africa. I spent 10 days ministering in Tanzania, Africa where I saw the power of images open the eyes of those who minister to villagers in rural jungles. This is revolutionary thinking. I applaud the book. It unpacks reality in our culture and gives us new tools to bring Jesus to our own hearts and our world.

**Dr. Stacy Rinehart**

Author of *Upside Down Leadership* and Founder of MentorLink International  
[www.mentorlink.org](http://www.mentorlink.org)

Because the Word made flesh is also the image of the invisible God, this book matters. Enabling the reader to connect God's eternal Word with the reality of how images are used today, this book paints a strong picture—while offering ample explanation—of how to unearth and communicate God's presence and purpose embedded in the ever-shifting visual swirl of our culture. It's a book worth more than a cursory read; it's worth your attention.

**Connally Gilliam**

Author of *Revelations of a Single Woman*, The Navigators Metro Staff

The artful use of imagery is a powerful and irreplaceable communication tool used extensively in the media saturated society we live in. Christian communicators need to both wise-up and catch-up. This unusually useful book will definitely help.

**Alan Hirsch**

Author of *The Permanent Revolution* [www.alanhirsch.org](http://www.alanhirsch.org)

Today, more than ever before, images are everywhere, and just about everyone's thinking is increasingly shaped by the images around them—whether they know it or not. That's why I'm excited about a new resource coming out this fall from NavPress. "Worth a Thousand Words: The Power of Images to Transform Hearts" is an interactive digital book written by Dennis Stokes, Ralph Ennis, and Judy Gomoll (with Christine Weddle) that addresses the influence of visual imagery on personal—and spiritual—formation. Created to be a resource for thought leaders, ministry leaders, and ministry practitioners, "Worth a Thousand Words: The Power of Images to Transform Hearts" is a helpful apologetic for why those working in ministry vocations in the twenty-first century must not only be aware of the power of images in shaping our minds, but they must also be equipped to address and engage images in communicating the Gospel to younger generations. More than a merely aesthetic punctuation for the communication of the gospel, images are becoming the very means of communication themselves, and ministry practitioners need to be more fluent in speaking the language of imagery.

Through helpful research data, practical scenarios, and a wide array of full-color images to support their thesis, the writers have achieved an important step toward this "image-language literacy." With points to ponder, questions for personal reflection, and image exercises at the close of each chapter, this e-book is an informative and practical tool that will leave those who read and engage with the material much more prepared for ministry in the digital age.

**Christy Tennant Krispin**, actress, interviewer, speaker, singer, songwriter, worship leader, creative catalyst, connector, and writer

It's said an image is worth a thousand words. But all too often, its better to stick with pictures and leave the thousand words out of communication. Worth a Thousand Words is a book on the cutting edge of ministry. The way images conjure thoughts, emotions, and relative life experience without even trying, is nothing short of remarkable. We've been using similar techniques in our work with teenagers and find the conversations quickly turn into deeper spaces able to help get at the heart of a particular issue a student is dealing with. We live in an image driven world, and the best way to give students the opportunity to open the doors to their hearts is to use images. I'm excited to watch the Church embrace these transformative ministry tools, and continue to meet the next generation where they are. After all, to live life WITH students rather than AT them always produces fruit. Take some time to dive into this powerful book. It will change the way you think about ministry, and it will help connect you with people you're trying to connect with.

**Andy Braner**

President KIVU Author - Speaker - Teen Advocate Some books reveal the longings of the present generation.

Aristotle said, "The soul never thinks without a picture." If we want to touch minds words will suffice but if we want to touch souls, then more than ever we need to learn to effectively use images of beauty and brokenness to convey God's big story, our place in that story and his place in our lives. Worth a Thousand Words is a must-read for kingdom-minded believers today.

**Dr. Eric Swanson**

Co-author of The Externally Focused Church and To Transform a City

# Forward

*Worth A Thousand Words* tells us what we intuitively and experientially know - the traditional way of transferring The Message through print is no longer the primary way the Gospel will be carried in our culture. As new wineskins are always needed, we should welcome this as good news. Yet, history shows us that new ways are not always welcomed ways. At least, not at first.

You may need a little shove out of the nest of “the way things have been done.” If so, you will find thoughtful and faithful friends in these authors to do just that. They not only make the case for the effectiveness of image-driven missions, they show how naturally images are already embedded in the Gospel. You may want help navigating the vast sea of images that surround us. If so, the authors will help you exegete the images of our culture from within a biblical framework. Or, you may want to use images in your life and ministry with more power and wisdom. If so, this book will be an invaluable resource for visionary strategy and meaningful practice. Make no mistake in picking up this book; this is no infomercial for the latest ministry tool; *Worth a Thousand Words* is an invitation for spiritual transformation.

Don't just read this book. Enjoy it. Digest it. Practice it. And, by all means, linger in its images. (If you're not haunted by an image of a teddy bear on the ground, you need to read it again.)

In sum, *Worth A Thousand Words* is a PRIMER for understanding culture, a DEVOTIONAL for spiritual growth, a MANUAL for intergenerational ministry, and a TEXTBOOK for theological and Scriptural reflection. It will be eye-opening for some, immediately helpful for most, and deeply encouraging for all.

**Dave Meserve**

Founder of Urban Skye in Denver, an umbrella for nontraditional missionaries, and is the Denver Representative for The Spiritual Formation Alliance.

# Introduction

## Images Everywhere!

Images are everywhere. From morning to night they bombard us! Some of them delight, entertain, and educate us. Others confuse, annoy, and appall us. But we cannot escape the fact that images profoundly describe and shape our world today. Even when we take them for granted, we would probably miss them if they were not available.

Imagine the world that Jesus lived in. Yes, there were a few images—sculptures and paintings of important people, mosaics, floor tiles, and some decorated pottery. In addition to His verbal images and metaphors and parables, Jesus often used objects and tangible visuals to speak of Kingdom realities and invite people into spiritual transformation. But absent back then were the cameras, the marketing industry, digital picture programs, printers, televisions, the Internet, and so on. Absent was a vast audience of young and old with ample time to view and be influenced by still and moving images.

Times have truly changed. Of course the good news of Jesus is still vitally relevant to the hearts, minds, and souls of all people. However, we must adjust to the power of images that often steer our view of reality in other dangerous directions—in order to steer our view toward the heart of the Triune God and the hope of transformation.

The power of images<sup>1</sup> affects us in many ways. It can move our hearts and motivate us to action. Take the adage “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Conversely, one



word can also generate a thousand images through the power of our imagination. So let's do the math. If we watch a mere 300 images per day (a low estimate of actual viewing), that would be more than 100,000 images viewed in a year. Have you ever wondered how many words 100,000 pictures are worth? At a thousand words per picture, that's a staggering 100,000,000 words—or the equivalent of about 2,000 averaged-sized books. Here's today's reality: Many of us are "reading" hundreds of thousands of images each year while actually reading far fewer than 2,000 books! These images are shaping our understanding of the culture we live in, including our perception of how to survive and thrive in it. In subtle or obvious ways, they speak into our view of what is meaningful and meaningless, and our understanding of God and spirituality. Images in these quantities can even shape how we reason.

## Our Passion and Dilemma

Though we are all impacted by images, younger people have been far more influenced due to technology. We authors are passionate about seeing God's story, especially as revealed through the gospel of Jesus and His Kingdom, advance into the younger generations.

Awhile back, I (Ralph) attended a seminar led by George Barna, a demographic and church researcher. He stated that the younger generations come into the church just as they are and they leave just as they were. Now that's a blunt generalization with many exceptions, but it still warrants exploration. Statistically, Barna reports that 20 percent retain their faith at age twenty-nine and only .5 percent of young adults aged eighteen to twenty-three have a biblical worldview.<sup>2</sup> That means only one out of every two hundred people in this age group thinks and makes decisions based on a biblical view of reality.

As we minister and look to the coming decades, we may see many local successes but these broader statistics reveal a significant dilemma: *Why does the church experience so often leave the younger generations basically unchanged? What can we do about it?*

The essence of what is written here is to explore these questions through the lens of images. We believe that teens and young adults often come to and then leave the church without the gospel deeply connecting to their hearts, minds, and souls.

We also believe that while connecting the gospel deeply within our souls is a work of God's Spirit, it also involves words (stories or teachings) as well as images (still and moving, real and imagined) within the context of loving relationships. Because younger adults grow up with a glut of imaginative images and sound-bite words that are influencing their worldviews (theological and otherwise), they need words and images all the more to enable them to connect deeply to the gospel.

A core principle for us is stated in Ephesians 4:15: "Instead, *speaking the truth in love*, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." We wish to speak the truth of the gospel in ways that penetrate people's souls and deliver His message in the spirit of genuine love. We have become convinced that images simply can do things that words often cannot: They can penetrate the heart at first glance, as we will demonstrate with stories and examples from our own ministries.

As authors, we have prayerfully watched God's spirit move into people's lives through images, our own included. Most often, we have been surprised at how doors open into our own and other's souls through images. It has significantly changed our ministry style and mentality so much that we now normally use images as our lead foot in ministry. Through this, we have sensed a deeper connection to those we seek to touch and so have seen ministry become more effective and more fun. Our approach to ministry changed over time and at points threatened our default modes of ministry.

## Our Direction and Promise

These writings are for thought leaders, ministry leaders, and ministry practitioners. Other NavPress print books of this genre include *The Kingdom Life*, dealing specifically with spiritual transformation<sup>3</sup>, and *Truth That Sticks*, addressing storytelling.<sup>4</sup> Our piece seeks to complement these by inviting you to use images (along with stories in community)—all designed to help facilitate spiritual transformation.

We will explore four issues with you here. And along the way, we'll insert images to help demonstrate the powerful dynamics of images.

First, images are powerful communicators, but what are they actually communicating? Why are images even more necessary today than in Jesus' day

some two thousand years ago? (Chapters 1-3)

Second, what's going on in the lives of young adults? How are images powerfully shaping their process of learning and perspectives on life? (Chapter 4)

Third, what's the role of images in our spiritual journeys? We'll explore the controversial, the obvious, the historical, and the subtle from Scripture. (Chapters 5-7)

Fourth, how can you learn to use images in your ministry to connect deeply with people? We'll explore authentically using images in very practical ways not just for entertainment or education, but ultimately for spiritual transformation. (Chapters 8-10)

We're hoping you'll discover, as we have, that images are most powerful when they are used in the proper environment or context. This context includes using non-threatening questions to draw out the stories behind the images.

Our promise to you is that you'll learn some whys and hows of using images as a means to facilitate true spiritual growth for those you minister among. These may be your peers or they may be much older or younger than you; they could be your own children or their friends. Regardless you can learn to connect the gospel of Jesus deeply within their souls and your own. (And in the appendix, we'll refer to specific image-based resources that are available to help you grow and minister to others.) We even dream of seeing your influence ripple to the edge of your pond and out into God's Kingdom.



Chapter 1  
The Power of Images as  
Starting Points



“How can you relate to this image?” I (Dennis) asked Brandon, a young man I was getting to know. It was such a simple question, really. We had talked before a few times—the usual, casual guy talk, nothing deep or too personal.

So why were tears filling his eyes all of a sudden?

Brandon stared at the black and white picture of a teddy bear for a very, very long time. Clearly it was stirring up something, and he was gauging warily whether I was safe to talk to—or not.

Finally he said softly, “My parents got divorced when I was young. Somehow I just felt . . . discarded. Sure, I got to trade off seeing them. But it wasn’t the same. Over time I felt more and more abandoned. They never intended me to feel this isolated, but I couldn’t help it. Something happened deep inside me. Seeing this image makes me realize . . . I guess I’ve never resolved this issue.”

It was a holy moment for both of us. My heart wept for Brandon as he got in touch with this broken place in his heart. I wondered how to help him make some sense out of his strong feelings of abandonment . . . maybe help him search for meaning from God’s point of view. Perhaps we could even talk about where God was when all this happened to him.

So I took the risk. I suggested that we try to connect his story with God’s story. The door stayed open and led to a deep conversation about how God also felt abandoned—by His own people. Discarded for other “gods” they liked better. How Jesus felt abandoned by the friends who should have stayed with Him. Forsaken on the cross by His Father. And how God doesn’t want any of us to feel abandoned . . . how He longs to adopt us into His family for good. Forever.

Brandon was open to receiving God’s solution to human loneliness and isolation! Although he and I had talked before, we had never gotten to real issues. This image pushed a button that words did not trigger. Brandon’s starting point became evident from the image. It helped him verbalize something significant he could not express before. In the context of our safe relationship, that picture opened his heart and helped him put words to a deep need. Instead of trying to diagnose him, I sat engrossed, listening as this young man shared a dark corner of his life story with me. And, together, we let in the light of God’s Word.

## Why Images Matter

So why should Brandon's story matter to us? It matters because he represents the younger generation in our culture . . .

. . . who are deeply disillusioned with organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

. . . who are leaving churches in alarming numbers, most never to return.

. . . whose worldview and values are overwhelmingly unbiblical.

Brandon's story must matter profoundly to all of us who long to see lost people rescued from the dominion of Satan and brought into the Kingdom of God, who are eager to apply the best and most effective tools to let Christ's perfect light into those dark corners while there is time.

Pastors and parents tell us in desperation, "We are losing the younger generations." And we agree. Brandon's story should also matter to us because he typifies the brokenness that younger generations bear, largely because they were born into a broken world. Our hearts should ache as we grapple with this in our country today where alarming numbers of children . . .

. . . are molested or abused by the time they are eighteen.

. . . are raised in divorced homes, or homes with at least one parent missing.

. . . have a parent in prison or on parole or probation.

. . . grow up below the poverty line.

. . . don't graduate from high school or are poorly prepared for productive work and independent living.

No wonder many feel abandoned. Discarded. Isolated. Hopeless.



It should alarm us that the doors are fast closing for young men and women like Brandon to even hear about Jesus and the good news of the gospel in their normal circles. Unlike those of us raised in the 1940s through the 1980s, those in Brandon's generation are very unlikely to experience church attendance, Sunday school, youth groups, Bible studies, Christian camps, VBS, or vibrant campus Christian organizations. They are much less likely than older people to hear any prayer uttered in school or natural professions of faith from teachers and public figures or people of faith portrayed respectfully in media. Do not expect them to learn sacred songs at school, see crosses and crèches erected in public places, understand the religious significance of major holidays, or hear the name of Christ spoken reverently instead of profanely.

But a new door is opening—largely unrecognized and untapped by Christian churches and ministries. That new door is the brave new world of images. Images offer a natural and culturally relevant way into the hearts and souls of the younger generations, if only we understand how to use them. Of course images don't do everything, but they are compelling starting points that can invite us into deep places. We need to bring safety to the table, along with authentic relationships, vulnerability, humility, listening skills, stories, Scripture, grace and truth—all bathed in love and compassion.

We will begin by exploring the power of images—both for good and for evil. We will trace the pathways that images follow into the heart and into the brain, and map out the places that images can take us. We will also see that these are not limited to the younger generations; we are *all* affected by a culture rapidly shifting from being primarily text-based to becoming primarily image-based. All of us are experiencing profound changes because of the impact of images in our world. Our purpose is to expose both the grave dangers we face, as well as the wonderful opportunities for finding Jesus in unexpected places and being transformed into *His* image.

In addition to our own experiences, we will provide research from other authors because most of us over forty can “see” better with words and numbers than with images, especially if they come from scientifically valid sources and experts. We usually prefer information packaged in truth statements—propositional and quantifiable. Fair enough.

But if you really want to get the most out of what you discover here, we urge you

to read more than just the words we have written. “Read” the images, too.

Pause.

Reflect. Pay attention to whatever is stirred up when you look at each image we have included. The older you are, the harder this may be. But our younger generation is socialized through images so much that they can often “read” an image as easily as we older folks read text. You will be tapping into one of God’s resources for revealing meaning—the whole world beyond words.

## The Power of Images

It’s important to start with some definitions. What do we mean when we use the word “image”? Primarily we are talking about still and moving pictures on paper or on screens. But there is much more. There are painted images and all forms of art. There are mental pictures and imagined scenes. There are images from nature and our surroundings—grass and flowers, mountains and water, animals and people, cities and machines, and so on. Images include representations or symbols—like flags, road signs, and other icons. Gold and money are images for something of worth connected to goods or services.

Many images are packed with religious or spiritual meaning. Think of the cross, the empty tomb, the image of a fish used by early Christians and even today. While our faith is rich with images, we also recognize the problems associated with idolatry and the worship of manmade things.

And so the list goes on. The big point here is that images—whether real, represented in printed or electronic form or even virtual—permeate our lives and our minds, and they are far more powerful than most of us realize.

That is where we are heading next, identifying seven ways that images impact us in daily life and



the implications flowing from each. All of this will pave the way for us to explore the positive power of images in our lives, families, and ministries.

## Images Capture Significant Events

Images have the power to capture significant events, even imprinting them into our memory banks. Which of us cannot still see in our mind's eye the Twin Towers in New York City burning and collapsing? If we are a little older, sights like the Berlin Wall being torn down or the Space Shuttle Columbia exploding in mid-air or Neil Armstrong taking his first step on the moon are indelibly printed in our memories. Images document horrific events in our history that none of us should ever forget—the death camps in Nazi Germany and the genocide in Rwanda. They can bind together strangers who saw and experienced common events.

Through photos and videos we capture events that are significant only to our immediate families or ourselves. They help us remember what we should remember—the high points, the tragedies, the rites of passage, the mundane and goofy moments. They can also haunt us by not letting us forget what we wish we could forget—the violent nightmares of a post-traumatic stress victim, the ashes of a home consumed in a wildfire, the smile of a perpetrator captured in a family photo. Images can push buttons in our hearts, minds, and perhaps deep in our souls by taking us back to scenes in the stories of our lives.

They also have the power to remind us of significant events from the biblical narrative. A simple wooden cross hanging in our home reminds us of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made to redeem our guilt and shame—a visual reminder that can prompt us into spontaneous connection with God.



## Images Motivate Us to Action

Images can do more than document history—they can actually make history! They can affect the way we view the world and therefore how we choose to live out of that worldview. They can do more than simply tell a story, they can actually shape our culture, our attitudes, and our actions.

For example, seeing images of homeless people or of abandoned homes in run-down neighborhoods has moved many to volunteer in food kitchens or with Habitat for Humanity. Images from the frontlines have drawn many to enlist in the armed forces. Viewing news reports and magazine covers about oil-coated pelicans brought many to the Gulf to help with the cleanup.

But sometimes the actions we take are not positive. Consider the video and still images broadcast around the world on 9/11. They may have had the impact of causing some to become passive, helpless, paralyzed with fear. Others of us have become numb and fatalistic, convinced that it's just a matter of time before the next attack. Try to imagine for a moment how radicalized Muslims (only a tiny fraction of all the Muslims in the world) might have responded to seeing those same images? Instead of the horror and the sense of vulnerability that Americans felt, these radicals may have been energized and ecstatic at seeing their enemies so helpless. We will never know how many new terrorists have been recruited by the dissemination of these and similar images.

From a Kingdom perspective, many of us respond to images of the cross with gratitude and by dedicating our lives to serve God. Or we respond to images in nature by worshipping the Creator of all. Pictures of people enslaved to gods—whether secular or pagan—have played a part in calling many into missionary service. And the actions we take in response to images launch new chapters in our own histories and those of others.

## Images Grab Our Attention

Whole industries exist to create images for the simple purpose of grabbing our attention. “Please notice me” is the primary unspoken message. Those who use images desire influence. If we get a newspaper, watch TV, use the Internet, or even drive down the highway, we are a target for the images of advertisers.



We can be grateful for many of these images. They direct us to a hamburger place when our kids get hungry on a road trip. They capture cosmic, otherworldly images from deep space. They chart the melting of the polar ice caps and the threat to wild birds and wetlands from oil leaks. In grabbing our attention, they can alert us to conditions that need to be addressed, and that is good.

God also wants to grab our attention. He sends storms to remind us of His power, sunsets to hint at His beauty, seasons to remind us of the passing of time. His creation talks to us all the time, using images of beauty to remind us of His power and goodness. Many people who do not affiliate with Christianity at all are quite open to discussing how being in nature stirs up spiritual longings in their hearts—a great starting point for ministry.

## Images Rewire Our Sense of Need

But let's get real. Not all image purveyors have such innocent intentions. There are mixed motives behind the barrage of images invading our homes and our line of sight 24/7. Why are our computers clogged with countless “cookies” trying to spy out where we go on the Internet? Because they want to tap into our personal interests, our perceived needs and wants, our attempts to enhance our self-image and well being—all parts of being human. They are trying to track what we usually





respond to and then serve it up just when we're most susceptible.

The advertising industry uses images to carry us from attention to intrigue to entrapment. In all fairness, some advertisers are marketing products that we actually do need, so their images can help us make better-informed choices about essential products and services. But often in today's marketing, the goal is simply to lodge a brand name or image within our memory banks. Rather than educate us

on the particulars of the product or service, marketers have found that name brand recognition will suffice. In that way, when people are considering a decision, they will remember the brand and thus be more inclined to actually buy the marketed product. The advertisers' goal in using the image is not "What you see is what you *get*," but rather "What you see is what you *need*."

What is your favorite Super Bowl commercial or television ad? Probably its core message is "Buy soap, buy prescription drugs, buy cars. Just buy *something!*" But first it must convince us that we actually need things we were not even aware we lacked. The industry creates in us a sense of "have to have" in order for us to feel included or experience the pride of having. Does all this visual-based marketing strategy work? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. However, businesses know for sure that people will not buy unless they can create awareness and motivate desire or a sense of need in some manner.

This process from awareness to desire to consequences is a universal process. James described its downside when he wrote:

WHEN TEMPTED, NO ONE SHOULD SAY, "GOD IS TEMPTING ME." FOR GOD CANNOT BE TEMPTED BY EVIL, NOR DOES HE TEMPT ANYONE; BUT EACH ONE IS TEMPTED WHEN, BY HIS OWN EVIL DESIRE, HE IS DRAGGED AWAY AND ENTICED. THEN, AFTER DESIRE HAS CONCEIVED, IT GIVES BIRTH TO SIN; AND SIN, WHEN IT IS FULL-GROWN, GIVES BIRTH TO DEATH. (JAMES 1:13-15)

Not all desires are evil; many are actually God-given. But most images we encounter in advertising try to convince us that all desires are good and that they all need to be

satisfied.

Soon our needs turn to wants that go far beyond the real needs Jesus listed: “Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on” (Matthew 6:25, ESV). What do we get from blending an affluent society + an excess of luxuries + advanced technology + advertising savvy + profit motives + worldly values? Before we know it, our needs have been manipulated, our values changed, and we lose sight of God’s purpose and priorities to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33, NASB). Most of the time images are right at the core of much of this. Moving and still images with a few words are perhaps the most powerful tools in our culture’s toolkit.

## Images Stimulate Our Imaginations

We humans and the entire created cosmos are the fruit of God’s imagination. As the only beings created in His image, we can tap into our God-given imaginations and creativity. However, we have all been influenced by modernity’s focus on facts that must be scientifically proven in order to be accepted. It has influenced us to rely too heavily, even in our Christian faith, upon formulas, systematic theologies, and all things quantifiable. This has likely suppressed our God-given imaginative abilities.



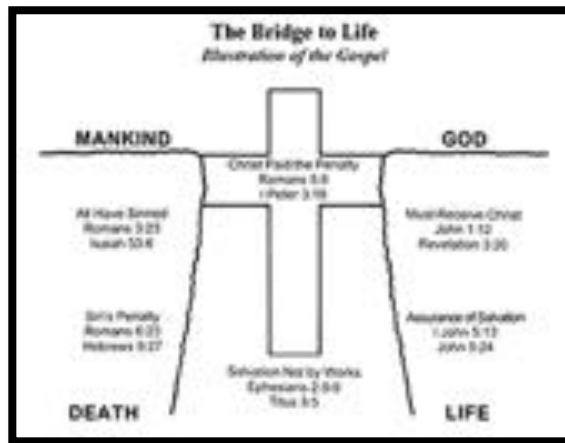
As we seek to release our imagination, we can use images for great good, especially when they motivate us to strive for a positive goal. I (Judy) posted a photo of a trimmer me on the refrigerator to help me imagine a higher level of fitness and healthier meals. A friend who survived cancer reported being helped by imagining her immune system fighting off malignant cells. Commercials for vocational schools

depict under-employed couch potatoes in jeans transformed into productive employees in career attire; this image can be just the motivation one needs to make significant changes. What might we see if we could peek into the minds of an architect designing a building, a quilter creating her next quilt, an entrepreneur dreaming of his next business venture, a homeowner redecorating a room? We would probably see images (not words) sparking their imaginations.

Meanwhile, the Enemy is using the power of images to stimulate the sinful side of our imaginations, and our actions as well. What was considered pornographic in the 1950s is now openly displayed on numerous commercials, billboards, movies, video games, and computer or mobile device screens. This proliferation of pornographic images stimulates our imaginations toward lust, infidelity, and fantasy relationships. This feeds our false self while demanding nothing of our true self, thereby eroding the fabric of sexuality as God intended it. Furthermore, these “images are ‘physically’ stored in the brain as mental models, and directly impact how we think and behave. The more we take in such images, the larger and more dominant the mental model becomes, until it finally triggers ‘automatic’ thoughts and reactions in specific situations—a habit.”<sup>1</sup> What we envision in our minds can drastically affect what we do.

On the other hand, images have the power to stimulate our imaginations about the things of God. Consider Michelangelo’s depiction of the birth of mankind on the Sistine Chapel, Auguste Rodin’s bronze *The Thinker* contemplating the hellish fate of those at the gates of Hades, and the images of the tearless and painless Holy City in Revelation stirring our longings for heaven. Some of us responded with saving faith when someone drew out the Bridge Illustration for us or the Four Spiritual Laws diagram with self on the throne.

These visuals helped us imagine ourselves crossing over and surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus.



## Images Educate and Inform Us

Images can also educate and inform us on a wide array of subjects. From the evening news to the Discovery and History channels, from documentaries to photos associated with investigative journalism, the world uses images to inform us. They help us identify the disease affecting our lawns, or tell us which skin spots are normal and which might need the attention of a doctor.



It helps that images are *efficient*—that they communicate much with simply a glance. We like the way they get to the point, often much faster than paragraphs of words. Why talk for ten minutes to describe a situation when one image and few words will suffice? How many of us have learned amazing things about the world simply by gazing at the photographs in *National Geographic* magazine, even if we don't bother to read the accompanying articles? Students of history, geography, and social studies (among others) know that these subjects come alive when presented with relevant images, not just words or textbooks. Ads on Craigslist are much more likely to sell the items if accompanied by an image because we can actually see what we are thinking about buying. Images can be used alone or with narration, questions, or music to make their point. Often images help implant that information in our minds for a long time.

But there are some downsides to this visual informing process. What we think we can see in the picture is not always what we get—like that nice mattress on Craigslist with bedbugs. While images may be *efficient* in what they depict, they can also be *imprecise*; what they communicate may differ greatly from one viewer to another. This forest image looks benign or inviting to one person, but threatening and dangerous to another.



Because most images are imprecise, they need interpretation . . . one or more contexts to get at the real meaning. Unfortunately images often come at us so fast and furious and with such intensity that we have no time to interpret them or to discern the values and worldview embedded in them. They become fragments of information, unprocessed and unexamined through the lens of our own values or through God’s Word.

Another downside to the educational value of images is how easily they can be abused and turned into propaganda. Like statistics, images are sometimes used to misinform and bias us. Giving titles to images can heighten their impact, often at the cost of accuracy. Sensationalism sells

where bland words do not. Look at most newspapers or news websites: The captions often try to “hook” the reader through exploiting the emotional side of the article that taps into human fears. The stock market did not just turn down one hundred points—it “slumped.” Our favorite sports team did not simply lose by fourteen points—it “suffered a devastating loss.” The politician did not just address some cause—he “ripped into his opponent.” Political cartoons are one example of images that capitalize on satire, caricature, and exaggeration to skew our views one way or the other.

The result of living in an unexamined, context-less world of fragmented images is not a worldview that is biblically critiqued. We who are involved in ministry can help believers mature by inviting them to process the embedded messages in the images they see. This reflective process is critical in “train[ing] their senses and mental faculties by constant use and practice to discern, discriminate, and distinguish good from evil...to recognize the difference between right and wrong, and then to do what is right” (Hebrews 5:14, various translations). The Holy Spirit will lead some of us to censor all questionable media from our family life and ministries. He may lead others to choose to view selected media but process them

intentionally to “distinguish good from evil” in what they view—and help others do the same.

## Images Entertain and Distract Us

It is not news to anyone how central images are to the world of entertainment. That certainly includes wholesome animations for children and shows with appropriate life themes for adults. During particularly hard times (war time, recessions, the Depression), people turn to happy themes in entertainment



for solace, comfort, and simple distraction from the daily grind. As part of the human experience, even images of violence can be appropriate to consider. However, images of horror are sometimes turned into comedies, or we find ourselves laughing at tragedies in a mind-numbing sort of way. We can end up questioning the very foundations of moral reasoning and the implications of violence.

I (Judy) spent a morning recently in divorce court with friends whose four-year-long marriage was breaking up. The young wife sat silent and sober, occasionally sighing as we watched couple after couple approach the magistrate to turn in their divorce papers. If there were ever an hour in this marriage worth sitting silent and motionless, contemplating how in the world it all came to this, and sighing in empathy, this was it. But the husband spent that long hour of waiting busily distracting himself with the new video games he had installed on his cell phone and rebuking his teary-eyed wife for sighing. He chose images to distract himself from the painful but potentially transformational task of praying and reflecting on what was happening to him. Another chance to hear from God was stolen away by images. He missed an excellent opportunity to cry out, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

## Images Connect Us to God's Story

If images become merely additions to a program or decorations on a page, they will fall short. But when someone responds to an image, it can open a window to the soul. Remember Brandon? His starting point was a simple, engaging picture that led to not one, but two stories. First, it brought a significant part of his own story to the surface with questions in a safe environment.

The teddy bear image opened the door to the second story and allowed Brandon to consider the part of God's story that connected to his own. Of course, not everyone looks at a picture of a lost teddy bear and says, "That's me." Yet more of us than you might expect actually do see ourselves in this picture. That is because images have the power to retrieve things not yet articulated or resolved and bring them tenderly out into the space of God's mercy and grace.

Simply put, *Images can take us where words cannot.*

That is the way God designed us. As Brandon's story illustrates, there are personal and relational ways to use images in ministry to others, as well as in our own process of personal growth. We can use images to engage nonbelievers in evangelistic conversations and also to move us toward discipleship from the inside out. Biblical concepts, principles, propositions, and truths are very important as final conclusions, but not as effective as starting points in spiritual conversations—especially to a generation socialized by images.



## Images—Catalysts for Change

If you are in the older generation, you may recall seeing a gruesome image that changed America profoundly in the late fifties and sixties. It depicted the mutilated body of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African-American boy who was murdered for whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. When his mother in Chicago decided to place Emmett in an open casket, fifty thousand mourners were shocked and outraged by what they saw. His story, driven home into the hearts of millions through those chilling photos, was the catalyst that ignited the civil rights movement.



An NPR interview captures the impact on Margaret Block, who was only a girl when the pictures were published:

“I remember not being able to sleep when I saw [the photos],” she says. “Can you imagine being 11 years old and seeing something like that for the first time in your life and it being close to home? The death of Emmett Till touched us, it touched everybody. And we always said if we ever got a chance to do something, we were going to change things around here.”<sup>2</sup>

See the power of *seeing*? The images of Emmett Till’s butchered body are sobering to look at, even half a century later, especially knowing that his murderers were acquitted in just an hour by an all-white jury. Of course, the yearning for civil rights had been stirring for a long time, yet it was these photographs that catalyzed



the movement. Within weeks, landmark court and agency decisions began to legally ban racial segregation in the South; Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white male on a bus in Montgomery; and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his first civil rights speech. When the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964 were passed, historians tell us that they were inspired by Emmett Till—just as thousands of Americans both black and white were.

That is the power of images. Thousands upon thousands moved—saying to themselves, *if we ever get a chance to do something, we are going to change things.*

Just as Emmett Till's mother insisted that the world look upon the open casket of her slain child, so God the Father resurrected His Son Jesus so the world would see the scars and never forget the unspeakable horror, the injustice, and the incalculable cost paid to redeem us.

And when we, ourselves, and those God brings into our lives grasp the enormity of that truth, we step into the powerful process of spiritual transformation.



## Points to Ponder

- Images can provide excellent starting points for conversations about the gospel.
- Our culture uses images to enhance consumption.
- The world's images impact our view of reality—sometimes by alerting us to important truths we need to be aware of, and often by numbing us to pain and suffering.

## For Personal Reflection

- Are your buying habits more impacted by scriptural principles or by the world's use of images in advertising and entertainment?
- How has the world's use of images impacted your empathy toward others?
- How can we help others interpret—from God's point of view—the true meaning of what they see?
- How can you use images to get to the starting points of those you seek to minister to?

## IMAGE EXERCISE

Before moving on, let's think back to the question Dennis asked Brandon as we look at the following image. ***How can you relate to this image?*** Don't rush. Sit with the image for several minutes.



- Is there something surfacing within you as you look at the image?
- What are some differences between this image and the image of the lost teddy bear?
- What happens in your soul when you look into the eyes of a child?
- What are the needs of a baby that must be met for life to continue?
- Does this image perhaps make you think about your life's legacy? Something else?

Isn't it a peculiar thing that the human soul desires life to have meaning? It is not enough to simply exist or survive or even flourish. We want a bigger picture. We want meaning. We want a destiny with freedom of choice.

Life without meaning is a degraded life. To give up the search for the meaning of life is to succumb to the habit of dulling one's soul.

Life's meaning answers the question each dawn asks, "Why bother?" It is like a light beam illuminating the scenery along the path of our life's journey. But what is the source of meaning in life? Is it limited to whatever we make of it? Are we the authors of our own stories, or the story of another Author?

Life means that we want our story to have meaning, with an option other than death. Life implies that God is the God of the living.

John 10:10 says, "A THIEF IS ONLY THERE TO STEAL AND KILL AND DESTROY. I CAME SO THEY CAN HAVE REAL AND ETERNAL LIFE, MORE AND BETTER LIFE THAN THEY EVER DREAMED OF" (MSG).

What images does Jesus offer regarding this type of life?

- The bread of life
- Life-giving water
- What are some others?

*This exercise was adapted from "Searching the Ordinary for Meanings," available at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)*

## Chapter 2

# Pathways of Image Impact



Recently Debbie, a campus minister and the mother of a teen-aged son, expressed her amazement at the impact of an image in one of image-based resources for youth:

It was wild! My teenage son picked up one of *The New Me* books and turned to the image of being spiritually oppressed. Was I ever surprised! I didn't even think he'd know what spiritual oppression is. But when I asked him about it, he said, "It was the picture, Mom. That was so awesome and then I really got into the verses and God encouraged me so much!"

What we see does impact us—but how? Clearly it's more than just fleeting impressions on the retina. A young man views an image and—by a mysterious process—finds his heart opened to be encouraged by the Word of God as he battles spiritual oppression. How does viewing an image move from impulses along the optic nerve to thoughts in the mind, stirrings in the heart, and encouragement in the soul?

When it comes to text, we think we understand this process quite well. We get how reading, studying, or meditating on a Bible verse leads to identifying a truth, principle, or example. We think we know how a written or spoken truth can lead to a conviction, encouragement, or obedience. But when it comes to images, most of us (especially those of us born before 1960) do not understand how that process works. How do images leave their imprint on us?

Part of the answer lies in understanding the pathways an image takes. It all starts with seeing. You see an image; it lodges in your memory, stimulates your imagination, or alters your perception of reality and somehow journeys to your mind, heart, and soul. The vast majority of images we see flash on our retinas for only a couple of seconds or less leaving little time to process them. Other images may evoke strong reactions of awe or delight, fear or passion. Given time for deeper reflection, they may even connect us with God and His stories.

The impact an image has depends on several factors. To start with, the sheer number of images matters. One image amongst a thousand is less likely to stand out. Then there's our exposure to the image—is it a passing glance, or do we stop to gaze? What about intensity? Many images are fairly subdued—a beehive sticker on a honey bottle, a business logo, or a pattern on a T-shirt. But other images may deeply impact us—a breathtaking sunset, an evocative clothing ad, or a snapshot of the devastation of an earthquake.

Another factor is context. Personal context may be created from your past memories, present situation, or future imaginations. A random baby picture might bring tears to the eyes of the baby's grandmother as she recalls the years of infertility treatments her daughter went through to conceive. Or there is a provided context, as in a scene from a movie or video game or the caption under a news photo. Often the personal context blends with the provided context, evoking a variety of emotions.

Images have impact.

## Pathways to the Heart

It all started with seeing. Adam and Eve were surrounded by a delectable paradise engaging all of their senses. Moses describes what happened in Genesis 3:6:

**WHEN THE WOMAN SAW THAT THE FRUIT OF THE TREE WAS GOOD FOR FOOD AND PLEASING TO THE EYE, AND ALSO DESIRABLE FOR GAINING WISDOM, SHE TOOK SOME AND ATE IT. SHE ALSO GAVE SOME TO HER HUSBAND, WHO WAS WITH HER, AND HE ATE IT.**

The sense of sight was the entryway for desire. A desire so strong that they ignored God's warning and command—creation's first act of disobedience. They saw and they ate, but they never imagined what they were setting in motion.

Thousands of years later, seeing still takes us one of two ways—toward God or away from Him. And in ever increasing ways we battle "the lust of the eyes" (1 John 2:16, NASB) as seductive advertisements lure us down the path to coveting and impulse buying or worse.



But clearly there is much more to seeing than just observing the visible world

around us. The external connects to the internal. Jesus addresses the deeper issues of seeing when He proclaimed:

**YOUR EYES ARE WINDOWS INTO YOUR BODY. IF YOU OPEN YOUR EYES WIDE IN WONDER AND BELIEF, YOUR BODY FILLS UP WITH LIGHT. IF YOU LIVE SQUINTY-EYED IN GREED AND DISTRUST, YOUR BODY IS A DANK CELLAR. IF YOU PULL THE BLINDS ON YOUR WINDOWS, WHAT A DARK LIFE YOU WILL HAVE! (MATTHEW 6:22-23, MSG)**

Seeing comprises both a physical and a moral sense. What we see and the way we see it can lead to light or to darkness, representing good and evil respectively. Jesus explained it this way: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

Images do not imprint directly on an empty hard drive or blank slate in our hearts. They travel a pathway we are already predisposed to—to see good or to see evil. Some people who watched Jesus heal lepers and cast out demons saw a man of God doing miraculous acts of goodness for the needy. But other people observing exactly the same events saw a charlatan and an agent of the devil. What caused these different perceptions?

The difference between the two groups wasn’t between what they saw with the eyes in their heads, but rather what they perceived through “the eyes of their hearts.” It was about their readiness:

**I PRAY THAT THE EYES OF YOUR HEART MAY BE ENLIGHTENED, SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW WHAT IS THE HOPE OF HIS CALLING, WHAT ARE THE RICHES OF THE GLORY OF HIS INHERITANCE IN THE SAINTS. (EPHESIANS 1:18, NASB)**

Because the Pharisees’ hearts were already filled with defensiveness and pride, greed for power, and fear of being upstaged, they perceived Jesus’ miracles as threats. By contrast the hearts of those who followed Jesus probably perceived (even if dimly) a man of kindness and mercy using God-given power to heal broken lives as well as





broken bodies. Perhaps it was the humility that comes from brokenness that prepared them to perceive Him that way.

We, too, have “eyes in our hearts” that perceive far more than our physical eyes do, even into eternity. As when a teacher “sees” untapped talent or potential in an angry, checked out teenager. Or when a social worker “sees” a woman of dignity trying to rise from an environment of shame. So our hearts have varying levels of readiness to create meaning from what we see—either negative, worldly meaning or positive, Kingdom meaning. Images can be agents to bring transformation to our hearts. But images will be transformative only to the degree that our hearts are ready to respond to God’s perspective on what we see. That is when images can serve as effective tools in overcoming evil with good (see Romans 12:21).

Remember Debbie from the beginning of this chapter? With another group Debbie tried a different image pathway to get to the “eyes of [their hearts]”—mosaicing. Before we move on let’s hear the story of transformation within her and her group.

*Debbie on Using Mosaics (00: 03: 23). Watch this video at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using\\_Mosaics.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using_Mosaics.html)*

## Pathways to the Mind

The act of seeing doesn’t just shape our thoughts, it also wires our brains. Both the content of the images and the media delivering the images profoundly impact our brains. In other words, depending on how they reach us, images can impact not only *what* we think, but also *how* we engage in the act of thinking itself.

Those of us who grew up before or during the seventies were probably socialized and schooled with lots of reading, and the very act of reading trained our brains in a certain way.

When we read, we focus on decoding one word after another, going left to right and top to bottom, beginning to end. Reading text in this way forced us to keep our attention on one thing for several minutes or longer. This methodical, sequential process developed some strengths. It helped us become more linear and logical, trained us to concentrate for long periods of time, and aided us in reflecting deeply and imagining creatively.



At school we read colorfully illustrated storybooks, studied textbooks with a few black and white illustrations, and watched an occasional filmstrip in a classroom perhaps decorated with a few posters. On the way home we viewed billboards and signs. At home we enjoyed comic books, coloring books, baseball cards, photos in magazines and newspapers, and a few family snapshots. Churches offered little more than the occasional flannel graph. For the most part the images we were exposed to were black and white, they stood still, had little or no sound, were very ho-hum in intensity, and there probably weren't very many of them. They were sidelined by the main lesson, which was delivered in words.

Early television programming offered us some black and white, humorous, non-violent (or slightly violent, non-bloody) cartoons and a selection of family-friendly shows. We went on an occasional trip to the local movie theater for variety. R- and X-rated images required trips to special limited showings or bookstores. That was about it.

The Internet and other technological media have changed all that forever. We have entered a new era that requires our minds to operate in entirely new ways. Younger generations have been socialized less and less through text, and increasingly through images served up in a juicy smorgasbord with ever increasing speed and intensity. This banquet of

opportunity contains some nutritious health foods, some junk food, and some poisoned delicacies.

So, now, instead of reading line after line, it's like trying to catch flying pieces from a hundred different jigsaw puzzles—with nobody to show us what the picture looks like. Life is coming at us in millions of disjointed image pieces, and we are struggling to make sense out of and find meaning in them. How do we form sustainable beliefs, convictions, and worldviews from the fragments?



The Internet—with its trillions of images, words, and sounds—has drastically affected those of us who use it, both young and old. Studies are showing that the overwhelming exposure to media has retrained our brains to think more randomly, moving us away from logical reasoning to more emotional reasoning. They have distracted our minds as we bounce around rapidly, impairing our ability to concentrate and reflect about anything deeply. They have robbed us of the ability to cope with boredom through play, creativity, imagination, and invention. Perhaps most worrisome of all, many images and virtual contexts can become so addicting that they overwhelm our lives!

Being inundated by images and messages from the media does change *what* we think. But before we get there, let's explore what that deluge does to *how* we think. According to author and researcher Nicholas Carr, "Media work their magic, or their mischief, on the nervous system itself. Our focus on a medium's content can blind us to these deep effects."<sup>1</sup> In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, he reports comments from men and women, old and young, ordinary Internet users like you and me. Unless you are among the endangered few who don't

use the Internet, you may recognize yourself in their comments:

Over the past few years, I've had the uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, had been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going--so far as I can tell--but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. . . . The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. . . . What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. . . . I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the Web or in print. . . . Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I just zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski. . . . [We've become] chronic scatterbrains."<sup>2</sup>

If you have wondered what is happening to your brain, you are not alone. We who use the Internet frequently are all being retrained. The power of words printed on page after page is clearly diminishing.

Researchers are also wondering what is happening to our brains when we expose them to the deluge of images and words flitting across the various screens and media in our lives, hour after hour and day after day. Carr especially appeals to those of us in the older generations who have grown up in both camps—the world dominated by linear text and the world dominated more by random images. One shift he notes is that from focus to distractedness because the Internet is designed as an interruption system to divide our attention. According to Carr's research:

The Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli—repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive—that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions. . . . It also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment. . . . The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking deeply or creatively.<sup>3</sup>

He warns us that:

Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new

kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better. . . . [And that] thoughtful people [are slipping] comfortably into the permanent state of distractedness that defines online life.<sup>4</sup>

Now not everyone considers these changes to be troublesome. Educator, philosopher, and scholar Marshall McLuhan believes that we may have lost something significant in the shift to a reading, literate society several hundred years ago. He claims that when we became a reading society, we experienced “a considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that a non-literate man or society would experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Mark Federman and Clay Shirky, on the other hand, invite us to celebrate our liberation from our bondage to books and “enter the Web’s world of ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity [where the greatest skill involves] discovering emergent meaning among contexts that are continually in flux.”<sup>6</sup>

Maybe they have a point. Perhaps our linear, sequential minds have minimized emotions. Of course, emotions do change and they can be unstable and unreliable. But, in fearing the fickleness of feeling, have we lost something? Have we minimized the emotions that fuel convictions, devotion, and God-given passions—a deep heart response that is part of loving God and others?

This is new and certainly uncomfortable territory for those of us who highly value the logical flow of words. Our modern minds are used to propositional truth expressed in words. Engaging in the emotional reasoning prompted by images feels much riskier and too abstract. Verbalizing them can be a frightening experience. We authors admit that in our own personal ministry journeys, we have often felt insecure adjusting to those who make decisions emotionally. But when we consider all that we—and those we care about—have to gain, it is worth the risk because involving emotions helps the truth “stick,” as Avery Willis explains:

Bringing the stories of the Bible to life in a way that involves people’s emotions allows them to walk away with God’s truth deeply embedded in their hearts. The truth of God’s Word will stick in their heads and hearts. The Holy Spirit can be counted on to interpret the story for you into the

lives of those who are wrestling with the truth.<sup>7</sup>

At the risk of sounding trite, we simply cannot turn the clock back. Post-modernism is becoming the dominant worldview in our culture whether we like it or not. The Internet and the oceans of social and image-based media are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. At an industry conference, Tim Brooks, managing director of Guardian News and Media, said, “The days when you could just trade in words are gone.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Content of Images

So far we have explored the “how” question—the physiological and neurological impacts that images have on *how* we think. Now let’s turn to the “what” question—the impacts of *what* we actually see and *what* we think as a result of viewing it. The content of the images we view (as opposed to the way those images are delivered to us) can play itself out in our psyche, in our emotions and behaviors, and in our spiritual lives.



### THE GOOD

Imagine yourself looking at gorgeous images of God’s creation—sunsets, mountains, streams, forests, or tides ebbing and flowing on a beach. As your eyes (the “windows of your body”) let these pictures in, what might be happening to you? Is your breathing slowing, are your muscles relaxing—are you becoming more tranquil? Maybe you are connecting with your Maker.

No wonder the apostle Paul encourages us to be intentional about what we focus on and fill our minds with:

**SUMMING IT ALL UP, FRIENDS, I’D SAY YOU’LL DO BEST BY FILLING YOUR MINDS AND MEDITATING ON THINGS TRUE, NOBLE, REPUTABLE, AUTHENTIC, COMPELLING, GRACIOUS—THE BEST, NOT THE WORST; THE BEAUTIFUL, NOT THE UGLY; THINGS TO PRAISE, NOT THINGS TO CURSE. (PHILIPPIANS 4:8,**

MSG)

The good things that are “true, noble, reputable” can include nature, people, ourselves, the world around us, and the circumstances we live with. But because modern-day media tend to impair our capacities to meditate or consider anything deeply, we must actively counter this process. As Scripture urges, we need to put “the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse” in front of our eyes continually. And we now have unprecedented access to more good, inspiring, wonderful images than ever!

## THE BAD

Unfortunately, there is a reality check. Bad news sells newspapers. Crisis, crime, conflict, and scandal send the ratings up—especially if there are graphic images to go with them. And “bad news” usually preys on our hopes and dreams.



One effect of image bombardment in our news sources is that we are never more than a click away from colliding with everything bad happening around the globe. Wars, disasters, crackpots, celebrity shenanigans, political wrangling, genocide, injustice, and environmental disasters—they stream unendingly through our media. This can keep us in a chronic state of stress about our world.

Constant access to the stories and images of bad news contributes significantly to the stress that is endemic in our society. As science reveals, the powerful hormones released when we sense danger or threat are only meant to last a short while—just until the emergency passes.

But what if the emergencies are endless? What if they follow one another in rapid, unremitting sequence? The cumulative effect of stress hormones damages and kills off brain cells, delaying the release of tranquilizing chemical forces intended to return our bodies to a state of equilibrium. With instant access to all that is good and bad in the lives of hundreds of friends and strangers on Facebook, many of us live in a constant, stressful state of either fight or flight. Peace eludes us.

## THE UGLY

There are two particular types of images that can have an especially damaging impact on our hearts and minds: images of violence and images of sexuality, especially pornographic ones. The damage these images inflict increases exponentially with the amount of exposure and the intensity of those images. Is the answer simply never to look at images in either category (as if that were even possible)? While some may choose that route, it would probably mean that we would have to stop reading our Bibles, because God's Word is quite frank about portraying incidents both violent and sexual in nature. The critical difference is that Scripture always places these stories within the context of God's laws and heart, explaining the very real consequences that flow from them.

## THE VIOLENT

Our hearts should break when we learn about cases like Andrew Conley, an Indiana teenager who pleaded guilty to murder. Just a few weeks before he strangled his ten-year-old brother, he told his girlfriend that he wanted to be just like the fictional television killer Dexter. Viewing images with violent





content is too often a factor in tragic stories like Conley's.

Since the 1950s thousands of studies have explored the possible connections between violent behavior and exposure to media violence. All except eighteen of those studies confirm that viewing media images containing violence can contribute to "aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed."<sup>9</sup> When researchers at the University of Michigan Health System reviewed research on violence in the media, here are some of the conclusions they came to:

- Two-thirds of all programming contains violence.
- Programs designed for children more often contain violence than adult TV.
- Most violent acts go unpunished on TV and are often accompanied by humor. The consequences of human suffering and loss are rarely depicted.
- Many shows glamorize violence. TV often promotes violent acts as a fun and effective way to get what you want without consequences.
- Repeated exposure to TV violence makes children less sensitive toward its effects on victims and the human suffering it causes. Viewing TV violence reduces inhibitions and leads to more aggressive behavior.
- Teenaged boys who grew up watching more TV each day are more likely to commit acts of violence than those who watched less.

Images of violence have powerful impacts on people, especially children and teenagers. Media outlets sometimes deny this power, but it is real and making a lasting impact on our society. A key lesson is that the content of the images we view matters—and it matters deeply.

## THE PORNOGRAPHIC

In addition to violent images, images depicting graphic sexuality can be particularly damaging to us. Images with "mild" sexual overtones are routinely used to sell everything from autos to blue jeans, so it often takes more intensely sexual or even pornographic images to shock us. Pornography is one of those subjects that many

Christians would rather avoid thinking and talking about. But as more and more of us both inside and outside the Church struggle with porn, we simply cannot ignore the subject. While the focus of our writing is not about porn, part of being “as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves” requires us to be informed about the impact of pornographic images on our brains, our society, and our souls. What follows are some sobering facts that everyone in ministry should know.

## Porn’s Impact on the Brain

First let’s explore the impact of pornography on our brains and bodies. In his ground-breaking book *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Science of How Internet Pornography Radically Alters the Human Brain and Body*, author Mark B. Kastleman explains what happens when someone looks at a pornographic image.<sup>10</sup> Instantaneously an overpowering flood of chemicals is released in the brain. The viewer probably feels arousal and fear, lust and shock, excitement and shame—in a confusing blend that amounts to an emotional-chemical cocktail. These chemicals virtually shut down the frontal lobes, containing the logic center of the brain—the part of the brain that would normally say, *Wait a minute . . . are you sure you want to do this?* The



viewer’s cognitive thought and reasoning abilities are overridden by the emotional gut-reaction part of the brain called the limbic system. So the pleasure/emotional center of the brain literally takes over. That exposure to porn lodges itself as an emotional memory before the viewer can take measures to stop it. No wonder a

porn viewer often asks himself in bewilderment afterward, *What was I thinking?*

This is especially true for teenagers because the cognitive reasoning part of the adolescent brain is still maturing. Kastleman explains:

Imagine what happens when pornographic visual images that already bypass the logic centers enter and are stored in the highly emotional, illogical adolescent brain! This creates confusion, stress, and behaviors in children and teens that are only now beginning to be understood.<sup>11</sup>

But the bad news doesn't stop there. Repeated exposure to porn can become highly addictive—so addictive, in fact, that “many neuropsychologists and therapists refer to pornography as ‘visual crack cocaine.’”<sup>12</sup> Too often simple curiosity leads to being hooked. Kastleman alerts us to the dangers of this addiction when he writes:

Internet access to an unlimited supply of increasingly extreme pornographic material has produced an unprecedented depth and severity of addiction... an addict doesn't have to be at the computer screen to “see” pornography. Norepinephrine [a chemical released by the brain that helps imprint images for recall] guarantees that he is equipped with his own, private mobile porn library, a catalogue of images he can access at any time for self-medication.

Lest we be naïve, porn is no respecter of persons: It impacts the brains of believers the same way it impacts the brains of those who feel it is morally acceptable to view it. Even though more than 70 percent of men aged eighteen to twenty-four visit a pornographic site in a typical month, porn also impacts women. In fact, one out of every six women, including Christians, struggles with an addiction to pornography.

How does viewing porn impact families, marriages, and children? Here are some statistics from safefamilies.org that should shock us all:

- 47 percent of families said pornography is a problem in their home.
- A 1996 Promise Keepers survey revealed that over 50 percent of the men were involved with pornography within one week of attending the event.
- At a 2003 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, two thirds of the 350 divorce lawyers who attended said the Internet played a significant role in many divorces in the past year, with excessive interest in

online porn contributing to more than half such cases. Pornography had an almost non-existent role in divorce just seven or eight years ago.

- More than 20,000 images of child pornography are posted online every week.
- Nine out of ten children between the ages of eight and sixteen have viewed pornography on the Internet, in most cases unintentionally.
- According to compiled numbers from respected news and research organizations in 2005 and 2006, every second \$3,075.64 is spent on pornography. Every second 28,258 Internet users are viewing pornography. In that same second 372 Internet users are typing adult search terms into search engines. Every thirty-nine minutes a new pornographic video is being created in the U. S. . . . The pornography industry has larger revenues than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined. 2006 Worldwide Pornography Revenues ballooned to \$97.06 billion.<sup>13</sup>

Just think about what is happening to the family! And if the flock is in trouble, what about the shepherds? Over half of evangelical pastors admit to viewing porn in the last year. Fifty-seven percent of pastors identify addiction to porn as the most sexually damaging issue to their congregations. Informal polling among para-church organizations supports these trends. These statistics remind us that some of the most damaging attacks are coming from the images we look at.

What we see with our eyes is often the first step into temptation, because it can stir up our own evil desires (see James 1:13). That is why effective ministry must include helping people discriminate in what they choose to look at and how they respond to what they look at. Here is how it usually happens: Seeing → Stirring up evil desires → Temptation → Sin. Consider how this process unfolded with David:

ONE EVENING DAVID GOT UP FROM HIS BED AND WALKED AROUND ON THE ROOF OF THE PALACE. FROM THE ROOF HE SAW A WOMAN BATHING. THE WOMAN WAS VERY BEAUTIFUL. . . . THEN DAVID SENT MESSENGERS TO GET HER. SHE CAME TO HIM, AND HE SLEPT WITH HER. (2 SAMUEL 11:2,4)

We can play a critical role in each other's spiritual journeys by processing together which images we will give ourselves permission to look

at—and where we will draw the line and say to ourselves, “No, I won’t look at that.” We fight a stubborn battle—not only with helping others, but also with our own viewing. Our culture lies when it tells us that, if it is out there, we are entitled to see it. As in most other areas of life, God’s boundaries are there to protect us. One way to minister to others is simply to help “little eyes” to “be careful” what they see. Then when they fail, we can provide a safe, grace-based community for confessing their sins and struggles with temptation (see James 5:16).

## What Then Shall We Do?

Images are powerful—and they are everywhere! They impact our hearts and our minds; our families and our society; our men, women, teenagers, and children. We cannot combat an enemy if we are unaware of his power and tactics, which is why we want to arm you with facts and statistics. And we cannot take advantage of the ministry God wants to accomplish using images if we are unaware of the potential benefits.



So what do we do with a heightened awareness of the power of images? Should we try to gain more skills and do more research? Should we try to create more movies, websites, and video games that reflect Kingdom values? Should we fund political and social programs to fight the dissemination of violent and sexual images? Should we try to overcome evil with good at the macro level and try to saturate the market as the world does?

God may call some of us to do any and all of the above. But we are advocating for a more incarnational and relational approach to spiritual growth and discipleship. We can connect, motivate, instruct, and more through media vehicles. But these

must lead to experiencing the real triune God through authentic, grace-based relationships in communities where people can confess struggles and find healing. We are not advocating using images for images' sake as stand alones. But we are convinced that images can open doors to the heart and mind through which the living God can enter and bring lifelong transformation.

So, will we dig in our heels and long for the good old days when people just read books? Will we simply unplug and refuse to participate in the image-saturated media swirling around us? Or will we educate ourselves about the power of images both for good and for harm? Will we find new ways to tap into that power that has the potential to connect us all—and especially younger generations—to the incomparably greater power of the gospel story? That is the unavoidable choice before us.



## Points to Ponder

- Images have an often unrecognized impact on both our minds and hearts. What effects an image leaves depends on exposure, intensity, context, and the sheer number of images.
- Being inundated by millions of random images and messages from the media is fundamentally changing *how* our brains think by increasing distractedness and preventing our minds from thinking deeply or creatively.
- The content of the images we view can impact our psyche, our emotional behavior, and our spiritual lives depending on whether they depict what is good and edifying (see Philippians 4:8), bad (stressful and anxious), or ugly (violent or sexual).
- Viewing pornography is deeply damaging individuals, families, marriages, and children, and is so addictive that some neuropsychologists call porn “visual crack cocaine.”

## For Personal Reflection

- How do you see images reshaping *what* you think about life, God, and relationships?
- When you think about your own habit of viewing media images, what impact have you noticed those images to have on how you think (focus, concentration, distractedness, depth, meditation)?
- Describe what you perceive about the impact of viewing porn in your personal life, ministry, work, or family context.

## IMAGE EXERCISE

Unlike the jealousy of warped husbands or foolish boyfriends, God's jealousy is His zeal to preserve something or someone precious. Human jealousy is often self-focused and destructive whereas our Heavenly Father's jealousy is protective and constructive.

—Sue Edwards, *Daddy's Girls*



- As you look at this image, what or who comes to mind? Explain.
- Recount a specific experience of someone being jealous *of* you? What was that like for you? Why?
- How is it different to have a person be jealous *for* you? Why?

DO NOT WORSHIP ANY OTHER GOD, FOR THE LORD, WHOSE NAME IS JEALOUS, IS A JEALOUS GOD. (EXODUS 34:14)

THIS IS WHAT THE LORD ALMIGHTY SAYS: "I AM VERY JEALOUS FOR ZION; I AM BURNING WITH JEALOUSY FOR HER." (ZECHARIAH 8:2)

I [THE APOSTLE PAUL] AM JEALOUS FOR YOU WITH A GODLY JEALOUSY. I PROMISED YOU TO ONE HUSBAND, TO CHRIST, SO THAT I MIGHT PRESENT YOU AS A PURE VIRGIN TO HIM. BUT I AM AFRAID THAT JUST AS EVE WAS DECEIVED BY THE SERPENT'S CUNNING, YOUR MINDS MAY SOMEHOW BE LED ASTRAY FROM YOUR SINCERE AND PURE DEVOTION TO CHRIST. (2 CORINTHIANS 11:2-3)

- How would you feel if your girlfriend or boyfriend or husband or wife were



not jealous *for* you?

- What dangerous or unhealthy influences or distractions might be taking you in the wrong direction or competing with God for your devotion and attention? How might God, in His jealousy, want to protect you?
- How do you feel about God being jealous for you and fighting for your heart?

## YOUR RESPONSE

God is a romantic at heart, and he has his own bride to fight for. He is a jealous lover, and his jealousy is for the hearts of his people and for their freedom. —John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*

Remember or imagine a period of time when you basically ignored God and gave your attention and affections elsewhere. If God had sent you a text message at that time, what might He have said about His feelings of being jilted? How might He encourage you to come back to Him? Write or draw a picture about that.

## GOING DEEPER

Deuteronomy 4:24; Nahum 1:2; Zechariah 1:14; Hosea 3:1

Chapter 3  
Through Time and Virtual  
Realities via Images



Images have the power to take us places—all kinds of places. They can take us back into the past, deep into the present, or far into the future. They can take us to virtual places like Pandora in *Avatar* or into realities within our own stories and God's stories. Also, because each person may respond to seeing the same image differently, they may well find themselves in a very different place from someone else.

For example, have you heard about the new psychiatric disease called “Post-*Avatar* depression”? It's not listed in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, but many people reported experiencing depression and suicidal thoughts after watching James Cameron's visually stunning movie depicting the wonderland called Pandora inhabited by the blue-hued native Na'vi:

When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed . . . gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning. I still don't really see any reason to keep . . . doing things at all. I live in a dying world.

—Ivar

Ever since I went to see *Avatar* I have been depressed. Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na'vi made me want to be one of them. I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it, I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora [where] everything is the same as in *Avatar*.

—Mike

People like Ivar and Mike emerged from their imaginary trip to Pandora so disenchanted with the dullness of their real lives that they were tempted to turn their backs on reality—and on life itself. On the other hand, many people viewing Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* emerged more awestruck by the flesh-and-blood reality of Jesus' crucifixion than they had ever been in response to a sermon. In our ministries, a simple way to start using images is to ask, “When you view this image [or video], where does it take you?” Then listen carefully to

the responses . Most likely they will offer clues that will help us recognize where they are in their journey with or without God.

## Images That Transport Us to the Past

Can you remember the first time something you saw in nature stopped you in your tracks with wonder? That happened to me [Ralph] in October 1954. I was only four years old and staying with my grandmother. I vividly remember staring out the front door as hurricane Hazel screamed through our small North Carolina town. Hazel was one of the most deadly hurricanes of the twentieth century. The sheer power of the winds and pelting rain is still etched in my memory, framed in my little-boy feelings of terror and awe.



Do you remember the first images you saw of 9/11? Planes crashing, immense structures crumbling, gigantic smoke and dust clouds billowing, people falling to their deaths, New Yorkers fleeing in panic. Will those images ever go away? Probably not. Images like these can influence our thoughts long after the original event.

Images are the stuff that memories are made of. Images captured by cameras and cell phones link in our minds with stories that help us remember special and significant events. But think about this: If we could delete from our minds all images that support our memories, what would be left? Probably not much.

Some personal memories are best forgotten. Images of past abuse can re-wound us as they haunt our dreams. Our dream world is usually an image that bridges the gap between the past and the present. For example, many soldiers are re-

traumatized by recurring nightmares long after they return from the battlefield. These images are actually a significant factor in suicide among our military. Sometimes the post-traumatic stress expresses itself as scenes from the actual trauma; then, very quickly, the dreams seem to deal with the dominant emotion the dreamer experienced. In our dreams, we search for a way to “picture” the emotional concern from the past that still lies unresolved in the present. So instead of being in a battle, as an alternative to the former horror the dreamer may now find himself overwhelmed by a tidal wave or swept up by a tornado.

Beyond memories and dreams, our spiritual heritage as followers of Christ also comes packaged in images, often in tandem with words. A good word image in Jesus’ day was the sower and the seed because it connected with His listeners’ everyday agrarian lives. The image stirred their imaginations of seeds growing in various types of soil. When He went on to embed the seed image in a story about a farmer, people could see themselves in the story and that helped them transfer that image into spiritual principles for their own growth.



One simple example of the power of images (combined with story) in our spiritual heritage is the communion table. There is a reason that we use real bread and real wine (or juice) in a real cup during the Lord’s Supper. The very concreteness of these elements confronts us with the genuine, historical sacrifice of Christ for our sins over two thousand years ago. As we ingest these symbols of His body and blood, we cannot help but remember what He sacrificed to take our sins into His body on the cross. This experience re-images for us His atonement stretching out of the past into our present need for forgiveness.

## Images That Ground Us in the Present

We all carry images in our heads. But we don't just carry images . . . they carry us. A growing majority of us gather our daily news primarily through viewing images rather than through reading text. It is primarily through images that we both authenticate and preserve significant moments of each day. They ground us in what we perceive as the real world, even if they are carefully selected and edited before they reach us. For soldiers deployed half a world away, images keep their children "present" to them. Images keep grandparents up to date on the latest Halloween costumes and developmental stages of their grandkids. They make us feel in touch from a distance even when we cannot hug them.



But there can also be a downside to the omnipresence of images in our broken world. Sometimes they authenticate and preserve moments we wish we had never captured. That image that seemed so cute when we posted it on our Facebook page turns off a prospective employer, for example—or gets us fired from our current job.

Another particularly disturbing trend is called sexting. This is the sharing of sexually explicit messages or nude, provocative images of oneself among adolescents, teens, and even adults, often distributed through their mobile phones. Gone are the days when one is sent to the principal's office just for chewing gum in class. Now parents and educators are called upon to explain the potential dangers of sexting, such as compromising or ruining your reputation, having your image go

viral for everyone to see, and attracting sex offenders and pedophiles. Who will talk with this adolescent about the damage being done to her soul, her still forming sense of sexual identity, her ability to deal with shame, and her response to temptation? These are fundamental matters of spiritual formation that the world of exploitive images requires us to step into, whether we are ready or not.

But wait . . . it gets worse. Posting an inappropriate image of yourself to a few friends is one thing: Cyber-spying and posting inappropriate images of others on the Internet multiplies the sense of lost privacy, devastation, and shame. The story of Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University, illustrates this dark side of social media. Tyler's roommate and another student secretly posted live images of him in a sexual encounter. A few days later he killed himself.



This tragedy highlights the fact that “a lot of kids are using digital technology to spy on each other,” according to Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety. “It’s the weapon of choice with older teens and young adults—spying on someone and broadcasting what they’ve learned.”<sup>1</sup> Some people urge us not to blame the technology. They emphasize that callous human indifference and the failure to consider the consequences leads to these harmful uses of media. Others warn that “youth culture and media culture . . . including reality shows that use hidden cameras—[are] desensitizing young people to the hurtful effects of their actions” by objectifying people and distancing them from compassionate connections.<sup>2</sup>

This, too, is a matter of spiritual formation. What might Jesus have said to Tyler Clementi between his betrayal and his death? What might Jesus say to the two

students who posted the images, facing both a trial and their own guilt? Who will walk this generation compassionately through the ethics of media use and the soul damage they endure—or perpetrate—when media images are abused? These are some challenges and opportunities we face as ministers of the gospel in today’s media-saturated world.

## Images That Form Our Future

Human imagination drives human innovation. We imagine our steps forward, adjust to avoid obstacles, and take advantage of opportunities. We imagine a future different from our present and seek to make it happen. Imagine your next vacation, job, or date. Many of the things we envision for ourselves—our aspirations and goals—we can “see” as images of the future. The Bible is full of visions and prophecies—verbal images of the future. For seven decades, God’s people exiled to



Babylon clung to the prophetic images of their return—a straight highway in the wilderness, valleys raised up, mountains made low, rough ground leveled, their sons and daughters gathered from the ends of the earth as God brought them home (see Isaiah 40; 43). These images of the future kept their hope alive.

Jesus was a master at giving His disciples glimpses of the future both to motivate them and to prepare them for what was to come. As you read these words from one of Jesus’ last prayers, pay attention to whatever images come to your mind:

**MY PRAYER IS NOT FOR THEM ALONE. I PRAY ALSO FOR THOSE WHO WILL BELIEVE IN ME THROUGH THEIR MESSAGE, THAT ALL OF THEM MAY BE ONE, FATHER, JUST AS YOU ARE IN ME AND I AM IN YOU. MAY THEY ALSO BE IN US**



SO THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME. I HAVE GIVEN THEM THE GLORY THAT YOU GAVE ME, THAT THEY MAY BE ONE AS WE ARE ONE: I IN THEM AND YOU IN ME. MAY THEY BE BROUGHT TO COMPLETE UNITY TO LET THE WORLD KNOW THAT YOU SENT ME AND HAVE LOVED THEM EVEN AS YOU HAVE LOVED ME. FATHER, I WANT THOSE YOU HAVE GIVEN ME TO BE WITH ME WHERE I AM, AND TO SEE MY GLORY, THE GLORY YOU HAVE GIVEN ME BECAUSE YOU LOVED ME BEFORE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD. (JOHN 17:20-24)

In a sense, Jesus invited them to imagine what their world would look like if they faithfully carried out His great commission—to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

Promises are another powerful form of imaging the future. Biblical visions and prophecies provide God’s people with mental images of the coming fulfillment of God’s promises. From the most mundane promises of daily life (“You can have a treat when you finish your homework”) to the most sacred of covenants (“I do”), promises provide the foundation for our relationships, cemented with trust. Again, as you read the words of this sacred wedding vow, notice the images they bring to the eyes of your heart:



I, (NAME), TAKE YOU (NAME), TO BE MY  
LAWFULLY WEDDED (WIFE/HUSBAND),

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE,

FOR RICHER OR FOR POORER, IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH,

TO LOVE AND TO CHERISH FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, UNTIL DEATH DO  
US PART.

One of the most powerful gifts we can give those we minister to is inviting them to trust God’s promises in their present for the ultimate out-working of His purposes in their future.

## A Virtual World of Images

So images can take us into time—into the past, present, and future. They also challenge us to take a fresh look at reality—make that plural, *realities*. That is because we all live in simultaneous realities whether we are aware of it or not. A simple photograph invites us to peek into something that was real in another place and time—like that weathered picture of your great-grandparents from seventy-five years ago. And our imaginations can take us into places that we can never experience—gliding over the surface of Pluto or diving into a river in a far off galaxy. Today modern technology has opened the door to such *virtual realities*. What do we mean by that oxymoron? How can something be nearly, almost, but not quite, real?

Virtual reality began as computerized simulations. For example, new pilots in training could practice landing a virtual airplane in various virtual weather conditions without jeopardizing the lives of real



passengers—or themselves. On simulators, teens can learn to drive on virtual roads, seniors can brush up on their skills behind the wheel, and medical and nursing students can practice procedures on virtual patients—all without endangering others. Virtual classrooms and meetings make it possible to be nearly together (but not quite) and to conduct important discussions without the expense and inconvenience of traveling. We can even improve our golf swing virtually! The virtual reality of online education provides flexibility in learning while minimizing the consequences of real-time mistakes. What a wonderful use for virtual images!

In addition, some incredible new “worlds” have been created in cyberspace. At [secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com) you can create an avatar of yourself, customizing yourself to portray any image you want. You can enter a virtual world full of people, places, and things to do—all online. Your avatar can converse in real time with the avatars of others visiting the site, buy products, form relationships, get married—even have virtual

sex if you want to. Some people who become hooked by endless hours spent in this virtual social world say that their “second life” actually feels more real to them than their first life in the flesh. Internet sites provide many places and chat rooms where one can visit. And our younger generation has grown up with these virtual realities. We must ask ourselves what lines are being crossed by these fantastic innovations.

The gaming industry is another way people are influenced by images as players try to accomplish some goal—capture a fortress, eliminate an enemy, win a race, buy businesses, and so forth. Popular video games like *The Legend of Zelda*, *SoulCalibur*, *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and even *Super Mario* provide realms you can spend time in, almost as though you are living there. We cannot yet quantify the long-term impact of interactive engagement with virtual images. But it is safe to say that these games do impact how we perceive our abilities and our influence on virtual outcomes.



The nature of video games requires interactive responses. Within this decade kids will have access to holographic interactive games. Beecher Tuttle reports, “a group of scientists from the University of Arizona are dangerously close to perfecting a technology that was inspired by a scene from the classic film *Star Wars*, where R2D2 projects a three-dimensional holographic image of Princess Leia delivering her famous plea.”<sup>3</sup> Imagine sitting, walking around, and jumping with a headset that gives you the ability to interact with life-sized three-dimensional images from a 360-degree perspective projected in holographic form right in front of you! That *Star Wars* technology is right around the corner. Which brings us back to *Avatar*. When hundreds of viewers realized that the hope, peace, and harmony shown on Pandora could never actually come true on earth, post-*Avatar* depression spawned support groups—also offered virtually!<sup>4</sup>

Virtual alternate realities can offer simple, harmless entertainment. But they can also blur the lines of God's designed reality with technology-generated realms or kingdoms. These new places that unfold through vivid imagery can be irresistibly alluring to many. Virtual reality has the unintended consequence of tricking our five senses into



questioning what is really true and real. After repeated use of the virtual, we may prefer it to real relationships and life. This is certainly one danger of feeding on the virtual "intimacy" called pornography: the prospect of having a virtual partner to escape to seems to excuse us from dealing positively with a real partner who may reject us. But even in *Avatar* there is a reality check. One of the characters sighs, "Sooner or later . . . you always have to wake up."

One of God's desires is for us to wake up, to face reality rather than to pursue "emptiness" as though it were reality. As we minister to those caught up in various virtual realities, the wisdom of Scripture can be very helpful in sorting out the potential emptiness of the virtual and the potential power of the real.

**TO TEACH THE INEXPERIENCED THE ROPES AND GIVE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE A GRASP ON REALITY. (PROVERBS 1:4, MSG)**

**THIS LOVER OF EMPTINESS, OF NOTHING, IS SO OUT OF TOUCH WITH REALITY, SO FAR GONE, THAT HE CAN'T EVEN LOOK AT WHAT HE'S DOING, CAN'T EVEN LOOK AT THE NO-GOD STICK OF WOOD IN HIS HAND AND SAY, "THIS IS CRAZY." (ISAIAH 44:20, MSG)**

**THEY'VE REFUSED FOR SO LONG TO DEAL WITH GOD THAT THEY'VE LOST TOUCH NOT ONLY WITH GOD BUT WITH REALITY ITSELF. (EPHESIANS 4:18, MSG)**

Job posed an intriguing question for his friends when he was frustrated with them during his very real pain:

**WHY ARE YOU WORKING YOURSELF UP LIKE THIS? DO YOU WANT THE WORLD REDESIGNED TO SUIT YOU? SHOULD REALITY BE SUSPENDED TO ACCOMMODATE YOU? (JOB 18:4, MSG)**

Virtual realities seem to redesign the world to suit the desires of participants—a world where pleasure is maximized and negative consequences are minimized. They seem to offer an escape from the pains of living life as if reality can be suspended. We cannot yet determine what the long-term impacts will be on the psyche of someone who devotes countless hours to computer games, engaging others in combat, racing, shopping, sex, and so on. Will three-dimensional interactive virtual reality become the great anesthetic of our society? Or will it empower people to develop society in positive ways for the glory of God? Our hope is that we will find creative ways to use images, combined with relationships and guided reflection, to invite people into the real Kingdom of God. After all, His Kingdom will supersede and swallow up all other realities and kingdoms, just as Jesus said in His day:

**STEEL YOURSELF IN GOD-REALITY, GOD-INITIATIVE, GOD-PROVISIONS. YOU'LL FIND ALL YOUR EVERYDAY HUMAN CONCERNS WILL BE MET. (LUKE 12:31, MSG)**

## Images That Open Our Hearts

In chapter 2 we explored what images can do in our everyday, real lives. Used effectively in our ministries, images can begin to connect the past to the present in our emotional realities in ways that words alone can rarely accomplish. In one Bible study I [Judy] was launching, I handed the women copies of a new, image-based study book<sup>5</sup> we would be using and asked them to flip through the pages until their hearts stopped them on any of the images.



A mature woman ministry leader sat silently, a tear trickling down her cheek. When it was her turn to share, she whispered, “This image was me forty years ago. Bullied, ashamed. I learned never to stand out . . . never to be noticed. I guess I still struggle with that.” I cannot imagine any question I could have asked that would have gotten to this place in her emotional reality—but the image did it instantly.

In another group of eight young women in their twenties, I tried the same approach. I handed each a copy of another study book<sup>6</sup> and invited them to select one image that they connected with. All except one of them “randomly” identified with the same image . . . and then went on to explain in great detail why their lives felt so fragmented. Again, had I simply asked, “How does your life feel to you?” I doubt that any of them would have come up with the word “fragmented.” Yet this image



opened doors into their emotional realities on our very first meeting that might have taken many weeks to approach without the power of images.

And do not miss the fact that these issues are the stuff that spiritual formation is made of—issues of our true identity, our unresolved wounding, our hesitancy to live out of our true self, our struggle to live with integrity instead of being one person today and another tomorrow. What an opportunity to explore with people the truth that in God:

**ALL THE BROKEN AND DISLOCATED PIECES OF THE UNIVERSE—PEOPLE AND THINGS, ANIMALS AND ATOMS—GET PROPERLY FIXED AND FIT TOGETHER IN VIBRANT HARMONIES . . . [AND THAT] CHRIST BROUGHT YOU OVER TO GOD’S SIDE AND PUT YOUR LIVES TOGETHER, WHOLE AND HOLY IN HIS PRESENCE. (COLOSSIANS 1:20, 22, MSG)**

The lives of so many people we minister to are anything but “whole and holy.” Before you read the next paragraph, take at least a minute to gaze at this image. It addresses an alarming and growing social trend in a deeply emotional manner. As you gaze, notice the thoughts and feelings that come to you.



For a growing number of people in our culture, self-injury (especially cutting) provides a temporary way to escape from their painful emotional realities. While cutters come from every age, gender, and economic group, the majority are women between thirteen and thirty years old. Ask almost any high schooler or twentysomething, and they could probably name friends who are cutting or abusing themselves. If we assume these are suicide attempts, we may miss the underlying emotional realities that could be brought into the light for Jesus—and the community of His followers—to address. Consider the conclusions of one counseling service in Denver on this issue:

People who injure themselves are experiencing overwhelming feelings, like extreme anxiety or tension, and in the moment self-injury may seem to provide a feeling of escape or relief. Some people also experience “depersonalization,” which is when a person doesn’t feel real, or feels she is outside of her body watching herself. People who feel this way might cut or harm themselves to help themselves feel “real” again. Others cut or injure themselves as a way of punishing themselves. Many people who self-injure have a history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and have a sense of shame about themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, it is beyond the scope of this book to suggest strategies to help people stop cutting. But as ministry leaders and parents, we need to become aware of the underlying emotional and perhaps spiritual struggles in those God brings to us. Using an image like this one can help you initiate a conversation that may lead to a process of healing.

One of the most amazing moments is when our story or the story of

someone we are helping moves into God's story—and into a deeper relationship with Him. Who knows what God may use to break through with His reality into the lives of those around us? Our individualistic, secular culture perpetuates the lie that *my* story is the only story that matters. It whispers that *my* story is nothing but a random sound byte in time, hardly connected at all with the grand mega-story God is writing for His creation. Jesus routinely tapped into the power of stories (parables) and images (wheat fields, sunsets, wedding celebrations, feasts) to show harassed and helpless people how their ordinary stories were connected to the outrageously grand story of God's very real Kingdom in their midst. We are tasked with following His example.



## Points to Ponder

- Images have the power to take us into the past, the present, and the future.
- The omnipresence of exploitive images and virtual realities requires us to walk with others as they wrestle with the ethics of media use and the soul damage they endure or inflict when media images are abused.
- Images can open the door into our emotional realities in ways that words alone can rarely accomplish.
- Jesus used images and stories to help people connect their individual stories with God's mega-story.

## For Personal Reflection

- What image(s) (such as a memory, nightmare, or something you posted) has haunted you? What image(s) (such as a promise, prophecy, or creative idea) motivates you? Why do you think they have impacted you so strongly?
- Think of a young person (real or hypothetical) engaged in sexting or cyber-spying. If you could come alongside him or her, what are several things you would hope to discuss?
- What experience do you have with virtual realities? How might this exposure affect your spiritual life and growth?
- How might your experience help you minister to others dealing with virtual realities?

## IMAGE EXERCISE

**BLAMING** . . . making it your fault that my life isn't perfect to avoid admitting my own mistakes or weaknesses.

- What blame has been dumped on you that you didn't deserve?
- When have you seen somebody step up and take responsibility instead of whining, "You're always blaming me!"?



## REFLECTING

THE MAN SAID, "THE WOMAN YOU PUT HERE WITH ME—SHE GAVE ME SOME FRUIT FROM THE TREE, AND I ATE IT."

THEN THE LORD GOD SAID TO THE WOMAN, "WHAT IS THIS YOU HAVE DONE?"

THE WOMAN SAID, "THE SERPENT DECEIVED ME, AND I ATE." (GENESIS 3:12-13)

Trace the blame trail in Genesis. Adam blamed his sin on \_\_\_\_\_. Eve blamed it on \_\_\_\_\_. What about us? Why do we blame others for what's really our fault?

- How can you relate to Adam and Eve? Who have you blamed . . . for what . . . and why?

These men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage. (Jude 16)

TWO OTHER MEN, BOTH CRIMINALS, WERE ALSO LED OUT WITH HIM TO BE EXECUTED. WHEN THEY CAME TO THE PLACE CALLED THE SKULL, THERE THEY CRUCIFIED HIM, ALONG WITH THE CRIMINALS—ONE ON HIS RIGHT, THE OTHER ON HIS LEFT. JESUS SAID, “FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING.” AND THEY DIVIDED UP HIS CLOTHES BY CASTING LOTS. (LUKE 23:32-34)

Jesus was the only completely blameless person who ever lived. And even though we don't deserve it He took our blame to the cross, choosing to offer us grace and forgiveness. Is there anyone you need to apologize to or offer grace and forgiveness to?

## REALITY

- I feel like blame is being placed on me that is not mine to bear.
- I feel out of sorts, and I completely blame them.
- I'm also not sure how I feel about not having anyone to blame my ditziness on anymore.
- Other . . .

What is the reasoning/feeling behind the statement you checked or wrote?

Now consider and write down your answer to the following:

“Instead of blaming you for my mistakes, I'll ask God to help me . . .”

*This exercise was adapted from the CONNECT series,  
“RELATIONSHIPS: Bringing Jesus into My World” Bible study available at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)*

Chapter 4  
Reaching a Generation  
Shaped by Images



Rewind briefly to Brandon’s story in chapter 1. A picture of a forlorn teddy bear lying on a cobblestone street triggered his unresolved feelings of abandonment since his parents divorced. “That’s me,” he sighed. But when we showed the same picture to Bob (in his late fifties) and asked, “How can you relate to this image?” Bob said matter-of-factly, “Somebody lost a teddy bear.” Neither Bob’s background nor the way he was socialized led him to interpret and personalize the image the way Brandon did. The divorce rate for his generation was not nearly as high as Brandon’s, nor was he accustomed to approaching images in this way.

We noticed the same thing at a recent ministry training forum. Poster-sized images related to our topics covered the walls. When we asked the group (ages twenty-four to sixty-five) what they saw in the images, those over fifty didn’t have much to say, while those under thirty-five could have talked for hours. For many of us at any age, the right image evokes our own stories. But for our younger generation it just comes much more naturally. Why is that?

Perhaps because things are changing, it is vital that we—recognizing the power and pervasiveness of images—retool our ministry approach accordingly. Most of us in ministry gravely underestimate the power and impact to the younger generation of the massive cultural changes shaping their socialization, especially changes brought by post-modernism, sexual freedom, multiculturalism, and spiritual pluralism. These currents of change in our cultural landscape are monumental—not subtle—and they influence our spiritual journeys. We need to be equipped to bring the gospel of Jesus to bear on these realities.

## Jesus on Change

After His death and resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter and some of the other disciples early one morning beside the Sea of Tiberius after a frustrating and fruitless night of fishing:

**THEN [JESUS] SAID, “THROW OUT YOUR NET ON THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE OF THE BOAT, AND YOU’LL GET [PLENTY OF FISH]!” SO THEY DID, AND THEY COULDN’T HAUL IN THE NET BECAUSE THERE WERE SO MANY FISH IN IT. (JOHN 21:6, NLT)**

Why weren't the disciples catching any fish? They certainly had all the vision, motivation, and skills necessary; they were fully equipped and had a long track record of successful catches. Only Jesus recognized the change. It was quite simple: The fish had moved! We're not told why. But until the disciples realized that the fish had moved and adjusted their fishing strategies accordingly, their nets would remain empty.



By way of analogy, the Holy Spirit is awakening many twenty-first century “fishers of men” in His Body to the sobering reality that, in our day, the fish are moving! Those we minister to—especially young adults—are changing in fundamental ways and at such an unprecedented and exponential rate that it deserves to be called a paradigm shift. While many factors are at play, the image-saturated media is making a significant impact. So just as Peter adjusted his fishing techniques in response to the movement of the fish, consider that perhaps the Lord is calling us to adapt our lives and ministries if we are to meet the younger generations with the gospel *where they are now*. Where have social, cultural, and spiritual currents swept them?

## Four Shaping Questions

Those of us who grew up in the fifties and sixties did not have the vast exposure to the media available today. We were socialized by the two influences we spent the most time with: family and school (with church playing a distant third). We learned to fit into society by conforming to the norms, customs, and values we saw in our parents, teachers, and peers. However, according to a Kaiser Family Institute study, today's teenagers spend more time engaging with various media than they spend receiving classroom instruction—fifty-three hours per week.<sup>1</sup> Now images—supposedly portraying societal norms—are having a deeper impact than ever before. These images impact how a teenager views his world and makes decisions, as well as what decisions he makes.

Within every generation and society, at least four developmental questions shape a young person's socialization:

1. How can I know what is true and false, right and wrong?
2. Who can I trust?
3. Who am I?
4. What (or Who) is beyond? Is there a God or not?



Most likely, images will shape how people (especially young people) answer these fundamental human questions in ways they don't even realize. While no two individuals have the same life journeys, we will look at four commonalities that describe the central tendencies in this age group. Whether you see yourself in these trends or not, you will likely see them reflected in the lives of many in this age group.

## Learning and Thinking

The first and most obvious shift has been from text to visual and oral learning. We realize that individuals have different learning preferences, but do we also realize how much our generational culture influences how we learn and think? As discussed in chapter 2, those born before 1975 were primarily educated through written means with a lot of text. Reading printed words strung across a page trained them to reason in a linear, sequential way. Mastery was a high value, so they accepted the claims of "experts" as truth and measured learning by what they "knew." They were also suspicious of thinking based on emotional reasoning . . . and they still are.

On the other hand, those born after 1975 have been socialized primarily through millions of images. Even though they can read, images rather than words are central to how they prefer to learn. They are no longer word-centric; in many ways they are word-phobic. They tend to view words and reading as significantly less important than seeing and experiencing. Many educational systems accommodate





these tendencies by creating non-textbook-based environments, dominated by images and experiential learning.

The younger generations also prefer the nuances of story to formulas and principles. Their patterns of reasoning are more mosaic and non-sequential, no doubt influenced by the countless sound bytes and various camera angles they have seen. This shift impacts how they reason, make decisions, are best persuaded, and how they form convictions. The best learning environments for them are experiential—blending images and stories with text, all delivered interactively and in ways that honor the logic of emotions more than the logic of intellect.

The younger generation is more tolerant of gray areas, ambiguity, mystery, contradiction, and paradox. While younger believers may hold to the truth of the Bible, they aren't as driven to accept something as "right" just because an older authority says it is so. Although this may change our starting points, it does not diminish our hope to lead them into the clear truths of Scripture as God's authoritative Word.

Driving the move to audio-visual learning has been the pervasiveness of technology. Technology has become central to the younger generation's learning, communication and socialization, and the formation of their identities. They are masters of multi-tasking, often using several technologies at once. But this shift from sustained, deep attention to power-browsing may have pros and cons when it comes to learning and thinking. According to Jordan Grafman at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke:



The constant shifting of our attention when we're online may make our brains more nimble when it comes to multitasking, but improving our ability to multitask actually hampers our ability to think deeply and creatively. The more you multitask, the less deliberative you become; the less able to think and reason out a problem.<sup>2</sup>

Nicholas Carr warns that the intensive multi-taskers among us are in danger of becoming “suckers for irrelevancy,” highly distractible and less able to concentrate. In particular he fears that we are losing the capacity for “calm, linear thought—[which] we use in traversing a lengthy narrative or an involved argument, [and which] we draw on when we reflect on our experiences or contemplate an outward or inward phenomenon.”<sup>3</sup>

Because technology throws life at us in millions of fragmented pieces, it's no wonder that we struggle to form an integrated, cohesive view of life. Young adults pick up pieces of their worldview from many directions but then lack an overall framework to integrate them. Usually they don't believe any framework exists that can integrate the fragments. Life feels random and meaningless.

In my ministry, I (Dennis) have had to learn to change my lead foot to accommodate young adults. Normally I like to create conceptual content, organize it, and then explain these ideas using many words. This fits with my strengths and past training. I used to focus on how I should deliver the goods to those I thought needed them. I feared that allocating time for my audience to reflect, discuss, and experience things would detract from all the great stuff I could share with words.

I would lead people through a logical, sequential, 1-2-3 process, assuming that if they grasped truth they would naturally



make applications in steps of obedience. Facts and faith dominated my message, with feelings and my own vulnerability staying on the sidelines. I mistakenly believed that if I got to their minds, their hearts and behaviors would follow.

Now, that's all changed. My initial goal with those God brings my way isn't getting them to listen to *me*, but helping me really listen to *them*. I use a blend of images, stories, and open-ended questions to gain trusted access to their emotions and fragments of their life stories. I have found that dialoging with them as a flawed, fellow journeyer is the best way to engage their hearts on the way to their minds.

## Relating Socially

Another important shift is from intact families to widespread relational brokenness. Child Development 101 teaches us that a child learns to relate socially by observing how her family relates, especially her parents, and interacting with them. If the family is essentially functional and remains together, she is more likely to grow into an adult who can trust others, make commitments, and communicate her heart. But if her family is abusive, highly dysfunctional, and/or dissolved through divorce, she will likely struggle throughout her life to form healthy relationships.

Many in the older generations grew up in intact families. Even if our families were dysfunctional, they generally remained together. Many in younger generations, however, have experienced the breakup of families—their own or their friends'. Among our younger generation's losses, probably none is more damaging than the loss of stable, two-parent households. Since 1970



the number of divorced people has quadrupled to 18.3 million. Currently more than 40 percent of

American children live in single-parent homes, many created by divorce. When you factor in the trauma of abuse—statistically more likely to happen at the hands of a family member than a stranger—you understand why so many young people struggle with relationships.

In the book *Prozac Nation*, author Elizabeth Wurtzel describes the affect her parents' divorce had on her life. Telling each new therapist her story, she received the standard response, "No wonder you're so depressed." But Wurtzel felt that these therapists were missing something:

They react as if my family situation was particularly alarming and troublesome, as opposed to what it actually is in this day and age: perfectly normal. I mean, I think about my development and I feel like a Census Bureau statistic or some sort of case study on the changing nature of the American family in the late twentieth century. My parents are divorced, I grew up in a female-headed household, my mother was always unemployed or marginally employed, my father was always uninvolved or marginally involved in my life. There was never enough money for anything, my mom had to sue my dad for unpaid child support and unpaid medical bills, my dad eventually disappeared. But all this information is no more outstanding than the plot of an Ann Beattie novel. Or maybe it's not even that interesting.<sup>4</sup>



Of course divorce existed before the seventies. But it did not form the socially destructive meta-narrative of an entire generation as it has for young adults. Older generations had Andy Griffith and the Cleavers as their media role models; today we have “Two and a Half Men” and “Family Guy” to point the way. No wonder many seriously doubt whether a happy, enduring marriage and family life is even possible. Their relational wounding leaves them with a sense of absence, rejection, abandonment, distrust, and shame, and it presents significant challenges to their emotional and spiritual growth. They need to see models and find genuine hope that they can establish stable families of their own. Many feel powerless to change themselves or their painful life realities. While the secular culture may “empower” them in practical ways, the Body of Christ can help them experience true healing in biblical ways.

A shift from trust to distrust also affects relationships, as emerging adults struggle to answer the second core developmental question: Who can I trust? Or perhaps more in keeping with their emotional reasoning: Who should I care about? After all, trusting and caring are at the heart of all good relationships—with people and with God. As mentioned, older generations enjoyed the security and structure of intact families, as well as support from social and community institutions such as churches and government. Their limited exposure to media made them less aware of danger locally or worldwide, so they tended to believe that authorities, institutions, and people (even strangers) could be trusted. Pastors and priests, teachers and coaches, neighbors and police, politicians and presidents were deemed safe and trustworthy people, by and large.

Not so among the younger generation. Many have experienced abuse, abandonment, and social dislocation—from the family to the whole of society. They have been deluged with exposure to all that is wrong, evil, and dangerous in the world. The rise in safety concerns has led to a generation of highly protective—arguably over-protective—parents whose highest values include minimizing risk and preventing failure in their children. For example, the percentage of children allowed to ride their bicycles to school has plummeted from 87 percent to 13 percent since 1975. Of course there are real dangers out there. But more and more, the world portrayed in our media and images warns young people to protect themselves more than it

encourages them to trust. The foundation for trust has eroded, replaced by growing levels of disillusionment and betrayal. And without trust, relationships do not operate in a healthy manner, leaving people isolated and fearful.

Dr. Jean Twenge summarizes what these trends tell us about the younger generation:

In 2000, 64% of 18-24-year-olds said that most people are “just looking out for themselves” rather than “try[ing] to be helpful,” and 53% said that most people “would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance.” . . . GenMe trusts no one, suggesting a culture growing ever more toward disconnection and away from close communities. Trust no one and rely on yourself is a self-fulfilling prophecy in an individualistic world where the prevailing sentiment is “Do unto others before they do it to you.”<sup>5</sup>

How does one reach out to a generation that is so suspicious of everyone’s motives? How do people with few deep connections to anyone find their way in the world?

Images are part of the problem. For example, many popular interactive games reduce play and relating down to maiming, killing, and conquering—the dynamics of destructive power. Perhaps the documented decline in empathy among the younger generation (down 40 percent since 2000)<sup>6</sup> and the rise in self-absorption can be partially explained because the media enables people to connect from a distance. By using social media, we can live vicariously rather than face-to-face, and we can negotiate without needing to trust anybody.



In reality these are spiritual issues, because trusting God (and others) is at the heart of true transformation. When working with young adults, it's important that we are safe, trustworthy friends to them. We can't be shocked and frightened by the brokenness in their lives, but instead we need to offer them genuine hope, even as we model how Christians deal with conflict and wounding in our own lives.

## Forming Their Identity

At a recent training event, young people were asked to look through *The New Me* (Not Currently Available) and pick an image that represents how they usually feel about themselves. The following are the top three images they chose.



Take in these images for a few minutes and then consider, with these starting points, where would your dialogue begin?

Answering the third core developmental question, “Who am I?” begins at the moment of one’s birth and continues for a lifetime. It includes:

- clarifying one’s gender identity, ethnicity, and nationality
- growing into one’s personality, giftedness, vocation, and calling
- resisting the temptation to be defined or labeled by one’s false self, handicaps or addictions, failures or successes, friends or family

Forming personal identity is something we all do, usually by our mid-twenties. Perhaps no developmental task is more life-defining than determining who we are. But it can also be difficult and daunting. It is critical for believers to view themselves as people created in the image of God to reflect His glory in a broken world. As today’s younger generation grapples with the “Who am I?” question, at least two trends stand out that are significantly undermining their journey toward a healthy self-identity: sexualization and shame.

Sex has been around in every generation, and parents lament the sexual experimentation of their children. However, sexualization is happening at an earlier age than ever before. Young people are inundated with overt sexual messages, turning what should be non-sexual relationships or experiences into sexual ones. Fashions and movies aimed at young audiences are getting sexier all the time. Elementary-aged cheerleaders are told to “shake your booty”—and then get kicked off the squad for





complaining that they feel uncomfortable. Thirty percent of seventeen-year-olds have received a nude or nearly nude image on their cell phones.<sup>7</sup> Exposure to pornography is just a click away for them—and that doesn't even touch on the trauma inflicted on the children used to produce child porn. Images like these speak into young adults' hearts, trying to tell them who they are—or should be. For many, protecting one's innocence, purity, and virginity until an appropriate age has become something to be ashamed of rather than proud of.

Establishing one's gender identity used to be relatively simple—a done deal as soon as the doctor exclaimed, "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" But today there is an epidemic of gender confusion and struggles with sexual preference. The mainstream media increasingly portrays homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender lifestyles as value-neutral options. For some, tolerance for diversity is giving way to preferences for same-sex romance. These changes deeply impact how the younger generations form healthy gender-identity, and they challenge our notions of spiritual growth. With only one out of two hundred young adults (ages



eighteen to twenty-three) holding a biblical worldview<sup>8</sup>, very few ever hear the voice of Scripture speak into their sexual identity or behavior in any persuasive way.

In the midst of all this sexualization there has also been a shift from guilt to shame. To illustrate, those of us born before 1975 lived in a time dominated by social norms and socially or religiously constructed "do's and don'ts." We knew how we "ought to" behave and were expected to follow the rules. We were "taught" to feel guilty when we broke a rule or did something we knew we shouldn't do. For us,

guilt is that inner critical voice saying, “I have *done* something wrong.”

Today’s younger generations grow up with fewer rules and laxer standards. They feel entitled to choose the norms they are comfortable with and ignore those they don’t like. They feel less guilty over doing things that induced guilt in older generations, often not believing they’ve done anything wrong until they are caught. While they still feel guilt sometimes, they are much more likely to experience their own brokenness through the lens of shame—freely admitting to feeling worthless, dirty, inadequate, or hopelessly flawed. For them, shame is that inner critical voice saying, “It’s not about what I have *done*. It’s who I *am*. I *am* wrong—flawed, hopeless.” Shame (more than guilt) brings them in touch with the depravity of man. “Good” shame, when it is healthy and redemptive, invites us to own our sinful, fallen natures and trust God for His solution.

- Do you think shame is healthy or unhealthy?
- Imagine if God had not given us the capacity to feel guilt and shame. Do you think we would be better off, or worse?



But there is also such a thing as “bad” shame . . . shame so dark and toxic that it becomes the foundation of our identity and the overarching metaphor that we allow to define us. Thus we have Brandon saying, “That’s me,” about the teddy bear—tossed aside, expendable, dirty, not worthy enough to be loved and protected. Brandon probably continues to struggle with unhealthy self-condemnation over things he should never have been ashamed of in the first place.

We also have Traci, a beautiful young wife I (Judy) know, saying, “I feel like a whore!” even though she was not sexually active growing up and was a virgin on her wedding night. Why? Because identity-defining shame was heaped on her by a coach and a youth-worker who sexualized what should have been trusted and safe relationships for her. Brandon and Traci represent millions in the younger generation who struggle with “heaped on” shame over life circumstances they could not control or over God-given and largely unalterable aspects of their identity such as their race, ethnicity, gender, bodily or intellectual design, family, economic or social status.

Our image-based research revealed a sobering result when we asked young adults to select one picture (from among hundreds) that best expressed how they felt about themselves. The most commonly selected image was of a pile of manure. Think about it . . . a pile of manure. How do you think feeling this way about yourself impacts your ability to receive God’s love and blessings?

Our shame-based culture also scolds us for failing, for merely surviving, even for aging. Shaming words are the weapon of choice for bullies and abusers, whether they are playground brats, violent spouses, harassing parents, coercive bosses, or self-righteous Pharisees. Many advertisements try to shame us into buying a product to enhance our public image. The images that accompany these messages cause us to feel inadequate. Then we increase the damage by the coping mechanisms and addictions we use to medicate the pain and hide the shame.

A special aspect of shame occurs within the arena of sexuality. Sexual shame sometimes leads to shamelessness—when we are so resigned to whatever we feel ashamed of that we become numb to it. The business of pornography is shameless and snares alarming numbers of men and women, Christians and non-Christians. According to a Market Wire report, fifty percent of all Christian men in America and twenty percent

of all Christian women are addicted to pornography, and many more regularly view or download pornographic pictures and movies.<sup>9</sup>

There are several proactive things we can do besides preaching about right behaviors, but it will probably mean casting our nets on the other side of the boat. We must explore God's design for sexuality and what it means, not just the guidelines for sexual behavior. We must address the raw nerve of shame over who they are, not just the guilt over what they have done or seen. We can introduce them to the Son of Man who also suffered abandonment, abuse, and public humiliation.

We can help each other "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame [or 'despising the shame,' NASB], and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). We can embrace the power of the gospel to heal our shamed sexual identities.<sup>10</sup>

These identity-defining issues remain hidden for most of us, because shame always tells us to hide. But we cannot ignore these under-the-waterline issues or relegate them to professional counselors. They will sink our ministry ship unless we address them compassionately in our teaching, small groups, and discipleship. One mark of a mature self-identity is the living out of who God says we are—not who our culture, peers, or personal wounding says we are.

Scripture is full of word pictures that portray our true identity in Christ—on the cross He exchanged our guilt for His righteousness and our shame for His mercy. The maturing believer is learning to answer the "Who am I?" question by declaring, "I am God's Son/ Daughter . . . His Beloved . . . Chosen . . . Servant . . . Bride . . . Disciple . . . Redeemed and Ransomed One"—and then truly living out that identity.



## Viewing and Processing Spirituality

The final developmental question we will explore is the existential issue of what we believe is “beyond” us: “Is there a God?” Many of us from the older generations grew up learning Bible stories at church. Apologetics dominated the debate between Christianity and secularism. Whether we followed Christ or not, we viewed America as a Christian nation. Today, many who self-identify as Christians are ashamed to carry the label. Clearly the landscape is changing.

A major shift in this area has been from a basic biblical worldview to a diminished knowledge of God. Most young adults believe there are many ways to God. “Whatever works for you” is the predominant mantra.



Obviously, this is not a biblical perspective that adheres to the redemptive work of Christ as the way to a right relationship with God. Lisa Miller has concluded that functionally we are a Hindu nation now. Only a few American adults acknowledge a Hindu religious identity, yet a majority adhere to the Hindu belief that there are many ways to God—not just one.<sup>11</sup>

Our younger generations have grown up in much more pluralistic environments than their elders. They have been exposed to a vast array of religious options via the media and other images. Instead of trying to understand, compare, contrast, and decide on a faith to adhere to, many simply piece together selected bits from various faiths which they like and thus form their own private religious preference. Young adults can be fascinated with the demonic. From *Harry Potter* to *Twilight*, interest in the occult is trivialized and popularized in a way that makes the demonic spiritual

beings appealing. Many take animistic beliefs seriously; they may worship goddesses or multiple gods. This may sound tolerant to our multi-cultural ears, but it places the human mind as the “captain of my soul”<sup>12</sup> in utter rebellion against the triune God of heaven and earth. In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Dr. Christian Smith asserts that teens have developed a “moralistic therapeutic theism”<sup>13</sup> pulled from various spiritual perspectives to form a designer spirituality of their own liking.

One result of this meshing of beliefs is a diminishing knowledge of the true triune God.

Without understanding the sweeping mega-narrative of God’s initiative of love and salvation across human history, many are not at all convinced that the God of the Bible is good. That makes it very difficult to like Him—much less love, trust, or obey Him. People simply don’t have a clear idea who they are rejecting. The silver lining of this dark cloud is that the younger generations’ longing for authentic relationships also provides opportunities to explore openly their curiosity about God.



Even so, as our society moves further away from its historical Christian roots, tolerance toward religion in general and Christianity in particular is decreasing. In the younger generation, over 90 percent view Christians in negative terms such as “intolerant, hypocritical, homophobic, judgmental, naïve, and too political.”<sup>14</sup> We in the older generations might underestimate this profound shift because, as people of faith, we have been a majority or a significant minority in our society. But prophetic cultural observers like Gabe Lyons, author of *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*, are announcing “the fall of Christian America.”

America was practically Christian just a handful of years ago, but in the past several decades, our country’s predominant self-perceptions have been challenged and replaced. Moving at the speed of our ever-accelerating

technology, society's ideals have evolved, removing its Christian underpinnings one by one. So although many of us still feel like we reside in Christian America, that reality is dead.<sup>15</sup>

What has been the role of images in this shift? Younger generations are exposed to other faiths, spiritual perspectives, and concepts of God through images on TV much more than through reading. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith global community, and images expose youth and young adults to a myriad of perspectives rather than a focused understanding of the Christian faith. Over time, multiple faiths have become part of their mosaic of beliefs. Nevertheless we can be effective if we model engaging with culture as thinking Christians, rather than separating from it or blending into it unreservedly. As Lyons writes, we can “be provoked but not offended; creators but not critics; called more than employed; grounded but not distracted; in community and not alone; countercultural rather than ‘relevant.’”<sup>16</sup>



## Moving with the Fish

Today, young adults with a biblical worldview are a tiny minority within society. They have grown up in an international environment of increasing hostility directed at Christianity. As Lyons has recommended, the “next Christians” need to learn how to live as fruitful insiders serving within secular and spiritually pluralistic

contexts.<sup>17</sup> Like the young prophet Daniel who lived as an exile in a culture hostile to his faith, they need to be skilled at using spiritual warfare strategies (even more than skilled apologetics) to proclaim to their own generation that “there is a God in heaven” (Daniel 2:28). They will need to engage with culture, not separate from it or just blend in. They will need to be a force for restoration in a broken world even as they proclaim the Christian gospel of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. And we older believers need to move with them as they take their place as God’s fishermen among their own generation.





## Points to Ponder

- Emerging adults think and learn largely through audio-visual means. Because of this, it's important that our ministry approach be more interactive and experiential, and that we learn to relate to them authentically, rather than as "experts."
- Because of pervasive relational brokenness, the lack of intact homes, and the increased isolation brought by media interactions, we need to emphasize and model trustworthy, genuine friendships with young people.
- As young adults are forming a sense of identity, we need to help them understand biblically who they are, what their sexuality means, and how they can move through their shame to wholeness in Christ.
- Growing up in a religiously pluralistic society has created a generation needing the right tools and the right attitude to succeed and be productive and effective Christ-followers.

## For Personal Reflection

- What are two or three concrete ways you could adapt your teaching to honor the younger generation's desire for experiencing truth?
- Jesus demonstrated a deep awareness of the many ways people struggle with shame. What is one way you could adapt your ministry of the gospel when you are ministering to sexualized or shame-based people?

## IMAGE EXERCISE

David was the mighty king of Israel and the author of many songs called “psalms.” God even called him “a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to” (Acts 13:22). Yet David’s past was stained by some shameful deeds—lusting after another man’s wife, adultery, even murder to escape exposure. But after all this caught up with him, he remembered God’s merciful heart and came clean, asking God for forgiveness. These are excerpts from the prayer David wrote after facing his shame.

HAVE MERCY ON ME, O GOD,  
BECAUSE OF YOUR UNFAILING  
LOVE.  
BECAUSE OF YOUR GREAT  
COMPASSION,  
BLOT OUT THE STAIN OF MY  
SINS.  
WASH ME CLEAN FROM MY GUILT.  
PURIFY ME FROM MY SIN.  
FOR I RECOGNIZE MY REBELLION;  
IT HAUNTS ME DAY AND NIGHT. . . .  
FOR I WAS BORN A SINNER—  
YES, FROM THE MOMENT MY MOTHER CONCEIVED ME.  
BUT YOU DESIRE HONESTY FROM THE WOMB,  
TEACHING ME WISDOM EVEN THERE.  
PURIFY ME FROM MY SINS, AND I WILL BE CLEAN;  
WASH ME, AND I WILL BE WHITER THAN SNOW.  
OH, GIVE ME BACK MY JOY AGAIN;  
YOU HAVE BROKEN ME—  
NOW LET ME REJOICE. . . .  
REMOVE THE STAIN OF MY GUILT.  
CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD.  
RENEW A LOYAL SPIRIT WITHIN ME . . . .



RESTORE TO ME THE JOY OF YOUR SALVATION,  
AND MAKE ME WILLING TO OBEY YOU.  
THEN I WILL TEACH YOUR WAYS TO REBELS,  
AND THEY WILL RETURN TO YOU. . . .  
YOU DO NOT DESIRE A SACRIFICE, OR I WOULD OFFER ONE.  
YOU DO NOT WANT A BURNT OFFERING.  
THE SACRIFICE YOU DESIRE IS A BROKEN SPIRIT.  
YOU WILL NOT REJECT A BROKEN AND REPENTANT HEART, O GOD.  
(PSALM 51:1-3,5-10,12-13,16-17, NLT)

- God's Spirit had convinced David that several things were painfully true about him. What were some of those things?
- David says his sins "haunted" him day and night. What are you haunted by?
- In what area of your life do you want God to . . .
  - ... restore your lost joy?
  - ... help you be more willing to obey Him?
- What would it feel like for God to wipe your slate clean and give you a fresh start?
- Who do you know that may be encouraged by exploring God's mercy from this passage?

Another rich promise of God's mercy is found in Isaiah 1:18:

"COME NOW, LET US REASON TOGETHER," SAYS THE LORD.

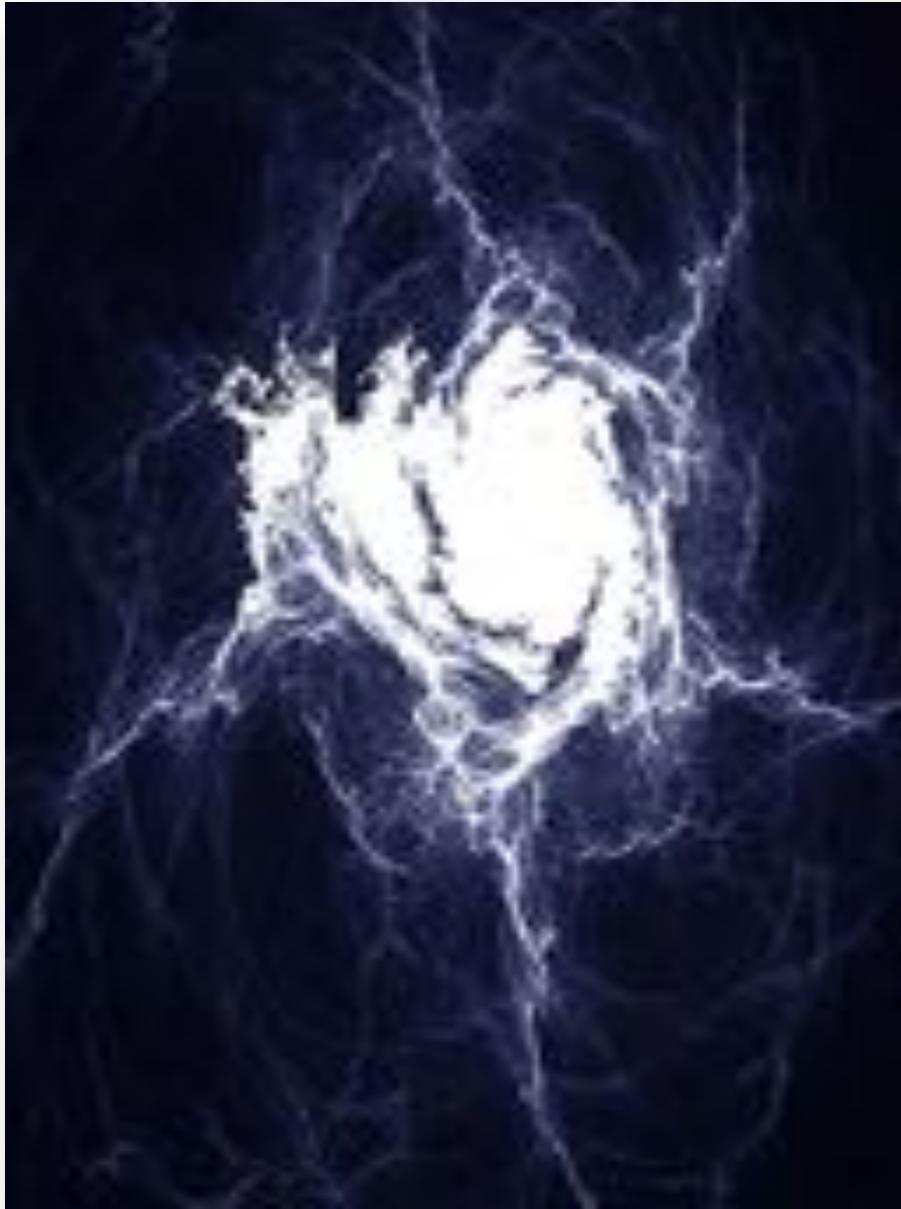
"THOUGH YOUR SINS ARE LIKE SCARLET, THEY SHALL BE AS WHITE AS SNOW; THOUGH THEY ARE RED AS CRIMSON, THEY SHALL BE LIKE WOOL."

God did what David could never do for himself—He stepped in to cleanse David's heart from everything that defiled him—the sins and guilt, and all the shame, too.

*This exercise was adapted from the  
"Freedom: Breaking the Power of Shame" Bible study available at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)*

# Chapter 5

## Imagination and Images



First this: God created the heavens and earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.

**GOD SPOKE: "LIGHT!"  
AND LIGHT APPEARED.  
GOD SAW THAT LIGHT WAS GOOD  
AND SEPARATED LIGHT FROM DARK.  
GOD NAMED THE LIGHT DAY,  
HE NAMED THE DARK NIGHT.  
IT WAS EVENING, IT WAS MORNING—DAY ONE. (GENESIS 1:3-5, MSG)**

God's imagination was unleashed! What an awesome picture. It's critical that we pause at this juncture in our discussion of images and ministry to consider the matter of imagination because it serves in many ways as the link between transformative ideas and images themselves.

## The Dawn of Images and Imagination

Try imagining a time before the primeval chaos when "darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Genesis 1:2), a time when absolutely nothing existed—material or immaterial—outside of the imagination of our Creator. Then He said, "Let there be light" (verse 3). Light was the very first of His splendid creations, and by it we are able to see all the rest. "God saw that the light was good" (verse 4).

When God gave us the gift of sight, He also gave us the ability to make sense out of what we see. When we view something with our eyes, we wrap meaning around it, thus forming a mental image in our "mind's eye." Think of imagination as the marriage of our capacities to both perceive and create images. Our imaginations allow us to form a mental image of something not currently perceived through sight or perhaps never before perceived in reality. Lest we forget, we have imaginations because God has an imagination and we are created in His image (see Genesis 1:26-27).

One of Adam's first opportunities to engage his imagination—by adding words

to images—came when God asked him to name the animals in the garden. The act of naming brings meaning to things. When we engage our imaginations in naming something—like a sofa we see—that can carry different meanings into different contexts. When our eyes see a sofa in a living room context, for instance, our imagination adds the meaning “a place to sit and relax.” The same identical sofa seen in a psychiatrist’s office may mean “a place to process my life and receive counsel,” while the same sofa in a hospital waiting room can mean, “a place to wait and pray for a sick friend or loved one.”

Imagination is the God-given ability to create mental images. But she can get a bad rap in some quarters, including religious ones. The fact is, she deserves an audience because imagination allows us to tap into the non-verbal reasoning of the heart and mind as well as the silent voice of the invisible. We can think of imagination as the key that unlocks our creativity—which are two of the most stunning attributes the Creator endowed us with when we were made in His image.

## The Dark Side of Images and Imagination

Unfortunately, early on, the God-given gifts of sight and imagination were twisted into something evil. Eve, beckoned and deceived by the serpent, “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” (Genesis 3:6). Satan whispered lies, tempting her to imagine her life and identity differently than what God had given her. This gaining of wisdom to become like God was Satan’s seduction to corrupt the human race. And it worked. She saw the fruit, imagined forbidden possibilities, tasted, and shared it with Adam. When “their eyes were opened” (Genesis 3:7, NLT), they did receive a measure of spiritual and moral insight.

However, it cost them their innocence and plunged the world back into another form of chaos and darkness. Like Eve, seeing can lead us to many evils as we imagine outcomes far different from God's intentions. Enter the dark side of imagination.

For some Christians, the idea of an image is often connected to idolatry. That is because the first and second commandments warn us against abusing the gift of imagination by turning images of anything into idols or false gods. History tells stories of people groups who engraved stone or cast metal or carved wood into images that became their

objects of worship. When I (Judy) lived in Africa, I saw some of these village idols and witchdoctor's fetishes. I was grieved to see how they enslave desperate people to a vicious cycle of fear and appeasement. This is spiritual warfare at its darkest.

But we in the West also endow things and people with supernatural power they don't deserve. We give them places in our hearts that should be reserved for God alone. They become our hope or our models for living. In addition to worshipping the almighty dollar, we tend to deify pop stars, athletes, celebrities, and technology. Surely God's heart grieves when we abuse the very images He gave to point us to Him by imagining powers they never had. Paul describes the slippery slope from healthy images to deadly idols when he writes:

FOR ALTHOUGH THEY KNEW GOD, THEY NEITHER GLORIFIED HIM AS GOD NOR GAVE THANKS TO HIM, BUT . . . [THEY] EXCHANGED THE GLORY OF THE IMMORTAL GOD FOR IMAGES MADE TO LOOK LIKE MORTAL MAN AND BIRDS AND ANIMALS AND REPTILES. . . . THEY EXCHANGED THE TRUTH OF GOD FOR A LIE, AND WORSHIPED AND SERVED CREATED THINGS RATHER THAN THE CREATOR—WHO IS FOREVER PRAISED. AMEN. (ROMANS 1:21,23,25)

Sadly, sometimes our imaginations extract God from His world. So as we focus on the power of



images, we need to beware of the danger of idolatry—creating visions of the world that diminish the truth of God’s presence and dominion.

## Imagination Beyond Logic

How many children, afraid in a dark room, have been dismissed with the words, “Oh, that’s just your imagination”—as though nothing real is behind their discomfort? Our traditional Western approach to most things spiritual tends to minimize imagination, so we may prefer analyzing to adoring, clarifying to crying out, studying to submitting, mastering to mystifying. If it is concrete and logical, if we can capture it propositionally in words, then it must be real and true. Sadly, we may be trained to trust our logic and push back our imagination, even when it comes to God’s Word. But as we explored in the previous chapter, we don’t have to choose between logic and imagination: both can point us to truth and to reality.

God has graciously given us His written Word—authoritative, sufficient, inspired, protected, translated, exegetical, and proclaimed by His people across the ages. It is what we have come to love and trust in hearing from Him. But God also has other means of communication—means that are engaging for the younger generation in fresh, understandable ways. He has always had at His disposal words not composed of letters, messages inaudible to the human ear, and truths not reducible to verbal propositions. These expressions of His heart have reached the non-literate for ages, and are getting through loud and clear in our time, especially to our postmodern generations. However, everything must be tested by God’s Word.<sup>1</sup>

Making sense of what God has revealed for practical life is crucial. C. S. Lewis said that, “Reason is the natural order of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”<sup>2</sup> So, because our younger generation is seeking meaning, then we are wise to unleash our imaginations in healthy, biblical ways to help them “perhaps feel their way toward [God] and find him” (Acts 17:27, NLT).



Steve Knight is a young “kingdom journalist” who is passionate about the role of communication in mission. He describes imagination as the muscle of meaning:

We can get all of the facts and information correct (i.e., communicating truth), but if we don’t understand the context and if we fail to engage our audience at a deeper, more fundamental level (the level of imagination and wonder), then the meaning will be lost and transformation will not truly occur. This is true whether we are communicating the Gospel or whether we are communicating about Gospel ministry. Imagination is the muscle that flexes to turn facts into fascination and ultimately transformation.<sup>3</sup>

One way to engage the imagination in our ministries is by using images, metaphors, and symbols. Consider the following meditation as a possible way of introducing people to the reality of their dependence on God.



## A Meditation on Food

Daily we eat. Some barely enough to survive—others with little restraint. But we all are bound to this food addiction for life.

Much effort goes into the habit. Some grow their own food. Others toil at the

mass production, marketing, and distribution of food. The rest of us work to make enough money to exchange for food from a store, a restaurant, or for many around the world, their only option is to scavenge for some little scrap to eat.

All this effort for a simple habit . . . an undeniable necessity. Is this one of life's most meaningless acts? Or does it reveal the simple reality of dependence?

On a daily basis we ingest material provision for our material bodies. Silently its scream of meaning seeks to touch our souls: "You are a dependent being. You need provision. You need a provider." Is there a Universal Provider? Food doesn't say conclusively. It simply alludes to our dependence . . . and its own existence as provision.

*Food means we are dependent beings, and food reminds us of this daily.*

*Food implies there is a Personal Provider Who has delicately designed this nourishment process for us.*

#### CONSIDER

- "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" – *Jesus, Matthew 4:4*
- "Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river . . . their fruit will serve as food and their leaves for healing." – *the Prophet Ezekiel, Ezekiel 37:12*
- Genesis 1:29-31, Isaiah 55:1-2

#### PONDER AND DISCUSS:

- Why do you think some foods are nourishing, while other types of food can make you sick?
- How do you think God feels about hunger and starvation?
- Is there such a thing as "food for the soul"?
- Where could you find this different type of food?
- If you pray over a meal, do you pause to consider your dependency? . . . or God as your Personal Provider?

See how effective an image coupled with some “food for thought” and symbolism can be? To be very clear: We do not want to—nor do we need to—back down on logical, revealed truth, and we don’t need to compromise, either. But we are wise to consider other vehicles God’s Spirit can use to reveal meaning on the way to real truth.

## Knowing God Through Images

The apostle John confronted the challenge of loving a God we can’t even see (see 1 John 4:20). In fact, how can we even know Him, much less like, love, trust, and obey Him, when He and His Kingdom are invisible to our eyes? In an age when the knowledge of the triune God has been alarmingly diminished, He gives us images and stories that can richly shape our vision of reality. In fact He has always revealed His invisible qualities through things we can see:

**FOR SINCE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD GOD’S INVISIBLE QUALITIES—HIS ETERNAL POWER AND DIVINE NATURE—HAVE BEEN CLEARLY SEEN, BEING UNDERSTOOD FROM WHAT HAS BEEN MADE, SO THAT MEN ARE WITHOUT EXCUSE. (ROMANS 1:20)**

How then do we make sense of the invisible, beyond our five senses? Somehow God has endowed humanity with an intuitive knowledge of Himself not dependent on words. This paradox of clearly seeing invisible qualities is a gift implanted within us all as beings created in His image. When we see, observe, and reflect on what He has created, two things emerge about God: His eternal power and His divine nature. Because God has “set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), we can embrace an eternal perspective about reality. And our observable world reinforces God’s eternal power.

God, like humans, longs to be known, not merely seen. So He reveals Himself in sensory ways throughout the entire universe through what we see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. Consider God’s silent but real language described in Psalm 19:1-4:

THE HEAVENS DECLARE THE GLORY  
OF GOD;  
THE SKIES PROCLAIM THE WORK  
OF HIS HANDS.

DAY AFTER DAY THEY POUR FORTH  
SPEECH;  
NIGHT AFTER NIGHT THEY  
DISPLAY KNOWLEDGE.

THERE IS NO SPEECH OR  
LANGUAGE  
WHERE THEIR VOICE IS NOT  
HEARD.

THEIR VOICE GOES OUT INTO ALL  
THE EARTH,  
THEIR WORDS TO THE ENDS OF  
THE WORLD.



*Use the following link to visually experience the “silent” language of God:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Psalm\\_19\\_Video\\_Clip.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Psalm_19_Video_Clip.html)*

God is not limited to revealing Himself through words. For Him, images are also a valid language—a language mutually spoken between His Holy Spirit and our spirits across all people groups. So what do they say, these declaring heavens and proclaiming skies? They say that God is glorious! How far is their visual language heard? Throughout all the earth! God declares and displays knowledge of Himself and His reality through what we humans can see with our eyes and interpret with our minds.

**THE GLORY OF GOD—LET IT LAST FOREVER!  
LET GOD ENJOY HIS CREATION!  
HE TAKES ONE LOOK AT EARTH AND TRIGGERS AN EARTHQUAKE,  
POINTS A FINGER AT THE MOUNTAINS, AND VOLCANOES ERUPT. (PSALM  
104:31-32, MSG)**

No wonder many people say they feel closest to God when they are in nature. That is also why no one has an excuse to dismiss His existence.

Silently and forcefully God says, “People, I offer love to you. I offer you beauty.” It

is part of His grace to all mankind. If we want to help others receive His love messages, we will need to be able to unpack images the way we now interpret text. Thus the power of images connected with words can begin to shape our understanding of the loving God of Scripture who is the jealous and merciful lover of our souls.

## Images as Metaphors

One subset of images is a word picture called a metaphor. Scripture brims with hundreds of them. A metaphor is an implied comparison between two things. They are figurative (not literal) expressions that employ a logic of comparison instead of equality. If we pause to experience the literal and sensory part, then we will better appreciate the figurative part where much of the meaning resides.

When Paul says that, “I planted . . . , Apollos watered” (1 Corinthians 3:6), he isn’t talking about actual plants in a field. He is comparing his ministry of proclaiming the gospel and nurturing new believers to the work of a farmer tending his crops. Because he lived in an agrarian society, comparing something as abstract as evangelism to something as concrete and everyday as farming helped them understand what he meant. This method of building meanings by evoking likenesses between visually perceived objects is efficient for the human mind. We see and rapidly interpret the world around us by employing metaphors.

Jesus was a master at using images as metaphors in His ministry. By pointing to and telling stories about concrete objects from ordinary life that they *could* see, Jesus helped His hearers understand invisible spiritual realities that they *couldn’t* see. He described Himself by using metaphors:

*I am . . . the Vine, the Living Water, the Good Shepherd, the Lamb, the Bread of Life*  
(examples from the Gospel of John)

He described His Kingdom by saying it is like a mustard seed, a pinch of yeast, a vineyard, a wedding feast, a banquet, an inheritance, a buried treasure, and a priceless pearl.

He used metaphors to compare life in His Kingdom to a soldier under orders, a

child in a family, a servant in a household, utensils in a kitchen, and sheep in a flock.

He compared various forms of ministry to fishing, searching for something we've lost, planting, harvesting, reaping, childbearing, and tutoring.

He unmasked the true nature of Satan by comparing him to a thief, a robber, a serpent, an accuser in court, and a ravenous lion.

The point is that He didn't always have to spell out how those things were alike. The power of image metaphors is that the new or expanded meaning is often implicit.

Elizabeth Achtemeier uses a vivid metaphor when she says that, "The human mind is a picture gallery, and we live by the images found in it."<sup>4</sup> In fact the ability to think in terms of metaphors and analogies is universal, illustrated in all the disciplines.



H. Richard Niebuhr said:

We are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and . . . are guided and formed by images in our minds . . . Man . . . is a being who grasps and shapes reality . . . with the aid of great images, metaphors, and analogies.<sup>5</sup>

As Jesus did so effectively, we can learn to use images and metaphors to grab attention and call others to deeper walks with God, creating deeper awareness of His life and realities. To paraphrase a famous saying, "whoever controls the metaphor, controls the conversation."

## Symbols: Images with Cultural Significance

Symbols, along with metaphors, are part of the same family of word pictures arising from images. One way to look at a symbol is to see it as an image that has grown up, has become more heavily laden with meaning, and has emerged as a shared language in a culture. Over time, a symbol has come to stand for an idea, or a whole system of ideas. For instance, take the American flag. At first it was a simple image identifying a newborn nation on the world's stage. But over time, different layers of meaning and sets of emotions have become wrapped around this visual symbol both in the United States and around the world. In one context and to some groups, the flag symbolizes patriotism and loyalty to the ideals of our country. In another it symbolizes the valor of a fallen veteran. In foreign contexts it can symbolize affluence and cultural dominance, or Western imperialism and aggression. When we see media images of radicals burning the American flag, it is probably because the flag has become such a powerful symbol for everything they hate or envy about America. What emotions are stirred up in you when you see an American flag? Those emotions have nothing to do with the flag's colors or fabric and everything to do with what the flag symbolizes to you.

Consider Dallas Willard's understanding of the power of images and symbols:

Closely associated with these idea systems are *images* that occupy our minds. Images are always concrete and specific, as opposed to the abstractness of ideas, and they are heavily laden with feelings. They frequently have a powerful emotional and sensuous linkage to governing idea systems.

For example, hair (long, short, skinhead, green, orange, or purple), body piercings, tattoos, flags (and their desecration), and clothing styles have



provided powerful images and symbols for conflicting idea systems. These images are often adopted by one generation, ethnic group, or locale to set itself off from another.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus Himself elevated the simple biblical image of water to one of the Bible's most powerful symbols when He told the woman at the well:

**“EVERYONE WHO DRINKS THIS WATER WILL BE THIRSTY AGAIN, BUT WHOEVER DRINKS THE WATER I GIVE HIM WILL NEVER THIRST. INDEED, THE WATER I GIVE HIM WILL BECOME IN HIM A SPRING OF WATER WELLING UP TO ETERNAL LIFE.”  
(JOHN 4:13-14)**

The point is that God has given special visual symbols to assure us of His love and goodness.

Today's Christ followers cherish many symbols, including the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper and the water of baptism. But the symbol of the cross is the ultimate visual reminder of God's love and Jesus' sacrifice. Willard unpacks the significance of this symbol for spiritual maturity:

Of course, Jesus understood the great significance of images. He carefully selected an image that brilliantly conveys Himself and His message: the Cross. The Cross represents the lostness of man as well as the sacrifice of God and the abandonment to God that brings redemption. No doubt it is the all-time most powerful image and symbol of human history. Need we say He knew what He was doing in selecting it? He is the master of images. For their own benefit, His followers need to keep the image of the Cross vividly present in their minds. In fact, learning to keep the Cross constantly in mind is a major factor in spiritual growth and maturity.<sup>7</sup>





Sadly, many in our younger generations have forgotten—if they were ever told in the first place—what the cross really means. In the secular realm movements are afoot to remove crosses (and flags and other symbols dear to previous generations) from the public square. All through Scripture and history a huge human problem has been forgetfulness. We desperately want God to remember His promises and yet we forget them so often—or perhaps we've never fully understood or embraced them at all.

Visual symbols were also used as memorials—calling the nation of Israel to remember certain events. From the stone piles erected on the shores of the Jordan River to the details on the high priest's garments to each aspect of the tabernacle, visual images were provided as memorials so that God's people would never, ever forget His nature and goodness to them. That fear of forgetting is still with us. Along several streets in my neighborhood, I (Judy) have noticed a cluster of teddy bears, plastic flowers, ribbons, and photos—memorials so that a slain family member will not be forgotten. In our ministries, we will serve people well if we continue to help them unpack and remember the rich, layered meaning embedded in the images, metaphors, and symbols found all around us in nature, culture, and Scripture (see 2 Peter 1:12,15). Symbols can be God's memory aides.

## The Power of One Controlling Image

Most of us grow up with various influential images, meaning that certain images color the way we think about reality and how we should live life. Some are pleasant, while others are intensely painful, shaped from the shards of our past wounds. For example, the pain of having a physically abusive parent or being constantly teased and bullied in primary school may linger for years and significantly control a young man's self-identity and decision-making. He may go so far as to conclude, "I am a victim and will always be one" or "I'll never let anyone victimize me again," risking becoming an abuser himself.

Ultimately each one of us must answer for ourselves the question *Which image will I let control my decisions?* or *Which image will dominate my worldview?* For three of the disciples, that question was perhaps answered in a defining moment known

as the Transfiguration. Jesus had invited Peter, James, and John—His “inner circle”—to come away with Him on a high mountain where He was transfigured in dazzling radiance before their very eyes—a clear sign that He was no ordinary man or prophet. Yet when the spirits of Moses and Elijah appeared, too, the exuberant disciples volunteered to erect shelters for all three of them. Immediately God spoke from a bright cloud: “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him” (Matthew 17:5, NLT). Immediately Moses and Elijah disappeared, leaving Jesus as the pre-eminent One they should heed.

The same should be true for us today. Every image or person who distracts us or commands too much allegiance should fade . . . leaving us fixed on Jesus alone. When we see and submit to Jesus preeminently as Lord, we become transformed to be more like Him (see 2 Corinthians 3:18).

So it will also be when all of God’s people are singing a new song before God’s throne in heaven. According to the powerful scene described in Revelation 5:1-14, an angel will shout, “Who is worthy to open the book?” (verse 2, NASB). One of the elders replies that only Jesus—the slain Lamb whose death ransomed people for God—only He is worthy “to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (verse 12, NASB). For the same reason, only Jesus is worthy of being our controlling image and dominant reference point in life.

Because we can choose the images that influence us, we must give way to Jesus as our one dominant image if we are to step into the abundant life He offers to us.



Because Jesus Himself is God's ultimate image: "He is the radiance of [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Hebrews 1:3, NASB). Throughout His ministry, He often asked people, in essence, "Which character image represents you? Are you like the rich young ruler or the Good Samaritan? Are you more like the prodigal son or his father, or his older brother or the persistent neighbor or the foolish virgin? When other people see your life, what image will they associate with it?" Then He offers us a whole new paradigm for thinking of ourselves as His brothers and sisters, His friends and servants, His messengers and ambassadors, sheep in His flock, the bride of His dreams. He reminds us that we are truly the Father's chosen ones, His beloved sons and daughters on a lifelong journey of submission and transformation into the image of Jesus.

As Kingdom citizens we must see all good images leading ultimately to Jesus alone. He is the One we are to set our hearts and minds on. We are to look to Him, the Author and Perfecter of our faith (see Hebrews 12:2). We must fix our eyes on Him to define us, shape our true identity, and teach us how to live out of who He says we are. As Jesus increasingly dominates our internal image database, we will see more clearly the reality of His Kingdom come "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Just as every knee will bow and every tongue will eventually confess to the Lordship of Christ, so every image will eventually bow to the supremacy of Jesus Himself, "the image of the invisible God . . . the exact likeness of the unseen God" (Colossians 1:15, NIV and AMP).

## Points to Ponder

- Our text-centric, propositional faith (Scripture) depends on the power of words. But the power of images (metaphors, stories, symbols) can carry profound spiritual meaning, deeply impacting our spiritual transformation.
- Images in nature, culture, and Scripture can help lead us to worship and surrender ourselves to the triune God who is everywhere. But misinterpreted, they can also become unholy idols.
- Images offer us a holistic approach to communicate God's eternal love. When connected to stories, metaphors, and symbols in the context of trusted relationships, they can embody the gospel story in ways that appeal to community-oriented, postmodern men and women.
- We all have dominant images that can shape our identity and worldview. If we surrender and embrace Jesus and His worldview as our one dominant image over all others, we can taste the transformation He promises us.

## For Personal Reflection

- Who or what is the dominant image in your life? (see 2 Corinthians 5:14)
- What image does your life present to those around?
- How will you help others move toward having Jesus as their dominant image and the relationship that defines them?

## IMAGE EXERCISE



### FROZEN TUNDRA

I wish I could just say that life sucks, but then I would have to feel something. That's the problem. I don't. I watch people laugh and wonder if I will ever feel that spilling out of my gut like it did back then. Or will I watch a sad movie and feel the need to even blow my nose? Tissues are only for my sinus problems. Even though today shone through my morning window with all the energy of spring, my soul feels like frozen tundra, buried beneath feet of snow. An eternal permafrost. I wish I could feel something, but then I am also afraid of what might come if the dam breaks. Where could God be in all of this?

Robert, a twenty-year-old artist who uses cigarettes to burn himself, articulates, "I have a hard time talking about what's going on inside me.

When I start talking, all of the crap I'm saying sounds so lame. I like looking at the scars on my arms because I know that they're real. It's like I'm trying to say, I've suffered, man, just look."<sup>8</sup>

When have you ever been physically so cold you've become numb? How did you warm up, and how did that feel?

Have you been with someone who seemed emotionally numb? What was that experience like?

## HOPE

**FOR THIS PEOPLE'S HEART HAS BECOME CALLOUSED;  
THEY HARDLY HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,  
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES.  
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,  
HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,  
UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEARTS  
AND TURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM. (ACTS 28:27)**

**AND SO I INSIST—AND GOD BACKS ME UP ON THIS—THAT THERE BE NO GOING ALONG WITH THE CROWD, THE EMPTY-HEADED, MINDLESS CROWD. THEY'VE REFUSED FOR SO LONG TO DEAL WITH GOD THAT THEY'VE LOST TOUCH NOT ONLY WITH GOD BUT WITH REALITY ITSELF. THEY CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT ANYMORE. FEELING NO PAIN [HAVING LOST ALL SENSITIVITY (NIV)], THEY LET THEMSELVES GO IN SEXUAL OBSESSION, ADDICTED TO EVERY SORT OF PERVERSION. BUT THAT'S NO LIFE FOR YOU. (EPHESIANS 4:17-20, MSG)**

**I WILL GIVE YOU A NEW HEART AND PUT A NEW SPIRIT IN YOU; I WILL REMOVE FROM YOU YOUR HEART OF STONE AND GIVE YOU A HEART OF FLESH. (EZEKIEL 36:26)**

Other Scriptures: Romans 1; Hebrews 3:13

- What are some things that used to touch you but you've become callous to them now?
- Can you remember why you might have numbed that part of you?

## BECOMING

- When you feel numb, what do you do? Do you have any idea what feelings or thoughts or fears you are trying not to feel?
- What hope do you have that God will meet you in your numbness and give you a new heart that can feel again—both pain and pleasure? What part do you play in regaining feeling?
- How might others come alongside you, to warm you up, to surround you as your numbness comes to life?

# Chapter 6

## The Ethics of Images





Before reading on, pause for a moment and really look at these two images. How would you rate them in terms of ugliness or beauty?

Believe it or not, there is an ethic to images. That simply means they are not value-neutral. Just as imagination can be misused, so images themselves can communicate good or evil, or perhaps something in between such as beauty arising from ashes. The beauty in them can move us toward stunning pleasure, while the ugliness in them has the power to move us toward evil. And the same image can move different people in different directions depending on their contexts.

The good news is that God has jam-packed His creation with innumerable glimpses of His beauty. The bad news is that Satan is trying to sell us a false and superficial beauty—a beauty that is simply a thin veneer leading to a black hole of death. So as consumers of images we must become keenly discerning about what we look at with our eyes, because what we see is *not* always what we get.

## Searching the Ordinary for Beauty

Let's start with the good news. The Creator has flooded our world with natural beauty. As we drive out of our cities or even just step outside our homes, God, through the beauty of nature, is just waiting to be noticed. From the blaze of autumn leaves and swirl of mountain streams, to the gleam of a snow bank and the hush of a woodland path, nature's beauty whispers, *If you think I'm beautiful, wait until you see the God who created me!*

Part of God's command to mankind to "subdue" and "rule over" the earth (Genesis 1:28) includes protecting its beauty forever—not just its productivity. But we are unlikely to protect what we rarely take the time to enjoy and cherish as precious. God intended that natural beauty refresh us and proclaim His glory in visual rather than verbal language. Part of maturing in our faith is learning to understand the language of God's revealed glory and beauty.

Consider Psalm 8:1:

**O LORD, OUR LORD, HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!  
YOU HAVE SET YOUR GLORY ABOVE THE HEAVENS.**

As we touched on in the last chapter, this glory and beauty is still so powerful,

although visual and wordless, that what we see can lead to truth. The psalmist writes that “silence fills the earth: unspoken truth is spoken everywhere” (Psalm 19:4, MSG).

We need to look for and seek to understand this unspoken truth in God’s creation, but man-made beauty also surrounds us. After all, we are created in the image of the original Creator of beauty. An aesthetically pleasing building, a handcrafted piece of furniture, a well designed website, or the taste and appearance of a deliciously prepared meal are beautiful to those who care to notice and appreciate. They give us pleasure, again pointing us back to the God who created us with a desire in our soul for beauty and delight in all things good.

Then, there is the beauty of the human body and human sexuality—both of which God gave us and delights in. Long before the glamour industry turned it into a competition for dollars and mates, God declared the beauty of male and female to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Savor this poem celebrating the beauty of human sexuality expressed in the context of marriage:

*YOUNG MAN*

HOW BEAUTIFUL YOU ARE, MY DARLING,  
HOW BEAUTIFUL!  
YOUR EYES ARE LIKE DOVES.

*YOUNG WOMAN*

YOU ARE SO HANDSOME, MY LOVE,  
PLEASING BEYOND WORDS!  
THE SOFT GRASS IS OUR BED;  
FRAGRANT CEDAR BRANCHES ARE THE BEAMS OF OUR HOUSE,  
AND PLEASANT SMELLING FIRS ARE THE RAFTERS.”  
(SONG OF SONGS 1:15-17, NLT)

Of course, the specifics of what constitutes outer feminine beauty, for instance, vary greatly from culture to culture. Depending on where you are, the most beautiful woman may have silky paper-white skin (Japan), chin tattoos and lips dyed indigo blue (Maori in New Zealand), a lower lip stretched to plate size (Ethiopia), Kohl-lined eyes and henna tattoos (Middle East, Nepal), a long neck stretched by brass rings (Thailand), or a shaved head and stretched earlobes with two front teeth extracted (Masai of Kenya).



All this begs the question: Who gets to define beauty? From the world's perspective, our cultures define and refine our tastes in beauty. In places like America, the media defines both beauty and ugliness—and they do it largely through images. If you want to discover the epitome of a beautiful couple or a wedding locale, a vacation spot or a sport utility vehicle, the media will be happy to tell you.

## The Beauty of His Holiness

God's very being defines true beauty. We can hear King David groping for words to describe God's indescribable beauty so compelling that it should move us to the ecstasy of worship:

**SPLENDOR AND MAJESTY ARE BEFORE HIM;  
STRENGTH AND JOY IN HIS DWELLING PLACE. . . .**

**ASCRIBE TO THE LORD THE GLORY DUE HIS NAME.**

BRING AN OFFERING AND COME BEFORE HIM;  
WORSHIP THE LORD IN THE SPLendor OF HIS HOLINESS. . . .

YOURS, O LORD, IS THE GREATNESS AND THE POWER  
AND THE GLORY AND THE MAJESTY AND THE SPLendor,  
FOR EVERYTHING IN HEAVEN AND EARTH IS YOURS.  
(1 CHRONICLES 16:27,29; 29:11)

So God's person is the "gold standard" of beauty in His Kingdom. And He reveals to us His holiness and glory and joy—that is beautiful.

For David, the fearsome general and manliest of warriors, seeking "the beauty of the Lord" was his greatest passion and his vital need:

ONE THING HAVE I ASKED OF THE LORD, THAT WILL I SEEK, INQUIRE FOR,  
AND [INSISTENTLY] REQUIRE: THAT I MAY DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE  
LORD [IN HIS PRESENCE] ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE, TO BEHOLD AND GAZE  
UPON THE BEAUTY [THE SWEET ATTRACTIVENESS AND THE DELIGHTFUL  
LOVELINESS] OF THE LORD AND TO MEDITATE, CONSIDER, AND INQUIRE IN  
HIS TEMPLE. (PSALM 27:4, AMP)

His intensity suggests that David was longing for much more than an enjoyable worship experience or religious entertainment. The cry of his heart was, "Change me, O God!" He longed to see God as He truly is in all of His resplendent beauty—and to be transformed by it. Paul clarified the connection between God's beauty and our transformation when he wrote:

WHENEVER, THOUGH, THEY TURN TO FACE GOD AS MOSES DID, GOD  
REMOVES THE VEIL AND THERE THEY ARE—FACE TO FACE! . . . NOTHING  
BETWEEN US AND GOD, OUR FACES SHINING WITH THE BRIGHTNESS OF HIS  
FACE. AND SO WE ARE TRANSFIGURED MUCH LIKE THE MESSIAH, OUR LIVES  
GRADUALLY BECOMING BRIGHTER AND MORE BEAUTIFUL AS GOD ENTERS  
OUR LIVES AND WE BECOME LIKE HIM. (2 CORINTHIANS 3:16,18, MSG)

Did you get that? When we behold God and experience His presence, when we see His glorious attributes in the face and life of Jesus and are drawn into intimate connection with Him, we begin to be changed and become more beautiful ourselves. That is the good news about true beauty.

## The Bad News About Beauty

Now here comes the bad news about beauty. Even at its best, outward beauty—beauty that can be seen with the eyes—is only temporary. King Lemuel cautioned us that “charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting” (Proverbs 31:30). Isaiah also warned us that:

**ALL MEN ARE LIKE GRASS,  
AND ALL THEIR GLORY IS LIKE THE FLOWERS OF THE FIELD.  
THE GRASS WITHERS AND THE FLOWERS FALL,  
BECAUSE THE BREATH OF THE LORD BLOWS ON THEM. (ISAIAH 40:6-7)**

Using the same metaphor of a blossom falling with its beauty destroyed, Paul warned us not to take pride in our wealth or allow it to define us, for it too will fade away even as we go about our business—a hard lesson many of us are learning in these difficult economic times (see James 1:11).



At its worst, beauty is often just a veneer worn by ugliness or evil. What you see isn't really what you're getting at all. From the beginning, Satan's *modus operandi* has been as one who “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). He disguises himself in beauty because God hard-wired us to be repulsed and repelled when we come face to face with

gross ugliness and wickedness. The best Satan can do is to imitate beauty masking his true motive—to “steal and kill and destroy” the abundant life Jesus came to give us (John 10:10). Our ability to discern between Satan’s deceptive beauty and genuine beauty requires us to focus our gaze on the Author and Perfecter of our faith (see Hebrews 12:2).

This exposes the dangerous side of some images. In our day, they who are among Satan’s most effective “servants” also masquerade behind beauty (2 Corinthians 11:15). Given such unlimited access to our eyes and minds and hearts, images have the power to:

- Convince a man at mid-life that his sexual prowess—or lack thereof—defines him . . . or that his possessions and money determine his worth in society.
- Convince an adolescent girl or a young woman to degrade her beauty by offering her body in promiscuity to just about anyone. (see Ezekiel 16:25)
- Give birth to the deadly progression of sin. James 1:14-15: “But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Millions of men and women are already snared in the destructive power of pornographic images as beauty is corrupted by lust.

When Satan tempted Jesus, he “spread out” the kingdoms of the earth in all their worldly beauty and said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works” (Luke 4:5-7, MSG). Of course, he still uses that same old trick today in a billion sinister variations, manipulating and deceiving us into believing there is depth beneath the facade. True beauty is meant to attract us to God, so when we find ourselves habitually seeking pleasure and beauty to feed our pride and appetites, we can be sure that idolatrous worship is upon us. Too many of us swallow Satan’s sales pitch “spread out” visually on the various screens we view. And when this happens, we choose the shallow and the immediate, and we miss the “real and eternal life, more and better life than [we] ever dreamed of” available only through

Christ (John 10:10, MSG).

Failing to see the possibility of real life in Christ is the saddest tragedy of all. Using his old bait-and-switch trick, Satan blinds us to the intrinsic beauty of the gospel:

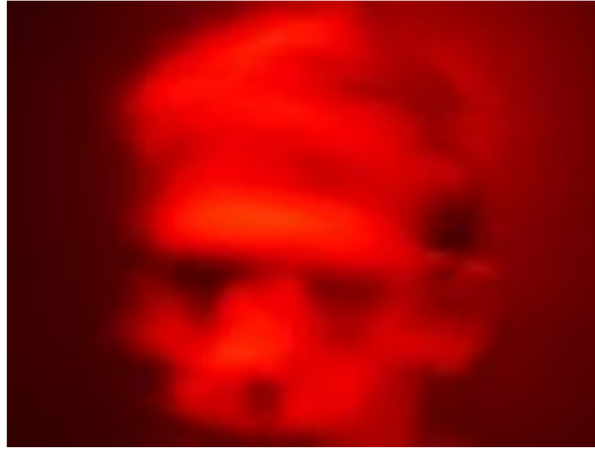
IF OUR MESSAGE IS OBSCURE TO ANYONE, IT'S NOT BECAUSE WE'RE HOLDING BACK IN ANY WAY. NO, IT'S BECAUSE THESE OTHER PEOPLE ARE LOOKING OR GOING THE WRONG WAY AND REFUSE TO GIVE IT SERIOUS ATTENTION. ALL THEY HAVE EYES FOR IS THE FASHIONABLE GOD OF DARKNESS. THEY THINK HE CAN GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT, AND THAT THEY WON'T HAVE TO BOTHER BELIEVING A TRUTH THEY CAN'T SEE. THEY'RE STONE-BLIND TO THE DAYSPRING BRIGHTNESS OF THE MESSAGE THAT SHINES WITH CHRIST, WHO GIVES US THE BEST PICTURE OF GOD WE'LL EVER GET. (2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-4, MSG)

If they go unexamined critically, exposure to images embedded with the world's verbal and non-verbal messages can put us in serious danger. With our ethical filters set on mute, we become dull if not blind to the beauty of the Lord Himself, the goodness of His gospel, and "the splendor of his coming" again (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

## From Dull to Discerning

So what does all this talk of beauty and ugliness and the ethics of images have to do with the ministry of the gospel? It goes without saying that as consumers of images ourselves we need to be careful what *we* see. But this book focuses on implications for the ways we minister to others, especially the younger generation whose worldview is so profoundly shaped by what *they* see. We want them to grow to spiritual maturity, becoming experienced and skilled in both the doctrines and the practices of righteousness. The problem, according to the writer of Hebrews, is that so many:

HAVE BECOME DULL IN YOUR [SPIRITUAL] HEARING AND SLUGGISH [EVEN SLOTHFUL IN ACHIEVING SPIRITUAL INSIGHT]. . . . BUT SOLID FOOD IS FOR FULL-GROWN MEN, FOR THOSE WHOSE SENSES AND MENTAL FACULTIES ARE TRAINED BY PRACTICE TO DISCRIMINATE AND DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHAT IS MORALLY GOOD AND NOBLE AND WHAT IS EVIL AND CONTRARY EITHER TO DIVINE OR HUMAN LAW. (HEBREWS 5:11,14, AMP)



This is where the rubber meets the road in our lives as Christ-followers. It is the choice between dullness and discernment; not only in what we do, but also in what we view. While we don't suggest gouging out your eyes (see Matthew 5:29), we must learn to selectively close them.

We admit that this is a lot easier said than done. Today images are coming at us at an overwhelming rate—faster than we can process. The mixture of beauty and ugliness is often swarming with a hodgepodge of verbal and sexual abuse, blood and gore, fearless acts of valor blended with tears of determination and heroism. We laugh at cynical, demeaning comments because they come embedded in comedy. We ignore violence and selfishness because they come within children's cartoons. We overlook appeals to crass materialism and gluttony because the ads are so slick and clever. If the commercial for that car came right out and said blatantly, "Buy this car and you'll attract a sexy woman," our verbal filter would say, "No!" But because the same message is spoken nonverbally through the images, it slips through almost unnoticed while being seductively persuasive.

The principle to remember here is that beauty and ugliness often come intermixed with goodness and evil—even within the same image! Let's look again at the two images from the beginning of this chapter.





Perhaps you described the first image as rather bleak and ugly—a dead and lifeless trees—and the second as beautiful flowers, so lovely to look at. Someone else, however, might see the first one as the death of the old for the sake of birthing fresh, new life. As for the second—yes, the flowers are pretty, but oh, my allergies! Keep them away from me or I’ll die trying to breathe. Where you see beauty, I may see none at all.

The same is true of ugliness. Yes, it is true that God created things that are innately ugly to human senses—such as decaying human flesh or excrement—so that we would seek God in His holiness and life.

Measured by the benchmarks of beauty in our culture, some people would have found my (Ralph’s) ninety-



year-old grandmother rather ugly, too, even expendable. But she was beautiful to me. My sense of her beauty came wrapped with decades of memories of her kindness that almost blinded me to her wrinkles and deteriorating body. These examples illustrate the complexity of the personal context we bring to the mixed images we see.

Here is another paradox we must help each other negotiate as we learn to distinguish between good and evil in our world of images: Not all beauty is good and not all ugliness is bad. Part of helping people mature is teaching them to detect and value inner beauty more than outer beauty, in themselves and others (see 1 Peter 3:3-4).

No image illustrates this more powerfully than the cross. On the one hand, the cross speaks to us of convicted criminals pierced by nails to suffer an extended, excruciating death to the taunts and shaming of the crowds. What could be more evil and ugly than the hypocritical religious leaders subjecting the innocent Lamb of God to this torture? Yet, on the other hand, that same cross speaks to us of a love so

sublime and unselfish that the Lamb of God sacrificed Himself for His beloved, and of a God so merciful and full of grace that He made the cross a place of perpetual redemption and hope—what could have more goodness and beauty? We are called to see the ugliness of our own hearts and the beauty of His solution—redemption through the ugliness of the cross and the beauty of Jesus' mercy offered to us there.

When I (Judy) was living in Uganda, a rebel force called Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, controlled large tracts of the north. They were notorious for their savagery against children, some of whose maimed bodies



we saw in Kampala. When I had seen one too many teenaged girls with body parts sliced off, I cried out to God, “Why must I see this horror?” He replied, “You will never know how good I am until you really see how evil My enemy is.”

In 2008 my wife and I (Ralph) visited Rwanda with some people from our church. During our stay, our hosts escorted us to a genocide museum at a nearby technology school. We stood on the killing fields where forty thousand Tutsis had been slaughtered and buried. Perhaps one could begin to embrace the depravity and scope of this tragedy through statistics and news articles alone.

Then we viewed room after room of bodies preserved in lime, revealing the grooves carved by machetes on the limbs and skulls of adults and children. Those images have never left me—and I hope they never will.

Though they speak loudly of unspeakable evil, the Rwandan government takes care to ensure that these brutal reminders are available to all who will come. They know the importance of people learning to discern good from evil. They know the power of raw images to embed deep realities within our souls. Their hope is to avoid a repeat of ethnic genocide.

Our culture often focuses on images, not of goodness, but of evil. There is a place for this even as the Rwandan genocide museum displayed the ugliness of hatchets in the hands of evil men. The ugliness of war, sexual abuse, environmental pollution—they speak to the fallen human condition and can be motivating catalysts for



positive change. However, these images can also numb us to these very realities. We can become so used to ugliness that we perceive it as normal. Again, as bearers of the Gospel, we need to hone our ability to discern good from evil as we negotiate the images of beauty and ugliness within our cultural contexts.

Clearly just shutting our eyes to what seems ugly or evil at first glance isn't the answer. Nor is opening our eyes wide to whatever presents itself as beautiful and attractive. The growing disciple of Jesus is learning that what he sees isn't always what it seems at first. He is practicing discernment by asking himself and answering probing questions like these pertaining to the images he views on his TV, computer screen, iPod, cell phone, game console, online magazines, apps, and other media sources:

- What good or evil, what beauty or ugliness do I see in these images?
- What emotions and desires do these images stir up in my heart?
- What do I think these images are trying to get me to believe, want, or do?
- If Jesus were looking over my shoulder at these images, how would He feel? How would I feel? What might He say?
- Do these images point me toward the beauty of the Lord or toward something else?
- Does viewing these images bring anything wholesome, helpful, edifying, or beneficial to me (the guidelines for our words—see Ephesians 4:29)?

Both for us and for those we influence, the journey toward godly, inner beauty involves aligning our hearts with the heart of God who is supremely beautiful in holiness and filled with jealous love for us, enduring mercy, and diverse creativity. In the transforming process of overcoming evil with good (see Romans 12:21), the maturing believer begins with stepping out of spiritual dullness and blindness to the message of images so that evil doesn't get the best of him. He develops the habits of critical awareness and intentional evaluation of the images he sees through the lens of the beauty of the Lord's holiness. He denies access to images he knows won't be beneficial or constructive to him or to others, even if they might be permissible (see 1 Corinthians 10:23). He refuses to let his culture or peers set the minimum standards for what he consumes visually; he exercises his right to set his own minimum standards. He is able to discern what is good for his soul. And he takes one more step: He proactively fills his eyes, mind, and heart with true beauty:

SUMMING IT ALL UP, FRIENDS, I'D SAY YOU'LL DO BEST BY FILLING YOUR MINDS AND MEDITATING ON THINGS TRUE, NOBLE, REPUTABLE, AUTHENTIC, COMPELLING, GRACIOUS—THE BEST, NOT THE WORST; THE BEAUTIFUL, NOT THE UGLY; THINGS TO PRAISE, NOT THINGS TO CURSE. (PHILIPPIANS 4:8, MSG)

## Points to Ponder

- There is an ethic to images, which simply means that they are not value-neutral. As consumers of images, we must become keenly discerning about what we look at with our eyes.
- From the world's perspective, our cultures define and refine our tastes in beauty. In places like America, the media define both beauty and ugliness—largely through images. But above all that, God's person and the splendor of His holiness set the "gold standard" for beauty.
- Beauty and ugliness often come intermixed with goodness and evil—even within the same image, depending on the personal context we bring to it.
- In the transforming process of overcoming evil with good, the maturing believer is stepping out of spiritual dullness and learning to discriminate between the good and evil embedded in the images around him.

## For Personal Reflection

- Where do you tend to see beauty and ugliness around you? What one or two forces have most strongly shaped your view of beauty and ugliness?
- On a scale of 1-5 (1 = rarely even notice, 5 = keenly sensitive), how discerning are you to the good or evil "ethic" in the images you view? Explain.
- What impact do you think it has on a person's spiritual maturing if he remains dull to the ethical content of the images in his world? What about if he is discerning about the ethical content of the images in his world?
- How can we as Christ-followers bring a quality, authentic, and restorative Gospel into our culture through the power of images?

## IMAGE EXERCISE

### TOUCHED AND HEALED

In Bible times, a disease called “leprosy” was greatly feared but not necessarily understood. Lepers . . .

. . . generally looked blemished and deformed.

. . . weren’t allowed to participate in religious or social activities

. . . were usually isolated so they wouldn’t infect other people.

. . . were often verbally abused and often had rocks thrown at them to keep them away.

. . . needed to make themselves known by wearing distinctive or ragged clothes and crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!” so people (especially religious leaders) could avoid them.<sup>1</sup>



**A LEPER CAME TO HIM, BEGGING ON HIS KNEES, “IF YOU WANT TO, YOU CAN CLEANSE ME.” DEEPLY MOVED, JESUS PUT OUT HIS HAND, TOUCHED HIM, AND SAID, “I WANT TO. BE CLEAN.” THEN AND THERE THE LEPROSY WAS GONE, HIS SKIN SMOOTH AND HEALTHY. JESUS DISMISSED HIM WITH STRICT ORDERS: “SAY NOTHING TO ANYONE. TAKE THE OFFERING FOR CLEANSING THAT MOSES PRESCRIBED AND PRESENT YOURSELF TO THE PRIEST. THIS WILL VALIDATE YOUR HEALING TO THE PEOPLE.” BUT AS SOON AS THE MAN WAS OUT OF EARSHOT, HE TOLD EVERYONE HE MET WHAT HAD HAPPENED, SPREADING THE NEWS ALL OVER TOWN. SO JESUS KEPT TO OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACES, NO LONGER ABLE TO MOVE FREELY IN AND OUT OF THE CITY. BUT PEOPLE FOUND HIM, AND CAME FROM ALL OVER. (MARK 1:40-45, MSG)**

## REFLECTING

This man probably had not touched—or been touched by—anyone in years. Think about the price he had paid for his disease. List several ways he probably had suffered because of it.

- When Jesus honored this man by touching him, what effect do you think this had on his soul? . . . on his dignity? . . . on his community? Consider the previous image before responding.
- Now think about the importance of touch in your own life—being touched tenderly, abusively, or not being touched at all. What memories or feelings or longings get stirred up in you when you think about touch in your life?

In Jesus' day, people with leprosy were "outcasts" and "untouchables." It varies from place to place, but every society still has its social outcasts. Today they might be the disabled, AIDS victims, and so on. What groups of people are the "outcasts" or "untouchables" in your context? How do you usually respond to them—stopping to notice or turning away or something else?

## FINDING MERCY

**FOR YOU ARE A PEOPLE HOLY TO THE LORD YOUR GOD. OUT OF ALL THE PEOPLES ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH, THE LORD HAS CHOSEN YOU TO BE HIS TREASURED POSSESSION. (DEUTERONOMY 14:2)**

**NOW YOU ARE CALLED "THE OUTCAST" AND "JERUSALEM, THE PLACE NOBODY WANTS." BUT, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I BRING YOU HOME AGAIN FROM YOUR CAPTIVITY . . . YOU SHALL BE MY PEOPLE AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD. (JEREMIAH 30:17-18, 22, TLB)**

**BOTH THE ONE WHO MAKES MEN HOLY AND THOSE WHO ARE MADE HOLY ARE OF THE SAME FAMILY. SO JESUS IS NOT ASHAMED TO CALL THEM BROTHERS. (HEBREWS 2:11)**



In the Old Testament, God chose the stubborn, nothing-special nation of Israel to be His special people as a foretaste of His love for all people. Today God invites anyone to join His family by trusting Jesus. From these passages, how does God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) feel about His people? How does your heart respond to knowing that Jesus is not ashamed of you?

Have you ever experienced someone else being with you in your darkest place and *not* being ashamed of you? From Hebrews 2:11, how can you expect Jesus to respond to your dark places?

*This exercise was adapted from the CONNECT series Bible study,  
"Freedom: Breaking the Power of Shame," available at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)*

Chapter 7  
Images, the Bible,  
and Church History



When I (Dennis) first attended an Orthodox church service, it felt so foreign to me that I wanted to just watch and not participate. But I was so drawn in that I could not remain merely a passive observer. The sights, sounds, and smells engaged not only my senses, but also my heart. Incense, tinkling bells, beautiful a cappella choral music, and light from ornate chandeliers—all these stimuli nudged me out of my passivity into a deeper worship experience. But the icons are what really caught my attention. Colorful paintings on the walls and overhead dome depicted scenes of Jesus with the crowds, the temple and Holy of Holies, as well as other haloed saints or biblical figures surrounded by winged angels. I also watched the other worshippers. Something about their posture spoke of intense and sincere devotion or respectful veneration (not worship) of the figures in the icons. Observing the Communion portion of the service was particularly powerful. I wondered what was happening here. Was their response right and sincere or idolatrous and forced? Were these images ethically beautiful and good, or was their beauty insidious in some way? I reflected back on my usual church worship experience and wondered why it seemed so passive and cognitive compared to this. Something about this whole experience moved me beyond the communication of biblical truth and ignited a longing within me for more authentic worship.



Since the earliest days of the church, images and art have played at least three significant (and sometimes controversial) roles for followers of Christ. Through the ages we have used images to communicate the truth of biblical stories and themes as a means of honoring the fathers and mothers of the faith and shaping a biblical worldview. We also have used images like the fish and the cross as identifying symbols of our Christian faith. And many art forms (such as icons, sculptures, frescos, and paintings) have invited us into private devotion and corporate worship of God. Even the architecture and furnishings of cathedrals and church buildings

were designed to enhance our connections with God and His meta-story. In this section we will touch on the historical controversy over the commands and practices related to the use of images in worship. But first, join us in a brief walk through the church's history of images and art as part of worship and devotional life.<sup>1</sup>

## Images in the Early Centuries and the Reformation

### *Sign of the Fish*

We've all seen the simple sign of the fish on bumper stickers and wall plaques. The fish was an early Christian symbol, probably referencing Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. In addition, the Greek acrostic *Ichthys*—translated "fish"—stands for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour."<sup>2</sup> During times of persecution, especially in the early centuries, Christians used this image to find



a safe place to spend the night and fellowship with other believers. This simple image of a fish survives today as a way that believers identify themselves across the globe.

### *Mosaic Tiles*

Shaping colored tiles into beautiful mosaic images was an art form common in the Roman Empire. Early Christians adapted this form to communicate biblical messages. Often appearing on walls, floors, and ceilings, these tiles depicted central themes of the church in stunning color to communicate to their



non-reading audiences.

### *Triptych*

A triptych was a work of art consisting of three panels that were hinged together, usually placed on or over the altar in a church. Triptychs could also be folded and easily transported. These panels were popular during the Middle Ages and served to invite people to meditate on various biblical stories.



### *Stained Glass Windows*

If you can, try to recall the last time you worshipped in a church with stained glass windows. How did that art form impact your experience? Stained glass windows are extensions of mosaic tiles. These windows allow light to sparkle through colored glass as they depict various biblical stories and church saints. A subtler message of this art form includes the revelation that “God is light” (1 John 1:5), revealing His truth among us. For many believers today, worshipping in a sanctuary with stained glass windows creates a sense of almost timeless connection with the saints and biblical characters through the ages.



### *Illuminated Bibles*

Before the printing press, the Scriptures were copied by hand to preserve and communicate God’s Word to illiterate people. Artists supplemented the text using inks, paints, gold, and silver, by adding decorated initials, borders, and miniature



illustrations. Ethiopian monks created the earliest preserved illuminated Bible in the fifth century, but most were created during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.<sup>3</sup>

## *Stations of the Cross*



One of the most common uses of images for worship sprang out of the practice of early believers making pilgrimages to Jerusalem. There they retraced the route of Jesus as He carried His cross to His death. Each important stopping point along this *Via Dolorosa* was called a “station.” In the medieval period when people could not travel to Jerusalem, they created a series of depictions that served the same purpose, usually in the form of paintings or sculptures, arranged on the walls of their churches or in a prayer garden. Especially during Holy Week, Christians followed the stations of the cross in a liturgical or private process of meditation and worship—as an act of devotion to God. These visual depictions of the passion of Christ serve as a context for a believer’s prayer and reflection even today.

## *Icons*

Icons are usually flat panel paintings depicting holy beings or objects, most commonly of Jesus, Mary, biblical characters, saints, angels, or the



cross. They might be painted on wood, carved in stone, molded in metal, embroidered on cloth, printed on paper, or done in mosaic or fresco. Still common in Orthodox and Catholic churches, icons are not meant merely to be looked at. While the eyes see the image, the mind and heart are meant to grasp something deeper and richer—God’s love and beauty along with grace and truth. Still, the icon is a much-debated art form that led to periods of persecution in the eighth and ninth centuries.

## Images During and After the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation called for the church to communicate the great truths of Scripture to the masses in ways they could understand, especially through written means with the advent of the printing press. So the Reformation churches elevated the written Word and promoted literacy and the translation of Scripture into the vernacular. One example of this movement is a Bible—hard fought for and translated by Martin Luther—which was illustrated by his followers.

In response to this movement, the Roman Catholic Church determined at the Council of Trent that the arts (especially paintings and sculptures used in church settings) should be used to communicate biblical themes and connect more directly and emotionally with the non-literate masses. Baroque art depicting religious themes emerged in the 1600s and was more direct and dramatic than the icons of the past, drawing viewers into the emotion of the scenes. They represent perhaps the epitome of religious art that adorned the walls of Roman Catholic churches in this era. This image of the hands of God and Adam at the time of Creation is one of the most recognized images today.

However, out of a fear of idolatry, the Puritans and other Anabaptist reformers reacted to the perceived excesses of Roman



Catholic art forms by often covering up these colorfully painted scenes. One example can be seen in the whitewashed murals on the walls of St. Nicholas' Church in Oddington, Gloucestershire.<sup>4</sup>

## *Crosses and Crucifixes*

Probably the most enduring image (and art form) used during worship and private devotion for Christians is the cross because it communicates the essential truth of our faith: Christ's sacrificial death on the cross for our redemption. The earliest form was the crucifix, still used in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, Anglican, and Lutheran public religious services in keeping with 1 Corinthians 1:23: "but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." During the Middle Ages, small crucifixes hung in the living quarters of monks, clergy, and laity; today they are still commonly displayed in Catholic homes. While Martin Luther approved of the use of crucifixes and crosses for devotional purposes, John Calvin did not. Today most other Protestants prefer the empty cross in their churches (or jewelry or homes) to emphasize that Christ conquered death and is risen.

## Don't Make Graven Images

What is your understanding about the proper place of images in worship contexts? Your answer probably reflects your religious heritage. The heart of the historical controversy and theological debate about images stems from two different interpretations of the second commandment:

**THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE, OR ANY LIKENESS OF ANY THING THAT IS IN HEAVEN ABOVE, OR THAT IS IN THE EARTH BENEATH, OR THAT IS IN THE WATER UNDER THE EARTH: THOU SHALT NOT BOW DOWN THYSELF TO THEM, NOR SERVE THEM: FOR I THE LORD THY GOD AM A JEALOUS GOD, VISITING THE INIQUITY OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN UNTO THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION OF THEM THAT HATE ME; AND SHEWING MERCY UNTO THOUSANDS OF THEM THAT LOVE ME, AND KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS. (EXODUS 20:3-6, KJV)**

The Hebrew word translated "graven image" in Exodus 20:4 is *pechsel* meaning



a carved or molded image.<sup>5</sup> The concept of “graven” implies something that is molded, sculpted, carved, engraved, stamped, or impressed.

So here are the tough questions: When is an image also an idol? When does honoring and venerating actually entail adoring and worshipping? When does it unlock evil and a negative reflection of the mind and heart? What is the intent of the second commandment’s prohibition against graven images? Respected theologians have differed in their interpretations. One interpretation leaves you with permission to use images in worship and ministry as long as they don’t lead to idolatry. We’ll call this the “use but don’t abuse” view. The other interpretation sets you on a path opposed to using any created or artistic piece that represents the Almighty, even if you are using it to worship the Almighty Himself. We’ll call this the “beware the slippery slope” view.

## Beware the Slippery Slope View

The first and more conservative view is that if you never actually “make” such an object as a “graven image” in the first place, then you will never be able to “bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” later on. It is a preventative view and it is a minority view throughout church history. It would stop human craftsmen from carving or molding virtually any images at all that depict humans, angels, land animals, sea creatures, or any person of the triune God—including Jesus. It assumes that too many of us simply cannot resist the slippery slope into idolatry.

In AD 726, Byzantine Emperor Leo III banned the use of images because he equated them with idolatry and saw them as a violation of the second commandment.<sup>6</sup> However, Pope Gregory III responded by asserting that images were not idols, but rather a means to help people focus on God in prayer (the “use but don’t abuse” view).

More recently, theologians like Karl Barth leaned toward the “slippery slope” view. He believed that “natural” religion always leads to false religion, so using images that depict nature to draw people into a right devotion of God are misplaced efforts at best, and perhaps dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

To illustrate the current danger of “natural” religion, I (Judy) have seen firsthand one contemporary expression of idol-worship. An African friend of mine named

Monica was born into a small clan who worshipped a local god in the form of a carved wooden idol (probably similar to the household gods Rachel took when leaving her father's house in Genesis 31). It is not clear whether they viewed the statue itself as a god, or as merely representing a god. But until Monica became a Christian, she was assigned as the god's "princess." She was required to feed it nightly and make occasional ritual sacrifices to appease the god in exchange for its supernatural favor on weather, crops, fertility, and so on. This kind of idol worship still thrives, especially in animist cultures.

J. I. Packer sees the second commandment as banning images depicting any of the persons of the Trinity, even for the purpose of worship:

Accordingly, we take the second commandment—as in fact it has always been taken—as pointing us to the principle that (to quote Charles Hodge) "idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images." In its Christian application, this means that we are not to make use of visual or pictorial representations of the Triune God, or of any person of the Trinity, for the purposes of Christian worship. The commandment thus deals, not with the object of our worship, but with the manner of it; what it tells us is that statues and pictures of the One whom we worship are not to be used as an aid to worshipping Him.<sup>8</sup>

This view raises the question: Is forbidding the making of images really the intent of the second commandment?

## Use But Don't Abuse View

Other theologians have looked at the second commandment from the end point of idolatry. The intent behind this view is honoring the fact that God is a jealous God (see Exodus 20:5), whose heart breaks to see us run after other non-gods in search of life that can only be found in Him. He commands us not to bow down to graven images so that we will embrace the jealous and lavish love of God who abhors our idolatry because He wants us for His own. And because the human heart is inclined to idolatry, and idolatry is encouraged through graven images, we are commanded not to make any graven images that lead us into idolatry. It's a matter of emphasis.

The “slippery slope” view emphasizes the making of the graven images, while the “use but don’t abuse” view emphasizes the avoidance of idolatrous uses of images.

Martin Luther subscribed to this latter view. In an article exploring the dangers of art-making in the church, David Taylor refers to Luther’s opinion that just because something might possibly be abused doesn’t mean we should prohibit its legitimate uses:

It is also important to remember what many sixteenth-century Reformers kept clear: *abusus non tolit usum*. The possibility of abuse does not remove the legitimacy of use. Martin Luther put it in earthier terms. People, he said, point out that women and wine are also dangerous things and are being misused. “But what is there that is not being misused?” The question for us, therefore, is not the goodness of art but its specific misuse in the particular contexts of the church, and it is for these misuses that we need to remain alert and discerning.<sup>9</sup>

Luther might say to us, “Anything can be abused, including women and wine and images used in worship. But let us enjoy all of them in their rightful, righteous place while being on guard against the possibility of misuse.”

The translators of the *New International Version* of the Bible have also grappled with how to interpret and translate this passage. In 1984 they translated Exodus 20:4 as “You shall not make for yourself an *idol* in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” Then they vacillated in 2010 to the slippery slope stance of prohibiting the making of images: “You shall not make for yourself an *image* in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” All of this simply demonstrates that there is a real and unresolved tension involved in using images appropriately in our worship and our lives.

Advocates of the “use but don’t abuse” view agree that God has no shape or form and is incomparable to any created thing. But they argue that at the incarnation, “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14); the invisible God who is bodiless and without form chose to take on the form of a servant in a body of flesh so that we could see Him. And therefore it is permissible to depict Jesus Christ as an aid to worshipping the

Savior Himself (not worshipping His depiction).

Speaking for the “use but don’t abuse” view, Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, differs with Packer in that he sees engaging in the arts and empowering local artists as a priority for ministry in today’s urban global context.<sup>10</sup>

## Holy Uses for Graven Images

Perhaps the key to this issue is the warning against idolatry in view of the jealous heart of God. In the Old Testament, God gave instructions for making many elements for worship, including the temple and various articles used therein. In that context, God actually instructed His people to craft metal images of cherubim for holy purposes—not idolatrous ones, of course. Shortly after giving the Ten Commandments, God asked the Israelites to create these images:

**YOU SHALL MAKE TWO CHERUBIM OF GOLD, MAKE THEM OF HAMMERED WORK AT THE TWO ENDS OF THE MERCY SEAT. MAKE ONE CHERUB AT ONE END AND ONE CHERUB AT THE OTHER END; YOU SHALL MAKE THE CHERUBIM OF ONE PIECE WITH THE MERCY SEAT AT ITS TWO ENDS. THE CHERUBIM SHALL HAVE THEIR WINGS SPREAD UPWARD, COVERING THE MERCY SEAT WITH THEIR WINGS AND FACING ONE ANOTHER; THE FACES OF THE CHERUBIM ARE TO BE TURNED TOWARD THE MERCY SEAT. (EXODUS 25:18-20, NASB)**



We understand cherubim (plural for cherub) to be winged celestial beings among the angels. In this case God ordained a graven (that is, molded) image for use in His holiest place to focus His worshippers’ attention on His divine mercy. Did He run the risk of some people worshipping the cherubim instead of the true God they pointed toward? Probably. But He seemed quite willing to run that risk for the sake

of drawing people to Himself. And, of course, most people, except the high priest once a year, never saw the cherubim within the Holy of Holies—that was left to their imaginations.

Another instance of God commanding the making of an image occurred when the children of Israel were struggling in their unbelief during the Exodus and complained that Moses had brought them out of Egypt. To stop this rebellion, God sent a plague of deadly, poisonous snakes among them, which convicted them of their sin. Then He directed Moses to have a bronze snake—a graven image—crafted and positioned on a pole for the Israelites to gaze upon in faith in order to be restored:

**THE LORD SAID TO MOSES, “MAKE A SNAKE AND PUT IT UP ON A POLE; ANYONE WHO IS BITTEN CAN LOOK AT IT AND LIVE.” SO MOSES MADE A BRONZE SNAKE AND PUT IT UP ON A POLE. THEN WHEN ANYONE WAS BITTEN BY A SNAKE AND LOOKED AT THE BRONZE SNAKE, HE LIVED. (NUMBERS 21:8-9)**

This graven image became a visible symbol of God’s mercy pointing people toward God’s pathway for restoration. Jesus later authenticated this graven image as a symbol and foreshadowing of His own crucifixion that would bring redemption to all who gaze upon Him.

**JUST AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SNAKE IN THE DESERT, SO THE SON OF MAN MUST BE LIFTED UP, THAT EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE. (JOHN 3:14-15)**

The point is that not all graven images are created equal. Some are useful—even commanded by God—for visually pointing people’s hearts to the Lord. Others, like the idols of the Canaanites and other pagan cultures throughout the centuries, are hazardous because they point people’s hearts away from the Lord. Even the bronze snake Moses made in obedience to God’s commands was worshipped idolatrously several centuries later. It was turned from an image of restoration into an object of idolatry:

**HE (KING HEZEKIAH) REMOVED THE HIGH PLACES, SMASHED THE SACRED STONES AND CUT DOWN THE ASHERAH POLES. HE BROKE INTO PIECES THE BRONZE SNAKE MOSES HAD MADE, FOR UP TO THAT TIME THE ISRAELITES HAD BEEN BURNING incense to it. (2 Kings 18:4)**



Can idolatry exist without images? Yes. We can potentially idolize almost anything if it becomes the focus of our attentive worship. We can idolize a person, one who is created by God in His own image. We can idolize, love, or even worship money, which carries with it a symbolic image of coins or bills or credit cards. We can idolize a car, which is a humanly created object. Other idols can be made through photos or drawings. Yet most of us still benignly carry family photos and the image of money with us and ride in cars without any of them becoming idols to us.

So let us move into the world of images with both permission and caution. We acknowledge that any image can be corrupted into idolatry. But this should not stop us from making and using images in ministry for the purpose of leading people into the jealous and lavish heart of God.

## Images as an Opportunity for Missions

During the days of the apostles, we find few references to using images in ministry. The one exception is Paul's interaction with the Athenians:

**PAUL THEN STOOD UP IN THE MEETING OF THE AREOPAGUS AND SAID: "MEN OF ATHENS! I SEE THAT IN EVERY WAY YOU ARE VERY RELIGIOUS. FOR AS I WALKED AROUND AND LOOKED CAREFULLY AT YOUR OBJECTS OF WORSHIP, I EVEN FOUND AN ALTAR WITH THIS INSCRIPTION: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. NOW WHAT YOU WORSHIP AS SOMETHING UNKNOWN I AM GOING TO PROCLAIM TO YOU. THE GOD WHO MADE THE WORLD AND EVERYTHING IN IT IS THE LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH AND DOES NOT LIVE IN TEMPLES BUILT BY HANDS. AND HE IS NOT SERVED BY HUMAN HANDS, AS IF HE NEEDED ANYTHING, BECAUSE HE HIMSELF GIVES ALL MEN LIFE AND BREATH AND EVERYTHING ELSE. FROM ONE MAN HE MADE EVERY NATION OF MEN, THAT THEY SHOULD INHABIT THE WHOLE EARTH; AND HE DETERMINED THE TIMES SET FOR THEM AND THE EXACT PLACES WHERE THEY SHOULD LIVE. GOD DID THIS SO THAT MEN WOULD SEEK HIM AND PERHAPS REACH OUT FOR HIM AND FIND HIM, THOUGH HE IS NOT FAR FROM EACH ONE OF US. 'FOR IN HIM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING.' AS SOME OF YOUR OWN POETS HAVE SAID, 'WE ARE HIS OFFSPRING.' THEREFORE SINCE WE ARE GOD'S OFFSPRING, WE SHOULD NOT THINK THAT THE DIVINE BEING IS LIKE GOLD OR SILVER OR STONE—AN IMAGE MADE BY MAN'S DESIGN AND SKILL. IN THE PAST GOD OVERLOOKED SUCH IGNORANCE, BUT NOW HE COMMANDS ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO REPENT." (ACTS 17:22-30)**

As Paul sought to bring the gospel of Jesus to these Greeks, he chose to adapt to their starting point, their objects of worship—“graven images.” Paul wasn’t trying to lead these people into idolatry with the use of physical images; they were already an idolatrous people. He desired to lead them away from their idol images into a true and right relationship with the living God.

In this passage, Paul does not address the issue previously discussed regarding the second commandment. He is participating in a missional effort to reach those who have clearly violated this command. Our encouragement from Paul’s example is to start where people are in their spiritual journeys—even with their worldly images—to help them reconsider their idols and guide them to the true God.

## Images in the World of Fresh Cravings

Back to the present . . . and the future. You may be thinking that images were valid “back then” in history or “over there” where literacy is low. But remember (from chapter 3) that our current literate younger generations still often prefer images to words, and they attach more meaning to images. As we wrestle with the place of images in our ministries and churches, we are wise to probe why we want to use them at all.

Gary Molander is a talented producer of art and media resources for churches through his company, Floodgate Productions, and was a regular columnist for *COLLIDE* magazine. He offers a fresh perspective on an unconventional use of art and images in the church:

By and large, I think the North American Church has become really good at using art to communicate truth. But there’s another beautiful use of art. . . . Art can help ignite fresh and unresolved cravings. Art not only communicates truth, it creates emotional uprisings. Art opens. . . . [What if] God’s will for us is to sit in our own personal pond of



holy agitation the whole morning and actually experience the ache of seeing no way out. And what if He wants to use a painting, a sculpture, a dance, a drama, or a video to push us headlong into that pool? . . .

What if, every week, your church had the ability to drop a beautiful piece of art into the worship experience, and just let it sit there? Using art this way isn't the opposite of using art to communicate truth; it's actually the beautiful sister many of us have never met. And while there are a myriad of qualifying questions to ask in the planning of your worship services, they could easily be reduced to just two: What are we hoping to communicate? What fresh cravings are we hoping to ignite? Art has already been created by God to answer both of those questions.<sup>11</sup>

What a rich invitation! In our brief walk through history, we have tried to illustrate how believers have traditionally used images: to communicate truth (that is, image-based learning), as an identifying symbol of faith, and to enhance devotional prayer and worship. As we move forward, our hope is that you understand how images can also assist in the ongoing process of spiritual transformation. Used transformationally, images can touch our hearts, unlock our stories, and invite us to long for even more of God than we have already known and experienced.



## Points to Ponder

- Images can lead us to idolatry.
- Scripture shows us that graven images, such as the gold cherubim and the bronze snake, can lead us to worship the true God.
- The core issue with regards to images and worship is our heart tendency toward idolatry in view of the jealous and lavish heart of God.
- We should be willing to start where the culture starts in its art—even starting with its graven idols in order to lead people into true worship.

## For Personal Reflection

- What has your religious heritage or theology taught you about the place of images in your spirituality?
- How could images and art, used in creatively redemptive ways, actually help us resist idolatry?

## IMAGE EXERCISE



### A MEANING OF POVERTY OF WEALTH

To desire riches seems natural to the human heart. These riches are often perceived as a reflection of our worth as a person. The more material riches we own, the more worth we have as people and the more pleasure we deserve—or so the logic of our emotions tells us.

“A rich person deserves the pleasures of riches. A poor person deserves what he has.” Such simple economics of the soul leaves us all impoverished.

Riches buy neither worth nor security, but they do afford opportunities. Such opportunities can embellish our lust or can release our love. Poverty, on the other hand, can afford struggle, defeat, compassion, or bitterness—we get to choose. Either way, the doorway of choice is shame. Only as we embrace our common shame does any man or woman—rich or poor or middle class—act with love, rather than with greed or self-protection or violence or denial.

- *Poverty and wealth mean we, though unified by shame, are differentiated by the trinkets we surround and identify ourselves with.*
- *Poverty and wealth imply that God knows the difference between true wealth and poverty.*

## CONSIDER

“THE BROTHER IN HUMBLE CIRCUMSTANCES OUGHT TO TAKE PRIDE IN HIS HIGH POSITION. BUT THE ONE WHO IS RICH SHOULD TAKE PRIDE IN HIS LOW POSITION, BECAUSE HE WILL PASS AWAY LIKE A WILD FLOWER. FOR THE SUN RISES WITH SCORCHING HEAT AND WITHERS THE PLANT; ITS BLOSSOM FALLS AND ITS BEAUTY IS DESTROYED. IN THE SAME WAY, THE RICH MAN WILL FADE AWAY EVEN WHILE HE GOES ABOUT HIS BUSINESS. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHO PERSEVERES UNDER TRIAL, BECAUSE WHEN HE HAS STOOD THE TEST, HE WILL RECEIVE THE CROWN OF LIFE THAT GOD HAS PROMISED TO THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” —JAMES, A FOLLOWER OF JESUS, JAMES 1:9-12

Other Scriptures: Proverbs 30:7-9; Philippians 4:11-13

## PONDER AND DISCUSS

- How impoverished are you?
- What wealth do you seek?
- What poverty do you seek?
- When you attain both the poverty and the wealth you seek, how will your life be different?

*This exercise was adapted from  
 “Searching the Ordinary for Meanings,” available at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)*

Chapter 8  
Images as Open Doors  
into Their Stories



When we first met Dickie, he struck us as a vibrant, young at heart, older man. His big Texas laugh and passion for Jesus were infectious. Stepping away temporarily from a demanding leadership role in a major church denomination, Dickie wanted to learn more about using images in ministry and how it can lead to spiritual transformation. We began by passing out the picture of the teddy bear. Then I (Dennis) asked Dickie just one question: “What do you see?” Most of us around the table didn’t expect what happened next.

After a short pause he said, “I see loss . . . perhaps someone lost a teddy bear. But I also see loneliness, isolation, and pain. You know, that’s how I often feel in my side job as a football and basketball official. When I make a tough call, thousands of people boo at me. In those moments I feel like the loneliest person on earth . . . and it hurts.” In just seconds, this simple image had unlocked a personal piece of this respected Christian elder’s story—not just past but present.

But Dickie didn’t stop there. With tears in his eyes he said quietly, “This is also stirring up feelings of pain about my son. You see, my father was in the ministry for over fifty-five years, and this is my forty-fifth year. I felt like I was supposed to carry on this tradition and prepare my son for going into full-time ministry. But I failed. My son chose to do other things—good things, mind you, he’s into the arts, and that really fits him well—but I feel like I’ve let them down. Yet God has been so good to enter into these painful places with me.”

It was a while before anyone spoke. Dickie was stunned that one ordinary image and one simple, invitational question had opened up such deep places in his heart. A friend of his said later, “I’ve known Dickie for twenty years, but I have never heard him open up like that before and be so vulnerable with his heart and life.”

What’s the point? That people of all ages and places of spiritual maturity can connect with the power of images we place in front of them. We are not limited to religious art or ancient churches or even the beauty of God’s creation; images that we provide for people can be very effective. Used in relational contexts of trust, images can help people open doors into their inner worlds where desires and disappointment often mix—exactly where spiritual transformation can occur. It wasn’t that the image had made us vulnerable, but rather that it launched a significant discussion. Our two-hour dialogue that day around the teddy bear image included many encouraging and healing moments. As a result of being touched by what happened, we all sensed a deeper ability to embrace God’s grace. Dickie—and the rest of us—left that meeting convinced and energized to try tapping into the

power of images in our own lives and ministries.

Remember, the goal when using images is not just to grab attention, entertain, or educate. What we really want is to help people move deeply into relationship with God and experience transformation, whatever their current starting point may be. In today's world the gateways of our eyes and ears create access to our minds and hearts. Through these gateways we are also given glimpses of other people's worldview—how they see different aspects of their lives, all of which need God's transforming touch.

## Using Images Transformationally

In this section we offer you a menu of tested ministry examples and ideas incorporating images. Some may or may not be appropriate for your context. As you consider them, keep in mind your current circle of influence—the people you naturally connect with in your ministry. And then think a little broader—perhaps the younger, the older, the less churched or less conservative, the lost, strangers and foreigners, or the people in their circles of influence. We desire to help expand your ministry impact in practical ways by employing images effectively. The examples that follow are not meant to be a precise, linear approach to every discipleship situation.

## Taking an Image Inventory

True life in Christ is meant to bring integration to the different pieces of our lives because God permeates everywhere. He is at work in our homes and schools and businesses, in our bedrooms and boardrooms and classrooms. He even shows up in our shame and failures just as much as in our joy and successes. When we have trained ourselves to see God within all the ordinary experiences of life, we become genuinely more integrated and authentic. But if our values and beliefs don't align

with our actions, we easily become disillusioned with our own hypocrisy or the hypocrisy we see around us. That is one reason why Scripture reminds us: “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23, NASB). If we want to take this seriously, reflecting on the images we see can make us much more aware of how they are shaping our worldview. Here are some simple questions we can ask ourselves or those we minister to in various contexts:

- How are the images you have viewed today or this week affecting you?
- Are they moving you toward God and His ways?
- Are they reinforcing your biblical convictions or your sinful desires?
- How are images opening new doors for dialogue with others about Jesus and His desire to redeem and restore them?

Taking an inventory of images using these types of questions can really get dialogue moving and prompt all involved to consider the significant influence that images they encounter in daily life can have.

## Theological Starting Points

Often, a great way to get transformative conversations moving is to direct someone to clarify their understanding of who God is. At the core of anyone’s worldview is what they believe God is like and how He operates in this world. Depending on one’s life experience, values, or upbringing, God may seem benevolent or judgmental . . . aloof or involved . . . fair or mean . . . existent or nonexistent. Selecting images can help us press beyond what we assume we’re *supposed* to think about God and begin to identify how we *truly* feel about Him. We are wise not to assume that we really know how someone else views God—just because he grew up in church or because she was raised in a secular family.

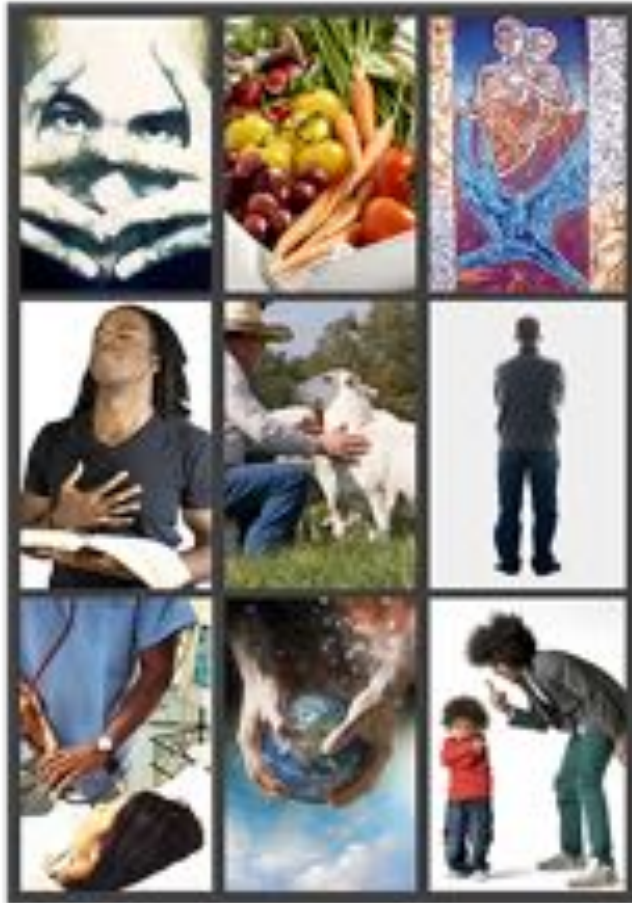
## EXERCISE: VIEW OF GOD

The following is a collage of nine images that others have chosen as identifying their view of God. Take a moment to study this collage picture by picture; then choose one (or find your own) that reflects how you view God. Try to articulate why you chose that image and what feelings or memories it stirs up in you.

Do you wonder why in the world anyone would choose some of the images you did not choose? Remember: real people selected these images to reflect their starting points, their current realities, and their responses to God in their lives. So try putting yourself in the shoes of someone quite different from YOU—perhaps someone whose view of God seems rather “dark” to you, perhaps someone who has lived through harrowing life circumstances, or someone who seems immune to suffering, or someone who has never known Jesus.

From that perspective, does that person’s choice make more sense to you?

Because this is truly his or her starting point in viewing God, how could you move into that person’s world and engage him or her in dialogue noncritically?





## EXERCISE: NEARNESS TO GOD

Do the people you minister to really believe God is near to them? If so, how do they feel about being near to Him?

Would they say His presence makes them feel small and insignificant, important and welcomed, or something else?

Consider the following six images (or find another). Which one expresses how you feel in God's presence today?

This is a reminder for us not to assume that everybody is comfortable with God's nearness or presence. Adam and Eve weren't, and neither were Saul or Peter at times.

If people in your ministry were to select one of the "darker" images, how would you respond inwardly—and outwardly?

While we might tend to immediately correct a negative or unbiblical view, that correction may just shut the door into their hearts. Asking questions to learn more about their story keeps the door open relationally and can provide a bridge to God's stories—such as a glimpse of His heart's desire to adopt them, a biblical character whose story is similar to theirs, or a promise from God that might comfort them. So even if some of the images you have or will see here push you out of your comfort zone, try to seize the opportunity to listen, ask questions that link back to Scripture, and prayerfully move deeper into the presence of God.

Remember Debbie from chapter 2? She also challenged several staff team members to express their view of God in their lives by using modeling clay. *Use the following link to hear her story:* [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Modeling\\_Clay\\_-\\_Video.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Modeling_Clay_-_Video.html)



## EXERCISE: LIKING GOD

Has anyone ever asked you, “Do you *like* God?” Probably not, because this is a politically incorrect question, especially for those of us in the older generations. We were not permitted to even entertain the idea of not liking God and His ways. But if you were asked that question today, what would you honestly say?

For our younger generations, there are few more relevant issues than where their hearts and emotions actually are on the “liking God” continuum. Many of them struggle with how to relate to a loving God when the suffering and injustice in the world seem so overwhelming; they often doubt His goodness when life feels so bad and hopeless. Many more people than we realize often feel this way. If you desire to help them move toward knowing God in the beauty of His holiness and goodness, you must be made aware of this critical part of their worldview. When they trust you enough to give you a glimpse through that open door, you have a powerful starting point for a transformative conversation.

Try to imagine a conversation with someone in your ministry, starting with the following image. Imagine asking her,

- Where do you see God in these images?
- Do you really *like* God?
- Do you really believe God is *good*? If so, tell me about that. If not, what’s not good about Him?

Merely giving her the freedom to be honest with you will minister deeply to her. Where do you think the conversation might go?

Often the issue of liking God boils down to the question of pain and suffering. How can a good, loving, powerful God allow such human suffering? Can I like that kind of God?



To get you started we would like to recommend the below image-based resources:

*GOD: Can I Like Him?*

— two short videos available at:

[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471)

*Dear God: We Need to Talk about Pain and Suffering*

— 50+ page book with eight journal entries available at:

<http://www.ralphennis.com/my-resources.html>

(under “Spiritual Formation”)

## Stepping Through Open Doors into Their Story

In addition to how we view God, how we view ourselves is also a core part of our worldview and spiritual journeys. Images offer a creative way for people who don't know each other very well to become acquainted. When we understand their outlook on God, a solid next step is understanding who they are so that we can proceed with them toward transformation.

### EXERCISE: GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Instead of resorting to the usual getting-to-know-you questions like “What's your favorite \_\_\_?” you could try asking a neutral question like “What is something you want us/me to know about your \_\_\_\_ (work, family, goals)?” But instead of answering with just words, ask them to select an image and explain what it reveals about them. You will be amazed at how quickly people move beyond the superficial into deeper sharing simply by using images.

### EXERCISE: RELATIONAL METAPHORS

For followers of Jesus, another core part of our worldview is maturing to embrace who we are in relationship to God. The Bible is full of metaphors or analogies that try to capture certain dynamics of who God is to us and who we are to God, which may be very familiar to you. These relational metaphors can profoundly shape how we view our true identity in Christ and how we do (or do not) embrace who God made us to be. But we usually connect with a few of these biblical identities more than with the others. Few issues are more critical to our spiritual journeys than how we see ourselves in relation to God (as His child, servant, disciple, or as His pawn or the black sheep). The dominant metaphors we use to picture our connection to God are open doors to understanding and ministering to one another.



From the list below, pick one that you most identify with and another one that you least identify with. Also pay attention to the images that come to mind as you consider each identity.

<b>Potter</b>	<b>Clay</b>
<b>Judge</b>	<b>Sinner</b>
<b>Creator</b>	<b>Creature</b>
<b>Savior</b>	<b>Saved</b>
<b>Lord</b>	<b>Servant</b>
<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Disciple</b>
<b>King</b>	<b>Citizen</b>
<b>Head</b>	<b>Body</b>
<b>Cornerstone</b>	<b>Building</b>
<b>Father</b>	<b>Child/Son/ Daughter</b>
<b>Shepherd</b>	<b>Sheep</b>
<b>Friend</b>	<b>Friend</b>
<b>Bridegroom</b>	<b>Bride</b>

As before, now try to imagine a conversation with someone in your ministry over these biblical metaphors (perhaps with pictures to go with them). If you could really understand which metaphors he most—and least—connected with, where might you go with that insight or that glimpse of his inner story? How could you

meet him at this starting point and help him draw closer to God?

### EXERCISE: EXPOSING THE DISSONANCE WITHIN

If we are really honest with ourselves, at times there can be a sharp dissonance between how we actually feel about ourselves and our lives and what Scripture says is true about us. For instance, we may know we are supposed to feel loved and accepted by God, but right now we feel rejected and forgotten. How often in our ministries have we lamented seeing a Christian brother or sister living out of hopelessness, shame, or lies rather than out of who God says he or she is in Christ? How often have we longed to meet that person right in that place of brokenness and point him or her to the Healer?

When we asked people (especially those under age thirty-five) the question, "How do you feel about yourself?" they selected the following images.<sup>1</sup>



Whether you identify with many, only a few, or none of these images for yourself, we encourage you to take a moment to study them.



- How might you start dialoging with someone who chose each image?
- How might you go about discovering each person's story behind the image?
- How do you imagine you could meet each person where they are (even if their feelings are dark or negative) and invite them to consider who God says they are, according to His Word?

Images can be used to draw out in more detail how people see themselves (identity) or feel about themselves—which is an important starting point in anyone's spiritual journey. The next time you meet with people in a small group, consider asking them to select or bring an image that expresses how they feel about themselves, and then reflect together over the promises of God.

You might also want to consider using the *Personal Image Profile* assessment tool for your group or team (Not Currently Available). The *Personal Image Profile* is a wonderful way to explore your life and thoughts through images. A few of the questions answered from taking this assessment are:

- What environments are the best and worst for uplifting and energizing for you?
- What kind of relationships should be important or avoided when you want advice?
- What key elements should be included or deleted when you want to develop spiritually?
- What you should engage in more or what to choose not to do in order to be internally healthy?

## Building Trust by Asking and Listening

Even if you cannot personally relate to some of the images you have just viewed, they can still provide a new and creative opportunity for God to open doors, and for you to bring the gospel of hope to others as you journey together. They can help build bridges of trust that will bear the

weight of truth.

One of the most powerful ways we can build trust with those in our ministries is to become more skilled at asking questions rather than answering them. People usually view people in vocational ministry as the go-to “answer people,” which can be intimidating both ways. Of course sometimes answering others’ questions is the most appropriate thing to do. However, images lend themselves more to conversing the gospel than to proclaiming the gospel—and that requires us to be askers and listeners even more than tellers and teachers.

## EXERCISE: ASK AND LISTEN

**ASK:** You might start with a personal question, such as “Select an image that describes your life right now. What does that image represent about you?” [If they have difficulty answering, rephrase it as a more impersonal question about “people in general” or “someone you know” or “what you see.”]

**CLARIFY:** Keep your questions open-ended, not leading. The point is to invite them to share their perspectives and responses—not to manipulate them toward yours. If they respond with only one or two words, be ready to nudge them a little deeper with a clarifying question like, “Would you explain that a little more?”

**LISTEN:** Pay attention to what is stirred up within you or others. By now you know from our repeated use of the same teddy bear image that—even when looking at the same image—different things get stirred up in different people, depending on their life experiences and current realities. That makes it doubly important for you to listen well and ask clarifying questions to get to the heart of their story and perhaps identify a barrier to their spiritual progress.

**INVITE:** Pray silently over these stirrings and listen to what God is saying in response. Invite God to bring to your mind a biblical character or a verse of Scripture that speaks into the image and soul stirrings. This could be the bridge from their story to God’s story.

**REFLECT, MEDITATE, and PRAY:** Pause—don’t rush—in the presence of your Father.

## Bridging to God's Story

Once the door is open into someone's story, where do we go from there? When the time is right, we long to help them see the possible connections between their stories and God's story, as told in His Word. You may remember a story from chapter 3 that exemplifies crossing the bridge to God's story. Several twentysomethings were asked to select one image (from about thirty options) that expressed how they felt inwardly. Independently, all except one of them selected this image:



During their discussion, they described feeling fragmented, disjointed, aimless, wandering without a clear purpose—very vulnerable admissions

for strangers. They offered each other deeply honest glimpses through the open door of the image into their inner lives.

Building on these starting points the next week they explored what it is like to feel fragmented by discussing these questions:

- What are some things people do that they really don't want to do? Why do you think they still do those things?
- What sins do you keep committing that you don't really want to keep doing? Why do you think that is so?
- How have you tried to find wholeness on your own? How is that working for you?

Then they bridged from their stories into God's story by meditating on Romans

7:15-20 (“I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it,” NLT) and Colossians 1:19-22 (“all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross,” MSG). They were asked to imagine God bringing them “over to God’s side and putt[ing] your lives together, whole and holy in his presence” (Colossians 1:22, MSG), and to write a prayer, inviting God into the fragmented pieces of their lives. What started with a “neutral” image of cracked glasses bridged into Scripture through reflective questions. Then, processed in community, it led to the hope of being made whole by the power of God’s Spirit. All from an image they resonated with!

Resources that will help get you started are:

*The New Me* videos –

[https://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14](https://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14)

*The New Me* – see topical mini-studies at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

In closing, perhaps this story will illustrate the process of using images and questions as door-openers into someone’s story and then bridging naturally to some part of God’s story. On a recent flight, I (Dennis) sat next to two women, wondering how to turn our conversation into an opportunity to converse about the gospel and the Lord. I took out the teddy bear image, held it open in my hands, and simply asked, “I was wondering, what do you see in this image?”

The forty-two-year-old said offhandedly, “I think someone lost a teddy bear.” Notice her “think” (not feel) and



“someone” (not her). The thirty-two-year-old stared intently for almost a minute until she said, “I see lostness . . . loneliness. I see pain and isolation and . . . abandonment. In fact, I feel like this sometimes.” And without further probing, she revealed two of her current starting points—her difficult divorce and pain in her relationship with her daughter. During a twenty-minute conversation I was able to connect with her feelings of loneliness and abandonment using questions like these:

- Did you know that Jesus felt abandoned, too? Like when His friends betrayed Him, and especially on the cross when He cried out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).
- God really gets it when we feel betrayed and rejected. Did you know that He offers to adopt us into His family forever by trusting Jesus?

Given more time I could have shared part of my story and current reality, feeling painfully disconnected from our grown daughter. Later on in the conversation we talked about how they responded to the image. I shared that I often find that older people respond more impersonally and objectively. They concurred. Through the use of this one image these women were able to recognize more clearly some of their heart issues that were bound up in pain. And through dialogue they were open to hearing how God can relate to that pain and offer hope to heal. In addition, they experienced and recognized the difference in how the generations process images. This is one example of how images can help you to begin a gospel dialogue on the path of spiritual redemption and transformation.

## Points to Ponder

- Images can help people of any age open the door to their hearts, exposing their worldviews.
- Images can serve as an effective vehicle to move people toward the next steps of spiritual transformation.
- Images have a way of bypassing our cognitive processing and drawing out our ambivalent or painful emotions. So they can point us to as-yet unresolved parts of our story that we tend to deny but which need God's transforming touch.
- For our younger generations, there are few more relevant spiritual issues than identifying where their hearts and emotions actually are on the "liking God" continuum.

## For Personal Reflection

- Has there ever been a point in your spiritual life in which you did not like God? Explain. How can you use this experience when dealing with others?
- In the process of spiritual transformation, how important do you think it is to raise awareness of our heart attitudes—not just our thoughts and beliefs? Explain.
- Which one idea in this section are you most motivated to try? Think through the "who," "how," and "when" of implementing that idea.

Chapter 9  
Images as Bridges to  
God's Grand Story



Few things in life threaten our view of God's goodness more than suffering. This is when what we *feel* about God is most likely to supersede what we *know* to be true about Him. Well-meaning reminders that "God is sovereign" or "God won't give you more than you can bear" ring hollow as our broken hearts scream out, *Why, God? Why? Where were you?*

Those questions haunted a university student named Lauren. She had recently returned from a six-week sociology class on the subject of death in Rwanda and Uganda. She came back with several hundred photos—a combination of the beautiful and benign mixed in with others depicting abject poverty, despair, machete-slashed skulls, and the skeletal remains preserved since the Rwandan genocide. "I feel so numb," she said flatly as she shared these images with a friend and ministry leader. "I don't know how I'll ever lead a Bible study on campus this term. Maybe if it's about Jesus. . . . But I can never again worship the God of the Old Testament who committed genocide!" Clearly her exposure to some of the most evil killing fields on earth had traumatized her and caused her to intensely dislike the God she had trusted just months earlier.

"Where do you picture God being when those people suffered and died?" her friend asked.

"Standing by, just watching helplessly," she answered coldly.

Lauren was clearly in a spiritual crisis, her view of God's goodness was challenged for perhaps the first time in her life, and she had concluded that it was His fault. Her dislike of God was reinforced every time she viewed her photographs. There were two options: either her heart would continue to harden toward Him, or this experience would invite her into a deeper engagement with the God who is very present in the midst of suffering. How could a bridge be built to the truth of God's good heart?



Knowing how deeply Lauren was being impacted by what she saw and experienced, the ministry leader decided to give her a copy of *GOD: Can I Like Him?*<sup>21</sup> Then she prayed that something in its images, questions, and verses would help Lauren process the tension she was experiencing in her relationship with God. Less than six hours later she called back, almost breathless with excitement. “You’ll never believe what happened! Over my lunch hour, I was flipping randomly through that piece you gave me. And my eyes stopped on this image.”

Notice that an image first caught her attention—not words. It is an image depicting the fact that it is not only we who suffer, but God Himself suffers, too. A few days later she wrote:



This study is absolutely amazing! The part at the beginning where you can make a collage of your view of God—that was so cool. It really impacted me and helped me realize who I thought God was at this point in my life. And the questions are just so original and make me think differently than normal. It helps me think about how God suffers—and if He deserves to. That just rocked my world and is already changing my perspective.

Following this interaction, Lauren made this collage expressing her current view of God.



Can you sense the readiness for transformation in Lauren's story? As you learn to tap into the power of images, the "Laurens" in your circles of influence will also taste the transforming power of God.

In chapter 8 we looked at using images to touch the heart, unlock and open doors into people's stories, and help them cross the bridge to God's story of redemption and hope. Now we want to focus more on that final and critical step, inviting them to see themselves in the sweeping panorama of God's grand saving plan in many very practical, daily ways.

## Unpacking Images Reflectively

The more we connect with the lost and broken, the more we need to listen for starting points to their inner worlds. Then, as Lauren's friend did with her, we can step through their open doors and bridge into a redemptive theme from the Scriptures.

## EXERCISE: BRIDGING TO REDEMPTIVE THEMES

Bridging to redemptive themes can be as simple as connecting their struggle or story with a person in the Bible who experienced something similar. That's why stories, parables, and narrative portions of Scripture usually offer the most natural bridges. "Did you know that Jesus (or King David or the woman at the well) probably felt that way, too (angry, ashamed, hopeless, afraid, and so on)?" Redemptive themes reveal our God who can meet our deepest needs to restore us. These analogies tell an ashes-to-beauty story; they almost always start with a negative feeling but point to hope:



- Abandoned, now adopted
- Rejected, now chosen
- Rebellious, now welcomed home
- Ashamed, now honored
- Sick, now healed
- Addicted, now freed

What if someone selected one of these feelings, or one of the following images, and said it expresses their current reality and how they feel about themselves?



Some questions you might ask are:

- How do you think God, in His mercy and grace, might enter into your need?
- What would you like God to do for you?
- Try to choose a biblical character or story in Scripture that might relate to how they feel.
- Ask, “How could God meet the need expressed in this story?” Or, “How did He?”

A resource available on the topic of God’s mercy and grace is the *Finding Mercy Topical Mini-studies* at: NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

If, for example, you are using an image like the teddy bear we’ve used previously, here is a possible line of questioning on the redemptive theme of God’s adoption. These same questions can be used with other themes. Notice how it moves from someone’s personal story to God’s story, to finally linking the two together.

- What do you see in this image?
- How can you relate to this image?
- Can you tell me more? When were you or someone you knew abandoned or lonely?
- Where was God then? Where could He have been?
- Where would you like Him to be?
- Do you think God could resolve this need for you? How?
- Did you know Jesus was abandoned? How do you think He felt?
- Have you considered God's offer of adoption into His family? (see Ephesians 1:3-10; Romans 8:15,23; Galatians 4:5)
- Would you like to talk about God's good news?
- Would you like to hear about how God adopted me?

Resources previously referred to that will also work well in this situation are:

*GOD: Can I Like Him?* Two short videos

[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471)

*GOD: Can I Like Him?* Topical mini-studies (Not Currently Available)

*The New Me* – Two short videos

[https://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14](https://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14)

*The New Me* Topical mini-studies (Not Currently Available)

## EXERCISE: EXPLORING MEANINGS IN ORDINARY LIFE

Today's world of images serves up many competing stories of life, eternity, spirituality, good and evil, redemption, male and female, and so forth. But how closely do these image stories align with God's revelation of reality—His grand story? Many are godless; they depict a corrupted reality that assumes God shows up absolutely nowhere—or as a tack-on to reality. But through the eyes of Christ we see God omnipresent among us, embedding meaning in everything He created.

Another great use of images invites people to explore meanings in ordinary life. The question, "What's the meaning of life?" feels far too intimidating for most people. So we suggest starting with a more bite-sized question like "What's a meaning of food? Play? Clothes? Music?" The Buddhist view of reality (perhaps the most prominent view in secular America and even functionally among Christians) aims at emptying the world of God's presence. Conversely, the Christian view of reality aims to open our eyes to the omnipresence of God. We affirm with David that no place exists where we can go and find His Spirit absent (see Psalm 139:7). So, how can we help others experience the presence of God through the images they see all around them?

*Searching the Ordinary for Meanings*<sup>2</sup> is a resource with thirty-two different images. ( [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html) ) Each image depicts something ordinary like food, clothing, sleep, money, or work. If Jesus used ordinary things like these as conversation starters to get at deeper meaning, so can we!

**DO NOT WORK FOR THE FOOD THAT PERISHES, BUT FOR THE FOOD THAT ENDURES TO ETERNAL LIFE, WHICH THE SON OF MAN WILL GIVE TO YOU. FOR ON HIM GOD THE FATHER HAS SET HIS SEAL. (JOHN 6:27, ESV)**

The following image asks, "What do clothes mean to you?" This question could launch you into a discussion about clothes—that we all wear clothes in public covering certain body parts rather than go naked. What does that suggest about us? Perhaps that we are fallen beings when it comes to our identity and sexuality? Perhaps that, like Adam and Eve, shame compels us to do a certain amount of

covering up?



And one Scripture passage you could consider together is:

THEN THE EYES OF BOTH OF THEM WERE OPENED, AND THEY REALIZED THEY WERE NAKED; SO THEY SEWED FIG LEAVES TOGETHER AND MADE COVERINGS FOR THEMSELVES. THEN THE MAN AND HIS WIFE HEARD THE SOUND OF THE LORD GOD AS HE WAS WALKING IN THE GARDEN IN THE COOL OF THE DAY, AND THEY HID FROM THE LORD GOD AMONG THE TREES OF THE GARDEN. BUT THE LORD GOD CALLED TO THE MAN, "WHERE ARE YOU?" HE ANSWERED, "I HEARD YOU IN THE GARDEN, AND I WAS AFRAID BECAUSE I WAS NAKED; SO I HID." AND HE SAID, "WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE NAKED? HAVE YOU EATEN FROM THE TREE THAT I COMMANDED YOU NOT TO EAT FROM?" (GENESIS 3:7-11)

A friend of ours has printed off these Meaning images and places a different one above her desk every week at work. Her colleagues go out of their way to check out and discuss the meaning of the topic-of-the-week. Those images build great bridges for her to go deeper than typical office chitchat, meet people at their starting points,

and converse about one small piece of God’s grand story at a time with those she is influencing. Whether in print or digital form, you could do the same around the dinner table with children or at a coffee shop with friends or on an airplane with strangers.

## EXERCISE: CREATING SPONTANEOUS DIALOGUES OVER IMAGES IN MEDIA

Some of our most fruitful times of ministry happen spontaneously while we are at work, play, watching television, or doing other everyday activities. Scripture exhorts us to “always be prepared to give an answer” (1 Peter 3:15) when people ask about our hope in Christ. These days most people are suspicious of “answer people” and respond much better to more interactive questions. What would it look like for us to refine the art of being prepared “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2) not only to preach, but to ask spontaneous questions about the messages embedded in the images around us?

The whole point is to be intentional about unpacking the image’s message rather than being oblivious or undiscerning about its message. Often conversations like these will expose anti-biblical themes in the images around us—which is great training for ourselves and others to “distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14). For instance:

- The next time you watch a television show or movie, take five minutes afterward to prayerfully discern any redemptive themes that might have been suggested in it. Media stories that move us usually have some theme of redemption and hope, or perhaps the triumph of good over evil—even without any overt religious references. Reflect and celebrate messages of redemption that come through images.
- While driving down the road with one of your children, point out a billboard or other image-based sign, and ask, “What do you think they’re trying to say to us with that billboard?”



- While making conversation on an airplane or in a waiting room, select an image from an available magazine and ask, “What do you think of this image? What do you suppose it is trying to get us to believe about \_\_\_ (our needs, the way life should work, and so on)?” Or ask about the message in a video game someone is playing.
- After watching a TV commercial, hit mute and ask, “What do you think is the core message or value in this ad? Besides trying to get us to purchase their product, what are they trying to persuade us to believe?” It is probably more than “buy this car” or “drink this beer” or “use this beauty product.” It is probably also, “IF you buy/drink/use this product, we promise that you will attract a sexy young woman . . . will be accepted by the other guys as a real man . . . will avoid the shame of looking old . . . will be as beautiful and alluring as the other women.”
- Once you have identified the message embedded in the image, talk about that message. Use it as a bridge to God’s story.
- What do you suppose God thinks about that message?
- Does He want us to try to attract sexy women?
- Does He define our manhood by the beer we drink?
- Is He ashamed of our aging?
- If Jesus could respond to this image with a billboard (or commercial or magazine image) of His own, what message do you think He might embed in it?

Pause for Him to bring a verse of Scripture to your mind that expresses His view on these issues. In doing so, you are inviting wisdom into your life, just as Solomon prescribes in Proverbs 3:13-18:

**YOU’RE BLESSED WHEN YOU MEET LADY WISDOM,  
WHEN YOU MAKE FRIENDS WITH MADAME INSIGHT.  
SHE’S WORTH FAR MORE THAN MONEY IN THE BANK;  
HER FRIENDSHIP IS BETTER THAN A BIG SALARY.  
HER VALUE EXCEEDS ALL THE TRAPPINGS OF WEALTH;  
NOTHING YOU COULD WISH FOR HOLDS A CANDLE TO HER.**

WITH ONE HAND SHE GIVES LONG LIFE,  
WITH THE OTHER SHE CONFERS RECOGNITION.  
HER MANNER IS BEAUTIFUL,  
HER LIFE WONDERFULLY COMPLETE.  
SHE'S THE VERY TREE OF LIFE TO THOSE WHO EMBRACE HER.  
HOLD HER TIGHT—AND BE BLESSED! (MSG)

## Meditating on Scripture

For many of us, spending time reading and meditating on Scripture means unpacking God's Word from an *analytical* point of view. We observe themes and key words, research cross-references and word studies, read commentaries, take notes, and so forth in order to learn about the text. For instance, if you are unpacking the story of the prodigal son *analytically*, you might explore issues of inheritance in that culture, types of parties, Jewish attitudes toward pigs, or the significance of the ring given by a father to a son. This is a valuable text-centered approach that is very good, but we can enhance our analytical approach by adding a more *reflective* application to meditating and praying through Bible stories.

In meditation we are asking God's Spirit to guide us as we read by personally involving ourselves. In this approach you try to put yourself in the story and imagine what each person might have sensed, thought, felt, or responded. Then you reflect on and listen to how God is meeting you in this meditation. For example, Jim Downing in his book *Meditation*,<sup>3</sup> encourages us to prepare for our times with God by a practice of mediation and reflection on Scriptures involving visualizing the stages of entering the tabernacle (the gate, the blood of sacrifice, the veil, and so on) until we enter the Holy of Holies by the blood of Christ.

### EXERCISE: IMAGE MEDITATION

As another starting point or next step, you may want to consider augmenting your meditation on a biblical narrative, such as the parable of the prodigal son. You could do this by *meditating with images* depicting the story, such as this painting by Rembrandt.

Without rushing, look at each person in the painting, noticing posture, facial expressions, clothing, hands, mood, and so forth.

- Where do you imagine yourself in the scene?
- Where do you see God in this scene? Be open to allowing God (through the artist) to suggest new insights and emotions that you may not have picked up from the text alone.



Henri Nouwen's classic book *The Return of the Prodigal: A Story of Homecoming* is a good starting point for an inspiring experience of blending meditation on Scripture with meditation on art. Nouwen wrote this book after sitting for a long time absorbing Rembrandt's painting (above) titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which hangs in The State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. Having seen this

painting personally, I (Ralph) can imagine Nouwen sitting there in that majestic, chilly gallery gazing on this one painting that so engaged his heart. A print of Rembrandt's painting that my wife purchased in St. Petersburg still hangs in our home as a daily visual reminder to reflect on the love and mercy of God our Father.

Because this type of meditation may be new to you, here is another painting to reflect with over the Scripture of Jesus agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46). Pause in your reading and give yourself several minutes to look at and absorb *Agony in the Garden*, by James Tissot.



As you look at the image:

- What surfaces inside you?
- In what ways are you like (and unlike) the characters in the picture?
- What particular detail in the painting draws your attention? Why is that?
- Does any part of this image-story correspond to any part of your own story?
- Where do you see God present in this image?

(See the Appendix for more ideas on "Reflecting on Biblical Art.")

## EXERCISE: SCRIPTURE MEMORY IN COLOR

We don't have to make the case for the role of spiritual disciplines in a believer's walk with God. "Sacred rhythms"<sup>4</sup> like prayer, quiet time, Scripture memory, Bible study, corporate worship, fasting, silence, and other disciplines have a way of opening us up to God's transforming power to bring change that only He can bring. Some fear that the memorization of Scripture is becoming a lost art. Why not try a new approach by selecting a verse or passage you want to memorize, then try pairing it with an appropriate image. You will be amazed at how the image both motivates and facilitates your memorization and recall of the verse.

If you are looking for specific resources, you could find your own images to enhance the Topical Memory System (NavPress) or download the below *CONNECT with Jesus* Meditation Apps that come with visuals.



## APPS FOR ANDROID:

GOD:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.GOD#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLkdPRCJd>

IDENTITY:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.navpressidentity#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLm5hdnByZXNzaWRlbnRpdHkiXQ>

FOR ITUNES: Not Currently Available

Another way to help you remember a key truth learned in a Bible study or course on any topic is by selecting an image that captures that truth. After our local ministry team finished a three-month Bible study on mercy, justice, and peace, we each summarized our best take-aways visually with images before explaining them to one another verbally. Then we created a group collage of our images as a visual reminder to each of us of how God moved in our minds, hearts, and souls.

## EXERCISE: GOD'S GRAND COLLAGE

Rather than starting with a biblical story leading to art, start from the other direction. The following are a couple of ideas:

1. Develop an image collage of God's grand story (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration).
2. Take any aspect of life or the gospel and ask your group to do an image sort from pictures they find or you provide. Connect each image to Scripture as you align your collective image story to the grand story of God. You may also want to build this story one piece at a time or whatever works better for your group.

One last time let's hear from Debbie and how developing a visual journal is having a powerful impact during her sabbatical.

*Debbie on Journaling (00: 03: 33)*

Watch this video on at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Art\\_Journaling.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Art_Journaling.html)

## EXERCISE: VISUAL DEVOTIONAL OR BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

When you are selecting a devotional or Bible study resource for your own use or for others, search for ones that incorporate images creatively as an integral component in the meditation and study process. The *CONNECT* series and complementary resources are just such resources.

The images in this series were carefully selected and field-tested to integrate with the text.

See *CONNECT* series at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)



## Images in Prayer and Worship

During our quiet times, extended periods of prayer, and worship services, there are many ways we experience God. Images can powerfully enhance these aspects of our Christian life.

## EXERCISE: IMAGE RETREAT

Often we hear people talk about being out in nature and God’s creation, which, if you think about it, is a visually stimulating experience. For many this is not only a time of deepening our walk with God, but also of healing and listening to God. The next opportunity you have to get away alone with God for a while or take a retreat with others try one of the following:

- Ask participants in a ministry or prayer retreat to bring a variety of images or art; then post them around your space for people to visit privately or process together.
- Select several images that invite you into God’s presence in worship and create a collage out of those images—either individually or together.
- Bring some selected images along (instead of more reading material) that relate to your current spiritual journey. If you aren’t already doing so, you might consider beginning a journal and pasting images on its pages, as this real-life example reflects.



You may also want to find an image or series of images to use as a screensaver, wallpaper, or other apps that could invite you into a visual morning “moment with God.” Many people choose scenes from nature. Select any image that encourages you to hear God saying, “I am with you and for you today.” Again, the *CONNECT with Jesus*



Meditation Apps are a downloadable resource you can use on your iPhone/iPod or Android device. Each morning, or any time during the day, take a few minutes to reflect. Or you may want to begin a daily subscription to [www.godtube.com](http://www.godtube.com) to view short video clips that are inspiring, humorous, motivating, or thought provoking about God.

#### APPS FOR ANDROID:

GOD:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.GOD#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLkdPRCjd>

IDENTITY:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.navpressidentity#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLm5hdnByZXNzaWRlbnRpdHkiXQ>

FOR iTUNES: Not Currently Available

#### EXERCISE: IMAGES IN WORSHIP SERVICES

For centuries churches have used crosses, stained glass windows, banners, and bulletin covers as “fixed” images to enhance worship visually and experientially. Many churches and other ministries now incorporate some projected images into their worship times. Additional options can be:

- Use well-chosen video clips that ignite questions; they don’t always need to provide answers.
- Consider including less overtly “religious” images that may move, motivate reflection, or even disturb viewers. To be disturbed by whatever disturbs the heart of God can be a very sacred moment. Images don’t all need happy endings to point us to Him; some can be left unresolved because this authentically reflects the reality of our spiritual journeys.
- During Holy Week, design a worship experience based on the traditional stations of the cross—scenes from Jesus’ journey from Gethsemane to

Golgotha. Use paintings, banners, sculptures, clips from *The Jesus Film* or *The Passion of the Christ*, or other images portraying those events in Christ's last hours as springboards for contemplative prayer.

## Enhancing Learning and Teaching Experiences for Others

Veteran teachers realize that people do not all learn the same way. Strictly verbal presentations (messages, lessons, seminars, workshops, sermons, meetings) leave many learners unsatisfied. Images—especially images with stories—invite people with diverse learning styles into the experience, as Avery Willis says:

In America, most of the preaching, Bible studies, evangelism, and discipleship is based on linear and sequential thinking conveyed in print media. But our postmodern culture is driving a storytelling revival: We are experiencing a groundswell of social and spiritual change that is largely the result of changes in our learning-style preferences. The majority of the millennials, baby busters/gen Xers, and even many of the baby boomers clearly prefer to learn through spoken and visual means rather than the printed word.<sup>5</sup>

So when you are teaching or leading others, you can honor the diverse learning styles among your audience by creatively incorporating visuals. For example:

- Ask participants to summarize their best take-aways from a learning experience, course, study, or other meeting by making a group collage.
- Build your next PowerPoint with much less text and at least half images, including reflective questions for your audience to discuss related to those images—especially to tap into stories and elicit emotional connections.
- During a seminar or training session, use images to draw out their emotions, especially ambivalent ones. For example, while training staff on fund-raising, they could process images that capture any fears or concerns they might be struggling with. During an adult Sunday school class, an image of a senior carrying a child on his shoulders might move members of the class to tears

as they share their feelings of both delight and inadequacy as grandparents.

- The next time you want to conduct a survey or do some informal research, consider basing it on images along with text.
- Use images to help your group debrief after a ministry trip or experience.
- When you gather people together to cast a vision, respond to a calling, tackle a social problem, make joint decisions, or set a goal, you are inviting them to imagine a link between the present and the future. This is an *imagining* process. Consider what place images could play in these activities.

(See Appendix for ideas on how to develop your own image library.)

A veteran missionary once advised a rookie: “Do not attempt to cross an ocean and accomplish in a foreign culture what you haven’t already at least tried at home.” For many of us, stepping intentionally into an image-conscious ministry may feel like crossing into a totally foreign culture where we don’t even speak the language. But be encouraged! If you love God and His Word . . . if you love people and have a tender heart toward their pains, disappointments, sins, and failures . . . then you have most of what you need to enhance your ministry with images. We encourage you to “start at home” by first trying out one or two of these options for your own walk with God. Then trust God as you walk with others on their journeys with Him.

## Points to Ponder

- Using images transformationally often includes exposing the messages embedded in images. These may reveal a need or lead into the redemptive themes of Scripture.
- Meditating and reflecting with others is the key to using images to bridge to God's story. Reflecting refers to a whole interpersonal dynamic of asking questions, listening, feeling, pondering, praying, meditating, waiting, and journaling.
- When you incorporate images into your ministry, you can help others enrich their practice of spiritual disciplines and worship, unpack image from the media reflectively in spontaneous conversations, and unpack Scripture reflectively alongside art and images.

## For Personal Reflection

- Which one idea are you motivated to try in your ministry during the next few weeks? How, with whom, and when will you try it?
- What exercise or idea seems like it would be most difficult or awkward for you to attempt? Why do you think that is? How might you overcome this?
- Reflect on a movie you have seen recently. What redemptive themes are reflected in it that could make for great discussion with others?

*Watch a 59-minute seminar on*

*"Story and Images in Communicating the Gospel" by Dennis and Ralph at:*

*[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using\\_Images.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using_Images.html)*

# Chapter 10

## Images from Now On



Arvid is a friend of ours, and a church leader who recently had an “aha!” moment about using images transformationally. A graphic designer by profession, he swims adeptly in a sea of images in his work life. His training and expertise have given him a clear primary approach to images—seeing the quality of the image, the blends, the contrasts, color saturation, and resolution. While working as a graphic designer on several image-based resources, Arvid became more intrigued by our different primary perspective on images—using images reflectively and transformationally by tapping into stories. So he decided to take a big risk by using an image reflectively in the adult Sunday school class he leads. We’ll let him tell you what happened. (You can either read Arvid’s story below or use this link to view him telling his story in person):

*Arvid’s Story (00: 03: 01)*

Watch this video on YouTube at: <http://youtu.be/Dzlb3xQm-yY>

I had been meditating on Psalm 131, particularly verses 2 and 3, which say “Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child *rests* against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever” (NASB). In my searching I found an image of a father and child which I projected it on the screen as people walked into the class. To start the class I simply asked, “How do you respond to this image?” Not surprisingly, their answers were pretty technical—much like the way I have approached images in my craft. But before long the dialogue began to move from the technical to life and soul issues. Next we spent some time reading through Psalm 131 and meditating on it together. Then I asked the group to reflect on the image again in light of their relationship with God. A thirty-year-old man began sharing how it touched him from the perspective of forming a father-son relationship. After the class he sought me out to talk about his divorce and the challenges he faces trying to be a good dad when his son lives out-of-state. The burden of this brought him to tears. That one image was all it took for this young man to open up to me—for the first time—with a painful and unresolved issue that was at the core of his personal and spiritual life. Several others told pieces of their stories, too. But what really surprised me was the response of a sixty-nine-year-old man I’ve known for some time. He began sharing his concern for his relationship with his sixteen-year-old step-granddaughter who was living in his home. In the image he saw both the joy and the seriousness of a child hanging on to its father. He described both his longings and insecurity about being a father-figure to her—and how he needed to hang on to God in order to provide her with that kind of love. The image had evoked a deep response

beyond where words alone would have. He, too, teared up as he shared this piece of his story with the class. What an open door for any of us to walk through!

Arvid took the risk to go beyond his current paradigm around the use of images. When he saw God at work in people's souls, it significantly changed his perspective and approach to using images.

Do you see the power that was released among those men and women? What Arvid brought to the table was simply:

- An everyday (not religious) image
- An invitational (not informational) question
- A related Scripture passage

His non-threatening lead foot invited others to respond by:

- Sharing current starting points in their stories
- Interacting with each other's stories
- Connecting with God's heart and story from His Word

Honestly, isn't that what we long to see happen whenever we minister to others? To help them:

- Trust us and their community with the current, specific needs and unresolved issues/touch points in their lives
- Engage relevantly with God and His Word
- Open the door for brothers and sisters in Christ to pray and walk deeply with them into God's ways

These are some of the important components of genuine spiritual transformation.

Throughout this piece we have tried to articulate and help you experience the impact of images in our world today. Hopefully you have sensed how dramatically the incorporation of images has affected our ministries. Time and again we have seen God's Spirit move deeply in hearts and souls—our own and those we influence.

So now, the ball is in your court.

## Take a Risk

You may still be wondering how to move ahead. This may be something new to you. Or perhaps you have been uncomfortable with some of the more disturbing or dark images and ideas you have seen or read here. Perhaps that very discomfort could put you more in touch with many people who feel even more uncomfortable with our faith, assurance, worship forms, social or political values, or with the thought of relating personally with the triune God. Discomfort isn't necessarily bad; it might even push us all ahead in many ways.

Yet as you take risks to follow in the footsteps of the incarnate Jesus into the fresh opportunities He brings your way, you will probably find your audience expanding—perhaps among the lost, the unchurched, your children, or their friends. You will likely find it easier to move toward people who are different from you and into their worlds more effectively for the sake of the gospel. What a joy to discover that (like Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:22) you are becoming all things to all people.

Of course, there are many valid means of engaging others. Certainly, spiritual gifts like evangelism, teaching, and exhortation will use lots of words. But incorporating the language of images could add new dimensions to the use of these gifts. God will still use verbal proclamation to confront others with truth. But this, too, can be enhanced by incorporating and interacting with images and related stories.

As authors, we've seen how quickly people will plunge deeply into what images stir up, so now we often begin our conversations by presenting images first—or if not first, somewhere in the conversation. We prayerfully seek to be purposeful as images enrich the various ways God leads us to advance Jesus' Kingdom.

## Relational Ministry

As with any ministry approach, offering it with life giving love will help tremendously. Images can be very memorable for sure. But God will use them more when relational grace is modeled and



felt . . . when others feel heard and respected as you live and minister in authentic community. This is incarnational ministry, starting where your people are (not where you are), just as Jesus “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG).

Jesus was the master of interacting with people. He instinctively knew the state of the soul of each person He dialogued with. He didn’t need help perceiving their inner worlds because He knew their starting points and their emotional struggles already. Usually He asked penetrating questions to help them see themselves as He already did.

As ministers of the gospel, however, we *do* need help. We need people to give us clues. Everyone wants to be known. Your invitational use of images can say to those you influence, “I want to hear you and learn about you.” When we invite people to engage in images, many begin to open doors into their souls that they may not have been able to articulate without images—as revealed in our earlier stories. When we hear them unpack their images with words, our job is to listen carefully and to draw out their inner realities and stories with open-ended questions flowing from a heart of compassion.

The offer of being heard resonates in a relational context of safety and trust. It is less about using the “right” materials than it is about how you use whatever resources you have by allowing those resources to create opportunities as you listen for open doors into their stories. People can sense when we are offering them an environment of grace—or an environment of criticism and judgment. Expect that some people will be carrying unresolved trust issues from previous mentors, pastors, groups, or family members. They don’t owe us their trust; we will have to earn it, just as Jesus did. He modeled for us how to invite people to trust us with who they really were.

The opposite is also true: Those who demand trust are rarely given it. The Pharisees closed people down in shame and hiddenness. Some of us may need to address unresolved issues of distrust in our relationships before we ask others to

expose their needs or take faith risks. Breaking down preexisting walls of distrust could also be as easy as volunteering to be the first one to share your story. This simple act sends several messages:

- “I’m on a journey just as you are.”
- “See, I don’t have it all together either.”
- “I trust you with this piece of my story and life.”

Don’t fear that you will lose their respect if you admit to struggles or brokenness. Just the opposite. Your willingness to open up will disarm others’ anxieties and communicate an environment where all can be real without fear.

We believe that the use of images to unpack stories in the midst of safe community can propel many people forward in their journey of spiritual transformation. We hope that this new dimension of ministry will broaden and make your mission in helping others more fruitful. But you will have to take a risk and try using some images first. We have given you some of our favorites here (especially chapters 8 and 9). You will probably discover your own.

Our longing is similar to what happened to Peter, James, and John when Jesus was transfigured right before their eyes (see Mark 9:2-8). They were amazed to see other spectacular images including Moses, Elijah, garments radiating light, and a cloud. But suddenly, they only saw Jesus! “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:9, NASB). We, too, hope that all the images we use will point to and ultimately converge before they fade away into the glorious light of Jesus forever.

# CONNECT MORE!

## **CONNECT Series Bible studies:**

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

*GOD: Connecting with His Outrageous Love*

*IDENTITY: Becoming Who God Says I Am*

*SOUL: Embracing My Sexuality and Emotions*

*RELATIONSHIPS: Bringing Jesus into My World*

*LIFE: Thriving in a Complex World*

*FREEDOM: Breaking the Power of Shame*

## **For Complementary Resources to the CONNECT Series:**

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Store\\_P4UF.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Store_P4UF.html)

- *Searching the Ordinary for Meanings*
- *The Shame Exchange: Trading Shame for God's Mercy and Freedom,* Steve & Sally Breedlove and Ralph & Jennifer Ennis
- *Personal Image Profile* – Not Currently Available
- *GOD: Can I Like Him?* Topical mini-studies – Not Currently Available
- *Finding Mercy* topical mini-studies – Not Currently Available
- *Relationships* topical mini-studies – Not Currently Available
- *The New Me* topical mini-studies – Not Currently Available



# Appendix

## Additional Ideas on Using Images in Your Ministry

### 1. DEVELOP YOUR OWN IMAGE LIBRARY

Enhancing your ministry to others through images launches you on a scavenger hunt of sorts. We suggest you start with household magazines, including some from your family members, neighbors, and colleagues at work. Libraries, schools, and hospitals usually discard older magazines on a regular basis; find out when that occurs and forage for images you might not find in your household magazines. Also consider newspapers, Google images, and so forth, showing a variety of emotions and situations. For images you get from magazines or newspapers, try to trim away all the words. To help you with this you might also invite friends or family to an image scavenger hunt party. This exercise in itself might create some interesting discussion!

Or, if you are not into magazines but have a color printer, we recommend subscribing to one of several excellent online royalty-free image sources such as:

- Dreamstime—[www.dreamstime.com](http://www.dreamstime.com)
- iStockphoto—[www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com)
- Photos.com—[www.photos.com](http://www.photos.com)
- 123rf—[www.123rf.com](http://www.123rf.com)
- Crestock—[www.crestock.com](http://www.crestock.com)
- Stock.XCHNG—[www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu)
- morgueFile—[www.morguefile.com](http://www.morguefile.com)

In addition, we have found that most group members are eager to contribute pictures to expand your library, so don't hesitate to ask them to bring their own

images. Or, to get started immediately, you might want to order the set of fifty images and suggested conversation starters from [www.mysoularium.com](http://www.mysoularium.com).

As you look for images, you may be tempted to only use “neutral” or happy images. Try not to “sanitize” your image library. You might inadvertently convey that it isn’t really okay to struggle—or at least not to admit it. Consider including some dark, disturbing, ugly, and edgy images especially as you engage with the younger generation and anyone who is lost and broken. We are trying to identify current realities and starting points for those we are ministering to or those we want our audience to influence.

And remember, images should not be used as a gimmick to slide you into a canned gospel presentation, but rather as bridges to help you cross from hopelessness to hopefulness. You can expect many (certainly not all) in the younger generations to be starting further away from the hope of the gospel, hence our advice to include darker, more disturbing and chaotic images along with some milder ones. These types of images often permeate their realities. From here, it becomes natural to move toward pictures and stories that show more and more hope. Also try to include pictures from various cultures and generations. These will more accurately represent the world in which we live.

Once you have a variety of images, you are set to go!

## 2. REFLECT ON BIBLICAL ART

As we touched on in chapter 9, meditating on Scripture and related art can also enrich your group’s time together in the Word as you “unlock” Bible stories together reflectively as well as analytically. Painters, sculptors, and other artists through the ages have interpreted almost every story in the Bible visually. You can find different websites that link biblical stories with scores of classical and contemporary works of art.<sup>1</sup> For your next small group Bible study, bring several color copies of corresponding artwork to reflect on as you also study and discuss the Bible story. Some of our personal favorites are:

SCRIPTURE	STORY	ART	ARTIST
Genesis 1-2	Creation	<i>The Creation of Adam</i> Fresco in Sistine Chapel	Michelangelo
I Samuel 17	David and Goliath	<i>David</i> sculpture	Michelangelo
Mark 4	Calming the Storm	<i>The Storm on the Sea of Galilee</i> painting	Rembrandt
Luke 10	Mary and Martha	<i>At Jesus' Feet</i> painting	Nathan Greene
	Any passage on hell	<i>The Gates of Hell</i> bronze door including <i>The Thinker</i>	Rodin
John 20	The Resurrection	<i>Les Disciples</i>	Eugene Burnand

Instead of the whole group reflecting on the same image, you could provide images of a different piece of art to each member for a variety of interpretations. The power of using art to unpack Scripture is that it invites us to step into the relational and emotional dynamics that lie at the heart of most stories—and lead us into the heart of God.

### 3. VISIT AN ART EXHIBIT

Whether the art is overtly religious or not, ask the God of beauty to speak to you from one or more pieces. Explore what moves you as either beautiful or ugly, and why. Better yet, create art yourself. When was the last time you gave yourself permission to sketch, draw, paint, quilt, sculpt, mold—or even doodle? Give it a try and then reflect on the experience.

#### 4. TALK WITH KIDS ABOUT THE IMAGES THEY ENCOUNTER

In chapter 3 we suggested reflecting on the interactive games you watch and what sexually explicit and violent images all do to your soul. What about their impact on those in your ministry and family? If we ministry leaders don't take the initiative to help others process these potentially damaging images in their worlds, then who will? Two-thirds of parents do not even set parental controls and monitor what their children are doing online.<sup>2</sup> While it might make everyone uncomfortable at first, some frank conversations about these images can deeply impact their spiritual journeys. The next time they play a video or online game, pause afterward to reflect on the images in the game. What messages, values, or themes were embedded in the game? Consider with them what God's Word may say on those themes and bring His perspective to your attention.

#### 5. STOP THE FLOW OF HARMFUL IMAGES INTO THE HOME

For those looking for help in blocking porn sites or sexually explicit junk mail, our recommendation is that they install a good filter like Covenant Eyes ([www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com)). This is a practical way to help them make a covenant with their eyes and not look lustfully at another person (see Job 31:1). That can be powerfully transforming. Then help them reflect with God on what draws them to those sites and the damage being done to their soul by such images. Also pray for the countless men, women, children, and families exploited and deeply wounded by the sex industry. When (not if) you inadvertently view an inappropriate, sexually explicit, or violent image, exercise your right to complain to the sponsor in writing or over the phone. Negative feedback influences sponsors as much as sales.

#### 6. CONSIDER A PERIODIC FAST FROM IMAGES

Consumption of rapid fire, image loaded media can super-excite the brain. This excitement can impair our ability to concentrate and distort our decision making abilities. Consider legal educator John Batt's thoughts regarding electronic media:

*MacLean's model, along with the work of other neuroscientist, suggests that electronic narrative may activate the triune brain by neurobinding all three biological computers. Electronic narrative gets inside the total human mind/self. It floods all three brain systems. Electronic narrative is the ultimate neuroelctochemical stimular. It produces total engagement. The images, action, motion, light, color, sound, emotional expressiveness, human conflict, and dramatic twists and turns coalesce into a particular story with a mesmerizing verisimilitude. When my students view electronic narrative, their consciousness is altered. I would call what happens "triune participatory awareness."<sup>3</sup>*

In our cultural context it is very difficult to escape from media/image glut. Over time we can develop a sense of dependency for having our brains super-excited with images. However, we encourage you to try periodic image fasts or fast from all technology.

Unplugging for a day may cause feelings of withdrawal that aren't pleasant. Start slow—maybe just part of a day—but try to build a habit of unplugging one or two days a week from the power of images and reconnect to a simpler way of life that is rich in its own way. To build this habit it may be helpful to find others close to you who can band together to encourage this reprieve from the glut of images.

What might we do without images? One option is to regularly spend a day apart with God in silence, solitude and Scripture. For more on this, see: [www.journeymates.org](http://www.journeymates.org).

## 6. ENGAGE IN ON-GOING RESEARCH WITH IMAGES

We are exploring two questions: First, "What motives people to decide to follow Jesus?" And second, "What motivates people to turn from following Jesus?" If this is a topic of interest to you, please send your brief thoughts and one or two images that depict your thoughts and feeling related to these two questions. Clearly state which image goes with which question. Though your responses will be held in confidence, it would be helpful to know your age, gender and ethnicity. Please send your response to: [ralphennis@gmail.com](mailto:ralphennis@gmail.com). In time, we'll post our findings at: [www.leadersandinfluencers.com](http://www.leadersandinfluencers.com)



## 7. SIGN UP FOR LAND OF THE LIVING ELETTER

I (Ralph) send out an eLetter with images, Scripture, reflections and questions. If you'd like to receive this periodic one-page eLetter please sign up at:  
<http://www.ralphennis.com/land-of-the-living-eletter.html>

# Land of the Living

eLetter from Ralph Ennis

In a world of profound and rapid change, we all must choose how to live. The Psalmist proclaimed in his time that he would "walk before the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 116:9). May we all walk into this lifelong journey!



## Labor to Rest

A labor to rest is prescribed for the people of God.

*There cometh therefore a rest to the people of God, for he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (Hebrews 4:9-11 KJV)*

As the world changes by leaps and bounds, where can we find a rest worthy of laboring? How can we labor to enter into rest? And how might belief be linked with labor and rest?

Put yourself in the above image. Are you resting, laboring or believing as you walk this beautiful coastline created by the true God?

Personally, I find that it takes a concerted work of belief to truly rest—to cast aside all distracting worries and trust in the presence and goodness of God Who is trustworthy and with Whom my soul can rest.

**Your Reflections ...**  
What can you take with you into this day of walking with God in the land of the living?

**Sharing with Others ...**  
Will you be a member, helper or encourager in a small group? Consider inviting the one who is to encourage you (or to walk with God in the land of the living).

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<http://www.ralphennis.com/land-of-the-living-eletter.html>

# Notes

## Introduction

1. For simplicity, we use the word “images” throughout unless otherwise noted) to refer to “still and/or moving captured images.”
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3. Alan Andrews, ed., *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 20120).
4. Avery T. Willis Jr. and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflong World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 20120).

## Chapter 1

1. Mark B. Kastleman, *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Science of How Internet Pornography Radically Alters the Human Brain and Body* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2001), 166.
2. Noah Adam, “Emmett Till and the Impact of Images,” *NPR*, June 23, 2004, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1969702](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1969702).

## Chapter 2

1. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010), 3.
2. Carr, 116-119.
3. Carr, 116-117, 119.
4. Carr, 10, 112.
5. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed., ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 2003), 112-113, quoted in Carr, 56-57, Carr, p. 93.
6. Quoted in Carr, op. cit., p. 111.

7. Avery T. Willis Jr. and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 98.
8. Carr, p. 93.
9. <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics>, then click on "Television." Bushman BJ, Anderson CA. Comfortably numb: desensitizing effects of violent media on helping others. *Psychological Science*. 2009 21(3):273-277
10. Mark B. Kastleman, *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Science of How Internet Pornography Radically Alters the Human Brain and Body*.
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. <http://www.safefamilies.org/sfStats.php>

### Chapter 3

1. Avery T. Willis Jr. and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 98.
2. Carr, 93.
3. Kyla Boyse, "Television and Children," University of Michigan Health System, August 2010, [www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/tv.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/tv.htm).
4. Mark Kastleman, *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Science of How Internet Pornography Radically Alters the Human Brain and Body* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2001).
5. Kastleman, 21.
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7. "Statistics on Pornography, Sexual Addiction and Online Perpetrators," *TechMission*, [www.safefamilies.org/sfStats.php](http://www.safefamilies.org/sfStats.php).

### Chapter 4

1. "Daily Media Use Among Children and Teens Up Dramatically from Five Years Ago," Kaiser Family Foundation, January 20, 2010, <http://kff.org/disparities-policy/press-release/daily-media-use-among-children-and-teens-up-dramatically-from-five-years-ago/>

2. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2010), 140.
3. Carr, 142.
4. Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* (New York, NY: Riverhead, 2002), 33.
5. Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 36.
6. "Empathy, College students don't have as much as they used to," University of Michigan News Service, May 27, 2010, [www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=7724](http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=7724).
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8. "Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years," Barna Group, March 6, 2009, [www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years?q=years](http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years?q=years).
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10. Steve and Sally Breedlove, Ralph and Jennifer Ennis, *The Shame Exchange: Trading Shame for God's Mercy and Freedom* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009). Available at: . [http://www.leadconsulting-usa.com/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&cPath=8&products\\_id=24](http://www.leadconsulting-usa.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=8&products_id=24)
11. Lisa Miller, "We Are All Hindus Now," *Newsweek*, August 15, 2009.
12. Line from "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley.
13. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 162.
14. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).
15. Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 166.
16. Lyons, *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*, 166.
17. Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: How a New Generation Is Restoring the Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 130–132.

## Chapter 5

1. For instance, Psalm 119:64 states, “The earth is filled with your love, O Lord; teach me your decrees.” Seeing and perceiving the earth filled with God’s love includes our non-verbal experiences on this earth as well as understanding the revealed love of God in Scripture.
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3. Steve Knight, “Imagination Is the Muscle of Meaning,” *Kingdom Journalism*, April 20, 2009, [www.knight.with.sim.org/wp/index.php/2009/04/20/imagination-is-the-muscle-of-meaning](http://www.knight.with.sim.org/wp/index.php/2009/04/20/imagination-is-the-muscle-of-meaning)
4. Quoted from *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. (Carol Springs, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), back flyleaf.
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 151–152, 161. Dallas Willard, “The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, Alan Andrews, ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 47.
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7. Jerusha Clark with Dr. Earl R. Henslin, *Inside a Cutter’s Mind: Understanding and Helping Those Who Self-Injure* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 56.

## Chapter 6

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## Chapter 7

1. This section was written with the assistance of Dr. Christopher Morton and Dr. Mark Overstreet.
2. “Christian symbolism,” Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_symbolism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_symbolism).

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4. "Lower Oddington—St. Nicholas Church," Britain Express, [www.britainexpress.com/counties/glouces/churches/Oddington.htm](http://www.britainexpress.com/counties/glouces/churches/Oddington.htm).
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10. Tim Keller, "Priorities—Embracing God's Global Urban Mission Multiplex" (presentation, Lausanne Congress, Cape Town, South Africa, 2010).
11. Gary Molander, "A License to Feel," Echo Hub, November 30, 2010, <http://echohub.com/posts/creativity/a-license-to-feel>.

## Chapter 8

1. These images are from *The New Me* (Not Currently Available)  
*The New Me* videos are available at:  
[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14).

## Chapter 9

1. *GOD: Can I Like Him? Topical Mini-studies* (Not Currently Available)  
There is a two-part video downloadable at  
[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471).
2. *Searching the Ordinary for Meanings*, by Ralph Ennis, Dennis Stokes and Judy Gomoll, with Christine Weddle, is available at  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)
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5. Avery T. Willis Jr. and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 18.

#### Appendix

1. For example, <http://www.bible-art.info>.
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3. John Batt, Law, Science and Narrative: Reflections on Brain Science, Electronic Media, Story and Law Learning. *Journal of Legal Education*, 1990, Vol. 19, page 41-42.

# List of Resource Links

For easy reference, see “Resource Links” that occur within the book at:  
[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/W1000\\_Resource\\_Links.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/W1000_Resource_Links.html)

## **Chapter One**

Page 35:

This exercise was adapted from “Searching the Ordinary for Meanings,” available at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)

## **Chapter Two**

Page 40:

Debbie on Using Mosaics (00: 03: 23)

Watch this video at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using\\_Mosaics.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using_Mosaics.html)

Page 56:

This exercise is an excerpt from “The New Me,” a downloadable topical mini-studies available at: Not Currently Available.

## **Chapter Three**

Page 74:

This exercise was adapted from the CONNECT series, “RELATIONSHIPS: Bringing Jesus into My World” Bible study available at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

## **Chapter Four**

Page 86:

At a recent training event, young people were asked to look through *The New Me* (Not Currently Available) and pick an image that represents how they usually feel about themselves.



Page 98:

This exercise was adapted from the “Freedom: Breaking the Power of Shame” Bible study available at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

## **Chapter Five**

Page 107:

Use the following link to visually experience the “silent” language of God:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Psalm\\_19\\_Video\\_Clip.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Psalm_19_Video_Clip.html)

Page 118:

This exercise is an excerpt from “The New Me,” a topical mini-studies.  
(Not Currently Available)

## **Chapter Six**

Page 136:

This exercise was adapted from the CONNECT series Bible study, “Freedom: Breaking the Power of Shame,” available at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

## **Chapter Seven**

Page 154:

This exercise was adapted from “Searching the Ordinary for Meanings,” available at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)

## **Chapter Eight**

Page 160:

Debbie on Using Modeling Clay (00: 03: 00) Watch this video at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Modeling\\_Clay\\_-\\_Video.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Modeling_Clay_-_Video.html)

Page 163:

*GOD: Can I Like Him?*

— two short videos available at:

[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471)

*Dear God: We Need to Talk about Pain and Suffering*

— 50+ page book with eight journal entries available at:

<http://www.ralphennis.com/my-resources.html>

(under “Spiritual Formation”)

Page 168:

You might also want to consider using the *Personal Image Profile* assessment tool for your group or team (Not Currently Available).

Page 171:

*The New Me* videos –

[https://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14](https://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14)

*The New Me* – topical mini-studies (Not Currently Available)

## **Chapter Nine**

Page 179

A resource available on the topic of God’s mercy and grace is the *Finding Mercy Topical Mini-studies* at: (Not Currently Available)

Page 180:

Resources previously referred to that will also work well in this situation are:

*GOD: Can I Like Him?* Two short videos

[www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471](http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CA644EB3EA836471)

*GOD: Can I Like Him?* Topical mini-studies (Not Currently Available)

*The New Me* videos –

[https://www.youtube.com/view\\_play\\_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14](https://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=2393F67DE1320C14)

*The New Me* Topical mini-studies (Not Currently Available)

Page 181:

*Searching the Ordinary for Meanings* is a resource with thirty-two different images. [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching\\_the\\_Ordinary.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Searching_the_Ordinary.html)

Page 189:

APPS FOR ANDROID:

GOD:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.GOD#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLkdPRCJd>

IDENTITY:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.navpressidentity#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLm5hdnByZXNzaWRlbnRpdHkiXQ>

Page 190:

Debbie on Journaling (00: 03: 33)

Watch this video on at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Art\\_Journaling.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Art_Journaling.html)

See *CONNECT* series at: [http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

Page 192:

APPS FOR ANDROID:

GOD:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.GOD#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLkdPRCJd>

IDENTITY:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.navpressidentity#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLDIxMiwiY29tLm5hdnByZXNzaWRlbnRpdHkiXQ>

Page 195:

Watch a 59-minute seminar on

“Story and Images in Communicating the Gospel” by Dennis and Ralph at:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using\\_Images.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Using_Images.html)

## **Chapter Ten**

Page 197:

Arvid’s Story (00: 03: 01)

Watch this video on YouTube at: <http://youtu.be/Dzlb3xQm-yY>

Page 202:

CONNECT Series Bible studies:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect\\_Series\\_2.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Connect_Series_2.html)

For Complementary Resources to the CONNECT Series:

[http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Store\\_P4UF.html](http://leadersandinfluencers.com/Store_P4UF.html)

## **Appendix**

Page 203:

Dreamstime—[www.dreamstime.com](http://www.dreamstime.com)

iStockphoto—[www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com)

Photos.com—[www.photos.com](http://www.photos.com)

123rf—[www.123rf.com](http://www.123rf.com)

Crestock—[www.crestock.com](http://www.crestock.com)

Stock.XCHNG—[www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu)

morgueFile—[www.morguefile.com](http://www.morguefile.com)

Page 207:

For more on this, see: [www.journeymates.org](http://www.journeymates.org)

Please send your response to: [ralphennis@gmail.com](mailto:ralphennis@gmail.com)

In time, we'll post our findings at: [www.leadersandinfluencers.com](http://www.leadersandinfluencers.com)

Page 208:

If you'd like to receive this periodic one-page eLetter please sign up at:

<http://www.ralphennis.com/land-of-the-living-eletter.html>

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For other works, thoughts and services from the authors see:

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[www.leadconsulting-usa.com](http://www.leadconsulting-usa.com)

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