

# **The Evangelical Imagination**



*How Stories, Images & Metaphors  
Created a Culture in Crisis*

**Karen Swallow Prior**



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**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Prior, Karen Swallow, author.

Title: The evangelical imagination : how stories, images, and metaphors created a culture in crisis / Karen Swallow Prior.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023002055 | ISBN 9781587435751 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493441914 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493441921 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Evangelicalism—United States. | Christianity and culture—United States.

Classification: LCC BR1642.U5 P75 2023 | DDC 277.308/3—dc23/  
eng/20230314

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023002055>

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Victorians, Evangelicals, and the Invitation*

Imagine, if you will, that you are in my classroom. We are studying Victorian literature, a subject I teach often, whether within the context of a general education survey class (the kind every college student is required to take) or an upper-level course filled with English majors.

The Victorian age (as well as the literature it produced) is named after Queen Victoria, who reigned in Great Britain from 1837 to 1901. The period's beginning is often marked at 1830, as this was the year the nation's first Reform Bill was introduced, setting off a series of social and political reforms that would define the age—from expansion of voting rights to increased protections for laborers. It was a heady age marked by rapid change, optimism, prosperity, and progress—all undergirded by the evangelical faith that had grown increasingly influential throughout the previous century.

In this imaginary class, we are reading a variety of literary genres, including essays, novels, poetry, and drama. We will read writers such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, Matthew

Arnold, Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy, and many others. (Some of these writers, and others, will appear in the pages that follow.)

If you are an evangelical Christian (as most of my students are), you will probably begin to notice something over the course of our study together. You will notice a pattern emerging from all this Victorian literature. You will see in both the texts and their surrounding historical contexts qualities strangely similar to many of the defining characteristics of modern American evangelical culture. And by seeing in that literature many of the values and beliefs prominent within American evangelicalism today, you might find yourself wondering whether some of the ideas that characterize today's evangelical culture are *Christian* as much as they are *Victorian*.

It is this recurring question that raised the idea for this book, one that explores the origins and continuing power of some of the primary images, metaphors, and stories of the evangelical movement that began around three hundred years ago. The Victorian period sits right in the middle of this story. Most scholars agree that evangelicals, who emerged a century before, created much of the ethos that defined the Victorian age and, as I hope to show in the pages that follow, this ethos defines much of evangelicalism today. As historian Timothy Larsen, who writes frequently on both Victorians and evangelicals, observes, "Almost all of the issues that we are wrestling with today that have salience for us the Victorians had a version of that conversation that is still ongoing."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in my own context—in the classroom and out, inside the church walls and outside of them—I've found that there is not enough of this conversation happening. Instead, the religious beliefs and cultural currents that birthed the evangelical movement in the eighteenth century and manifested as political and social values in the centuries that followed

exist now as unexamined assumptions swirling within the evangelical imagination.

If evangelicalism is a house, then these unexamined assumptions are its floor joists, wall studs, beams, and rafters—holding everything together but unseen, covered over by tile, paint, paper, and ceilings. What we don't see, we don't think about. Until something goes wrong and something needs replacement. Or restoration. Or reform.

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The evangelical house is badly in need of repair. We must confess, with Augustine, about ourselves and our movement, “My soul’s house is too meager for you to visit. It is falling down; rebuild it. Inside are things that would disgust you to see: I confess this, and I know it. But who’s going to clean it?”<sup>2</sup>

The crisis facing American evangelicalism today—manifest in increasing division, decreasing church membership and attendance, mounting revelations of abuse and cover-up of abuse, and an ongoing reckoning with our racist past and present—is one in which the decorative layers that have long adorned the evangelical house are being peeled away. Now we can see, some of us for the first time, the foundational parts of its structure. Some of these parts are solid. Some are rotten. Some can be salvaged. Some ought not to be saved.

Many have said that what has been exposed within the evangelical movement in recent days, months, and years is apocalyptic.

It is.

The biblical meaning of the Greek word translated into English as “apocalypse” is simply an *uncovering* or *revelation*. We often associate apocalypse with the end of the world



because of the vision given in the book of Revelation about future days. We also make this association because some moments of revelation in human, church, or personal history do seem like the end of the world. There are times when this particular historical moment—which has included crises in the church, the first global pandemic in a century, and deep political polarization—seems to portend the end of the world. But perhaps it's only, as the rock group R.E.M. put it, “the end of the world as we know it.” And maybe that's fine.

Many truths that have been hidden are being brought to light. Many deeds that have been covered up are being uncovered. Many assumptions that have been unexamined are being brought to the surface and scrutinized in order that we may consider whether they are rooted in eternal truths or merely in human traditions. In the process, Jesus is revealing more of himself. As he said to his Father in Matthew 11:25, “You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.” It is significant that the word translated as “revealed” in this verse is the Greek word for “apocalypse.”

Some of what is hidden from us is spiritual reality, divine truths that can be revealed to us only through God's divine power.

But some of what is hidden remains so because of our own limited human nature, along with our habits, practices, and traditions. Human beings and, cumulatively, human cultures develop language, stories, metaphors, images, ideas, and imaginations that shed light on some corners of reality only to cast shadows in other places. Every good story offers a slice of reality. Every true metaphor illuminates certain likenesses. Every beautiful image has a frame. Each of these reveals something but also leaves some-

Every good story offers a slice of reality. Every true metaphor illuminates certain likenesses. Every beautiful image has a frame.

thing out. We see through a glass darkly, as Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 13:12).

There is no limit to the things that fill the evangelical imagination. And there is, of course, no *one* evangelical imagination. There are dozens more subjects I could have chosen to cover in this book beyond those in the chapters that follow. And there are hundreds more examples of each of these I could have included. But these are the ones that I know—the images, metaphors, and stories that I have pondered, taught, examined, or questioned, and seen others do the same.

I must also note that I am not a historian. I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher. I am an English professor. I am a reader and writer who cares about the way imagination shapes our world and each of us. And I am an evangelical, one who has been formed by the surrounding culture—and cultures—just like everyone else. I am not attempting in these pages to outline a historical linearity, a doctrinal critique, or any *post hoc ergo propter hoc* claims. I know that correlation is not causation. The human imagination is not so neat as any of these.

In a way, what follows in these pages is simply my testimony. It is a picture of the evangelical imagination as I have found it over the course of years of researching, studying, reading, worshiping, and living and grappling with my own imagination—what fills it and fuels it.

The stories, metaphors, and images I identify in these pages as influential within evangelical social imaginaries are not strictly evangelical, of course. Nor are they uniquely Christian. They are certainly not exhaustive. They are simply part of the larger culture that has made evangelical culture—and that evangelicalism has made—for good and ill.

As you read about the images, metaphors, and stories I have chosen to illuminate as forming part of the evangelical imagination, as you consider with me how these things have

brought good and how they have been distorted or abused, I hope you will look for other ones around you. Let them be evocations. Let them invite your own examination. Examination is an act of love.<sup>3</sup> Look for the images, metaphors, and stories that fill your own imagination, your community's social imaginary, and your own cultural experience.

Weigh them against the eternal Word of God.

Weigh them against the truth, justice, and mercy to which he calls all his people.

Weigh them against what Dante calls “the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.”<sup>4</sup>

I make this invitation without asking you to close your eyes or raise your hand. In fact, keep them open. Look. See. Go forward, down the aisle, to the altar. Walk in confidence that God's foundation is true, the walls of the house he has built are strong, the steeple is upright, and all the windows will allow the light to stream in, now and for all generations to come.

# Made in His Image

## *Imagination, Imaginaries, and Evangelicalisms*

**M**any of us associate imagination with children’s playtime, creative problem-solving, and hobbies.

Imagination might seem to be merely a fun but optional exercise, enjoyable but indulgent. We also tend to think of it as an individual ability or gift. “Use your imagination,” we say. Or “She’s really imaginative,” we might observe about someone else curiously. Most of us aren’t likely to think of imagination as something arising from our communal experience and exerting tremendous influence on our social lives, let alone our religious beliefs and practices. But the power of the imagination is large, pervasive, and overwhelming. Imagination entails much more than our individual fancies and visions, and its hold on us reaches far beyond the limits of our own minds. The imagination shapes us and our world more than any other human power or ability. Communities, societies, movements, and, yes, religions are formed and fueled by the power of the imagination.

Evangelicals are no exception. Now, this is not to suggest that the Holy Scriptures or confessional creeds or cloud of great witnesses are figments of our imagination. By no means. Rather, the evangelical imagination—like any imagination at the heart of any culture—has been forming a particular kind of people, and those people have been helping to form the world for hundreds of years.

But what is the evangelical imagination?

First, we must consider the imagination itself. At its most literal level, the word “imagination” refers to the mind’s process of making an image: the act of imaging. In this way, imagination is simple. At this level, it is also very much an individual, solitary behavior.

Yet, much surrounds this image-making activity that includes far more than an individual making an image independently in one’s own mind. The images our minds make are drawn from the objects we perceive, just as the phenomena we perceive through our bodies come through the senses. As Owen Barfield explains, there’s “no such thing as an unseen rainbow.”<sup>1</sup> What we perceive depends on what makes up our surroundings. It also depends on what we are paying attention to. What we pay attention to derives from a host of experiences, associations, emotions, thoughts, practices, and habits. Do you have the habit of looking up when you walk? Then you will notice things above and around you. Or do you watch your feet to make sure you don’t stumble? Then you might be more likely to spot a four-leaf clover. Do you have the habit of staring at your phone as you go through your day? Then you will notice far less of the physical things around you. Just as our dreams are filled with the things that fill our days, so too is our imagination formed by the things we perceive. Reality

**Communities, societies, movements, and, yes, religions are formed and fueled by the power of the imagination.**

as we understand it is what registers. (And some of us have to see, hear, or read something half a dozen times before it registers!)

Barfield notes that we don't perceive anything solely through the sense organs but with our "whole human being," the being that makes meaning of what we perceive. He explains,

Thus, I may say, loosely, that I "hear a thrush singing." But in strict truth all that I ever merely "hear"—all that I ever hear simply by virtue of having ears—is *sound*. When I "hear a thrush singing," I am hearing, not with my ears alone, but with all sorts of other things like mental habits, memory, imagination, feeling and (to the extent at least that the act of attention involves it) will.<sup>2</sup>

## ■ Metaphors Are Life

The ability of the human mind to imagine—to make images that have meaning—reflects the marvelous fact that we are made in the image of God. We are the product of his imagination in a very literal—as well as metaphorical—sense. The ability to imagine is a reminder of the one in whose image we are made. One of the greatest philosophers on the imagination, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, characterizes the imaginative act as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even the incarnation—God in the image of human flesh—is a work of God's imagination, for Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). We who are made in God's image, from his imagination, reflect our Creator's image through our acts of imagination. Imagination engages our whole humanity: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. This truth is the starting point of any right understanding of the imagination, including its role, power, and significance.

Imagination is such a simple concept in some ways. Yet our ideas about the workings and wonders of the imagination have a long and complicated history.

Like all human abilities, imagination has been idolized and debased—and held in every valuation in between. At times, imagination has been understood as merely a brain function, while at other times it has been treated as mystical or even magical. Indeed, from the creation and fall told in Genesis, to the prohibition against graven images given in the second commandment, to the myth of Prometheus, the powers associated with the imagination were in ancient times often linked to human transgressions into powers reserved for the divine. Some of this mythology about the imagination carries over into today in the way we imagine artists to be mad geniuses or especially sensitive (or even weak) souls.

Painted in the broadest strokes, the history of how we imagine imagination consists of two parts. First, imagination was understood, generally, as a mirror, then later as a lamp (this pair of metaphors being made famous by literary critic M. H. Abrams's treatment of imaginative literature in a book titled *The Mirror and the Lamp*). Imagination as a mirror is manifest in the classical tradition, where imagination and its associated activities are understood primarily in terms of imitation or mimesis. For Plato, the idealist whose ideas were and continue to be influential, imitation is by its very nature inferior at best and dangerous at worst. Plato sees imitation as but a shadow of true reality, an illusory shadow having the power to lead us away from what is real if we mistake imitation for its source.

Plato's student Aristotle, however, disagreed with his teacher and argued powerfully in *Poetics* in favor of the value of the imitative arts. Aristotle saw in imitation both the pleasure of learning and the opportunity to practice through art the habits that lead to virtue.

But a radical shift in the way we think about imagination occurred in the modern age—not coincidentally, right around the time the evangelical movement began. With the Enlightenment, imagination came under closer examination, as did other human faculties and abilities. At the height of the Enlightenment, the imagination became an object of fascination for writers and philosophers, reaching its peak in published texts coincidentally (or not) right around 1776. Even the term “imagination” rose to its highest prominence in the eighteenth century, as a search on Google’s Ngram Viewer shows.<sup>4</sup> It might seem ironic that the age so closely linked to science, rationalism, and reason also brought the idea of imagination to the fore. But reason and imagination are by no means as opposed as they are commonly thought to be. What they share is in fact central to the ethos of human invention that is at the heart of the Enlightenment and the modern age it birthed. After all, the scientific revolution and all its discoveries were the fruit of the powers of the human mind. What the Enlightenment, the birth of the evangelical movement, and a changed understanding of the imagination share is their new emphasis on individual experience and the authority of that experience.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the varieties of individual intellectual experience and authority became a source of fascination and study as philosophers, poets, and critics developed particular interests in nuanced categories of intellectual abilities such as wit, fancy, judgment, and imagination. Imagination began to be seen as capable of far more than mere imitation. Imagination came to be understood as a faculty responsible for invention and creativity. This view took flight in the Romantic age in the following century, and imagination has never looked the same since. Furthermore, novelty—as a phenomenon and as a value in and of itself—also gained traction in the emerging modern age (we’ll explore that in greater



depth in chap. 5). Thus, the imagination’s ability to create and invent new (or seemingly new) things—rather than to merely imitate something already in existence—became a source of growing fascination.

As imagination became increasingly understood as a phenomenon connected to perception, it came to be conceived of more as a subjective experience (based on personal, sensory, emotional sensation) than an objective one (based on the mind’s ability to replicate an object outside itself). Imagination moved from being viewed as mechanistic to organic, from intellectual to sensory—not, of course, that any of these functions are entirely separate from the other; indeed, even these terms, being metaphorical to some degree, are also imaginary.

Because perception is the ground of imagination, the new philosophical field of aesthetics, which also arose in the eighteenth century, was closely tied to emerging ideas about imagination. Aesthetics—the philosophical study of beauty—is directly connected to sensory perception and therefore to subjective, bodily experience. The word “aesthetic,” which means “sensuous cognition,” first appeared in 1735. At the time, it was related not only to art and beauty but to all ways in which we experience “felt cognition.”<sup>5</sup>

While the objective world in all its entirety exists all around us, our imagination draws only from what we perceive. And we primarily perceive what we attend to. Just consider the way we can hear what someone is saying while we are texting someone else on our phone but moments later have no recollection of what they said. Or think of the way we might pass the same scene every day on our commute to work yet never notice it until something out

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of the routine draws our attention to it. This way of understanding the relationship between the objective world and our subjective experience—which constitutes the field of philosophy called phenomenology—now informs the way we think about both aesthetic experience and the imagination.

## ■ Perceiving Is Believing

In *Imagining the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith describes imagination as “a kind of faculty by which we navigate and make sense of our world, but in ways and on a register that flies below the radar of conscious reflection, and specifically in ways that are fundamentally aesthetic in nature.”<sup>6</sup> Smith further explains,

Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passional orientation to the world—affected by all the ways we’ve been primed to perceive the world. In short, our action emerges from how we *imagine* the world. And that shaping of our character is, to a great extent, the effect of stories that have captivated us, that have sunk into our bones—stories that “picture” what we think life is about, what constitutes “the good life.” We live into the stories we’ve absorbed; we become characters in the drama that has captivated us. Thus, much of our action is acting out a kind of script that has unconsciously captured our imaginations.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Smith says, “perception is already an evaluation.”<sup>8</sup> Again, we perceive what we pay attention to.<sup>9</sup> This is why Coleridge describes imagination as the “prime agent of all human perception.”<sup>10</sup> Imagination serves as a bridge between objective and subjective human experience. We act based on what we imagine about the objective, external world, yet we also imagine based on what we perceive and receive

from the world. As C. S. Lewis famously observed, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, we cannot desire what we cannot imagine. (We certainly can’t name that desire, anyway.) If we are to envision an expression of the Christian faith within our culture that is as true to Christ as can be, then we must imagine beyond the realities of our culture that limit our sight.

This meaning-making function of the imagination connects it to religion. While imagination helps us make meaning, our religion (even our rejection of it) is the ultimate arbiter of all the meanings we make. In creating “images out of the chaotic influx of our sense perceptions,” imagination constitutes “our fundamental mode of insertion in the world” and thus “has deep religious implications.”<sup>12</sup> For example, we might believe as a matter of religious doctrine that all human beings are made in the image of God. But how we imagine that belief inserting itself in the world—or how we ourselves insert that belief in the world—will reflect (or perhaps not reflect) that doctrinal teaching. Thus, the “function of imagination is such that it never merely copies the world or translates perceptions; it is a constantly active and creative faculty that shapes the world we perceive and that uses our hopes, fears, and other emotions in that shaping.”<sup>13</sup>

Human beings are, as Douglas Hedley writes in *The Iconic Imagination*, “deeply symbolic” creatures. “We are body and spirit, and the imagination is the unifying field of this duality rather than its dissolution.”<sup>14</sup> While some think of imagination as a flight from reality, what Hedley is saying here is that imagination is the bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. The imagination is not only “a mediating power” but

no less than “the ‘locus’ of revelation,”<sup>15</sup> not only spiritual revelation but the revelation of all that is encompassed by the Logos or ultimate reality named in John 1:1. Even the logic of a correct mathematical formula, for example, has no meaning apart from what the imagination reveals to be that meaning.

Clearly, imagination is not merely making an image. The images we make are drawn from what we attend to, and what we attend to are the things that already have meaning for us—and create more meaning too. The images we make arise from and make meaning out of our lives. It is impossible, then, to separate the role that our religious belief has in directing our perceptions and meaning-making from the role our perceptions and meaning-making have in directing our theological understanding.

## ■ **The Imagination and the Social Imaginary**

These theological implications of the imagination are both individual and cultural.

As examined above, imagination as a reflection of God’s image in all human beings is suggestive for how we treat the work of our own and others’ individual imaginations. Our own individual imaginations create dreams for the future, plans for our next vacation, conjectures about the meeting our boss asked to have tomorrow, and countless works of music, poetry, and art.

Collectively, the works of our imaginations reflect and create cultures. Sculptures uphold standards of beauty. Love songs shape our views of romantic love. Movies give us images of sexual encounters that establish new norms and expectations. “Poets,” as Percy Bysshe Shelley famously wrote in 1821, “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

While the work of imagination contributes to the making of a culture, a culture in turn provides individuals with a

precognitive framework—a framework that includes unconscious, unarticulated, and unstated underlying assumptions—that directs, shapes, and forms our thoughts and desires and imaginations in ways we don’t necessarily recognize. Again, think of the unseen parts that form the structure of a house. Philosopher Charles Taylor calls these frameworks “social imaginaries.” In his early work *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor defines the social imaginary as a culture’s shared pool of “images, stories, and legends” that shape one’s social existence and expectations and “the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>17</sup> The social imaginary forms a “common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life.” This “understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go.”<sup>18</sup> Put another way, our social imaginary is both descriptive and prescriptive. It makes a particular practice possible, and, in turn, “it is the practice that largely carries the understanding” forward.<sup>19</sup> Our practices, Taylor says, both reflect and maintain “self-conceptions” and “modes of understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

A culture is composed of both the ingredients we know and recognize—material artifacts, social and political relationships and institutions, and ideas and beliefs—and the unexpressed assumptions and attitudes that make up the social imaginaries therein. The autonomy and agency that the modern age has taught us to believe in (part of our social imaginary) fools us into ignoring the fact that we are shaped by the culture in which we exist in ways that can be difficult, if not impossible, to recognize.

Nearly a century ago, Virginia Woolf perceived this problem as she wrestled with the art of representing a life through memoir and biography: “Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes

from decade to decade; and also from class to class,” she wrote, pointing out the need to examine the “invisible presences” in our lives. “I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.”<sup>21</sup>

This concept has been more recently expressed in a 2005 commencement speech given by writer David Foster Wallace:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, human beings are not goldfish. The water we live in is language—*logos*. When the images we make from our imaginations emerge in our minds from the precognitive state, they accumulate meaning through language. Thus, while a certain distinction between image and word is helpful and important to maintain and understand, we must also consider the way in which both our individual imaginations and our social imaginaries are shaped by language. (In the beginning was the Word, after all.)

When the images we make from our imaginations emerge in our minds from the precognitive state, they accumulate meaning through language.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson make an argument similar to Charles Taylor’s when they describe what they call our “conceptual system”:

“conceptual system”:

The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities.<sup>23</sup>

As with Taylor’s social imaginary, Lakoff and Johnson explain that our conceptual system “is not something we are aware of.”<sup>24</sup>

But one way they propose that we goldfish can see the water we are swimming in, to invoke Wallace’s metaphor, is to examine language. While the most literal understanding of the imagination centers on image making, language is inseparable from the working of the human imagination. Language allows humans to make connections that exceed the merely instinctual level of a mouse and a lever or Pavlov and his dogs. This is where metaphor comes in. Lakoff and Johnson claim that “most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature.”<sup>25</sup> If the word “metaphor” brings unpleasant flashbacks to college literature classes, fear not. Metaphors, though they can be rich, complicated, and profound, are also simple and part of our everyday thinking. A metaphor, simply put, is a similitude, the seeing of one thing in terms of another. “You are a mist,” James 4:14 says, “that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” “The LORD is my shepherd,” Psalm 23:1 proclaims. We know instantly what these metaphors are saying. And we know, too, that they are not to be understood literally. Metaphors are so prevalent that it’s easy, like the goldfish in the water, not to see them. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” explain Lakoff and Johnson,<sup>26</sup> and “metaphoric reasoning” is the means by which human beings make sense out of experience.<sup>27</sup> Lakoff and Johnson show that the orientational metaphors that pervade our language express the way our spatial experience grounds all experience. As they point out, we *fall* asleep, we *wake up*, we *rise* early, we *fall* ill, we take *over*, we *decline* an offer, we *incline* our hearts, we stay on *top* of the situation, we feel *down*, we cheer *up*.<sup>28</sup> Other categories of common metaphors used to process human experience, Lakoff and Johnson show, include containment metaphors

(by which concepts are understood to be *in* or *out*), visual metaphors (“See what I mean?”), and entity and substance metaphors (in which abstract concepts are expressed in terms of quantity), as well as personification, metonymy, and countless other figures of speech.<sup>29</sup>

## ■ The Myth of the Machine

Even science—what we consider to be the most objective field of knowledge—is built on metaphors that create myths, which in turn orient our attention and shape our thinking, according to philosopher Mary Midgley in her book *The Myths We Live By*. It is important to recognize that myths are not “lies” or “detached stories.” Rather, myths “are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world.” Such symbols are “an integral part of our thought structure,” Midgley explains, offering as an example the imagery and metaphors related to machinery that have determined the way science has been approached since the seventeenth century. It’s notable that the English word “science” derives from a Latin root meaning “knowledge.” The fact that we at some point in the development of the English language repurposed a word that once referred to *all* kinds of knowledge to designate the specific field of *scientific knowledge* demonstrates the supreme role we have given to science. As Midgley says, “The way in which we imagine the world determines what we think important in it, what we select for our attention among the welter of facts that constantly flood in upon us.” Our “official, literal thoughts and descriptions” emerge out of the thought structure built by symbols and imagery, not the other way around.<sup>30</sup>

An everyday example of how this Enlightenment-era machine metaphor persists comes from a friend who has a daughter with Down syndrome. My friend heard someone



observe that a classmate was “low-functioning” in comparison to my friend’s child. This well-intentioned comment made my friend realize that talking about any person’s abilities in terms of “functions” is dehumanizing because it serves “to compare them to a machine.” When we use language such as “functioning” to describe human beings, my friend wrote, “we play into the dehumanizing rhetoric of modernity.”<sup>31</sup> We treat ourselves, as Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, as if we were “created in the likeness of a machine rather than in the likeness of God.”<sup>32</sup>

This hiddenness of the metaphorical nature of language contributes to a phenomenon that linguists call “hypocognition.” Hypocognition describes experiences and concepts that have little or no representation in words (whether in a particular language or within a culture) and therefore remain under-recognized, unarticulated, and even unseen. They fly under the radar, so to speak. Hypocognition involves not only concepts that are “accepted but unexamined” but also those that obscure what is left out. In short, hypocognition refers to the “unknown unknowns.”<sup>33</sup>

I want to pause here to emphasize this concept of hypocognition, because it is essential to this book. To examine previously unexamined assumptions is to acknowledge not only that there are things we don’t know— aspects of reality yet hidden to us— but also that there are things we don’t even know that we don’t know.

Reality as we conceptualize it is shaped by the habits of our language, which includes the things we have words for and the things we don’t have words for.<sup>34</sup> This is where categories and labels, so ubiquitous in the modern age and helpful in many

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ways, also leave out aspects of *reality* that the *terms* leave out. But this is also why the language of metaphor is so helpful: because metaphor—along with symbol, analogy, and all kinds of figurative language—points to connections and similarities without closing borders. (This is why reading literary works—which use language in figurative ways—develops the ability to see unexamined assumptions. It’s similar to the way an experienced builder can spot with a glance a hidden structural flaw that has gone unnoticed by an inhabitant for years.)

Philosopher and activist Cornel West offers another description of the social imaginary, one also rooted in language. What West calls “the structure of modern discourse” consists, he writes, of “the controlling metaphors, notions, categories, and norms that shape the predominant conceptions of truth and knowledge in the modern West.” He says that these elements of modern discourse “are circumscribed and determined by three historical processes: the scientific revolution, the Cartesian transformation of philosophy, and the classical revival.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the very things that have formed what Taylor calls “a secular age.” These elements that comprise the structure of our thinking, West argues, “produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, specific conceptions of truth and knowledge, beauty and character, so that certain ideas are rendered incomprehensible and unintelligible.”<sup>36</sup> Like a door, language, along with the structures it builds, lets some things in and leaves some things out.

What does all this have to do with the role of imagination in evangelicalism?

First, I hope to have shown—ever so briefly—just how central imagination is to all of us every day. Imagination encompasses far, far more than creative works of art or ingenious inventions, the sorts of things with which we tend to associate the term “imagination.” Imagination is central

to the way we think, the way we go through our days, and even the way we believe and enact those beliefs. If we think about imagination as, in its essence, the way our minds form images, it's important to recognize that the materials from which these images are made are not entirely of our own choosing. For example, I can imagine what my travel next week will be like in a way that someone living two hundred years ago could not have imagined. In addition to my cognitive thoughts about this travel will come various precognitive feelings, impressions, and (for me anyway) anxieties. (It took me a long time to realize that being sick to my stomach days before a trip was because of the trip! My body reacts in ways my mind doesn't always recognize.) We are born into communities and societies that have their own languages, practices, values, beliefs, associations, metaphors, and stories. We inherit all of these structures, and they provide molds that help to shape the way we think (and feel) about our experiences. This molding often exists without our even being aware of it—at the precognitive level. A conceptual system is like a field that has been prepared (or not) to receive and grow certain seeds. We can think of a conceptual system, or a social imaginary, as a kind of perceptual ground that has been made more fertile for some impressions and images than others. It's fruitful to reflect, too, on how the Bible prepares our perceptual ground by using language (inspired by God) in ways that invite from us heightened perception and imaginative response, preparing our perceptual ground for the reception of its truth.

Second, to be an evangelical is to inherit social imaginaries that have been developing for as long as evangelicalism has existed as a coherent movement. That movement, in turn, participates in the longer history of the modern age. Of course, I must define what I mean by “evangelical.”

## ■ What Is an “Evangelical”?

As a result of the 2016 election, the term “evangelical” for many has taken on a new—and to some, unshakable—association with American politics. But the evangelical movement is much older than 2016 (it originated in the early eighteenth century), and it began, and continues, far outside the borders of America. One researcher estimated that in 2020, there were 660 million evangelicals around the world, 93 million of whom are in the United States.<sup>37</sup> In short, evangelicalism is a movement that is nearly three hundred years old with a global presence that dwarfs that in America.

The movement that would later be called “evangelical” began in England in the early decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> It’s crucial to understand that evangelicalism arose within a context of a complacent, cultural Christianity in a country in which Christianity had been for a couple of centuries the official religion, with an established state church. Within this deadened traditionalism—perhaps a replay of the dead traditionalism of the earlier church that had brought about the Reformation—some recognized the need for a spiritual awakening both within individuals and within the church. Two of the most prominent of these leaders were John Wesley (1703–1791) and George Whitefield (1714–1770), who brought about tremendous revival in England and America. Refusing to adhere to the cold traditionalism of the Church of England, warmed by what came to be called a “religion of the heart,” Wesley and Whitefield took their preaching to the open air when refused by the church. Masses of people heard, and the evangelical movement was born (see fig. 1).

Because the movement, also called the Evangelical Revival, was not limited to any church or denomination (and indeed was scorned by many of them), evangelicalism was never unified or defined by particular doctrinal distinctives

but rather constituted a spirit that Christians across denominations could accept or reject. (Eventually, it birthed denominations reflective of its emphases.) The most widely accepted definition of “evangelical” is given by historian David Bebbington, one accepted by the National Association of Evangelicals, and commonly called the Bebbington quadrilateral:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a life-long process of following Jesus
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity<sup>39</sup>

These characteristics described by Bebbington apply equally to politically liberal and politically conservative Christians, to those for whom “social reform” means the abolition of the slave trade or the abolition of abortion or the death penalty.

The National Association of Evangelicals expresses these points in less technical language, often used by researchers and pollsters:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.<sup>40</sup>

Because Bebbington begins his analysis of evangelicalism with its roots in Great Britain, his definition is Anglocentric in a way that is not reflective of global evangelicalism today. In the *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, Timothy Larsen offers an alternate definition, one that better accommodates the growth of the evangelical movement around the world. Larsen defines an evangelical as:

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;
5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.<sup>41</sup>

Larsen argues that because some pre-Reformation figures in church history could easily fit Bebbington's definition and because evangelicalism is a distinctly Protestant movement that clearly arose from the revivals mentioned in the second point, his first characteristic needs to be part of the definition. Larsen further explains that he considers conversionism central to Bebbington's definition as part of the work of the Holy Spirit expressed in his fifth characteristic.

John Stackhouse counters these definitions by offering an interesting alternative, arguing that evangelicalism is essentially a style within larger Christianity. "Christianity in the

modern era” can be seen in “three main styles: a conscientious maintenance of the past, a determined freedom toward the present and future, and a way between the two.” Evangelicalism is the “third way” within Protestantism, between conservatism and liberalism. Although rooted in both tradition and the “text at the heart of that tradition,” Stackhouse explains, “evangelicals feel free to appropriate the tradition selectively in terms of what they see to be the core of Christianity and then innovate as necessary in order to fulfill their mission.”<sup>42</sup>

Of course, most people who belong to evangelical churches don’t define themselves according to these academic definitions. Most laypeople aren’t even aware of them, including those surveyed by pollsters outside voting booths. In general, however, these definitions, though broad, set evangelicals apart from Catholics, most traditional mainline denominations, and any traditions that elevate personal experience or revelation above Scripture. And all of these definitions form the foundation of the evangelical house, whether seen or not.

## ■ A Rose by Any Other Name

Because of the way in which the word “evangelical” has become connected with partisan politics in recent years, some are questioning whether the label has reached the end of its usefulness in the church, while others are choosing to reject the label altogether.

Writing about a recent dustup over the definition of evangelical and who might rightly (or wrongly) be described as one, one Christian historian draws on Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in observing that evangelicalism is “an imagined religious community.” There are, she argues, “many evangelicalisms,” and they are “imagined” in the sense that it “has always been a dynamic, fluid movement, or series of movements, imagined and maintained through networks,

alliances and authority structures, each drawing and enforcing the boundaries of ‘evangelicalism’ for varying purposes.”<sup>43</sup> Who or what an evangelical is differs if that question is being asked by a church historian, a pastor, a politician, a pollster, or the marketing director of a book publisher.

Of course, most labels are imaginary, as elastic as language itself. Labels are tools that are both helpful and limiting. Whether or not one goes by the label “evangelical,” or whether the label goes by the wayside at some point, there still exists a group of Christians here in America and around the globe, within various denominations, who believe Christ is their personal Savior, the Bible is God’s authoritative Word, Christianity can change lives, and that message is worth sharing. We have a history that cannot be rewritten. But that history can be better understood in the present as we write the future.

While there are many approaches and angles to consider in understanding that history, one that has not been examined often or closely enough is the evangelical imagination. By this, I really mean the evangelical social imaginaries, the collective pool of ideas, images, and values that have filled our books, our thoughts, our sermons, our songs, our blog posts, and our imaginations and have thereby created an evangelical culture.

American evangelicalism in particular is shaped by a social imaginary that reflects the longer history of the movement as well as more recent history. As Willie James Jennings demonstrates so thoroughly in *The Christian Imagination*, “The deeper reality of theology and theological identity” is “hidden beneath” our history.<sup>44</sup>

Evangelicalism, like America, is a product of the modern age, in addition to being a movement of the Spirit. It is, perhaps, a paradox that this “religion of the heart” was born from the age of reason. Indeed, it reflected the spirit of the modern age, which, like evangelicalism itself, emphasized the “new and improved,” individual experience, the authority of the



written word, and the promise of progress. Early in the twentieth century, the American evangelical movement gained traction as a sort of middle way that emerged between the fundamentalist/liberal split. The term “evangelical” reached peak usage in the middle of the eighteenth century before steadily declining until it was resurrected about a century later in America.<sup>45</sup> The retrieval of the term is largely owing to the rise of Billy Graham and his decision to adopt the term as a way of distinguishing his “big tent” Protestantism from the increasingly separatist fundamentalists.<sup>46</sup> In the midst of these controversies, evangelicals staked out a spot within American Christendom that claimed adherence to the traditional orthodoxy that liberal Christians increasingly rejected while attempting to eschew the anti-intellectualism that characterized the fundamentalist movement. Events in the early and mid-twentieth century resulted in a division between Christians who identified as fundamentalists and those who, eschewing both fundamentalism and mainline liberalism, began increasingly to call themselves evangelicals.

## ■ Apostles of Imagination

In *Apostles of Reason*, Molly Worthen examines the history of ideas, particularly those around authority, which have formed American evangelicalism as we know it today. She sees as central to evangelical existence the tensions inherent in a movement emphasizing individual, subjective experience while being based on the external, objective authority of God and his Word. By Worthen’s account, evangelicalism is characterized by competing claims of authority. Evangelicals “are the children of estranged parents—Pietism and Enlightenment—but behave like orphans,” she writes. “This confusion over authority is both their greatest affliction and their most potent source of vitality.”<sup>47</sup> One fruit of this confusion is a “fraught

relationship between reason and imagination.”<sup>48</sup> She writes, “If American evangelicals do not share a single mind, they do share an imagination.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than speak of an “evangelical mind,” as many historians and critics are wont to do, Worthen suggests it “may be wiser to speak instead of an ‘evangelical imagination.’” She explains,

In every individual, the imagination is the faculty of mind that absorbs ideas and sensations as fuel to conjure something new. It is a tool for stepping outside oneself or plunging into egocentric delusion. But we might also speak of the imagination that a community shares, no matter how furious its internal quarrels: a sphere of discourse and dreaming framed by abiding questions about how humans know themselves, their world, and their God.<sup>50</sup>

The ingredients of the modern imagination and the evangelical imagination may not be universal or eternal, but they are pervasive and formative. The elements of the social imaginaries of the evangelical movement explored in the chapters that follow are not exhaustive, but they are representative and, to my thinking, central to what has formed the evangelical imagination for three hundred years.

Of course, the images and ideas found within the evangelical social imaginary don’t necessarily belong to evangelicalism alone. Some, in fact, are part of the larger modern social imaginary and have become part of the evangelical imagination because evangelicalism is, as later chapters will show, a product of modernity. Because I am writing within the current evangelical context, some of these ideas may be as representative of America as they

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are of evangelicalism. The fact is that twenty-first-century American evangelicalism can hardly be separated from either the modern age or the American Dream. As Jennings says in *The Christian Imagination*, “Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination.”<sup>51</sup> It is not simply that Christianity and evangelicalism are infected by other ideologies and identities—it’s also that too often we don’t recognize their undue influence on our beliefs, narratives, images, traditions, and institutions.

Wherever our evangelical imaginations are informed and formed by modernity, Romanticism, Victorianism, or any *-ism* other than the tenets of our faith, the disease will fester. A central goal of this book is to help tease out the elements of the evangelical social imaginary in such a way that those elements that are truly Christian can be better distinguished from those that are merely cultural. This also means that it is hardly possible, as noted above, to talk about evangelicalism rather than evangelicalisms. This now-global movement is not contained by the qualities and characteristics of a George Whitefield, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, or any of its other founders and leaders.

This is not to say that all that is cultural is bad—or good. Human beings exist in culture, and that is by God’s design. (Otherwise, he would have had us skip this part of human existence before he brings the new heaven and the new earth.) Nor are these images and ideas necessarily consistent with one another. In fact, they may contradict not only each other but even, at times, more clearly biblical ideas. But this is the nature of a conceptual system. The precognitive notions that populate our imagination come from various sources and take various expressions. The social imaginary or conceptual system is similar to what we might encounter during a commercial break on television. During those two minutes, we might see ads for fresh pizza, the latest model sports car, a financial

investment firm, and bikini-clad women enjoying a Caribbean cruise. There is no logic to tie together these tantalizations (except that they indeed aim to tantalize). They even work against one another, inasmuch as pizza works against the bikini body depicted, and expensive cars deplete finances. But all of the images seep into the viewer's imagination, leaving the mind, consciously or unconsciously, to work them out. Thus, our very desires are ordered—if not produced—by the power of our imaginations and the social imaginary that is our context.

As James K. A. Smith explains, “It is because I imagine the world (and my place in it) in certain ways that I am oriented by fundamental loves and longings. . . . My longings are not simply ‘chosen’ by me; they are not self-generated ‘decisions.’ . . . We don’t choose desires; they are *birthed* in us.”<sup>52</sup> The social imaginary primes us even before we make any decision on our own. Gaining our bearings requires us to first recognize that we have been oriented—much the way that the one who is “it” is blindfolded, spun around, and left flailing. Only when the blindfold is removed will we see what direction we are facing, and only then can we decide which turns to take as we move forward.

The metaphors, images, and stories we live by orient us. To recognize these metaphors, images, and stories—and to understand their power as part of the imagination we share—is to remove the blindfold and to see.