

# *Shaping the Imagination*

*By Jim and Shelley Hendry*

**Imagination**—“the action of imaging or forming mental images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses . . . the power of reproducing images stored on the memory under the suggestion of associated images.”

**Imagine**—“to form a mental image” from Latin *imaginari*—“to picture oneself . . .” (The American College Dictionary)

*O be careful, little eyes, what you see . . .*  
*O be careful, little ears, what you hear . . .*  
*O be careful, little hands, what you do . . .*  
*O be careful, little feet, where you go . . .*  
*O be careful, little mind, what you think . . .*  
*For your father up above is looking down in love.*

Of all the topics about which we at His Image Ministries feel the strongest, we must honestly say that shaping the moral imagination of our children is one of the most important issues we desire to address when writing to or speaking with parents. We feel very strongly that the child’s moral imagination presents a greater guiding factor than perhaps any of us would realize.

It has been said that we will be different this time next year based on the books we read and the people we meet. We heartily concur, and we would add the following: the ideas we encounter, the images we view, and the stories we hear. As God’s Word reminds us, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7)

We are reminded that thought precedes action and character and life purpose. “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure in his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh.” (Luke 6:45)

In this article we would like to touch on the highlights from our lecture “Shaping the Imagination.” We hope that this article will help you gain a vision for protecting your children’s moral imagination and cultivating their spiritual life by prayerfully, carefully, and zealously placing in your children’s minds that which is excellent and protecting them from those things which could in any way be harmful. While we recognize that most parents have this goal, we want to briefly elaborate on some of the details of the forming of the moral imagination and its powerful potential for directing an entire life.

Let us begin by considering a few stories that practically illustrate the principle of shaping the moral imagination. Many of us heard, with horror and great grief, the testimony of Ted Bundy, convicted serial killer who was put to death in Florida for his crimes against women. In a chilling interview, Bundy accepted full responsibility for his actions and concurred with civil authorities that he served the strictest punishment that society could mete out, yet he warned the audience that as long as the kinds of materials that corrupted his life (detective magazines, pornography, and violent pornography) were allowed to remain in communities, the problem would never be solved. He went on to recount how, although he had been raised in a stable home, his exposure to explicit materials led him gradually to the point where merely looking at pornography (and that of an increasingly violent nature) no longer satisfied him. He had to *act out* the images he had stored in his mind.

Equally chilling was an account of a young boy in California, who through access

to dial-up pornographic telephone lines perpetrated heinous molestation against a very young girl. When he was interviewed, it was realized that, although he had not been exposed to *visual* pornographic materials necessarily, the images had been created in his mind by what he had heard described on the tape. So it is through the eye gate and the ear gate (as described in *The Holy War* by John Bunyan) that the access to man's soul is gained.

On a lesser scale, many of us could testify that images and sounds seen and heard up to fifteen, twenty, thirty, or forty years ago have left their indelible mark on our minds. And, try as we may, we cannot erase those images. These very images, whether deliberately or innocently placed in our minds, may now be the very weapons that Satan uses to torment us with temptation, seeking to bring about our destruction. One of the difficulties is that once the images are placed in our minds, it is well nigh impossible to then prevent them from being brought up on the screen of our minds and replayed over and over again.

We distinctly remember one time attempting to counsel a woman regarding her deteriorating marriage. We knew she spent her days watching soap operas, and when we asked her candidly about them, her husband interjected, "And she acts just like those women on the soap operas." Could it not be said that today's teens, as was the case in our own lives, are acting out (whether consciously or unconsciously) the images with which they have filled their minds (movies, videos, and magazines)? A recent television program on teens' involvement in open immorality clearly

revealed by the youths' own testimony and experiences how they have been devastated by the images bombarding them. And in the absence of any images patterned after the Word of God, what else can we expect? They were simply living out and imitating what they had seen in film and print!

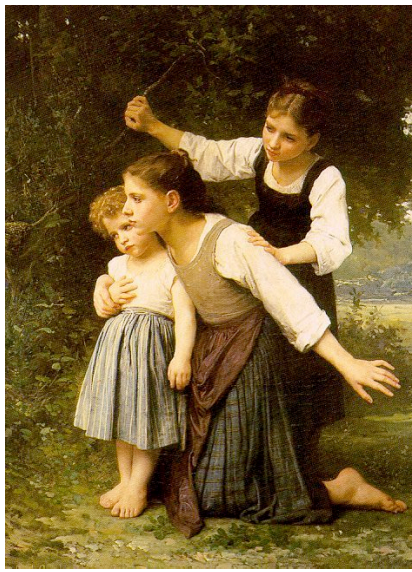
Many would argue that we can remain unaffected by these images, and that only certain individuals have a propensity to mold their lives after these images (for example, those who have no inward reality to counter these images). One need but

casually look at the changes in women's apparel and behavior in the last few years to see that, of a truth, the media is shaping our entire generation, and that to a frightening degree. And sadly, is the church radically different anymore? Can she be, if she is regularly viewing these same images?

But God's Word testifies that "as a man thinketh, so is he." (Prov. 23:7) Furthermore, those images that clearly depict sin and allow for vicarious sinning on the

part of the viewer clearly violate the Biblical principle of II Cor. 10:5: "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and *bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.*" Paul also warns us not to "be partakers of other men's sins; keep thyself pure." (I Tim. 5:22)

It is interesting to note that in the days of Noah, the Bible records that "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every imagination of the thoughts of his heart* was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5) Of course, we realize that Cain slew Abel without the benefit of the corruption of television.



*O be careful, little eyes, what you see*

R-rated movies, or MTV because the imagination of fallen men is evil; however, we are discussing in this particular article the importance of the Christian not deliberately filling his mind with images that dishonor God. If people are prone to those sins without the media, why make it worse?! And equally, if not more important, let us beware that we not simply clean house and seven demons worse than the first come in, but rather that we gain a vision for the life-shaping literature and experiences that will help orient one's mind and heart toward God and His ways, and prepare for a life of seeking to advance His glory in all the earth.

Today, unfortunately, even the consciences of most Christians have become dull if they have been subjected to the tremendous proliferation of evil via media that have abandoned nearly all standards of decency and that usually portray purity as "contemptible" and evil as "thrilling." So now, as many Christians' consciences become more and more desensitized, we see believers participating in questionable activities that even unbelievers would not have condoned sixty years ago. Furthermore, no longer are most Christians diligently seeking to fill their minds with the Christian classics—the heroic exploits of the saints of old, the testimonies of God's miraculous works throughout church history, and the stories of men, women, boys, and girls living Biblically in contrast to their culture.

When God's Word commands us to "keep our heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23), then we must consider how the heart and imagination

work hand-in-hand in deciding one's responses to the situations all around him.

And more importantly, have we *deliberately* chosen Godly images for our minds? To be specific, if we have filled our minds and imaginations with scenes of Joseph fleeing sin, or Daniel in the lion's den, or David Livingstone slogging through the steamy jungles of Africa to bring the gospel, or a young woman pledging her purity with the token of a ring at a special ceremony with her parents—then our responses to the issues and temptations of life will be very different than if we have filled our imagination with scenes where sin is glorified, justified, or minimized, and wrong is made to look as right. Surely there can be fewer issues of greater importance with regards to living a life of holiness unto the Lord than how we shape our



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imaginations.

With the issue of protecting our imaginations at least briefly addressed, let us go on to the shaping of our imagination for Godliness. How wonderful that the Christian life *can* be characterized by a joyful and diligent partaking of those things that are preparation for Godliness, which, in turn, strengthens the appetites for those things. By so doing we choke out (or at least minimize) the appetite for those things that debase, corrupt, weaken, and ultimately disintegrate the soul.

Think of how, for instance, a young person's life can be shaped for Godly service by reading great Christian biographies, for then they see over and over again men and women whose Godly life purpose was the dominating factor in

deciding their life's course, decisions, and actions and reactions to life. As we read how God worked in other's lives, our own imaginations can be enlivened toward a life far beyond our present capacity even to envision; it brings experiences and perspectives to our mind and life that would not occur there otherwise.

We think particularly of imaginative play as we've seen it reflected in the lives of our own children. When our first-born son was as young as 2 ½, he regularly would act out the characters in *Pilgrim's Progress* on walks, simply because that story had been read to him so many times. We can still see our young children outside pretending to give out gospel tracts, speaking "Chinese," because of watching a film about Hudson Taylor. Our daughters' first interest in nursing came about following their viewing of a movie on the life of Hudson Taylor and the gracious and loving bedside manner of Hudson's wife Maria.

We can also see how our own lives have been dramatically shaped over the last ten years by reading stories of great men and women of God and having a perspective on life, eternal values, and relationships with men and women that would never have come to us out of our own backgrounds and experiences.

We think, for example, of the story we read as a family of Eric Liddell, the famous Scottish runner who stood for Christ, and how he would stand at the starting line and shake hands with the men with whom he was to compete and say to them, "May the best man win." We think, too, of the wonderful stories of dedicated, Godly mothers and their responses to their children, and to their friends, and to the difficulties that came their way and how these stories have shaped our imaginations in a way dramatically different than our personal backgrounds or present experiences.

And the beautiful thing is that the process of shaping the imagination can be quite exciting as we partake of the finest of Christian literature, poetry, and testimonials, and seek the Lord for the renewing of our minds. Then, we can also help shape the imaginations of those whom we come in contact as we act (consciously or unconsciously) upon what we have placed in our minds.

Let us be diligent, by choosing how we shape our imaginations, to write "Holiness unto the Lord" upon our foreheads. Let us not simply curse the darkness, but light thousands of candles as we remember the saints of old and profit by their example. And as we profit, so will the watching world who lives in perpetual spiritual darkness.

So, out of pure love for the Lord Jesus, a commitment to the strengthening of the brethren, a desire to protect and prepare our children as set apart for the Lord, let us honestly endeavor to raise the banner of holiness unto the Lord for *His* glory and for the sake of His own dear ones.

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