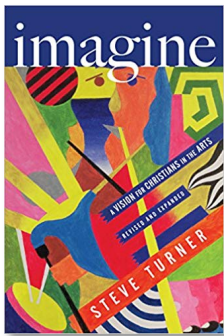


# [Review] *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts*, by Steve Turner



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Christian artists often face the question of what message they are sending. In the first edition of Steve Turner's *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (2001), he advocated that art does not need to be "preachy" but can share life from a Christian perspective. In this revised and expanded edition, he continues to drive that vision forward for Christian artists who are in "the mainstream arts rather than in the religious subculture" (9) and adds supplementary discussion questions that strengthen the application for readers. Interweaving the voices of various artists, past and present, in the public sector, Turner wants to challenge the thinking of Christians who are producing arts specifically for a Christian subculture. As an alternative, he emphasizes the importance of being intentional in sharing life with the wider artistic community.

Drawing from a combination of influences and his experiences as a poet, writer, music critic, and former student at L'Abri, Turner's *Imagine* is an artistic application of Blamire's *The Christian Mind*.<sup>1</sup> Turner demonstrates a wide range of thinking Christianly about how believers should engage the arts. He continues to challenge his readers to do the same in this new edition. The 15-year gap between the book's editions has seen changes in how the church thinks of the arts. This new edition implies the possibility of further transformation in that thinking. In the first chapter, Turner expands the discussion with the vision he himself is imagining. "I don't believe every artist who is a Christian should produce art that is a paraphrased sermon," Turner says. "A lot of Christian art is for the sake of art. But because art is also a record and reflects the

<sup>1</sup> See Harry Blamire, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).



questions and anxieties of the time, I would like to see contributions that reflect a Christian understanding of that time. I also would like to see them in the mainstream arts rather than in the religious subculture” (9).

Turner’s purpose is not to encourage all Christian artists to enter the mainstream arts. Rather, the book is a reconsideration of how we think of the arts as the church, perhaps causing some in Christian arts to pursue activity in mainstream society. This text is not only for professional artists but for all Christians, even those who do not think they are “artistic.” Many of the questions Turner considers can help the church learn how to support artists within the church.

In chapter 2, Turner continues his conversation about the church’s thinking about the arts, giving examples of its struggles. Turner’s thoughtful discussion carefully guides the reader toward understanding the place of the arts within the sphere of the church and the world. He helps readers navigate thinking about the world holistically, correcting the church’s tendency to separate itself from the arts rather than “reflecting a Christian understanding of that time” (29), shielding itself from influence rather than proactively being an influence. This leads to Turner’s consideration of the church, the world, and artists in the third chapter. He argues that the separation between the church and the world often encourages the church to believe that if art is not for the church then it is not for the glory of God.

In chapter 4, Turner expounds on Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). A key observation he makes is that CCM is the only musical category based on lyrics and not musical style (62). Thus, for musicians producing and performing CCM, the role of music is focused more on the topic governing the words, rather than on the style of art present in the music the words are sung to. He observes that in CCM “the listener is not meant to be enriched but changed. Success is gauged not in terms of critical appreciation but in souls saved” (63). For me, this chapter made the most convincing argument of all—even for people who may not consider themselves artists—because Turner identifies how this dichotomy affects the way we “reach” people. We tend to distance ourselves from the world, making dichotomies of everyday matters that should unite us with the people we are called to share Christ with. Turner argues instead that the artist’s goal should not be to save souls: “Christian songwriters are encouraged to ignore the ordinary things of life because they don’t appear to provide the obvious opportunities to ‘witness’” (66). This is a theme Turner builds on—the opportunities that artists have to engage the Christian life expressed in the public forum, addressing topics of everyday experience, without the need to convert their audiences.

In chapter 5, Turner addresses the representation of the arts in the Bible in a way that illuminates the creativity expressed in the text. As he does throughout his book, Turner here continues to use quotes from

artists in the mainstream as he explains how the Bible has inspired creativity in many mainstream artists, such as Leonard Cohen and Eric Fischl.<sup>2</sup> Turner captures the influence that the Bible has on creativity and challenges his readers to aspire to creativity outside of the Christian subculture. He asks pertinent questions about an artist's role in the church—questions applicable, really, to understanding our role in any “occupation.”

The last three chapters focus on vision put into practice, the role that artists play in the present time, and how being active in the mainstream arts allows witness; Turner uses U2 as a case study.<sup>3</sup> The last chapter discusses the complexity of the life of a Christian artist. Turner unpacks a difficult reality faced by the Christian artist: that renewed knowledge requires us to rethink how we serve those in the arts community. These added discussions seem to target how the church thinks about the professional artist. While this assists professional artists by encouraging them to pursue arts outside of the Christian subculture, the discussion is centered on challenging how the church thinks of art. These additions provide depth in the effectiveness of the text by providing an obtainable application of each chapter, putting the vision in practical reach for many spheres of life, for all creatives.

Turner shows the way professionals in the arts are pursuing his vision of expressing themselves artistically in the mainstream arts, not a pursuit of an evangelical platform. An area where he could expand his thesis, however, is looking at how this reality works out in the everyday life of the artist, for non-professionals in artistic communities. His discussions seem targeted toward all creatives, but I felt that it falls short. Though he affirms that we are all artistic, he doesn't show how this passion manifests itself outside of the professional spectrum. It's worth noting, however, that most readers will find this text applicable, not only to the work of ethnoarts but also to thinking Christianly about the art communities in which we work. Whether in a community orchestra or performing at a café or in a local park, encouraging local artists to continue making art in their communities also fulfills Turner's goal of sharing the Christian arts within the public arena.

While working in Asia, I noticed that parks were central hubs for community music-making. These performers were not professional musicians, but they enjoyed the arts. It was here that I learned the importance of community and much else about the arts in everyday life. We should encourage Christian artists to create dialogue in local art communities, not just to “reach the world for Christ” (62) but because our local

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<sup>2</sup> Leonard Cohen identified as Jewish; Turner uses the term “Christian” broadly—or, as he puts it, “generously.” For more on his use of “Christian,” see page 15.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Williams and Steve Turner, *U2 Rattle & Hum: The Official Book of the U2 Movie: A Journey into the Heartland of Two Americas* (New York: Harmony, 1988).

communities should have an opportunity to hear our perspective on life, just as we should also pay attention to their perspective.

Though a useful text for understanding the current state of Christians' approach to popular music, Turner's book could benefit from an approach similar to that of Makoto Fujimura, who challenges artists to be cultivators of culture.<sup>4</sup> Of interest is Fujimura's target audience, which is all people who are interested in the arts. Because many of Turner's readers are also community musicians, a future edition might include voices from these local artists. This vision should not be limited to the professional arts industry but should be accessible to community musicians in coffeeshops, parks, local orchestras, and neighborhood jam sessions. Often a worldwide vision starts in local communities.

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<sup>4</sup> Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017).