

The New Age Movement

The second feature of our contemporary world that leads many Christians to have reservations about imaginative prayer is the prevalence of what is now called the New Age movement. Since the late sixties, millions of people in the West have come to endorse elements of Eastern religion, including its pantheism and meditation techniques, and to practice shamanistic forms of visualization.⁶ They have claimed, in many different ways, that they can tap into their inner divinity, their own infinite potentiality, and create their own reality by visualizing it. Sometimes people are encouraged to visualize a spiritual guide in their imagination and allow this guide to instruct them or heal them. Who this guide happens to be is of no real consequence; he could be Buddha, Muhammad, some unknown guru figure, or even a "power animal."

Because of the influence of the New Age movement, some Christians have become very suspicious of (if not outright antagonistic to) all forms of visualization. Indeed, some have publicly charged any Christians who endorse the practice of envisioning Jesus in prayer as intentionally or unintentionally endorsing the New Age movement.⁷

While this paranoia in some conservative Christian circles is to some extent understandable given the pervasive influence of the New Age movement, it is, I believe, completely misguided and very counterproductive. Several things can be said that will help dispel this unhealthy air of suspicion.

So too one could argue that the only thing that imaginative prayer as practiced by the church throughout history (and as recommended by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3) has in common with the New Age movement is that they both use the imagination. That gives no foundation for an argument that Christians who espouse the ancient Christian practice of imaginative prayer are being influenced by the New Age movement. (The fact that the Christian practice predates the New Age movement will be considered below.)

There's Nothing New about It!

Yet another consideration that can help answer the overreaction on the part of some Christians against the New Age movement's use of visualization is to simply recall that the practice of imaginatively beholding the Lord is as old as Christianity itself. Those who come against the practice of imaginative meditation seem to be unaware of the biblical and ecclesiastical tradition in which this practice has played a central role.¹³ They seem to mistakenly assume that the practice originated with the New Age movement. In point of fact, the only thing that is new is the sometimes novel ways in which the New Age movement has employed imaginative spirituality.

As we saw in chapter 6, Paul's prescription for spiritual transformation was for believers to behold with an unveiled mind the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Believers throughout the ages have been transformed by following this practice. As we will see in part 3 of this work, believers are still being transformed by this means. They are experiencing the love of God in concrete, experiential, and transforming ways through imaginative prayer. We must not let the prevalence of counterfeits create in us a fear of the genuine thing.

Gregory Boyd,
Seeing is Believing, Experiencing Jesus through Imaginative Prayer,
(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004) 131, 134-35.