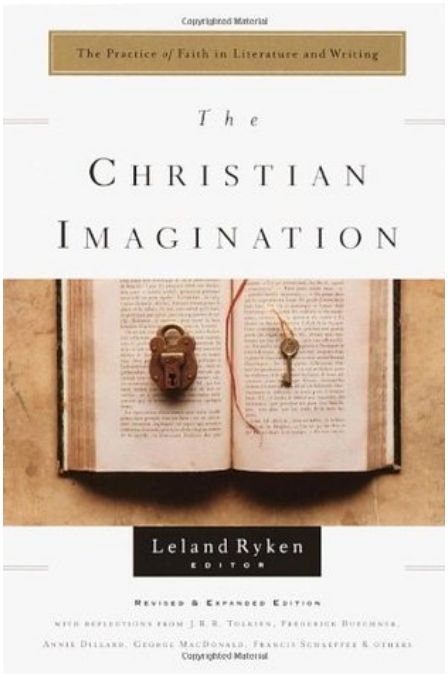

The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing

Leland Ryken (Editor)

The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing

Leland Ryken (Editor)

The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing Leland Ryken (Editor) *The Christian Imagination* brings together in a single source the best that has been written about the relationship between literature and the Christian faith. This anthology covers all of the major topics that fall within this subject and includes essays and excerpts from fifty authors, including C.S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Sayers, and Frederick Buechner.

The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing Details

Date	:	Published February 19th 2002 by Shaw Books (first published January 1st 1981)
ISBN	:	9780877881230
Author	:	Leland Ryken (Editor)
Format	:	Paperback 480 pages
Genre	:	Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Religion, Theology, Christian, Christianity, Faith

From Reader Review The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing for online ebook

Josiah says

One of my favorite books on writing. It’s basically a collection of essays by brilliant literary minds about the purpose of writing, how to write, and basically anything and everything having to do with writing. You have essays on the purpose of literature, on viewing literature as a form of art, on why modern-day Christian fiction is weak, and so many other fascinating topics. Poetry, fantasy, realism, narrative—it’s all in here. We have stuff by J.R.R. Tolkien, Francis Schaeffer, Flannery O’Connor, Madeline L’Engle…

If you're interested in writing, or just interested in literature, and looking at it from a Christian point-of-view, this is a must-have.

5 stars.

A.K. Preston says

This book belongs on the shelf of every Christian creative working in whatever medium, format, or genre. If you’ve been uncertain about the proper use of your talents and imagination within a Christian lifestyle - or faced misunderstanding or outright challenges from fellow believers, this book is for you. There’s a perception in many Christian circles that a walk of faith necessarily restricts or discourages the human imagination. On the contrary - it unleashed it. Being made in the image of an imaginative Creator - in fact - the greatest Artist of them all, humans too carry the gift of creation, be it in story, art, poetry, song, etc. This book is a compendium of essays by a variety of writers from various decades and backgrounds who have approached their craft with just such an understanding. If you have ever felt but have been unable to articulate the God-given nature of your talents and creative dreams - read this book. You’ll be enriched for the experience.

Ron says

Varied selection of writings by Twentieth Century Christian authors.

Lexi says

What a beautiful and important set of essays, expounding upon the vital role of imagination as "an act of hope, a challenge to fate... the weaver of culture."

Laurie says

This book is meant to be chewed slowly, leaving time between bites for the digestive processes to work.
Key Quotes:

It is evident on every page of his writings that Augustine was impacted for the good by his classical reading in spite of his cynical teachers and his own scruples, and sometimes he is not unaware of it. The pagan Cicero's Hortensius was a major influence leading to his conversion to Christ. It "quite altered my affection, turned my prayers to thyself, O Lord, and made me have clean other purposes and desires." It has this effect, he interestingly notes, because he made use of it not to "sharpen his tongue" but "for the matter of it" (109f). He had then, moments in which he recognized something in literature which the abuses that also exist ought not to deter us from seeking. (p. 5).

We "cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race" (Hughes 728). Spenser's Guyon is a positive role model of uncloistered virtue who makes his authors a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas. Thus Sidney's poet defeats the philosopher and the theologian. But even when a text promotes error, discernment is better than blindness, and "books promiscuously read" can help prepare us for life. If they do not, the fault lies not in the book but in the reader.(p. 14).

Christian art is defined by the one in whom it exists and by the spirit from which it issues: one says "Christian art" or the "art of a Christian," as one says … the "art of man." It is the art of redeemed humanity. It is planted in the Christian soul, by the side of the running waters, under the sky of the theological virtues, amidst the breezes of the seven gifts of the Spirit. It is natural that it should bear Christian fruit. (p. 53).

The poet is not a man who asks me to look at him; he is a man who says "look at that" and points. —C. S. Lewis, The Personal Heresy (p. 56).

Abelard raised a very foolish question when he asked: "What has Horace to do with the Psalter, Virgil with the Gospel, Cicero with the Apostle?" The answer is simply that Horace, Virgil, and Cicero clarify the human situation to which the salvation of God is addressed through Psalter, Gospel, and Apostle. —Roland M. Frye, Perspective on Man: Literature and the Christian Tradition (p. 56).

The young especially must be helped to take responsibility for what they glimpse—hints of beauty, visions of the future germinating in the present. And they must be pushed to project these insights in their own words and images for others to share. This does not mean applauding any and all of their dadaist flings. It means rather helping them to focus what they see. It means inciting them to clarify their own response to the world. It means helping them deal with their fears and destructive instincts, in order to discover their own capacity to insert themselves joyfully into the world—to give thanks for it—to participate in its transformation. It also means helping them acquire the vocabulary, visual and verbal, the basic disciplines and techniques, which make imaging possible. (p. 74).

No one needs padding from reality; we must learn early to see both its reflected glory and its ultimate inability to fit our wishes. We must learn early to seek God within the wounds that reality inflicts. There is indeed no better educator of the imagination than Job, since he ended up "seeing" God! The healthy imagination, rooted in contrition, is fully open to painful change; it is always ready to accept the new, however dazzling to human eyes. (p. 75).

"O man," says St. Irenaeus of Lyons, it is not you who make God, but rather God who makes you. Wait patiently for the hand of your Artist, who makes all things at the proper time. Present him with a heart that is supple and docile, preserve the imprint that this artist has given you, protect in yourself the Water that comes

from Him, without which you will harden and lose the trace of his fingers. In preserving the modeling, you will mount up toward perfection, for the art of God will cover what in you is only clay. His hands have fashioned in you your very substance; he will adorn you with gold and silver, inside and out, and the King himself will be captured by your beauty. (Against Heresies, IV, 39, 2) The highest role of human imagination is humble cooperation with this modeling of our own face by God Himself. Thank heavens, education of the Christian imagination is, first and foremost, in His hands. (p. 79).

Our own creation of beautiful things links us with our Creator. God was the first Quilter of prairies, the primal Painter (night skies, ferns, thunderheads, snow on cedars), the archetypal metal Sculptor (mountain ranges, icebergs), the Composer who heard the whales' strange, sonorous clickings and songs in his head long before there were whales to sound them, the Playwright who plotted the sweeping drama of Creation, Incarnation, Redemption, the Poet whose Word said it all. God made us human beings in his image; we participate in creative intelligence, giftedness, originality. We each have the faculty of imagination deep within us, waiting, like a seed, to be watered and fertilized. Imagination gives us pictures by which to see things the way they can be, or the way they are, underneath. The prairie woman, hemmed into her sod house with her small children by months of sub-zero cold and snow, used her imagination redemptively. Around the traditional quilt patterns—double stars, wedding rings—her imagination pieced in the exuberant flowers and leaves that redeemed the long winter, that brought her soul back to life. She created beauty and richness from the ordinary stuff, even the castoffs, of her life. (p. 90).

Where linear, logical thinking may produce prose with a specific function—information or historical record or critical analysis or entertainment or instruction or narrative—poetry and art select and reflect on a small slice of human experience and lay it out there, a gift to anyone who is willing to look at it, savor it, and enter into the artist's experience. The poet communicates experience in images and forms so precisely tailored, so personal, so multileveled that the insights go far beyond bare facts or mere usefulness. (p. 93).

Often, in the process of writing an article or a poem or an essay, I find myself "stuck," confused, or unable to know in which direction the writing wants to go. That's when I cry "Help!" and ask the Holy Spirit to guide my listening, my thinking, my creating, into channels that will bring me to the heart of truth for the work. I become a servant of the word, rather than its controller. And listening obedience, rather than preplanning, becomes my modus operandi. (p. 95).

We tend to think of our Creator in terms of the infinitely large, a deity of cosmic and supercosmic proportions. But not only do we have a God who creates mountains, oceans, planets, galaxies, universes. For our God, even the smallest details are significant, details like a mustard seed, a single pearl, a sparrow, a hair on a human head, an olive leaf in a dove's mouth, drops of blood on a doorframe, a coin in the mouth of a fish. (p. 96).

Because the human intellect is fallen, secular knowledge is always partial and in a state of change, and we are in constant need of God's revelation—the Word of God—which alone is the ground of truth. (p.120).

We enjoy the beauty of a sonnet or the artistry of an epic or the fictional inventiveness of a novel, we are enjoying a quality of which God is the ultimate source and performing an act similar to God's enjoyment of his own creation. The way to show gratitude for a gift is to enjoy it. Literature and art are God's gifts to the human race. One of the liberating effects of letting ourselves "go" as we enjoy literature is to realize that we can partly affirm the value of literature whose content or worldview we dislike. If God is the ultimate source of all beauty and artistry, then the artistic dimension of literature is the point at which Christians can be unreserved in their enthusiasm for the works of non-Christian writers. John Milton gradually came to deplore the ethical viewpoint of pagan authors, but he noted that "their art I still applauded" (Apology for

Smectymnuus). Werner Jaeger, in his book on the classical tradition, claimed that “it was the Christians who finally taught men to appraise poetry by a purely aesthetic standard—a standard which enabled them to reject most of the moral and religious teaching of the classical poets as false and ungodly, while accepting the formal elements in their work as instructive and aesthetically delightful.” (p. 151).

Reading is not only a pleasure in itself, with its concomitants of stillness, quietness and forgetfulness of self, but in what we read many of our other comforts are present with us. —ELIZABETH GOUDGE, A Book of Comfort (p. 151).

The novelist doesn’t write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated, and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, a total experience of human nature at any time. For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama. The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan colleagues by recognizing sin as sin. According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment, but as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future. Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe. One reason a great deal of our contemporary fiction is humorless is because so many of these writers are relativists and have to be continually justifying the actions of their characters on a sliding scale of values. (p. 168).

Stories are sometimes most effectively told by limiting the scope of the tale. Although young writers often attempt to make their work appear universal by offering generic time and place settings, it takes a writer who is an experienced student of literature to discover, as James Joyce did in his works set in Ireland, that the universal is best expressed when grounded in the particular. (p. 192).

Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e., God. — Conversations with Walker Percy Ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985 (p. 194).

Great literature must treat evil, sometimes in a base and repulsive form … as do the Christian Scriptures. —ROLAND M. FRYE, Perspective on Man: Literature and the Christian Tradition

In The End of Education, Neil Postman argues that we cannot live without a narration—a story that “tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose.” We tell ourselves stories that explain where we are, why we exist, why the world works the way it does.

The Christian story served this purpose well, with its narrative of a transcendent God and a personified Evil. But for twentieth-century Americans, the Christian story has been largely overwritten by snappier narratives. Postman offers the stories of inductive science, technology, and consumerism as examples. Each story offers us a purpose for living—the pursuit of knowledge, the mastery of the physical world, the accumulation of wealth.

The central theme found in Flannery O’Connor’s writing is the redemption of man; but, since her talent inclines her toward the portrayal of sin, she shows the effects of the redemption (i.e., grace) in a negative manner. She reflects the beauty of virtue by showing the ugliness of its absence. —JAMES F. FARNHAM, tribute to Flannery O’Connor in Flannery O’Connor: A Memorial, ed. J. J. Quinn

Kenneth Koch said in a book on the pleasures of reading and writing poetry rings true: “Read in the right way, poetry is a rich source of pleasure, knowledge, and experience. Not knowing poetry is an impoverishment of life such as not knowing music or painting would be, or not traveling.” Owen Barfield, in his book Poetic Diction, speaks of how the very element of strangeness in poetry is so powerful in the lives of some people that “it binds [them] to their libraries for a lifetime.”

All of life is the subject that should engage Christian poets.

Poetry appears less concerned with practical communication. It seems to arise out of silence and to disappear into silence. And while it is present, it behaves as if a disruptive child had gotten hold of the word processor, wreaking havoc on normal word order and creating rhythmic patterns that focus attention on themselves. It repeats sounds for effect. It forces decent nouns and adjectives into positions in sentences they never imagined. And it makes claims that are, on the face of it, outrageous—Love is a house where I have taken up abode. As a dialect, poetry appears to be impractical.

Too often poetry is thought to be impossibly far apart from ordinary human existence. Anyone’s mind is a teeming gallery of sensations and memories.… We all know the taste of things sweet or bland or sour, we all have known rage, we all feel the passion to recall even a painful past. A rich confusion of awareness underlies all human feeling, and the language for it surges all around us. The poet reaches into that rich confusion toward the wellspring of the surging speech of life. He must, through language alone, catch a tone, a perception, a quality of sensation and arrange a whole poem round the impulse of energy so captured. —M. L. ROSENTHAL. Poetry and the Common Life

The point of all the arts, including poetry, is to tell the truth about what it is to be human. For this, those of us who make art, finally, are responsible to God. But the question of truth in a poem is not so easy to settle. A poem is not a brief. It is meant to be an experience. So any proposition within the borders of a poem changes meaning if it is wrenched out and quoted. This point is easier to make about a script. I remember how shocked I was when I realized that Polonius is actually an old windbag and Shakespeare wrote “This above all, unto thine own self be true,” and all the lines of gorgeous poetry that follow it to make Polonius look pompous. Polonius always speaks majestically. As Gertrude points out, he needs more matter and less art. And yet I hear people quote those speeches as if Shakespeare had meant them straight.

I believe that the art for arts’ sake movement, for example, which led to confessional poetry, is heartbreakingly and awfully mistaken. Art is wonderful, but it cannot save us and it cannot be the whole point. And yet I do not believe that the point of art is to spread the gospel either. Take a look at the variety and subtlety of what God has created: giraffes, hedgehogs, the dawn, the mind-boggling world of a cell, the Milky Way. He is not didactic. He has a sense of humor. And He must be fascinated by His whole creation.

Generally for me a poem comes in a whoosh. Typed cleanly on the paper, it feels immense and splendid, like the creation must have seemed on the first morning of the world. I’m happy as a new mother—until I go back to look at it several days later. Then the work begins. I see it with the cold, beady eyes of a critic. I find fault with it. I consider throwing it away. Sometimes I do. But usually I begin the slow process of revision which can take from several months to five or six years. Crazy as it sounds, I love to revise. It gives me another chance. It’s like saying, Wait! That’s not what I meant at all. Let me take another stab at it! Paper and ink are endlessly forgiving. I thank God for these second chances, which sometimes become fifteenth chances and ninety-seventh chances. It is humbling and redemptive, the process of rewriting.

Maybe, writing poetry is for me a particularly loud or tall form of reading. I write poetry because it is my way of knowing the world. I try to tell the truth about what I know. But I also read and write poetry because I

am having a love affair with the form. Poetry is an expression of hope. It is play. A lifetime is too short to exhaust its possibilities.

Writing with the hymns of his brother Charles as well as his own in mind, Wesley theorizes, May I be permitted to add a few words with regard to the poetry? Then I will speak to those who are judges thereof, with all freedom and unreserve. To these I may say, without offence, 1. In these hymns there is no doggerel; no botches; nothing put in to patch up the rhyme; no feeble expletives. 2. Here is nothing turgid or bombast, on the one hand, or low and creeping, on the other. 3. Here are no cant expressions; no words without meaning.… We talk common sense, both in prose and verse, and use no word but in a fixed and determinative sense. 4. Here are, allow me to say, both the purity, the strength, and the elegance of the English language; and, at the same time, the utmost simplicity and plainness, suited to every capacity. (iv)

Jane Austen has a fictional character say, when asked what she is reading, “Oh! it is only a novel,” adding, “Only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its variety, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (Northanger Abbey, chapter 5).

It is odd how hymns can trigger off memories of the past more strongly than visual scenes or smells.… If as a child I disliked the sermon, I loved the hymns, and this affection has remained with me. The soaring triumph of the processional Easter hymns, the celebration of All Saints’ Day, with the hymn “For All the Saints,” … and the plangent melancholy of the evening hymns, particularly “The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Has Ended,” sung while the church windows darkened and the mind moved forward to the walk through the churchyard between the gleaming tombstones in the evening dusk. Some of my early religious memories are of the hymns.… Some of them still have the power to move me to tears. —P. D. JAMES, Time to Be in Earnest

Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence. For example, ever since we can remember, all of us have been telling ourselves stories about ourselves, composing life-giving autobiographies of which we are the heroes and heroines. If our stories are coherent and plausible and have continuity, they will help us to understand why we are here, and what we need to pay attention to and what we may ignore. A story provides a structure for our perceptions; only through stories do facts assume any meaning whatsoever. This is why children everywhere ask, as soon as they have the command of language to do so, “Where did I come from?” and, shortly after, “What will happen when I die?” They require a story to give meaning to their existence. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die. —NEIL POSTMAN, “Learning by Story”

At the same time that we insist that meaning is at the heart of story, we must be clear where that meaning lies. It lies in the whole story or not at all. Meaning inhabits story like a morning mist envelops a pine forest—everywhere present, but nowhere tangible. Detach meaning from the story and both die.

David Bronson says

Amazing. Wish I'd read it sooner. This'll help hammer out anyone's theology of art, especially fiction.

Alyssa says

Having read this book in one hard slog, I now see it will be most valuable to return to in dipping in and out, as the various essays and quotes become more relevant. Be that as it may, I don't regret reading it in one go: this book taught me a lot that I already knew, and a lot that I didn't. It is comforting to read the thoughts of people who love books, words and reading like I do, and inspiring to listen to them reinforce again and again the importance of all kinds of literature.

Takim Williams says

This book was given to me by one of my high school English teachers, Jonathan Koch, to recognize me for my service as president of the Creative Writers' Guild. It was the perfect gift. As a christian and an aspiring author I've long considered Lewis and Tolkien my primary role models, so reading about the creation of the Chronicles of Narnia and about Tolkien's thoughts on the purpose of fantasy was a joy. The philosophy of literature defended in this book puts many of my own half-formed theories into words and elaborates on them. I've always believed that imagination is one of God's greatest gifts and that literature is one of the best ways of expressing ultimate truth beyond mundane facts. Leland Ryken has done a great job of compiling a representative sample of the words of several renowned Christian writers into a cohesive argument for the significance of poesy in terms of faith.

Randy Alcorn says

This is an extraordinary treasure of thought-provoking reflections, by many of my favorite authors (including Lewis, Tolkien, and Chesterton). The sections on “Imagination, Beauty and Creativity” and “Myth and Fantasy” were particularly rich, at times enchanting. “In Praise of Stories” was one of many intriguing articles I intend to go back to. I would read one or two of these delicacies, then force myself to put the book down, to contemplate what I’d read, yes, but also to ration out the precious remains. Whether you restrain your appetite and consume it over weeks or months, or gorge yourself in a day or two, you’ll find this a literary feast, to be read with pen or highlighter in hand. It’s also a bargain, since there are a dozen articles easily worth the price of the book. The Christian Imagination should not be resigned to literature classes. It deserves a place in homes that love, or want to love, great books, and long to enter worlds that lead to The World. If your imagination has gotten too wet to burn, this book is a flame-thrower.

Becky Pliego says

You don't have to agree with every essay in this wonderful book but I assure you, in every page you will find good food for the thought.

I will not put this book away on a distant shelf; I want it always at hand.

Jeremy says

Read Thomas Howard's "Myth: Flight to Reality" on August 1, 2016. Used Woiwode's piece on realism in my book chapter on fantasy as realism.

I teach (kind of—students lead discussion) through this book in ENGL 485 (the senior seminar for English majors).

Part 1: A Christian Philosophy of Literature
Donald Williams's opening essay on Christian poetics is excellent, and Ryken's followup essay is good as well. Schaeffer's list of eleven perspectives is very helpful. The viewpoints and reflections are good. There's just so much great material out there for Christians who are interested in how the arts connect to their faith.

Part 2: Imagination, Beauty, and Creativity

Part 3: To Teach and to Delight

Part 4: The Christian Writer

Part 5: The Christian Reader

Part 6: State of the Art: Success and Failure in Current Christian Fiction and Poetry

Part 7: Realism

Part 8: Myth and Fantasy

Part 9: Poetry

Part 10: Narrative

Andrew says

I had thought to call this book boring - which might have been a sad indictment on the titular subject. It's taken me a long time to get through it, and the reading often felt like wading.

Although it's a symposium of a wide array of Christian thinkers (nearly 50 of them) holding differing views, it seems to me the parts of the book that get the most bogged down are where it assumes that something called the 'Christian imagination' is a unified, singular thing that can be defined, and that good Christian writers and readers will (and should) display certain listed characteristics. In these parts, the book seems overly prescriptive, narrowing and didactic.

Where the book sparkles is where the discourse moves beyond this assumption and when the practitioners themselves (some of them very highly regarded practitioners at that) take the reigns. The symposium, the multiplicity of voices, wins out in the end. I found large parts of the second half of the book, which deal with

realism, myth and fantasy, poetry and narrative, sparked outwards, rather than narrowing down the field of play. Worth the effort in the end.

Jonathan says

Awesome.

Helped fight my natural inclination to write off (booh...) the beauty of writing, of telling a story, of art.

I am inclined to propositional thinking, but sometimes my propositional attitude forgets that propositions are supernatural. Our propositions contain more of heaven and hell than we know. I.e. though propositions are thought to be understood only by the intellect, yet it is our souls, and the reality in which our souls live and breathe and move, in which the propositions in our mind are really alive.

Propositions, the true ones, speak of a true reality. And art, writing, or story telling, are all attempts to proclaim the same true propositions, but instead of focusing on the intellect, they focus on the feeling.

[They still hit the intellect, but not in the same way as: Jesus is Lord. Art can communicate the same truth, but it hits us differently. And we need that, we need both (beauty in truth and truth in beauty), because they both affect our souls].

Ex.

Proposition: Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the living beauty in the true proposition.

Art: Van Gogh's "Starry Night." The truth is in the artistry, the beauty it reveals is the beauty of God. The heavens are proclaiming of the beauty of our LORD.

[I think I need to think this through more. My writing is convoluted].

The one quibble I have with the book, or with some of the essays, is the inclination of artists to exaggerate the reality of their work. It is not enough that art can glorify God, but many still want to go one step further and make their art, in effect, divine. Or maybe it is that they seem to say that all art is God-breathed, which is true in a sense, but then they forget the rest of the story.

Eve and Adam eat the apple.

Evil enters the world. Hence, all our art must inevitably be tainted. And only Christ can redeem us, and it. Art has no redemptive qualities apart from Christ. I have no redemptive qualities apart from Christ. Feeding the starving children has no redemptive quality apart from Christ.

I.e. the redemption that there is in feeding starving children is brought about, and only able to happen, because of what Christ did at the cross and in the grave. The fact that we are allowed to help others is because of Christ. The fact that atheists are allowed to help the poor is based on what Christ did. Christ made it, and makes it, possible for good to be in the world. Because Christ IS the good.

We exist by the grace which rests on and in and because of Christ.

Common grace in a world of evil. And for the joyful few: Amazing grace.

So let us rejoice in the grace God has shown us, but let us remember that we still live in a world rampant with evil, even still in our own hearts. The good news, or true story, is that God has and is setting us free from this same evil to draw us near to Him.

Nathan Huffstutler says

This collection is fantastic.

Kim Kim says

Great collection of essays, though I could do without the little italicized quotes interspersed through the essays. They were more distracting than helpful.
Best read was the Three Faces of Evil by Susan Wise Bauer. Insightful and thought-provoking. Lewis, Tolkien, and Chesterton are a given for excellence, of course.
