

Contemporary Spirituality:

A Review of Desiring the Kingdom by James K. A. Smith

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Introduction

My father brought his bathing suit to church one night. No one explained why Dad was going to swim while the rest of us had to return to our Sunday outfits. As a pastors kid in a small logging town I was confused. I didn't realize that I was about to witness my first baptismal service. The night went on and I watched some adults getting dunked in a small pool. *Why did our church have a pool?* This part of my Pentecostal upbringing has always seemed unique. My Lutheran and Catholic friends had a lot of strange traditions but I didn't understand why their Sunday was different from mine. Furthermore, I didn't know if their traditions were good or bad. James K. A. Smith, in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, argues that worship traditions form our relationship with God and the rest of the world. He pictures the Church as a *feeling* organism that is formed by love before it is formed by logic.

This is a review of Smith's reasoning towards *worship, worldview and cultural formation*. I will begin with a summary of the major arguments presented in each chapter. I will follow up with a discussion regarding those arguments that were enlightening, challenging or seemed problematic. The last part of this review will include a final thought regarding the ideas presented in *Desiring the Kingdom*.

Summary and Major Arguments

What comes first: the thought or the feeling? This is the fundamental question behind Smith's book. In the first part of *Desiring the Kingdom* we learn that, "we are

what we love.”¹ Part two addresses the, “practiced shape of the Christian life.”² The chapters found within part one argue that we are lovers before we are thinkers³ and that what we love is generated by how we worship.⁴ It states that we belong to a popular culture of worship that constantly determining what we love.⁵ The second part of Smith’s book argues that Christian worship generates doctrine.⁶ It also provides us with a description of Christian worship⁷ and concludes that Christian education should adopt a liturgy that creates Christ lovers.⁸

The foundational argument for *Desiring the Kingdom* is that we are lovers before we are thinkers. Smith states that, “we are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends.”⁹ The term liturgy used to describe a pattern of worship. It is this pattern of worship that determines how we interact with the world. Smith is displacing the popular notion that we are primarily a thinking people. Plato and Descartes reason their way into being and the church, says Smith, has generally accepted their philosophies about thought and worldview.¹⁰ We are warned not to develop an overly intellectual view that reduces humanity to a series of rational decisions.¹¹ We do more than think; we think *about something*. Smith’s opening argument rests in the idea that our thoughts are mere

¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.) p. 7.

² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*. p. 8

³ Chapter 1

⁴ Chapter 2

⁵ Chapter 3

⁶ Chapter 4

⁷ Chapter 5

⁸ Chapter 6

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 47.

expressions of our desires and that our desires represent that which we love.¹² We must peek behind the curtain of our ideas and understand what is motivating us to think.

Smith believes that you will find love fueling desire and desire fueling thought. He states that, “to be human is to be just such a lover – a creature whose orientation and form of life is most primordially shaped by what one loves as ultimate.”¹³

The next step in Smith’s argument asserts that what we love is generated by how we worship. Worshiping is at the core of our human existence. As we interact with our environment we determine which things shape us. We give in to certain rituals and practices and ultimately adopt these as liturgical aspects of life. This process can take place in the supermarket or the mall as easily as it can take place within the church. Smith believes that, “we become certain kinds of people without even being aware of it.”¹⁴ We should note that all habits are not created equal. The practice of making the bed every morning is not as significant as the practice of church attendance. Smith refers to these habits as *thick* and *thin*. The former represent those habits that are rich in meaning.¹⁵ The behaviors that we choose to repeat will teach us what to love. They will aim our hearts towards something and create a desire for those things that lead us forward.

Smith believes that we belong to a culture of worship that is constantly determining what we love. We are presented with an image of a *secular liturgy* that produces a certain type of humanistic worldview. The strongest example of a *secular*

¹² Ibid., p. 48.

¹³ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

liturgy is that of the consumer. The mall is compared to the church and the desire to have more motivates every waking thought.¹⁶ This metaphor is stretched to express the person who worships consumption and loves accordingly. This fits Smith's model of habits, driving desire, which in turn drive thought.

The focus shifts when we begin to describe the process by which Christian worship generates Christian doctrine. Smith has established the pattern of liturgy, desire and thought and believes that, "historic Christian worship is fundamentally formative because it educates our hearts through our bodies (which in turn renews our mind), and does so in a way that is more universally accessible... than many of the overly cognitive worship habits we have acquired in modernity."¹⁷ We believe Jesus in the same way that we worship Jesus. Worship is a holistic encounter with the God of all creation and approaches his throne of grace with our entire created selves.

The fifth chapter of *Desiring the Kingdom* contains the primary message of the book. Smith's efforts have draw us to this point where he can recommend a model of worship to help shape the love of the church. It is this desire towards the Kingdom of God that will help us live as the united body of Christ. Smith offers examples for the liturgy,¹⁸ call to worship,¹⁹ community,²⁰ song,²¹ the law,²² confession,²³ baptism,²⁴ the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

²¹ Ibid., p. 170.

²² Ibid., p. 173.

²³ Ibid., p. 176.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

creed,²⁵ prayer,²⁶ scripture and sermon,²⁷ the Eucharist,²⁸ offering,²⁹ sending as witness,³⁰ worship, discipleship and discipline.³¹ This is meant to be an exhaustive list for the church to consider when contemplating spiritual formation. He believes that, “the practices of Christian worship function as the altar of Christian formation.”³² It is on this altar that we must be willing to thoughtfully submit our love for Christ.

Smith concludes that Christian education should adopt a liturgy that creates Christ lovers. He believes that the current state of Christian education may, “generate an army of alumni who look pretty much like the rest of their suburban neighbors.”³³ The thing that will separate Christian *lovers* from Christian *thinkers* is a liturgical education that focuses on desiring Christ. We must be willing to make the shift from *information* to *formation*.³⁴ This shift will only take place once we begin to recognize and respond to a Biblical desiring of the kingdom.

Response to Argument

I found many of Smith’s arguments enlightening. His presentation of *homo liturgicus* over *homo rationale* was convincing. I agree that his approach takes into consideration the whole of human experience. I get a sense that intellectual based Christian world views exist as a remnant of Plutonic dualism. The dualistic valuation of self falls to heavily into the world of thought and reason. There is no room for mystery or

²⁵ Ibid., p. 190.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 203.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

³¹ Ibid., p. 207.

³² Ibid., p. 213.

³³ Ibid., p. 219.

³⁴ Ibid.

emotion in the fragmented world of intellectual Christianity. A faith that is based out of desire, however, starts with the most powerful urges of self: love. The important aspect of Smith's argument is based on *what* we desire. He handled this nicely by presenting the flawed thinking behind a *secular liturgy* in part one of his book.

I struggled with Smith's assertion that worship generates desire. By way of introduction Smith tells us that, "before we think, we pray."³⁵ I understand the profound impact behind the axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* but view the early creeds of the church as a type of educational process. Did the memorization of important doctrine shape the prayer life of the early Christian or did this happen the other way around? My Pentecostal tradition has shaped my views on *the law of prayer*; I have not been exposed to a highly structured model of prayer. I have, however, been taught to pray *from the bottom of my heart*. What is at *the bottom of my heart*? Is it a love for God or a defeated sinful self who I am always trying to put to death? When I think of human desire I think of our natural tendency towards sin. It makes sense that we are *desiring* creatures but it seems unlikely that we will desire the kingdom. Our sinful human *nature* must be *nurtured* towards Christ in order to direct our lives towards the Kingdom of God. This is, of course, what the psalmist intended to communicate when they said, "delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." A choice of my making (my delight) results in my desire.

The question still remains, *how do we start worshipping?* Where do these liturgies come from? Is it ironic that Smith gives us an academic argument for the emotional pursuit of Christ? Does his chapter titled, *Practicing (for) the Kingdom: An Exegesis of*

³⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

the Social Imaginary Embedded in Christian Worship, defeat itself in intellectual complexity? Or should we view Smith as an ambassador for those rational believers who have detached their *thinking* selves from their *feeling* selves? I believe that it is possible for us to close the loop between understanding and feeling when we analyze and apply the scriptures to our daily worship. Just as Smith asks Descartes, *what are you thinking about?* We can ask Smith, *how do you understand worship?*

Conclusion

My childhood church had a pool because it was part of our worship tradition. We worshiped God by baptizing people into the Church. This act of worship helped shape our views of Christ and the mission of our community congregation. The liturgies of Lutheran and Catholic churches shape their desire of Christ in the same way. The Kingdom that they desire is a product of their worship. We must acknowledge that our worship is a product of *something*. How we approach God in communion, offering and discipleship come from our understanding of the Bible. We depend on the revelation of the Holy Spirit to enlighten us but we also depend on a thoughtful reading of scriptures to lead us to the Bethlehem star.

Bibliography

Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.