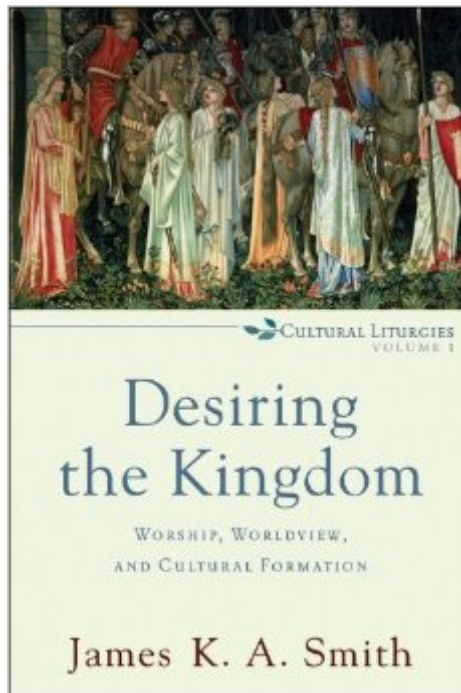


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Desiring The Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, And Cultural Formation



Synopsis

Malls, stadiums, and universities are actually liturgical structures that influence and shape our thoughts and affections. Humans--as Augustine noted--are "desiring agents," full of longings and passions; in brief, we are what we love. James K. A. Smith focuses on the themes of liturgy and desire in *Desiring the Kingdom*, the first book in what will be a three-volume set on the theology of culture. He redirects our yearnings to focus on the greatest good: God. Ultimately, Smith seeks to re-vision education through the process and practice of worship. Students of philosophy, theology, worldview, and culture will welcome *Desiring the Kingdom*, as will those involved in ministry and other interested readers.

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Customer Reviews

Which comes first? Belief or practice? Christian worship or a Christian worldview? In recent years, evangelicals have rightly discerned that many people in our churches lack even a rudimentary understanding of theology and the Bible. Too often, the people sitting in our churches on Sunday do not know what they believe or why. In response to this problem, leaders have created a number of

resources designed to help Christians develop a Christian worldview - a biblical framework for understanding life. I am encouraged by the worldview trend, as I believe it addresses a neglected aspect of evangelical church life. But James K. A. Smith says that worldview training does not go far enough. In his new book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker, 2009), Smith makes the case that worldview training targets only one aspect of our humanity - the mind. The assumption is this: when we think like Christians, we will then act like Christians. Smith challenges this notion and calls evangelicals to look beyond informational understandings of discipleship to a worship-centered view of discipleship, one that demonstrates how our liturgies form us into the people of God. The book begins with an excellent question: "What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?" (18). Smith invites us to see Christian education as formed by worship, not just informed by teaching. Christian discipleship should not be reduced to the transmission of knowledge; true discipleship forms our desires. Smith begins by challenging the anthropology that casts humans primarily in the role of "thinkers". Instead, Smith believes humans are primarily "lovers" (worshippers).

It is a ubiquitous question for thinking and engaged Christians everywhere in every age: How do we understand the tension between the influence of the culture upon the church and the influence of the church upon the culture? In much of the recent evangelical literature on this subject, the focus has been on worldview. The big ideas have been ideas, beliefs, and doctrines and how Christians ought to transform theirs or recapture a distinctly Christian set. Smith sees the project in a different light. In fact, he sees the matter of influence to be upon our ideas and not necessarily through our ideas. In many ways, Smith reaches back through modern and enlightenment-influenced theology and philosophy to Augustine and his belief that we are primarily affective creatures before we are rational creatures: we love before we think. And if the central questions about our character and formation are about our loves, we ought to get to what forms and shapes our loves. Smith's fundamental claim and the one that drives the book is that "liturgies" form our loves, and thus, form us. Early on he notes, "The core claim of this book is that liturgies - whether 'sacred' or 'secular' - shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people and what defines us in what we love." (pg. 25) Though the primary audience of the book is Christian education, Smith is aware, and I wholeheartedly agree, that his work has far-reaching application outside of the academy. If his premise is true, then this work has implications for the form and shape of the church as much as the university.

Why is it that the everydayness of many Western Christians' lifestyles often reflect the values of their culture instead of Christ? How do our ways of engaging and teaching discipleship often leave our actions thin but our heads heavy? What is it that our actions betray our words or beliefs so that we proclaim God as highest but pay homage to the other gods of entertainment, consumerism, or nationalism? James K.A. Smith's newest reflection on education at its core is a reflection on discipleship. In this quest, he gives a fuller and more correct understanding of humans as affective, desiring animals in able to work towards a deeper discipleship, but fails to go beyond classical liturgical practices. This book is valuable to many: students, teachers, Sunday Schools, professors, preachers, and academics. While I'll hold off on a full review I will say that he takes off better than he lands. Part I of the book is devoted to constructing a deeper philosophical anthropology than the anthropology modernity or romanticism. The core argument of *Desiring the Kingdom* is that humans at their core are not thinking or even believing animals, but rather are precognitive, pre-rationalist lovers. We are what we love, we are what we worship. Furthermore, the first part of the book reflects upon the power of "secular" liturgies that form and shape human desire and love, so that our love is misdirected. Much of my aggravation from my own as well the discipleship of the Western church, is that the true formative practices of our daily lives come less from the church than the mall, White House, flag, Jerry World (the newest Mecca of entertainment and competition: the Dallas Cowboys Stadium). While these things are not evil in themselves, they should not be the focus of our desire as they tend to claim.

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