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Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation

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James K. A. Smith; *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation.*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009)

Reviewed by Laura M. Rodeheaver

From the background of the Reformed tradition, James K. A. Smith offers a manuscript that builds a landscape for the mission of Christian higher education. The premise: Colleges and universities are called to be inextricably connected with the Church by imitating their engagement with worship practices. As a result of this calling, the goal of Christian higher education is “the formation of a peculiar people – a people who desire the kingdom of God and thus undertake their vocations as an expression of that desire” (Smith, 2009, p. 34). Smith guides the reader through philosophical and theological arguments to reveal the importance of liturgical practices within education that form students’ desire for God. Accordingly, the reader is inspired by the biblical message of being transformed into humans who image Christ, yet is in want for more practical means of transferring this truth to the daily workings of an American university.

The philosophical foundation for Smith’s work begins with Descartes’ conception of the human being as thinker. Next, Smith moves to the deeper consideration of the human being as believer who interacts with the world through a belief-constructed worldview. Ultimately Smith arrives with the human person as lover. With credit to Augustine, Smith explains how human beings’ interactions with the world are driven by desire. Christians would answer this desire with a love for the “gospel whose power is beauty, which speaks to our deepest desires, and compels us to come not with dire moralisms but rather a winsome invitation to share in this envisioned good life” (Smith, 2009, p. 21). As lovers, human beings are not moved to love through intellectual pursuits. Instead, lovers’ “ultimate love is oriented by and to a picture of what we think it looks like for us to live well, and it is that picture which then governs, shapes, and motivates our decisions and actions” (Smith, 2009, p. 53). Here a distinction is made between intellectual motivation and social imaginary. Smith determines that the formation of our ultimate love does not occur consciously, but instead is driven by practices that are most often aimed at our affective region. These practices, which occur communally, shape us to love a certain vision of the good life.

In the next section of his manuscript, Smith fleshes out the definitions for and distinctions between rituals, practices, and liturgies. The focus is on liturgies as “*rituals of ultimate concern*: rituals that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the ‘good life,’ and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations” (Smith, 2009, p. 86). Smith also defines secular liturgies as “a *mis*-formation of our desires – aiming our heart away from the Creator to some aspect of the creation *as if* it were God” (p. 88). In order to help the reader understand the misdirected power of secular liturgies, Smith takes considerable time to unwrap liturgies within consumerism, a certain ‘military-entertainment’ complex found in movies, sporting events, etc., and today’s universities. Not surprisingly, these pervasive liturgies are dangerously antithetical to the good life mirroring the principles of the kingdom of God. In contrast to these

cultural liturgies, Smith reveals how efficacious the liturgies of the Church could and should shape our overarching aims. Under the argument that the Church's doctrines or beliefs flow from "the nexus of Christian worship practices; worship is the *matrix* of Christian faith, not its 'expression' or 'illustration,'" Smith discusses the strength of social imaginary imbedded in a long list of the Church's worship liturgies (Smith, 2009, p. 138). The list includes practices such as baptism, song, confession, prayer, etc. Smith declares that these liturgies must be a part of the mission of Christian higher education in order to:

form radical disciples of Jesus and citizens of the baptismal city who, communally, take up the creational task of being God's image bearers, unfolding the cultural possibilities latent in creation – but doing so as empowered by the Spirit, following the example of Jesus' cruciform cultural labor (Smith, 2009, p. 220).

This drafted mission is a high calling for education to go beyond assisting students in conceptualizing a Christian worldview to shaping students into a 'peculiar people' through meaningful liturgies. Briefly, in his last chapter, Smith expounds on three areas of the university, including connecting chapel with the classroom, living space with the classroom, and forms of service-learning to engage the body with the mind as practical examples of how to shape students to long for the principles of the kingdom of God.

Through his dialogue on practices of worship, Smith offers a certain layer of depth to the Christian higher education community. In a powerful way, Smith validates previous research that highlights the impact of the student experience on students' character. Chickering & Reisser (1993) lay forth significant elements of education that lead to successful student development, resting on a fundamental belief "that by taking developmental needs as an organizing framework, we will better prepare all our students, and our ourselves, for the kinds of lives as workers and citizens required by the social changes rushing toward us" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. xvii). In Astin's *What Matters in College?* (1993), the constructs of community orientation and social activism are positively associated with the development of students' meaningful philosophy in life (Astin, 1993, p. 155). Astin (1993) further reports practices or what he refers to as "involvement variables," that influence the building of a meaningful philosophy. The work of these well-known leaders is evidence that the world of higher education has acknowledged the need to engage more than the students' mind in college. As Smith articulates what engagement looks like with students attending Christian universities, the value of the mind and its role in shaping students is largely absent. It would have been beneficial to be shown the partnership between the mind and heart in this endeavor, as well as greater practical detail for how to implement this vision in the Christian higher educational setting.

Smith's argument for the influence of Christian liturgies as counter-formation to the cultural liturgies surrounding humans does not adequately struggle with the complexity that sin nature and willpower bring into this world of affective liturgies. And in the midst of these complexities, what is the extent of the Holy Spirit's role? In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul offers a prayer for the church, praying that the Spirit would strengthen their inner beings, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (v. 17, NIV). Paul also prayed that with the same power, the church would grasp and know the

dimensions of God's love. The Greek word for "know" was also used "as a Jewish idiom for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman," revealing the intimate depth of this understanding (Strong's, # G1097). Paul comments that this love surpasses or transcends knowledge of moral living (Strong's, # G1108). All of Paul's prayer, to have Christ inhabit their hearts and to know the depth of God's love for them, was for the ultimate purpose of being filled with the "fullness of God" (v. 19).

In this passage, Paul is praying for the power of Christ to be in the *kardia* of the people, which Smith speaks of as the heart, the affective part of human nature that is shaped through liturgies. Paul's prayer is in line with Smith's call to worship, which is "a call to be(come) *human*, to take up the vocation of being fully and authentically human, and to be a community and people who image God to the world" (Smith, 2009, pp. 162-163). Through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians together as a body can experience the fullness of God as was the desire of Paul and is now the expressed desire of Smith. What a charge to shape our universities to be agents in welcoming students to participate in this transformation of becoming the peculiar people of God.

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