

James K. A. Smith. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009. 238 pages. \$21.99.

James Smith, in *Desiring the Kingdom*, provides the reader with a glimpse of what formation can look like for the church as it is innately connected to worship and culture. In my studies of the 21st century church, I have heard many churches talk about “being” the church in action, but often the “doing” is more problematic. Smith intends a project that concentrates on what Christians actually “do,” opposed to how they think. This book is part one of a projected three book project. In this first publication he lays out his intent for Christian formation and lays a foundation for readers regarding his entire scholarly work.

The author is writing to an audience of students and faculty tasking them with the job of articulating Christian formation and how learning occurs both in education and worship (11). In the first two chapters, Smith lays out his premise regarding philosophical anthropology. While typically Christian Education is about imparting ideas and information to one’s students (whoever they are), it is done from a particularly Christian perspective. Smith posits it should be more about formation than imparting information (17-18). This is an important premise, which the author does an excellent job articulating throughout the text.

Also particularly well done is his concept that liturgies—whether secular or sacred—shape who we are and form our definitions and understanding of love (25). Smith provides the reader with highlighted sections in each chapter entitled, “To Think About,” which gives an opportunity for the reader to interact with the practical implications for the text.

Part I of the book examines more closely the premise that “we are what we love” (37). Formation should be more about what we love rather than how we love. His idea is intriguing. We should be teaching students, through Christian formation, to do more than think for themselves, we should be teaching them to love more readily and in more embodied practices and ways (40-41).

One of the elements of the book that was quite helpful was the discussion of “thin” and “thick” habits. Looking at the ways our habits and rituals form us is an important task for all persons and was helpful to this reader. Some of these habits are merely mundane parts of our lives, while others are formative and meaning-full (82). Readers will likely find that this section is helpful in understanding how persons are formed by the rituals, habits, liturgies, and education that is part of their experience.

Providing the reader with a lens for “reading” culture through worship is insightful and helpful. If we analyze culture through identity-forming practices or liturgies as Smith suggests, we are opening possibilities of both sacred and secular analysis that can be transformative (89).

Smith provides an excellent exegesis of the various parts of Christian liturgy and rituals of worship and how they serve as important elements of personal and communal formation (155-214). Moving persons from participants in Sunday services to active disciples the rest of the week is a vital part of the church today and Smith offers a very helpful discussion of this topic.

Chapter Six has some powerful implications for those involved in this endeavor—formation of Christians, especially in the Christian University. Connecting the “thick” practices of the faith with intentional formation through Christian practices and learning provides an educational framework that nurtures students and moves them into living their faith in profound and impactful ways (19). This education will enlarge the rituals and liturgies experienced in worship into the learning environment and into the daily living of students who are part of this

kind of educational environment. This task of unfolding persons to engage the world is the kind of activity in which Smith insists the Christian University should be engaged (221).

The audience for this text is potentially small in the fact that he is relating a theory regarding formation and education, especially in Christian colleges. The text has some interesting elements to it, but at times it is so narrow in its scope that this reader found it difficult to translate. However, several pieces, especially relating the university to the cathedral and learners to seekers were wonderful images in the midst of the text (112), as was the helpful section on “thin” and “thick” practices (82).

I recommend this text for persons interested in formation and the university. For that, Smith has written a helpful book on a number of levels and his further work should be beneficial.

Karyn L. Wiseman, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA