

Book Review

By Wes Bredenhof

Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation, James K. A. Smith, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. Soft cover, 238 pages, \$25.50.

At my local Chapters bookstore there is a section entitled “Books with Buzz.” This is where you’ll find the books that are getting a lot of attention. I could imagine that a Christian bookstore with a similar section might prominently feature *Desiring the Kingdom*, especially if this bookstore were catering to a Reformed community. I belong to a small group of Reformed ministers who get together occasionally to discuss good books. *Desiring the Kingdom* was recently on our agenda, though I regret that I wasn’t able to make it to any of the meetings to discuss it. However, I did read it and I’ve noted that others are reading it too. This seems to be a “book with buzz,” a book we need to take a closer look at. As we’ll see, while there are some good points, there are also some serious concerns.

Before we get to the meat of the matter, you might be wondering about the author. James K. A. Smith is associate professor of philosophy and adjunct professor of congregational and ministry studies at Calvin College. Smith is a prolific author – he seems to roll out books like a minister does sermons. He is associated with a movement known as Radical Orthodoxy. Radical Orthodoxy is a school of thought which attempts to utilize the insights of postmodernism. Radical Orthodox theologians and philosophers also promote return to the emphases and outlook of the early church – hence the term “Radical” (which derives from the Latin *radix*, “root”).

The aim of this book is to transform the way we understand education. The author believes that education ought to have more to do with what we love and what/who we worship, than with what we know. Writes Smith, “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 is what we *love*” (25). This book is especially directed at educators, those involved with the formative years of children and young adults.

Helpful Contributions

Smith identifies a significant problem in many Reformed communities: an over-emphasis on the intellectual aspect of faith and the Christian worldview. We often have placed all the focus on **what we know**, rather than on **whom we worship and love**. I love the Heidelberg Catechism and fully agree with everything that it states. But I sometimes wonder if the Catechism’s focus on sanctification almost entirely in terms of thankfulness contributes to our tendency to intellectualize the faith and the life that it shapes. Thankfulness is biblical, but so is love – the two need one another. Thankfulness without love is not genuine. Love is the affection that motivates and undergirds the attitudes and actions of thankfulness. I wondered

about all that before reading Smith, but *Desiring the Kingdom* affirmed that this may be a real concern. Whether in our schools, homes, or churches, we need to place more emphasis on love for God as a fundamental driving force behind our education and spiritual development.

A second helpful contribution is Smith's description and analysis of various secular liturgies. The best example is the shopping mall. In chapter 3, Smith describes in detail how the local shopping mall presents a religious experience to its visitors. Elsewhere, he writes about the liturgical character of nationalism. He writes about the American Pledge of Allegiance: "No hint of eschatological deferral; no sense of a 'not yet' failure to measure up; but a confident claim of justice here and now, secured by the republic" (109). I could not help but read this and think of the Canadian national anthem. We sing that Canada is "glorious and free." Is a country glorious and free when it allows millions of unborn children to be murdered? To be sure, there are many good things about Canada, but this element of our "secular liturgy" exaggerates. Yes, there is eschatological deferral in the second stanza of our anthem ("as waiting for a better day"), but seldom is that stanza sung outside of Christian circles and even then, an internal contradiction remains. How bad does Canada have to get before we start singing, "God **make** our land glorious and free," instead of "God **keep** our land..."? Smith brings us to ask these sorts of questions and that's good. He helps us to see that all of life is inescapably liturgical in some sense.

Concerns

Unfortunately, there are also some concerning aspects to this volume. As mentioned above, Smith is a philosopher, albeit a Christian one. One of the fundamental weak points of *Desiring the Kingdom* is the lack of a meaningful engagement with the Bible. This is not to say that everything here is unbiblical, only that if one is looking for transparent biblical support for many of Smith's assertions and arguments, they will not be found here.

Another troubling aspect has to do with the way that the author works with our Reformed heritage. In the first chapter, he describes how Protestant Christianity absorbed the "model of the person as a thinking thing" from René Descartes and others. There may be some truth to this, but it should be mentioned that the best theologians of the post-Reformation period were highly critical of Descartes and resistant to his rationalism.

Later in the book, Smith argues for a form of monasticism in Christian post-secondary education. Apart from the virtues or demerits of such a proposal, my concern is with his appeal to John Calvin. In a footnote on page 209, Smith writes, "For Reformed folk who think that monasticism is simply incommensurate with a Reformed 'world-and-life view,' I commend Calvin's discussion of a 'holy and lawful monasticism' in the *Institutes*, 4.13.10." Smith makes it sound as if Calvin would approve some form of the monastic life. Calvin at that point was writing about Augustine and the form of monasticism in his day, one that was quite different than that which existed in the sixteenth century. But we should take note of what Calvin writes further: "Meanwhile, I frankly admit that even in that ancient form which Augustine

commends there is something that I do not like very much...Though we grant there was nothing evil in that profession, it was surely no slight evil that it brought a useless and dangerous example into the church." (*Institutes*, 4.13.16). According to Calvin, it is better for man to be "serving God in a definite calling." All of this is to say that Calvin's views of Augustinian-era monasticism are more nuanced than Smith portrays.

Another concern has to do with balance. As mentioned above, I have appreciation for Smith's emphasis on love has a formative element in who we are as Christians, who we are becoming, and what we are doing. This element has been brought out by theologians of the past, especially by various Puritans and, later on, Jonathan Edwards. However, it was never at the expense of a rigorous knowledge of what the Bible teaches. To be faithful to Scripture, we need both head and heart.

This leads me to another point. The author teaches at a Christian Reformed institution and presumably is a member of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Within the CRC, discussions are ongoing about the practice of paedocommunion, allowing children to partake of the Lord's Supper. It appears likely that the CRC will move in the direction of allowing churches to practice this. I wonder if there is a connection between Smith's approach and the growing openness of the CRC to paedocommunion. After all, if the emphasis is on love rather than on knowledge, we can easily see that this may open doors for children to profess faith at a young age and thereafter sit at the Lord's table. Imbalance does have consequences.

On page 135, we find this footnote: "For a helpful history on the Bible as, in some significant sense, a product of the church in the Spirit, see Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?...*" Then on the following page, Smith asserts that "worship precedes the formation of the biblical canon..." and "Lived worship is the fount from which a worldview springs." There are two problems here. First of all, while there is some truth to the last two quotations, the notion of revelation is notably absent. Did anyone ever worship the true God apart from revelation? Second, I am deeply concerned about this author's recommendation of Craig Allert. Besides Allert's opposition to biblical inerrancy, his view that the Bible is the product of the church (rather than the other way around) is problematic. Allert argues that if believers would understand the fluidity of the process of formation of the canon, they would not limit inspiration to the sixty-six books of Scripture, nor would they hold to inerrancy. Is this a **helpful** approach? Does this sound faithful to the teaching of Scripture itself, say like in Psalm 12:6? Allert does not hold to a high view of Scripture and Smith's commendation of Allert's book causes one to wonder about him as well. I have noted before how a lower view of Scripture developed in the CRC between the 1950s and the 1980s and this seems to be further evidence of that development.

Chapter 5 provides an exegesis of "the social imaginary embedded in Christian worship." There are good elements in this chapter; for instance, the discussion of confession of sin and assurance of pardon. However, Smith's discussion of baptism does not emphasize the promissory character of this sacrament. Instead, Smith relies heavily on the treatment of

Federal Vision author Peter Leithart. He states that baptism “makes what it promises” (183). In other words, baptism is not just God signing and sealing his promises to those who are baptized, but also **giving** them what is promised. In this discussion, Smith seems to be saying that this means that baptism is the way in which we are grafted into the Christian church – and certainly no one can object to that. However, we also find Smith quoting Leithart saying, “baptism likewise forms new creatures” (184). This swings too far in one direction and confuses the sign with the thing signified. Moreover, I wonder again about the connection between this treatment of baptism and the trend towards paedocommunion in the CRC.

Finally, a few other items of concern need to be mentioned. Part 1 is entitled, “Desiring, Imaginative Animals.” “Animals” here is a reference to human beings. Elsewhere, Smith says that we are “liturgical animals” (40). In a footnote, he explains that his usage of this term comes from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Of course, this term raises the eyebrows of those who are more accustomed to biblical terminology and makes one wonder about Smith’s view of creation. On page 148, Smith says “the whole world is a sacrament.” Again, for those accustomed to biblical and confessional terminology this raises questions like: how is the whole world a sign and seal of God’s covenant? On page 207, when describing the benediction at the end of a worship service, Smith writes, “The minister raises her hands, we stretch out ours to receive, and God’s blessing is proclaimed...” Obviously this author is not averse to the idea of women in office.

More concerns could be brought forward, but I think I’ve touched on the main ones. There are some good elements in *Desiring the Kingdom*, but readers should be warned that the author does not share many of our core convictions, especially those pertaining to Scripture. This book is radical in many ways, but orthodox not so much.