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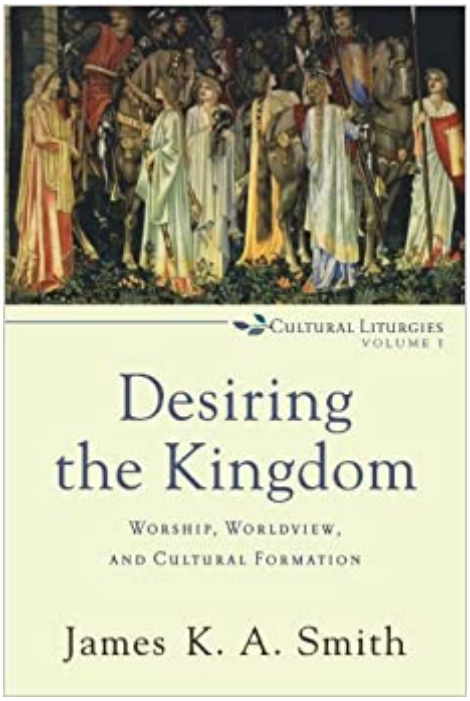
# Desiring The Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, And Cultural Formation (Cultural Liturgies)

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## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A Philosophical Theology of CulturePhilosopher James K. A. Smith reshapes the very project of Christian education in Desiring the Kingdom. The first of three volumes that will ultimately provide a comprehensive theology of culture, Desiring the Kingdom focuses education around the themes of liturgy, formation, and desire. Smith’s ultimate purpose is to re-vision Christian education as a formative process that redirects our desire toward God’s kingdom and its vision of flourishing. In the same way, he re-visions Christian worship as a pedagogical practice that trains our love."James Smith shows in clear, simple, and passionate prose what worship has to do with formation and what both have to do with education. He argues that the God-directed, embodied love that worship gives

us is central to all three areas and that those concerned as Christians with teaching and learning need to pay attention, first and last, to the ordering of love. This is an important book and one whose audience should be much broader than the merely scholarly."--Paul J. Griffiths, Duke Divinity School"In lucid and lively prose, Jamie Smith reaches back past Calvin to Augustine, crafting a new and insightful Reformed vision for higher education that focuses on the fundamental desires of the human heart rather than on worldviews. Smith deftly describes the 'liturgies' of contemporary life that are played out in churches--but also in shopping malls, sports arenas, and the ad industry--and then re-imagines the Christian university as a place where students learn to properly love the world and not just think about it."--Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, Messiah College; authors of Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation"This is a wise, provocative, and inspiring book. It prophetically blurs the boundaries between theory and practice, between theology and other disciplines, between descriptive analysis and constructive imagination. Anyone involved in Christian education should read this book to glimpse a holistic vision of learning and formation. Anyone involved in the worship life of Christian communities should read this book to discover again all that is at stake in the choices we make about our practices."--John D. Witvliet, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary

James K. A. Smith (PhD, Villanova University) is the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In addition, he is editor of Comment magazine and a senior fellow of the Colossian Forum. He has penned the critically acclaimed Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? and Introducing Radical Orthodoxy, and his edited books include After Modernity? and Hermeneutics at the Crossroads. Smith is the editor of the well-received Church and Postmodern Culture series (www.churchandpomo.org).

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. I will briefly summarize the two sections of the book with some of his major points, and then offer some questions and analysis.The first of two sections is devoted to an expression of anthropology, focusing on humans as loving/affective creatures and how those loves are formed. Cultural liturgies are examined and exposited as Smith makes the case for loving as the fundamental act of the human being in place of reasoning. Most worldview thinking, he argues, has the human creature exactly upside down as it emphasizes rationalistic behavior over affective influences.For someone familiar with some of the basics of virtue theory, it will not come as a surprise that Smith argues that habits and practices play a large, if not primary, role in the forming of loves and the human character. He also employs the structure of "social imaginary" to describe how the practices of our lives and our worship form us as "noncognitive" directors of our actions and dispositions toward the world.In the second section, Smith moves from anthropology to the more constructive task of dealing with the actual ins and outs of Christian worship. In the first section he argues that we need to form a new way of imagining and seeing the Kingdom of God, and in the second part he goes about dealing with how that happens. He asks, "In other words, what does worship say about Christian faith?" (pg. 134) It is a good question, and it deserves to be dealt with. What do our actual practices as Christians tell us about the shape of our faith in Christ? The term "practical atheist" may be overused in some contexts, but its point fits just fine with Smith's larger idea. Are we as Christ followers worshiping (acting) in such a way as to make good sense of our faith?While some reviewers have noted that the first part of the book may be stronger than the second, I think a degree of charity needs to be applied to this second part. I must admit that I lost some steam reading through to the end as Smith listed the various "practical" applications of his theory, but I still found them instructive and at times provocative.I found a lot of Smith's argument to be the kind of thing we ought to be talking about in our churches and universities. Are we guilty of a kind of Gnosticism in which we have disconnected what we believe from how we behave and what we do when we gather together? Have we lost a sense of being deeply affective creatures who are

often moved by our experiences more than the latest lecture we heard? We need to wrestle with the implications of these issues. Given that, there are some assertions and arguments in the book to push against.I'll get a rather small thing out of the way first. From time to time Smith seems to erect scarecrows to knock down. One particular instance happens in his sidebar on The Moulin Rouge. His argument is that there is something valuable in the way love is portrayed (at least in its force in the human being) there, and he notes, "And so one could suggest that the kingdom looks more like Montmarte than Colorado Springs!" (pg. 72) The play, of course, is on a stereotype of Colorado Springs as a kind of evangelical Mecca where nearly everyone is blindly evangelical and in lock-step with the Republican party. I was disappointed in that kind of broad-stroke ad hominem, but it isn't the only place where part of his argument relies on pigeon-holing a set of evangelicals in a cubicle and knocking the whole thing down.Then there are times where it seems Smith is too heavy-handed with other points of view in order to make his argument. The result of this tact is that he portrays an apparent disregard for and a simple denial of different points of view. Smith clearly argues that we are primarily affective/loving beings, but at times he appears to say we are exclusively affective/loving beings, showing a disregard for what seems to me to be the truth of the influence of ideas and reason. Instead of a both/and or primary/secondary approach Smith seems to want to have an either/or approach, which doesn't help his overall case.Early on Smith characterizes his foil as "rationalistic," "a talking-head version of Christianity," and provocatively enough a "'bobble head' Christianity" where what goes on in the head far outweighs what goes on in the body (pg. 42). While this can be true of some forms of Christian theology heavily influenced by the enlightenment, is it true of all forms of theology concerned with true doctrine and the content of the propositional messages we proclaim? As seems to be the case with theologians and Christians influenced by a postmodern philosophy, there might be a temptation to make a category mistake here: all who disagree with us are disjointed enlightenment thinkers.Another example of this kind of reasoning appears in the second half of the book on page 163, "The `image of God' (imago Dei) is not some de facto property of Homo sapiens (whether will or reason or language or what have you); rather, the image of God is a task, a mission" (emphasis his). This is the kind of thing that shoots the argument he wants to make in the foot. We are put off by the unnecessary bifurcation of the two - property vs. mission - and we are on guard from then on. I find it obvious in both the Scripture and in the theology on the subject that the image of God is at least a set of properties endowed to us by God that make us, not worms, uniquely human. It is then be constructive to note that the image of God is a "task, a mission" that we have as creatures living under God.I simply do not see a logical contradiction in his argument if he took love to be primary to reason, and then argued for the proper

places of each in the liturgies of the believer.There is a lot to be gained through Smith's book, and he raises arguments we need to wrestle with that we don't often think through. And for that, I think this book is very useful for Christian educators and pastors. But I hope that as he fills out this project he will avoid some of the unnecessary rhetorical and argumentative devices that hurt the overall argument.

I was assigned this book as part of a Theology Discussion group at church. So I was a bit unsure of what I was getting into as I opened the pages. The book is "academic" to say the least. When you approach the book do so with paper and pencil in hand and a good bit of time to devote to each reading. You will be challenged to think, digest, react and then decide, do you agree with Smith or disagree with Smith.The main tenant of the book appears to me to be the thought that man is a liturgical being. He is born to worship! He desires to worship! He lives to worship! The question is, "what will he worship?" John Piper rightly tells us in his book, "Let the Nations be Glad" that Missions exists because Worship doesn't. When God created the world and then created man He created man with the purpose of bringing Honor and Glory to God and to delight in God, in other words to Worship God.But our world has delved into a world of sin, paganism and worldliness that God never intended. Even the most gracious of humans, the most gentle of humans, the most kind and caring of humans have succumb to the sin nature of man. We all have a tendency to "worship" something and usually that worship is not the God of our Bible.Smith will argue that there are several things taking the place of our rightful worship. He will use the examples of The Mall, The Sporting Event and The American University to show that we have replaced the Worship of God the Father with the worship of materialism, sports, entertainment, celebrities and the Intellect.He will delve into the Philosophical worldviews that have developed and then continue on into a Christian Worldview, but he won't stop there, he will actually go further to declare that even a Christian worldview is not where we should land. You will need to read to learn where he lands.He also will write that we have put to much credit on the intellect, to much weight on the necessity of learning and have made books, learning and the University things to be worshiped more than the God of the Bible. He will argue that God did make us intelligent beings, but that God gave us his Emotive character and that our faith needs to reside not in our intellect but in our Gut. That's correct, we are emotional romantic people who are pushed more towards the belief in something by our emotions and romance than necessarily by intellect. He will argue that the world / advertisers have it correctly, we are pushed more towards decisions by sex than we are by anything else. That may fly in the face of many Christians but I think he may have a very strong point here. Sex sells. Just watch a

little TV and you will know that.He reminds us that as Christians we often preach and teach, use your intellect to over ride the sex drive. Use your brains to over ride your emotions. Use your wisdom to put down your feelings.But didn't God make us feeling creatures? So, the question is not that our feelings are bad, but how do we attune ourselves to our feelings, allow them to talk to us and move us without allowing them to drive us to sin. That same phrase could be used with the word "intellect". Yes, our intellect can also drive us to sin when it is mishandled, look at the amount of Pride in some people.This book is not one that I completely agree with, but it did make me stop and think. I did not buy all of his arguments, but I did have to pause and wonder about them. I think he points out many areas that Christians need to be concerned with and meditate on.This is not a simple read. It is not for the new Christian. It is not for someone looking for a devotional book. This is a serious read for a serious study and will take you time to work through it. I would recommend that you not read it in isolation, but that you read it as part of a study group that can pick it apart and grow from what you learn.God bless and Enjoy!

Spoiler alert! The habits, rituals, and items tat you fill your day up with are the things that cultivate you into the person that you will become. That is what Smith refers to as liturgy. The liturgy of today's education (Smith concentrates on Christian Education) is not bringing today's young minds to an image clearer to that of Christ. Rather than intellectual knowledge or a $50,000 piece of paper, today's student need to work for and desire the kingdom!

Had to purchase this for class but it's worth the read, class or not. It's essential reading for thinking about Christian discipleship and teaching. Smith is one of the better thinkers and theologians today. His main point is that human beings are primarily lovers driven by desire, not thinkers like we are often led to believe post-Enlightenment. Smith just released a more popular version of the book, but do yourself a favor and do the extra work of getting through this.

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