

*DESIRING THE KINGDOM: A CRITICAL REVIEW*

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by

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## DESIRING THE KINGDOM: A CRITICAL REVIEW

### Introduction

One of the most disconcerting challenges facing the Church in North America is its overall lack of influence on society at large. Anecdotal as well as empirical evidence strongly suggest that the Church is failing to penetrate society. For instance, polling data by George Barna shows little to no distinct difference in beliefs and lifestyle between professing adult Christians and the general public.<sup>1</sup> This raises some interesting questions for Christian educators. Why are so many young adults departing from the religious practices of their youth?<sup>2</sup> Why has the craze about Christian education (i.e. home schooling, private, undergraduate, or graduate) failed to produce the intended outcome of transforming the culture?

These trends present a major problem for Christian leaders seeking to entrust the faith to the next generation (2 Tim 2:2), whether senior pastor, youth minister, or lay volunteer. Those who go into this profession do so not for monetary gain but to leave a lasting impact on the lives others. They possess a consuming desire to give their lives to God's purposes and to lead others in doing likewise. It is only natural, then, that with the rising tide of liberalism and the Church's

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), Ch. 4. See also Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68-70. Their research, conducted on teens ages 13-17, show that most adolescence adopt the religious views of their parents. This is well and good so long as parents are orthodox in their Christian belief and practices. Thus, Barna's findings coupled with Smith and Lundquists' research actually reveal an unsettling trajectory for orthodoxy in the decades ahead: for better or worse the religious beliefs of parents today will be the religious beliefs of adults tomorrow.

<sup>2</sup> Barna Group, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years> (accessed March 18, 2013); Derek Melleby, "Why student abandon their faith: Lessons from William Wilberforce," Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, <http://www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=361896> (accessed March 18, 2013);

impoverished moral voice, these same leaders are easily discouraged, forcing them to ask piercing questions: “What has failed? Where have we gone wrong? Is it even worth it?”

Therefore, the ultimate aim of this paper is explore how we as Christian leaders can adapt our teaching styles in order to better penetrate the hearts and minds of our students so that they will make a long lasting commitment to Christ. To that end, I will first summarize Smith’s analysis of Christian education and his proposal for what some of those changes might be in his recent book *Desiring the Kingdom*. Then, I will offer a critique of Smith’s proposal, noting both the positive and negative aspects of the book. Finally, I will suggest three ministerial implications for Christian leaders today.

### ***Desiring the Kingdom: A Summary***

This book is the first of Smith’s three volume Cultural Liturgies series. The purpose of this particular volume is to demonstrate how Christian education has embraced an incomplete, reductionist anthropology, which has resulted in an inordinate focus on cognitive ideas rather than affective desires. Smith critiques the traditional worldview approach to Christian education, which operates on the assumption that right beliefs translate into right actions.<sup>3</sup> While this approach rightly says at root human beings are inherently religious believers and that those deep-rooted beliefs provide a fundamental orientation to life and daily practices, Smith contends humanity is not so rationalistic or cognitive. Because traditional Christian education traffics only in ideas, it fails to truly educate. By “educate” Smith means the transformation of the whole person and not the translation of information.

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<sup>3</sup> The epitome of this worldview apologetic can be found in such books as Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1999); Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999); Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004).

He argues that the Church has bought into a modern view of man, which sees the person as a “thinking thing.”<sup>4</sup> But this fails to account for the complexity of what it means to be human. Smith writes, “...humans persons are defined by love – as desiring agents and liturgical animals whose primary mode of intending the world is love....”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Smith challenges the Cartesian concept that we are because we think. He says humans just don’t *think*; we think *about* something. Accordingly, human thinking is always intentional about something else. It is a means to another end. We interact with our world rather than just think about it.

In contrast the more cerebral, modern view of man, Smith says we are affective, emotional beings who long to love and be loved. It follows that human identity is shaped by its “ultimate love”.<sup>6</sup> That ultimate love is a *telos*, or a picture of the good life. And that picture captures our imagination and pulls us toward it. So powerful is that picture that it controls our daily habits, whether positive or negative, turning our hearts in certain directions. But the only way that picture can be created in our imagination is through our senses as we navigate our way, or involve ourselves, in the world.

So what you end up with is a catch twenty-two effect: society implicitly conveys a picture of the “good life” which shapes our habits and those habits in turn reinforce that vision of the “good life”. Smith goes on to say that there is no such thing as neutral habits, though he does concede that some practices are more laden with meaning than others. It is those “thick” practices, those which he calls “rituals of ultimate concern”, that are the “liturgy” of our lives. Smith explains:

Liturgies shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world....[They] aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world

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<sup>4</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 40-1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51.

in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects.<sup>7</sup>

Convincing evidence of Smith's claim is the emotional appeal advertisers make in their ads and commercials. Effective marketing first targets the felt needs of their audience and secondarily surfaces why or how their product satisfies that need. In surfacing that felt need, marketers are, in a sense, creating a picture of the "good life" which causes our hearts to gravitate to that picture.

So rather than asking heady questions to students (i.e. "What is the underlying worldview of such-and-such movie director and how does that get expressed through this movie?"), educators need to be asking questions such as "What vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice? What does the 'good life' look like as embedded in cultural rituals? What sort of person will I become after being immersed in this or that cultural liturgy?" These are better questions that get at deciphering the culture. For all those images point to much deeper, more sinister aims. This is the process of discerning the "shape of the kingdom".<sup>8</sup>

The problem with Christian education, therefore, is not that it's orthodox or right in its thinking and beliefs, but that it fails to awaken an appropriate desire and love for God's Kingdom and his purposes on earth. Student's hearts are too easily seduced by other less noble, finite, and temporary "kingdoms". This problem exists because the Church operates on the wrong assumptions about what it means to be human. In truth, the secular marketers have a more complete understanding of human nature than the Church in North America, an unflattering conclusion for sure.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## ***Desiring the Kingdom: A Critique***

### *Relevance to Christian Leadership and Organizational Culture*

To begin, Smith offers an astoundingly erudite exegesis of Christian education. His analysis of this culture is a remarkable example of Malphurs' cultural exegesis found in his latest book *Look Before You Lead*. In this book, Malphurs guides candidating ministers on how to find ministry positions at particular churches that best align with their gifts and personality temperaments. He compares the process to the basic structure of an apple. Just as an apple has three essential parts to it (skin, flesh, core), so too do all churches, or any institution for that matter, have three parts.<sup>9</sup> They are behavior, values, and beliefs respectively. Wise candidates will do well to pay close attention to all the observable behaviors of a hiring church because these visible signs offer clues to the church's underlying values. Those values, in turn, are the church's beliefs in action. A good marriage is when the values and beliefs of the candidating minister mirror those of the hiring church. A poor marriage results when those underlying beliefs and values are disparate. It also follows that problems within a church cannot merely be addressed at the observable behavioral, or skin deep, level only; either the minister or church consultant must pry deeper in order to properly address the root issue. Only then can true transformation occur.

And that is exactly what Smith has done in *Desiring the Kingdom*. He *observes*, that Christian education is failing to produce a certain kind of "distinct" person.<sup>10</sup> Probing a little further, he found that part of the problem was most Christian education curriculums place an enormous *value* on transmitting Christian information to students. But why would they value information and cognition so much if they did not first *believe* fundamentally that humans are thinking beings? Therein does Smith touch upon the root issue: a flawed anthropology.

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<sup>9</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Look Before You Lead: How to Discern and Shape Your Church Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 26.

### *The Positives*

I believe Smith's revised anthropology serves as helpful corrective to the institution of Christian education at all levels. He is correct to question modernity's Cartesian view of humanity embraced by the Church. Rightly does Smith remind the Church that we are not merely cognitive thinkers but emotional, affective agents who interact and engage the world around us. And I believe his notion of desire and liturgy more effectively captures the complexity of what it means to be human.

Not only does Smith exegete Christian education, but he also exegetes the various aspects of Christian worship in order to show how a typical Sunday morning actually helps to re-direct our hearts toward more appropriate ends.<sup>11</sup> God, in his wisdom, has always directed his people to various physical liturgical practices precisely because following him cannot be done apart from living in this world. As such we must routinely be training our desires toward Him in whom our souls find rest.

### *The Negatives*

Nevertheless, I disagree with Smith's solution for the problem he has unearthed. He argues for a monastic university setting where students "...reconnect with the thick practices of the church."<sup>12</sup> Here his radical orthodoxy shines brightest. It is not that I am opposed to orthodoxy. My problem is the degree of separation Smith is calling for. These ecclesial colleges and universities

would be a counter-cultural institution[s] without being an anticultural institution[s]; rather, it would be an institution forming and equipping a peculiar people to unfold creation's cultural possibilities in a way that accords with the cruciform shape of the kingdom in the "not yet" of our sojourn.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Ch. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 221.

In order to see his vision to reality, though, these communities would need to resemble the cloistered societies of centuries ago and be supported by a church with diminishing resources while offering non-accredited programs of study that will never be recognized by secular society. In other words, his vision will fail not for its idealism but for its lack of pragmatism.

I see this as a departure from his Augustinian theology. Against Pelagius did Augustine hammer out the doctrine of total depravity. Man is hopelessly lost apart from God's mercy, and this world system is deeply corrupted. Christ said that his Kingdom is not of this world. That means that his kingdom is simply incompatible with this world's authority structures. It does not matter the form of government a society adopts, it is flawed from the beginning. Neither does it matter how we go about our catechesis or spiritual formation or Christian education or whatever you want to call it – for even our best intentions are marred by imperfection. The best we can strive for is to be faithful by God's grace and mercy to live out and pass along the faith to the next generation.<sup>14</sup> That may sound pessimistic, but I also think it is the most realistic solution given our fallen world system.

### *Concluding Thoughts on Desiring the Kingdom*

So, while I agree with Smith's anthropological correction to modern worldview Christian education, I disagree with his supposed hamartiology and man's ability to bring about this change in large scale. I don't believe the Church will ever get it right. In truth, we've been getting wrong for 2,000 years and yet somehow God's purposes appear to be advancing despite us. This isn't to say we shouldn't strive for optimal results. It just means we need to adjust our expectations to match reality. To be fair Smith does recognize the potential weaknesses in his proposal. For that I give him respect for even quoting the dissenters.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 222-3.

### **Ministerial Implications**

Despite these disagreements, I believe there are at least three helpful ministerial implications for Christian leaders that emerge from Smith's book. First, we in Christian education need to realize that right beliefs alone do not necessarily translate into right actions. The concept may sound good in theory, but in practice it is more complicated. The truth is we believe something long before we apply it. And one cannot just casually blame sin for that disconnect. Yes, sin is the root problem. But we must understand the extent to which sin our corrupted not just ourselves but our world.

The second is an extension of the first. We must remember that sin has shifted, or pulled, our desires away from that which is good and perfect and re-directed it toward lesser gods. We are negligent in our duties as leaders if we ignore the intoxicating power of emotional desires. Therefore, we *must* address the felt needs of our students and show them how God designed us for himself. In our teaching and speaking, we cannot speak only to the head. We must speak to first to the heart and then the head.

Finally, and most important, the book reminds us to cling ever so desperately upon the Holy Spirit through prayer to transform students into radical followers of Jesus. The Church is simply not capable of keeping pace with the marketing industry that incessantly assaults our desires. We all must wrestle with a worldly system that creates a vision of the "good life" at odds with Jesus' call of sacrificial discipleship. Let us make prayer a bigger part of ministry. And as we pray, let us ask the Lord to constantly be lifting our eyes toward heaven where we will gain a more eternal perspective of our present circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

I set out to probe how Christian educators might improve their craft. I believe Smith's book offers insights that every Christian leader ought to consider. Overall, he helpfully moves the discussion in the right direction by making us aware of our own anthropological misconceptions and challenging us to adopt better pedagogies with longer lasting results.

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