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Imagining the Kingdom (Book Review)

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Donaldson faces these challenges in a calm, careful, and charitable manner. He rightly discerns that the key issue is hermeneutical—exactly how is the Bible to be interpreted? He addresses this question in his initial chapter (1-30), which explores the false and inconsistent literalism on which so much dispensationalism is based. Only when the first order interpretative questions are addressed is it then possible to proceed to answer the question “Who is Israel?” (31-69). He effectively exposes the dispensational dual-track “Israel on Earth, Christians in Heaven” approach. This approach clears the ground for a much-needed clarification of the nature of “the kingdom of God,” which rejects the restoration of some sort of territorially delimited Davidic realm (70-95).

Thereafter, Donaldson proceeds to correct dispensationalist misreading of passages such as Daniel 9:24-7, Matthew 24, I Thessalonians 4:13-18, II Thessalonians 2:1-10, and Revelation 20:1-10 (96-147). The discussion of these passages offered by Donaldson is rich with insight and worthy of careful study, especially by those who have allowed the dispensational system and outlook to become part of their mental furniture. Donaldson clearly draws from writers familiar to many readers of *Pro Rege*, such as William Hendriksen (1900-82), Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007), and David Holwerda, late of Calvin Seminary. Also, and especially in his conclusions (150-160), Donaldson’s thinking has been influenced by

N.T. Wright, currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, at St. Mary’s College in the University of Saint Andrews, Scotland. He exhibits a deep accord with Wright’s contextual readings of Scripture and integral approach to eschatology (55-7, 68, 80-1, 154, 159). Donaldson acknowledges that he has drawn on the work of J. Richard Middleton, Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, NY, as did N.T. Wright (152-4, 159).

Those seeking a lucid and accessible introduction to the many problems inherent to premillennial dispensationalism should make Donaldson’s book their first choice. It is strongly recommended. Of course, there is more to be said—as is always the case. A passing reference is made to the fact that what has passed for a Christian worldview “has been influenced by Platonic dualism and by ideas reminiscent of Gnosticism” (154). Arguably, this observation, if followed through, would serve to recast our understanding of the entire history of post-Apostolic Christianity and, not least, provide considerable insight into the philosophical roots and historical origins of more than dispensationalism itself. Certainly, an appreciation of the teachings and influence of premillennial dispensationalism helps to explain why so many avowedly “Bible-believing” evangelical Christians remain tragically impervious to more biblically grounded and directed calls for integral Christian thinking and living.

Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Volume 2 of *Cultural Liturgies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 198 pages. ISBN 978-0-8010-3578-4. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., visiting professor at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary, Riga, Latvia.

Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works begins in a Costco food court as author James K.A. Smith reads Wendell Berry’s *Bringing it to the Table*, an anthology of essays critiquing the dominant systems of food production and consumption. While reading, Smith realizes that there is a gap between his worldview and his actions; he ponders that “the food court at Costco’ might be a kind of shorthand for Berry’s picture of the sixth circle of hell” (*Imagining* 8). Asserting that *Imagining the Kingdom* “is something of a hybrid, pitched between the academy and the church, since its argument is aimed at both” (*Imagining* xvii), Smith uncovers the roots of a Costco lifestyle and contrasts those roots with those of the kingdom of God. In other words, he presents two visions of the good life that are each struggling for dominance.

Imagining the Kingdom is the second volume of a 3-volume series on the theology of culture that Smith calls the *Cultural Liturgies* Project. In a superb manner, Smith packs a lot into a book that is less than 200 pages. Seeking the renewal of liturgical and cultural practice leads Smith to write for educators, pastors, and worship leaders who are reflective and open to new ways of envisioning liturgical practice. He invites scholars to explore phenomenology and philosophy of religion, offering some original, constructive proposals for a research agenda. Throughout the book he uses sidebars from fiction, art, and life stories, as well as philosophical, cultural, and liturgical passages.

Professor of philosophy at Calvin College, where he holds the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview, Smith is also the

editor of The Church and Postmodern Culture series (Baker Academic: <http://www.churchandpomo.org>). In Volume 1 of his *Cultural Liturgies* Project, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), Smith proposed

a theology of culture that understands human beings as *embodied actors* rather than merely thinking things; prioritizes *practices* rather than ideas as the site of challenge and resistance; looks at cultural practices through the lens of worship or liturgy. (*Desiring* 35)

According to Smith, humans show their intention through their loves and desires. This intention is shaped by “bodily practices, routines, or rituals” (*Desiring* 63) that capture our hearts and form an imaginary view of the world. In a return to Augustine and pre-modernity, Smith asserts that the human person is *homo liturgicus*—not *homo rationalis*, as in Descartes and modernity (*Desiring* 40).

Kinaesthetics and Poetics

The Augustinian view of humanity as *homo liturgicus* resurfaces in *Imagining the Kingdom*, as Smith digs deeper into a theory of practice. Smith draws on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) on kinaesthetics—how the body knows or perceives—and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) on poetics—how the body hears stories—to build a theoretical toolbox for naming and articulating a Christian liturgical anthropology (*Imagining* 29, 101). Smith believes that kinaesthetics and poetics are at the heart of liturgical anthropology. His working axiom is “rooted in a theological claim about the sorts of creatures we are: created in the image of God, and called to image the Son who is the image of the invisible God, we, too, are *incarnate* in a sense. We are sacramental animals” (*Imagining* 101).

Smith devotes much of chapters 1 and 2 to expounding the insights of Merleau-Ponty (kinaesthetics) and Bourdieu (poetics) so that we can “appreciate the dynamics of habituation that make us the sorts of actors we are” (*Imagining* 33). In so doing, he pushes back against an intellectualist account of actions that assumes that as we think, we do. Rather, he asserts that as we do (habits), we think (theology, worldview, theoretical ethics); for Smith believes that “our incarnating, accommodating God meets us *in* and *through* the creaturely conditions” (*Imagining* 33).

To develop his idea, Smith writes, “Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perceptions*¹ (*PP* hereafter) is

a classic account of how the body ‘knows’” (*Imagining* 41). This “knowing” involves a hybridity, or an incarnational mind *and* body experience, which is neither intellectualist nor mere biological response. We develop a habitual way of being-in-the-world that is carried in our bodies but is known on a level that precedes and eludes conscious reflection/thinking, below the radar of the mind: “The body carries a kind of acquired, habituated knowledge or know-how that is irreducible yet fundamentally *orienting* for our being-in-the-world” (*Imagining* 45). According to this view, our bodies are not just instruments of perception but are who we are: incarnated persons. Similarly, the body is the “me” that dwells in the world, *my constant background*. Smith asks, “What if the Christian life. . . is inscribed in our ‘habit-body’. . . [.] a sort of ‘momentum which throws us into our tasks, our cares, our situation, our familiar horizons?’” (*PP* 94; Smith 45)

In other words, experience is constituted against an acquired background that primes us to configure impressions into a world. For instance, we move through familiar places without thinking/antepredicatively (*PP* 149—prior to and without predication) because our bodies have learned and inhabit this space. Smith asks, “what if inhabiting the world *as* God’s creation requires a similar ‘antepredicative’ knowledge of place?” (*Imagining* 53) Just knowing/intellecting the doctrine of creation is insufficient; inhabitation of the world *as* creation requires rehabilitation “in the embodied practices of Christian worship” (*Imagining* 53). He asks, “How do we *teach* the body[?]. . . How is the body trained to *perceive* the world?” (*Imagining* 73)

Smith’s answer, drawn from Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*—a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action), an embodied know-how that is carried in a community of practice—is that the body is trained in social liturgical situations, either Christian or secular.² *Habitus* is a kind of embodied tradition, a handed-down way of being. Complex, ethically charged behavioral patterns that were once learned in community function like “a motor running under the hood” (*Imagining* 82) while we shop or run errands. It is this autonomic *habitus* that is often missed by intellectualist models of behavior that assert that we primarily act according to conscious principles. When the liturgy of the mall leads to a *habitus* of consumerism, principles of simple living often lose the battle: Costco in spite of Wendell Berry. Does all this mean that the mind has no significant role to play? Early in the *Imagining the*

Kingdom, Smith situates the intellect, the life of the mind, and worldviews as important, but he also views them as secondary to the imagination as the source of action. The imagination needs the critique and guidance of the mind. However, knowing what to love is not purely propositional knowledge; it is an *aesthetic* know-how that is derived from stories, pictures, images, and metaphors (*Imagining* 10–16, and later 113–114, 125–126). Therefore, it is a “hybridity” or an incarnational mind *and* body experience, neither intellectualist nor mere biological response.

Escaping the food court at Costco

Having explained the basis of liturgical and cultural practice as a “hybridity,” Smith turns, in chapters 3 and 4, to exploring how worship works, using the Ponty-Bourdieu toolbox. He focuses on the centrality of the imagination and the importance of the arts in sanctifying perceptions, especially the art of the story: “We’re less convinced by arguments than moved by stories” (*Imagining* 108). In words and signs, Christian worship enacts and performs the story of God’s redeeming work and his kingdom, drawing us into his action. This story is understood by the imagination.

Alternately, the stories of secular liturgies—of, say, the mall or of an electronic device—imagine another kingdom, one that is centered on the self rather than on God. For instance, Smith explains that the iPhone engages our bodies in shaping our imagination and our behavior. The rituals of handling and mastering the iPhone habituate us to treat the world as available *to me* to be selected, scaled, scanned, and enjoyed; what surrounds me exists *for me* (*Imagining* 143). Similarly, signing up for Twitter or Facebook leads to habits that shape one’s orientation to the world and, indeed, *make* one’s world. Because they shape our consciousness and world, secular liturgies are actually religious, imagining gods and visions of the good life.

By contrast, according to Smith, “Christian worship is an intentionally decentering practice, calling us out of ourselves into the very life of God” (*Imagining* 140). This decentering and re-formation through Christian worship culminates in sending the worshipers out to embody a foretaste of God’s shalom. Invited into union with the Triune God, we are formed for service. Smith points to John Calvin, who saw worship as a formative practice leading to the renewal not only of worshipers but also of the city beyond the church door.

In Christian worship, not only the decentering

and re-formatting effects of worship but also the form of worship—the form of the story telling—matters, Smith asserts. He explains that, because the form of worship enacts the Story, we can’t distill the message of the gospel and then place it in a coffee shop container or just any form of meeting. Rather, as liturgical animals, we are formed by the practices of worship, either the iPhone or the Christian liturgy. Smith includes a comparative chart of historic liturgies demonstrating the common shape of the liturgy over the centuries, now found in five different 20th-century books of worship, and urges their use. Worship works as it is repeated, forming and shaping perception and *habitus*, habituating us to walk humbly and justly with our God in his world.

In a sense, *Imagining the Kingdom* is an exercise in liturgical catechesis. It is an extended reflection on practice, an intellectual analysis of how worship works. Far from dismissing the guidance of the mind and of theological principle, Smith seeks to direct our reflection towards our embodied, incarnate being-in-the-world so that we can choose how to be habituated, how to escape the food court at Costco.

Liturgical theologians commonly assert the formative effects of liturgy in terms of the ideas and the truths presented in the Eucharist and baptism, but they seldom explain how this works, as Smith does. Some look mainly at religious rituals in general; they use the insights of Victor Taylor, Catharine Bell, and Roy Rappaport and make comparisons with Christian rituals, theorizing about the formative effects. Martha Moore Keish in her book *Do This in Remembrance of Me*³ draws on Rappaport to emphasize the bodily nature of ritual: “The physical doing is critically important in the celebration of the eucharist” (*Do This* 92). Louis Marie Chauvet (*Symbol and Sacrament*) cites Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu mostly in terms of language theory, along with J. L. (John Langshaw, 1911–1960) Austin’s theory of speech acts, to show how language functions in the liturgy. Joyce Ann Zimmerman and Graham Hughes draw on Paul Ricour’s hermeneutical approach to interpret liturgical texts. But seldom do we find an in-depth use of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu’s phenomenology and sociology. Smith has done us a great service in linking Merleau-Ponty’s and Bourdieu’s studies with the Christian liturgical formation of character and behavior, focusing on how the body is trained to perceive, and how sustained group experience trains the body’s imagination and desires.

Imagining is characterized by a rich interaction

with other scholars from many disciplines, which leads to fruitful footnotes for the reader. The conversation is going on at two levels, and the bottom of the page is as much fun as the top. However, because of the many valuable sources in the footnotes, I was disappointed to find no bibliography at the end of the book. The indices are also skimpy, running only 2 ½ pages for names and 1 ½ for subjects. I found this especially frustrating for a book partly aimed at scholars.

With that said, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* is a ground-breaking effort. I will refer to it again and again in pursuing my own research

agenda, seeking to better understand how worship works.

Endnotes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005).
2. In explaining *habitus*, Smith draws mostly on Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).
3. Martha Moore Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008)

Wittenberg, David. *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 306 pages. ISBN: 9780823249961. Reviewed by Josh Matthews, professor of English, Dordt College.

You might've seen this one before: it's a familiar science fiction (SF) plot. Frustrated by his inability to defeat the Superhero, the Archvillain builds a time machine to travel to the past, intending to kill the Superhero as a child. Someone therefore needs to save this child; otherwise, the Archvillain will take over the world. Because of this threat to the past from the future, the plot, as it were, thickens.

"But wait," you wonder. "If the Archvillain really did kill the child-Superhero, then why would he need to travel to the past? Wouldn't the Superhero already be dead in the present? In fact, the Superhero never would have existed in the first place, meaning that the Archvillain wouldn't ever need to travel to the past after he time-traveled! He built the time machine, but if he kills the Superhero, he never actually built it!"

Such time-travel paradoxes have long been fodder for SF stories, but few have considered them to be more than silly puzzles or fun little thought-experiments for analytical philosophy. David Wittenberg's book *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, however, challenges us to consider why so many SF narratives feature time-travel paradoxes like this as crucial plot elements. For Wittenberg, Associate Professor of English at the University of Iowa, time-travel stories fundamentally challenge our understanding of narrative. These stories ask, as he puts it, "many of the most basic questions about storytelling, [...] about the philosophy of temporality, history, and subjectivity" (2). In other words, time-travel fiction literally depicts key questions about the construction of history and the phenomenology of reading and interpreting. This is a serious kind of fiction in which readers and viewers become, perhaps unwittingly, "narrative theorists" (8).

Wittenberg spends much of the book arguing and demonstrating, via close readings of SF texts such as episodes of *Star Trek* and the first *Back to the Future* movie, that time-travel challenges our assumptions about narrative. As he points out, literary theorists have long distinguished between "story" and "plot," or, in Wittenberg's preferred terms (coined by Russian formalists), between "fabula" and "sjuzhet." The *fabula* is the chronological order of a narrative's events, while the *sjuzhet* is the order of events as presented by a narrative. Thus, for *Back to the Future* (1985), the *fabula* begins in 1955 and ends in 1985: first, Marty McFly in 1955 tries desperately to get his parents to meet and fall in love, and then in 1985 McFly time-travels in a DeLorean into the past. But the *sjuzhet* of *Back to the Future* depicts McFly as beginning his story in 1985, travelling to 1955, and then back to 1985.¹ Wittenberg demonstrates that narratologists and many writers, such as Henry James, have long preferred *fabula* to *sjuzhet*. In James' view, for example, writers should be a kind of "historian," thinking first of *fabula* and then constructing the *sjuzhet* (120). Moreover, when we think about the events in a story, we tend to re-tell them chronologically, even if the narrative does not present them chronologically. Wittenberg calls this common preference for *fabula* "fabular apriority."

Time-travel stories, as in this example of *Back to the Future*, challenge fabular apriority. They depict, literally, via time-travelers within their plots, a crisis of narrative priority. What if, as in a reader/viewer's experience of narrative, the *sjuzhet* is really prior to the *fabula*? By trying to change his past, the Archvillain who intends to kill the child-Superhero challenges traditional narrative theory. His story posits that the