
Pro Rege

Volume 45 | Number 1

Article 6

September 2016

You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habits (Book Review)

Shelbi Gesch
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gesch, Shelbi (2016) "You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habits (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 45: No. 1, 41 - 43.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss1/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habits. Smith, James K.A. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016. 224pp. ISBN: 978-1587433801. Reviewed by Shelbi Gesch, undergraduate student, Dordt College.

Pick up a copy of *You Are What You Love* by James Smith, and you'll read in the first few blurbs inside the book jacket that much of the material in Smith's latest book is a restructuring of his previous book, *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009). In *You Are What You Love*, Smith has rewritten and re-presented his previous work for a wider, perhaps more general, audience. As an older student having returned to college after a few years of marriage, career, and motherhood, I've read some of Smith's other work for my classes, but I'd hardly consider myself an academic reader, a fact that seems to place me within the intended readership for this book. Though I've not yet read *Desiring the Kingdom*, I found *You Are What You Love* to be clearly stated and engaging, and it would make great material for a small group fellowship. He makes his points applicable to a wide range of adult and young adult readers within the church.

You Are What You Love is subtitled "The Spiritual Power of Habit," but it is a book as much about worship as about habit. It is also a book about "liturgy," by which Smith means more than just the order of worship in church. As with his other books, Smith argues that liturgies are ever-present in our daily lives as the rituals and practices that shape and define who we are and what we love. Indeed, one of Smith's main claims is that "you worship what you love and you might not love what you think" (xii). The tension between these ideas forms the basis for much of the book.

Liturgy is a word that I thought I understood, at least in its general definition as a system of practices having to do with worship. Smith, however, expands that definition into "secular liturgies" as well as sacred liturgies. Smith's definition of liturgy "is a shorthand term for those rituals that are loaded with an ultimate Story about who we are and what we're for" (46). Lest the reader get the idea that Smith is dealing in dichotomies here, further reading clarifies that secular liturgies are a product of sin's effect on culture. If liturgies are "calibration technologies," as Smith says, secular liturgies are "aimed at rival kingdoms . . . pointing us away from our magnetic north in Christ" (47).

What do these secular liturgies look like? Smith offers an example of the American shopping mall as a place of worship that operates by secular liturgies. Inviting the reader on a virtual tour of the mall while

viewing it through a liturgical lens, Smith points out that several features of the average shopping mall—from the architecture (high cathedral-like ceilings, a "narthex" that welcomes the seeker) to its "icons" (mannequins and displays of each store's featured products)—guide the shopper to the consumerist answer to obtaining the good life. Even though malls as examples of "secular liturgies" might seem a stretch, as someone who has jokingly referred to the mall as the "shrine to avarice" before, I found his illustration here both amusing and convicting.

Once we can identify these "secular liturgies" that pervade our culture, how do we discover what we truly love? And if the object of our desire does not match what God would desire for us, how do we go about realigning what we love with what God desires? Smith addresses these questions by discussing the power of formative aspects of worship in our churches. These, he says, have the influence and potential to change the things we desire.

Worship in the traditional sense, Smith explains, calibrates our hearts toward desiring what God desires (20-21). Throughout the book, Smith points out that churches that merely try to fill our heads with strategies for change and information are insufficient to produce real character change. As he states, we are not "thinking-things," in the sense of Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am." Instead, we are fundamentally lovers of something (3). We are motivated primarily by what we love. The very message of the Gospel reminds us that our own efforts are not enough to solve the problem of our sinful nature.

Smith divides the traditional order of worship into four parts (96-99). In the order prescribed by traditional liturgical worship, we gather as a community under God, called together by Him (Smith names this part "gathering"). Together, we are reminded of God's perfect law, and we confess our own transgression of those laws ("listening"). Together, we are also reminded of God's forgiveness of those sins, and we hear God's word proclaimed and explained ("communing"). Together, we are given God's blessing and are dismissed into the world to do the work of His kingdom ("sending").

Smith presents the liturgical traditions of Christian worship throughout history as following the "narrative

arc of the Scriptures,” which Smith summarizes in the four parts of gathering, listening, communing, and sending. That these parts act as an antidote for the false cultural liturgies of our age perhaps further explains and justifies the contemporary trend of younger people wanting more formal liturgical worship. The traditional formula for the order of worship, Smith explains, forms a “counter liturgy” to the liturgies of consumerism, of ambition, of pride, which are the false liturgies of our fallen culture. It also reminds us of the Gospel weekly and re-sets our hearts toward desiring the things of the Kingdom. As I read Smith’s book, I was reminded of Psalm 37:4: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” When we find our delight in the Lord, His desires will become our own. Worship is the way we find our delight in the Lord.

But can all this truly happen in a repetitive, ritualistic, old-fashioned liturgical worship service, in a world full of emotive, expressive, experience-based spirituality? I doubted this at first, until I reflected on my own worship journey. Reading his faculty profile on the Calvin College website, I discovered that Dr. Smith and I both came to the Reformed tradition later in life. Though I was baptized as an infant in the United Methodist Church (“before we were saved,” said my mother), my pre-college church background was non-denominational with a Baptist leaning. “No creed but Christ” was proclaimed, prayers were never pre-written, and even the “order of service” was left out of the bulletin because it was understood to be always subject to change under the influence of the Holy Spirit. We worshipped in an auditorium, not a sanctuary, and when we spoke of a “call to worship,” if we ever did such a thing, we referred to our pastor’s call to take our seats and wrap up our pre-church banter.

The church I visited years ago during my first week of college, which was my introduction to Reformed liturgical worship, was in many ways my home church’s perfect antithesis. Where my home church was known for its casual friendliness, this congregation was distinct and intentional in its silence and reverence. Hearing my steps clicking down the aisle as I was ushered to my seat in silence came as a rude shock, given my upbringing. So when I hear the word “liturgy,” my mind immediately travels back to that long walk down the aisle past those cold, hard wooden pews.

But in time, I began to appreciate Reformed liturgy and tradition. I began to understand the careful intention woven into liturgical worship, the comfort of ritual, the meaning behind the repetition. Smith’s book has given me another dimension of appreciation for liturgy—the idea that not only worship, but also liturgy is something we experience through the week outside the church’s walls, and that includes sacred liturgy as well. We can be intentional in the ways we go about

our everyday lives, seeking to examine our daily routines and to take our place in God’s story.

Worship that changes us and helps us move from conviction to action is not solely intellectual or expressive, but should engage our imagination. As Smith reminds us, “Christian worship needs to meet us as aesthetic creatures who are moved more than we are convinced” (91). In *You Are What You Love*, Smith gives us a picture of church that engages our imaginations through worship and that makes use of sensory illustrations of the gospel, the most obvious example being that of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in which we gather together to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Worship that engages our imagination and captivates our senses not only restores us but “re-stories” us (91). This kind of worship reminds us of our part in God’s redemptive story and challenges the secular liturgies we are faced with all week long.

But Smith explains that showing up weekly in church is not the end of the matter. Exposure to the things of the Lord in the church community should inspire us to a change of intention that results in a change of practices. “Hungers are learned,” and when one is hungry, one acts to seek nourishment (58). The aim of worship that seeks to honor the narrative arc of the Scriptures, claims Smith, is to not only change our desires but also change our habits and life-patterns. He illustrates this point with an amusing illustration of finding himself reading one of Wendell Berry’s essays on responsible food production while eating a hot dog at Costco, then suddenly realizing that his intention to eat mindfully was not matching his personal practices (60).

The final three chapters lay out a vision for what this kind of “re-storying” looks like in the realms of the home, in Christian education, and in vocations. Smith’s section on the home describes a place that looks more like a garden than a greenhouse. The Christian home is where hearts are guarded, nurtured, and encouraged to both take the Gospel outside its walls and become a place of hospitality, welcoming others in. In the footnotes, Smith mentions that by “home,” he also includes the households that do not fit the assumption of a home as two parents and children; single members of the church are also included in this vision of home, and he encourages families within the church to “make room” for the single members of our communities. I was glad to see this inclusion, though it was buried in the footnotes.

In his section on education, Smith refers readers to his other book, *Desiring the Kingdom*, in which he deals with the subject of education in greater detail, but here he gives an overview that encompasses Christian education in the church, the home, and the Christian school. In addition to making an excellent case for multi-generational worship, he points to two

illustrations of imaginative education in this chapter: the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*,¹ a model of worship for young children that introduces them to the meaning behind the church liturgical calendar by means of capturing the imagination through play, and “Teaching for Transformation,” a model for Christian schools that provides a framework for curriculum based on the Biblical narrative, encouraging teachers to teach with a goal of “inviting their students into a better story” (155). As a mother with three children in a Christian school that is currently looking into implementing Teaching for Transformation, I was glad to see this so well explained and used as an illustration of what teaching to change a child’s desires by using the Biblical narrative might look like. As a former homeschool mother and a wife of a Christian school teacher, I found this chapter fascinating. While I understand the need for covering the subject with focus and brevity, Smith’s thoughts on education were some of my favorite parts of this book and I was left wishing for more on the subject.

The book ends on the topic of vocation, following the logical conclusion of Smith’s thesis: you are what you love, you might not love what you think, but

by restoring (“re-storying”) yourself to God’s desires through worship and Christian community and Godly practices, you will find that God will change your heart to desire what He desires. And that change of desire is to be worked out through our vocation—our calling. With hearts set in the direction of God’s desires, our vocation becomes a place in which the love of God drives everything we do. “Be careful what you worship,” warns Smith; “it will shape what you want, and therefore what you make and how you will work” (178).

Overall, *You Are What You Love* is easy to follow without being too simplistic, presents topics relating to worldview and philosophy in a way that is neither abstract nor unapproachable, and clearly makes points relevant to all who follow Christ and are part of His church: we are driven by what we love, and God has given us a way to recalibrate our desires through His church. I found *You Are What You Love* to be an engaging and challenging book, with wide-ranging applications.

Endnotes

1. More information on *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* can be found at <http://www.cgsusa.org>

Wanted: A Spiritual Pursuit Through Jail, Among Outlaws, and Across Borders. Hoke, Chris. New York: Harper One, 2015. 360pp. ISBN: 978-0-06-232136-7. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

Not long ago, the picture of a man arrested in our community made the rounds on Facebook. The man’s face was entirely tattooed, not something you see every day in the small-town Midwest. Perhaps it was impossible not to judge this book by its cover. We were meant to read the symbols printed there, my wife reminded me, and those symbols were trying to tell a specific kind of story. Predictably, too, the comments on Facebook were fascinated with that tattooed surface and wouldn’t go beyond it. What kind of monster would tattoo his whole face?

Chris Hoke’s memoir *Wanted* is a book that explores the stories behind face tattoos, especially as Hoke comes to hear these stories from gang members as chaplain in Skagit County (WA) Jail. However, *Wanted* is not just a collection of shocking jail stories accumulated by a chaplain over the years. Rather, it’s a book that uses these stories as clues for what the Spirit of God is doing in the wider world. Hoke’s book takes seriously both the image of God and the Spirit of God, tracing the former as it pursues the latter. In *Wanted*, Hoke is on the trail of the Holy Spirit, following the Spirit’s leading among the marginalized, and the trail is clear and is often marked by blood.

One of the primary trails of the Spirit is Hoke’s

relationship to Richard, a young Latino gang member sentenced for thirty-four years for various felonies, including the part he played in the death of an 84-year-old woman, and for which he is sent to Walla Walla State Penitentiary. Through Richard, we inhabit the life of the unwanted. True to good prison stories, we have to face the questions that Richard faced in his life. What does it mean to be unwanted by your own mother at birth? What does it feel like to be a disposable member of society in one of the most massive prison cultures in the world? How distant do the Scriptures feel when you’re in prison?

It turns out not that distant. Reading Scripture through Richard’s eyes often transforms it. In one memorable scene, as Hoke reads the parable of the wedding banquet from Matthew 22 in a Bible study, Richard puts Hoke on the spot. In the parable, a man is thrown out for not having the right attire, and Richard feels the slight. “Better to stay in the streets with the bad people than be told you’re wanted and then find out you’re really not!” he exclaims (162). We as readers feel everything hanging in the balance along with Hoke, and as he finds his way through the challenge, we feel the miracle in it.

But *Wanted* is not just a prison story. As we learn