

Review Article  
*You Are What You Love:  
The Spiritual Power of Habit*

Reviewed by Scott Aniol<sup>1</sup>

***You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, by James K. A. Smith. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016. 224 pages. \$19.99.**

For several years now James K. A. Smith has been helpfully speaking and writing on the subject of liturgical formation in education and worship. His first two volumes on this subject, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Baker, 2013), have reintroduced several important biblical concepts regarding spiritual formation, discipleship, and worship to evangelical Christians. His most recent treatment of the matter, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, repackages these key ideas in a readable book, accessible to a broader audience. Here he argues very similarly to his previous works that in order to live out their faith in their various cultural vocations, Christians must give careful attention to what they love and how their loves are being formed, because “you are what you love” (xii). In this short review article, I would like to briefly summarize Smith’s central thesis and then offer one way in which I think an element of his argument could be strengthened through utilizing the classical distinction between the affections and passions.

Smith carefully explains his underlying argument that we do not act primarily on the basis of belief, but rather that we are driven by our loves—our imagination of “the good life.” He bemoans the fact that, as a result of not understanding this fundamental idea, “we often approach discipleship as primarily a didactic endeavor,” when in reality discipleship “is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love” (2). He argues that, contrary to our modern way of thinking, we do not acquire knowledge in order that we might love correctly; rather, using Philippians 1:9–11 as an example, “love is the condition for knowledge. . . . I love in order to know” (7).

Smith suggests that one culprit for the reversal of head and heart that permeates much of Christian thinking is the fact that modern culture has reinvested secular meaning in the idea of “heart” such that now it is “equated with a kind of emotivism” (8). On the contrary, Smith argues, both Scripture and Augustine consider the heart to be “the fulcrum of your most fundamental longings—a visceral, subconscious *orientation* to the world” (8).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Aniol, PhD, is Editor-in-chief of *Artistic Theologian* and chair of the worship ministry department at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he teaches courses in worship, aesthetics, and philosophy of ministry. He has written several books, most recently *By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture* (Kregel, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are original.

As with his previous works, Smith argues that hearts are shaped and formed primarily through “the overwhelming power of habit” (4). These habits, he suggests, are virtues; “they are character traits that become woven into *who you are* so that you are the *kind* of person who is inclined to be compassionate, forgiving, and so forth” (16). These kinds of virtues are formed, not exclusively intellectually, but affectively through imitation and practice (18). He concludes this portion of his argument with a concise syllogism: “Because if you are what you love and if love is a virtue, then love is a *habit*. . . . And [if] love is a habit, then discipleship is a rehabilitation of your loves” (19). Smith calls the “formative, love-shaping rituals ‘liturgies’” (22). This is why worship is central to discipleship: “The practices of Christian worship train our love—they are practice *for* the coming kingdom, habituating us as citizens of the kingdom of God” (25).

This perspective is very important, because as Smith points out in Chapter 2, secular liturgies in the culture around us are perpetually shaping our loves in ways contrary to the kingdom of God, a process that can often be “unconscious and covert” (32). Thus, being shaped in this way could very well lead to the reality that “you could be worshipping other gods without even knowing it” (37).

For true discipleship to take place, then, at least two things must happen: First, “pastors need to be ethnographers of the everyday, helping parishioners see their own environment as one that is formative and all too often *deformative*” (40). Second, pastors must give careful consideration to how their church’s worship is shaping their people. This means recognizing that “God is the first and primary actor in worship,” not the worshiper (71). Thus, worship is not primarily an “expressive endeavor,” which often leads to a “penchant for novelty” and creates a “questionable distinction between the form of worship and the content of the gospel” (75). On the contrary, “worship isn’t just something we do; it is where God does something to us” (77).

Therefore, according to Smith, “form matters,” and by this he refers both to “(1) the overall narrative arc of a service of Christian worship and (2) the concrete, received practices that constitute elements of that enacted narrative” (78). As to the former, Smith suggests following historic Christian tradition in which “the practices of Christian worship reflect the plot line of the gospel, that the lineaments of Christian worship rehearse the story line of Scripture” (90). As to the latter, we must concern ourselves not just with the “*what* of Christian worship,” that is, the content, but “also the *how*,” that is, the poetics (106).

Corporate worship in the church is not the only time this kind of formation takes place, however, and so Smith gives careful attention to the “liturgies of home” in Chapter 5, and then connects the two with a discussion in Chapter 6 of how we teach children and youth to worship. It is in this chapter that Smith presents a rather helpful analysis of modern church youth ministry (indicative of church ministry as a whole), which he suggests “we have turned . . . into an almost entirely expressive affair. . . . Instead of embodied worship that is formative, we have settled for a dichotomy: an emotive experience as a prelude to the dispensation of information, thirty minutes of stirring music follow by a thirty-minute ‘message’” (145). Even worse, “we have already ceded [our youth’s] formation to secular liturgies precisely by importing those liturgies into the church under the banner of perceived relevance.” The result, Smith argues, is that “we have effectively communicated to young people that sincerely following Jesus is synonymous with being ‘fired up’ for Jesus, with being *excited* for Jesus, as if discipleship were synonymous with fostering an exuberant, perky, cheerful, hurray-for-Jesus disposition like what we might find in the glee club or at a pep rally”

(146–47). This has been true of youth ministry for at least the past 50 years, and so his description here could just as accurately describe the youth who grew up and now populate the worship services of many evangelical churches today.

In his final chapter, Smith extends his argument outside the church and the family to the rest of life, in which he explains that formation that takes place in the church then cultivates individual Christians who will go out into the world and actively live out their Christianity in their various vocations (180). Here I have a bit of a quibble with how Smith couches his language in “missional” and cultural mandate terminology,<sup>3</sup> but inasmuch as he is referring to the particular callings of individual Christians within the culture, I certainly applaud his underlying argument.

Overall, *You Are What You Love* is a fantastic argument for the true essence of Christianity, how discipleship takes place, and what should drive the structure and elements of corporate worship that aims to form Christian disciples. Smith successfully popularizes many of the key insights from his earlier more scholarly books and also satisfies one central criticism of those books made by several (including me<sup>4</sup>) regarding a lack of biblical support. *You Are What You Love* has no such lack; Smith carefully roots each of his main points in Scripture.

I have one primary criticism that I would like to expand here, which is not so much a criticism as it is a suggestion for something I think would actually strengthen Smith’s thesis. In an attempt to ground his argument in Scripture rather than (as he does in his previous two works) in secular psychology, Smith engages in an extended discussion of New Testament language for love. Having noted, as I cited earlier, that “the language of the heart . . . has been co-opted in our culture and enlisted in the sappy sentimentalism of Hallmark and thus equated with a kind of emotivism” (8), Smith seeks to reorient our thinking about love to match what the biblical language means, that the “heart” is not some sort of sentimental expression but rather an “orientation.” This supports his idea that our affections direct our actions. A biblical term he chooses as an equivalent to this conception of the affections is the word *splankna* (9). He notes correctly that this term literally refers to the “inner parts” but was used by the Greeks to metaphorically describe the seat of the affections. On this point I agree: for example, Paul commands Christians in Colossians 3:12 to put on the *splankna* of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. These are orientations—affections—that should govern a Christian’s actions.

However, Smith continues by defining the *splankna*—the affections—as “gut feelings” and insists that “discipleship doesn’t touch just our head or even just our heart: it reaches into our gut, our *splankna*, our affections” (9). The problem here is that Smith incorrectly equates the affections with “gut feelings,” leaving out one significant category, also designated in the New Testament by a Greek anatomical term, that I believe would actually help enforce his central idea that the biblical idea of “heart” is not merely a kind of sentimental emotivism.

The Greek term that more accurately describes the “gut” is *koilia*, the lower intestines. This referred to human physical appetites, or “passions,” essentially equivalent to how Smith

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<sup>3</sup> See Scott Aniol, *By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Scott Aniol, “Gospel-Shaped Worship: A Review of Recent Literature,” *Artistic Theologian* 2 (2013): 106–13.

describes sentimentality. In New Testament thought, the appetites are God-given characteristics of humanity, but they must never be allowed to rule us lest they lead us to sin. Paul describes enemies of Christ in Philippians 3:19 using this term: “their god is their belly [*koilia*].”

By leaving out any attention to this important biblical and classically Christian category—the “passions”—and subsuming all “emotion” under this one rubric of affections, I think Smith limits the successful application of his arguments practically. How does one discern the difference between affections that are merely emotive or affections that are orientations toward what is good? By bringing the classic category of the appetites into his discussion, Smith could helpfully articulate how one avoids the “soppy sentimentalism of Hallmark.”

Notably, even though Smith roots much of his argument in the writings of Augustine, he does not take advantage of the fact that Augustine himself was careful to distinguish the affections from the appetites. As Thomas Dixon notes in his very helpful historical treatment of the subject, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*, “St. Augustine of Hippo . . . produced models of the human soul in which the passions and appetites, which were movements of the lower animal soul, were distinguished from the affections, which were acts of the higher rational soul.”<sup>5</sup> The affections were active movements of the will, similar to what Smith identifies as desires or orientations, while the passions were lower sensory appetites, reminiscent of Smith’s “soppy emotivism.” This necessary distinction dominated premodern Christian thought until the post-Enlightenment category of “emotion” was created and blurred any distinction between the two.<sup>6</sup> In fact, I would suggest it is exactly this blurring of a distinction between passions and affections into the nebulous term “emotions” that is largely to blame for the very problems within Evangelical churches and worship that Smith so poignantly identifies.

A recovery of these biblical/Augustinian categories and integration into Smith’s argument would, I believe, give some needed clarity to his point. Jonathan Edwards in particular helpfully employed this distinction in his explanation of the nature of true religion in *The Religious Affections*, precisely during the period when such a distinction was disappearing and Christianity was beginning to be defined in terms of emotivism. Edwards argued,

The affections and passions are frequently spoken of as the same, and yet in the more common use of speech, there is in some respect a difference. Affection is a word that in the ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion, being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination, but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more over powered, and less in its own command.<sup>7</sup>

Edwards argued, in a very Augustinian fashion, that Christianity should not be defined in terms of external expression, but rather if over time a person’s life orientation evidenced the regenerative work of the Spirit of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 26–27.

Edwards ultimately lost the argument, of course, as Smith's astute assessment of modern Evangelical worship demonstrates. Smith's evaluation and solutions are helpful and necessary for churches to recover a biblical conception of what it means to be a Christian, how Christian disciples are cultivated, and the significant role corporate worship plays in such spiritual formation. However, correctly classifying the religious affections as distinct from emotive passions would only further strengthen what is already a must-read volume.