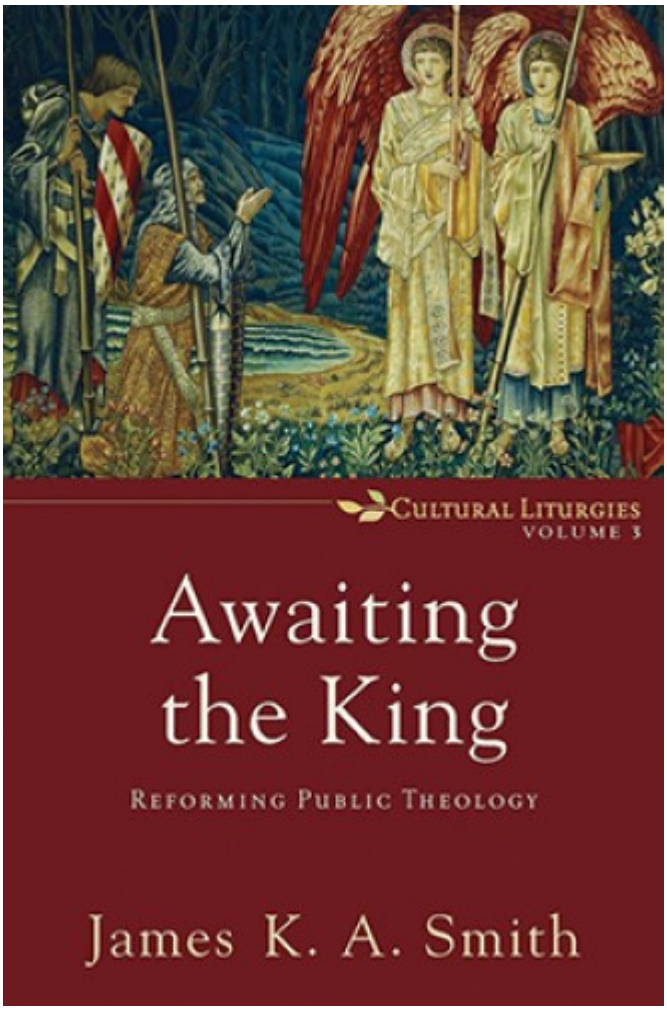
Can Christians transform culture?

Jamie Smith thinks it might be the other way around.

by Jason Micheli in the August 29, 2018 issue

In Review



Awaiting the King

Reforming Public Theology

By James K. A. Smith
Baker Academic

I’m a pastor at a congregation outside Washington, D.C., composed mostly of people who work on Capitol Hill, at the White House, or at the Pentagon. It’s a politically diverse group: worshipers include two Republican senators and fundraisers for progressive causes. Last year, soon after President Trump issued his incendiary executive order limiting immigration, customs officials rounded up some Hispanic worshipers as they walked out of our nearby sister church. The president’s actions provoked a furor across the nation and the body of Christ.

In response, I wrote a letter to the congregation, cosigned by congregational leaders, reminding people that the gospel is about Jesus the King who calls kingdom citizens to live in the community called church regardless of who occupies the White House. The letter acknowledged the diversity of views in the congregation and stated that we aimed to be a community in which worldly distinctions exist in submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

> The church is political in that it subverts the politics of the day by refusing the either/or dichotomy so often found in our politics. Indeed, in such a partisan, divided culture we believe this is the gift the church can offer the wider world.

The letter continued by concurring with the consensus in the larger church that the president’s executive order encroached upon our summons as Christians to welcome and care for the alien.

> We understand—some of you support the executive order for commendable reasons, including concerns for national security and a desire for secure borders. We understand—some of you oppose the executive order for commendable reasons, including fears that it undermines our national security and a desire for a more compassionate posture toward the vulnerable.
>
> Wherever you fall on this issue, we believe there’s a place for you in this community and a way to practice your faith.

> Christians are called not simply to make the world a better place; Christians are called to be the better place God has already made in the world. In our time and place, we believe what it means for the Church to be that better place is to be a place where all our differences about the kingdom we call America are transcended by the kingdom we await in faith.

I thought a lot about my congregation and what that pastoral letter was trying to do as I read James K. A. Smith's book on public theology.

Raised in a sharply dualistic, heaven-obsessed fundamentalist branch of Christianity, Smith was initially attracted to the public theology of the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper believed that because God's grace is not peculiar to the people called church but is common to all, Christians are called to engage culture and society in order to transform them in cruciform ways. Smith's Kuyperian stance was undermined, however, by his encounter with the work of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. Yoder and Hauerwas argue that under the banner of "common grace," Christians too often march into the culture seeking to transform it but end up merely baptizing the existing culture. Smith concedes that Kuyperian Christians too often were simply assimilated by the culture.

Smith's appreciation for Hauerwas's recovery of the eschatological dimension of public theology in *Resident Aliens* (his influential book written with Will Willimon) led to the writing of *Awaiting the King*. The eschatological frame offers a more robust ecclesiology than that of Kuyper. Whereas Reformed public theology stresses the role of individual Christians who, having been catechized by their churches, infiltrate culture in order to transform it from within (which is the model of James Davison Hunter's popular book *To Change the World*), *Resident Aliens* posits the church-as-community as its own culture.

The church, *Resident Aliens* argues persuasively, is not called primarily to engage and transform the culture; the church is called to be its own culture. It has its own language—words like *doxology* and *repentance*. It has its own cuisine—bread and wine. With these thick practices, the church forms a community, not individuals, to be a counterculture—a kingdom community that witnesses to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

While *Awaiting the King* was prompted by Yoder and Hauerwas, the bulk of it consists of a surprising and helpful reexamination of two other writers and their works: Augustine's *City of God* and Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*. In these two Catholic theologians, one ancient and one modern, Smith finds a resonance with the eschatological dimension that Hauerwas and Willimon got right in *Resident Aliens*. But Augustine and O'Donovan also caused some of Smith's working assumptions to shift underfoot. In their work, the eschatological dimension of the church underwrites not withdrawal from the world, nor even the positing of the church as a counterculture or a contrast society, but rather a provisional investment in the culture.

In rereading *City of God*, Smith points out that, contrary to the common view of Augustine, he never imagined that Christians could be dual citizens of both the earthly and heavenly cities. To suppose *City of God* permits Christians to possess two passports renders Augustine's theology incoherent, for Augustine's primary critique is that the earthly city is premised upon a disordered, self-directed love. Augustine argues that Christians are those people who sojourn in the earthly city as citizens, and exclusively so, of the heavenly city. In fealty to the ruler of the heavenly city, who ordered our first parents to tend the garden, Christians steward the society around them just as Adam and Eve cultivated Eden's soil. The earthly city is not a rival to the heavenly city but rather a creature of the Lord of the heavenly city. As citizens of the heavenly city whose love is properly directed to the Creator, we are directed to tend to its care as we do for all creation. *City of God*, Smith points out, sees Christians as resident aliens invested in the place in which they find themselves.

Likewise, Smith finds in *The Desire of the Nations* an eschatological focus that provides an alternative to both the ecclesiology lite of Kuyperianism and the neo-Anabaptist recommendation of *Resident Aliens*. In a time like our present one, when many make quick and sloppy analogies between America and Rome, O'Donovan soberly points out that democratic government itself, if not a product of Christianity, would not have been possible without the profession that the crucified Messiah has been raised from the dead and has ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. To confess that Jesus is Lord in the ancient world undermined and muted the totalizing claims of Caesar. The divine right of kings disappeared as a consequence of the church's claim that Jesus is King.

Culture and society in the wake of Christendom, then, are more ambiguous realities than Anabaptists accept, for they bear what O'Donovan calls the crater marks of the gospel. The limited power and provisional nature of democratic society were produced by and witness to the eschatological reign of Christ the King. Thus the church—primarily by its worship oriented around the liturgical year which itself is oriented to the lordship of Christ—forms and equips Christians to enter society and call it back to faithfulness in the One whose marks it still, however partially, bears.

While Smith recovers an eschatological dimension to reform Reformed public theology, *Awaiting the King* left me wondering if this very eschatological dimension reveals the abiding shortcomings of both Reformed public theologies and their neo-Anabaptist alternatives.

What's missing in both is the apocalyptic frame of the New Testament's eschatology. The human community shares in common not only God's grace, but God's enemy as well. As Fleming Rutledge and Beverly Gaventa might point out, Kuyperian cultural engagement mistakes the secular sphere for a (neutral) mission field. Willimon likes to joke that when Satan tempts Christ in the wilderness by offering him all the kingdoms of the world, it's implied that Satan is already in possession of the kingdoms of the world. As the New Testament sees it, the mission field of culture is actually a battlefield held by an anti-God power that Paul calls sin and death. Meanwhile, the Anabaptist alternative mistakenly views the church as somehow uniquely immune to the snares and temptations of the enemy. Paul sees the cross—not the church—as God's invasion of a captive cosmos.

The New Testament sees culture as a battlefield held by an anti-God power.

In other words, it's not that Christian engagement with culture fails to result in transformation. It's that Christians often are the ones who are transformed as the culture, controlled by the enemy, baptizes them through its own liturgies of false worship and disordered love.

This is a point that Smith makes, although less apocalyptically, in his previous books. *You Are What You Love* and *Desiring the Kingdom* point out an impoverishment in how we conceive of public theology across the confessional spectrum. In those works, Smith demonstrates that people do not think but feel their way through the world. We are formed by our loves and desires, not our thoughts and beliefs. And our loves and desires are formed through liturgies, secular as much as sacred. The

liturgy of the baseball game, Smith writes in *Desiring the Kingdom*—with its flag-draped outfield, welcoming of wounded warriors, reverent silence, and singing of the anthem—forms participants into a particular love.

While Kuyper sees the church as forming individuals to engage society, Hauerwas sees the church as forming individuals to be a community that witnesses to society. But both of them (and their disciples) assume that the church is forming people through its liturgies. If Smith is correct, then Christians are more often being formed by the liturgies given to them by Madison Avenue, the local hospital, and the high school football game. David Foster Wallace's doorstop novel *Infinite Jest*, which Smith cites in *Awaiting the King*, probably requires more hours from readers than the average churchgoer gives to worship in a liturgical year. An hour or a few given to Christian worship in a week is not sufficient to form the primary loves and desires of people who are being formed in rival and often contrary loves the rest of the week.

It follows, then, from Smith's own argument that the trajectory of Kuyperian cultural engagement runs the other way. Formed by the loves of the earthly city, we infiltrate the heavenly city's outpost, where we, as culture crusaders, transform the church. This explains theologically what I've intuited as a workaday pastor: Christians' primary loves and convictions are not formed by the church. Instead, secular liturgies, which are both omnipresent and effective, form the primary loves and convictions that Christians then bring with them to church.

Indeed, *You Are What You Love* and *Desiring the Kingdom* provide a theological account for what sociological data bears out. Nearly two years after the election, many Christians still rightly wonder how evangelicals continue to support President Trump. This question assumes that such support contradicts the convictions that evangelicals receive in church. In fact, they support Trump because his agenda (opposition to abortion, protecting Christians from accepting gay marriage, etc.) supports the values of their church—but only because they selected their church based upon their already-arrived-at values.

People select churches based on the convictions in which the culture has already formed them. Those formed primarily by the liturgy of the flag will choose a Southern Baptist church where they know their values will be mirrored, while those formed primarily by the liturgy of individualism will opt for a mainline church where they know inclusiveness will be a shared value. We choose churches the same way

we choose political parties. This is why so many Christians know so few Christians who disagree with them. It's why our ecclesial culture so neatly replicates the polarization in our wider culture. And it's why so few mainline pastors thought it odd that, when the Festival of Homiletics was held in D.C. this year, Elizabeth Warren and Cory Booker spoke but no Republican politicians did.

Christians come to church formed by secular liturgies.

Full disclosure: I'm a card-carrying member of the Hauerwas mafia. I'm moved by his vision of the church forming Christians into a contrast community. But I'm also sufficiently appreciative of Smith's work to concede a point that he doesn't make explicitly but that necessarily follows from his work: we the church are not anywhere near sufficiently forming Christians to achieve either Kuyper's or Hauerwas's proposal for public theology. We're playing chaplain and cheerleader to people whose faith is being formed elsewhere, shaped by another who just might be the enemy.

This is why *Awaiting the King* made me think about our church's pastoral letter. If it's indeed true that our culture—especially our political culture—forms each of us through its varied liturgies and has more opportunity to do so than the church, then perhaps the church is wise to stake out ways it will refuse to replicate or exacerbate the "religion" people bring with them to church. If the political differences we bring with us to church are formed in large measure by rival goods and gods, then the church can become a missionary community by being the place where those differences are subsumed under the claim that we've been made one, despite what we may like, in our common baptism in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity, who is a community of peace amid difference.

To be a community where our unity amid difference is a more compelling good than the all the other goods over which we disagree may seem like a meager and provisional project for the church. But it's precisely what's recommended by the wise title of Smith's book. We are still waiting. All our public theology and political engagement, in the end, should be chastened by the confession that God alone is the active agent of the kingdom for which we wait.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Can Christians transform culture?"