

# ‘Cardiac Discipleship’: Five Ways to Pursue the Heart in Spiritual Formation

January 14, 2017

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*You Are What You Love* by James K. A. Smith is a needed corrective to overly cerebral approaches to discipleship. It is a challenge to followers of Christ to evaluate how 'secular liturgies' are training our hearts to love things other than God and our neighbor. And it presents a vision of discipleship that does more than just cement spiritual disciplines in new believers; it calls us seek first the kingdom and to live with hearts enlarged for Christ and his glory.

In what follows I share a few quotes where Smith speaks directly about discipleship. I hope they will whet your appetite for your book and pique your interest in how discipleship is a matter of heart cultivation.

## 1. Discipleship cultivates the appetite and curates the heart.

While discipleship is a matter of learning, it is more like learning how to cook than to read code. Disciples hunger and thirst for the things of God and know how to feed on him, and good 'disciplers' seek to cultivate cravings in the heart of new believers. So,

**Discipleship** is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing. Jesus's command to follow him is a command to align our love and longings with his---to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all---a vision encapsulated by the shorthand 'the Kingdom of God.' (2)Read more...

## 2. Discipleship is more than 'information transfer.'

While saving faith requires a certain measure of information, saving faith is more than mental assent. It is the creation of loving trust in the triune God. This is not the typical way discipleship programs, classes, and curriculum are framed. As Smith observes, too much discipleship is purely cognitive, but "this is a very stunted view of human persons that generates a simplistic understanding of action and a reductionistic approach to discipleship" (33). Rightly, he observes that human anthropology is driven by impulses and desires that go deeper than what we know. He writes,

Because every approach to **discipleship** and Christian formation assumes an implicit model of what human beings are. While these assumptions usually remain unarticulated, we nonetheless work with some fundamental (though unstated) assumptions about what sort of creatures we are---and therefore what sort of learners we are. If being a disciple is being a learner and a follower of Jesus, that a lot hinges on what you think 'learning' is. And what you think learning is hinges on what you think human beings are. In other words, your

understanding of **discipleship** will reflect a set of working assumptions about the very nature of human beings, even if you've never ask yourself such questions.(2--3)

Pressing deeper into the implicit Cartesian ("I think, therefore I am") approach to much Christian discipleship, Smith pushes us to reconsider our models of sanctification and discipleship. Instead of just loading disciples with information, we need to aim at the affections through a reorientation of of our loves.

### 3. Discipleship is the re-orientation of our loves.

After spending a few pages unpacking Augustine's biblical anthropology, and showing why we are loving-things, not just thinking-things (think: Descartes), Smith makes the case that habits cultivate love and that love in turn empowers virtue, which he defines as "good moral habits" (16). Regeneration plants within us the seed of God's love (cf. Rom 5:5); discipleship cultivates this love (see John 15:8--11). And true discipleship, therefore, aims at stirring up God's love in the heart of his children. He writes, "**Discipleship** should set us on fire, should changed the 'weight' of our love" (11).

While Smith overlooks gospel-preaching and regeneration in his disciple-making process---this is the key weakness of his book---he's on the right track that discipleship is the ongoing process of re-orienting our loves toward God (and the things God loves). He writes,

Here's the crucial insight for Christian formation and **discipleship**: not only is this learning by practice the way our hearts are correctly calibrated, but it is also the way our love and longings are misdirected and miscalibrated---not because our intellect has been hijacked by bad ideas but because our desires haven't captivated by rival visions of flourishing. And that happens through practices, not propaganda. Our desires are caught more than they are taught. All kinds of cultural rhythms and routines are, in fact, rituals that function as pedagogies of desire precisely because they tacitly and covertly trained us to love a certain version of the kingdom, teach us [i.e., disciple us] to long for some rendition of the good life. These are just things we do; they do something to us. (22)

### 4. Discipleship comes from a recalibration of worship.

So how do we recalibrate our visions and affections? It begins with worship. Thus, discipleship is the recalibration of our affections through repeated practices of worship---personal and corporate.

Christian worship, we should recognize, is essentially a counterformation to those rival liturgies we are often immersed in, cultural practices that covertly capture our loves and longings, missed calibrating them mama orienting us to rival versions of the good life. This is why worship is the heart of **discipleship**. We can't counter the power of cultural liturgies with didactic information poured into our intellects. We can't recalibrate the heart from the top-down, through merely informational measures. The orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up, through the formation of our habits of desire. Learning to love (God) takes practice. (25)

To be absolutely clear, learning to love takes the power of Jesus Christ raised from the dead. But with this power granted through the spiritual resurrection of the new birth, then disciples must cooperate with the new life with them to worship and serve the one true and living God.

## 5. Discipleship is a pilgrimage where we learn to live as kingdom citizens.

Finally, the growing disciple must learn to see the way his daily habits influence his heart. And Christ's disciple must begin adopting new ways of living---what Smith calls "liturgies"---which subconsciously and unconsciously alter the "gut" (what the heart loves to eat). Or, to use another metaphor,

**Discipleship** is a kind of immigration, from the kingdom of darkness to the king of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). In Christ we are given a heavenly passport; in his body we learn how to live like 'locals' of his kingdom. Such a immigration to a new kingdom isn't just a matter been teleported to a different realm; we need to be acclimated to a new way of life, learning a language, acquired habits—and unlearn the habits of that rival dominion. Christian worship is our enculturation as citizens of heaven, subject of kingdom come (Phil 3:20). (66)

Resisting the patterns of this world, discipleship re-train our hearts to live for Christ's kingdom. Instead of racing after all that the world tells us to chase, the disciple submits his life, his heart, his loves to the spiritual formation of the kingdom. This begins with worship and "radiates" into every other area of life, as a growing desire for Christ and his kingdom reforms all our affections (68).

### A More Desirable Vision for Discipleship

Ultimately, the vision of discipleship found in *You Are What You Love* requires great attention to biblical truth that speaks to the heart---hence, cardiac discipleship. Smith's argument challenges us to do more than acquire or deposit truth, we must put into practice God's Word, by letting the story of Scripture and the patterns of worship retrain our hearts. In other words, we need God's word to fill our hearts with wonder and love, such that our appetites and affections pull towards Christ and away from the patterns of this world.

In this way discipleship is the process of learning how to obey all that Christ commanded (Matt 28:19), but the key insight Smith offers is that obedience follows from a heart that is filled with true desire. In truth, only God can do this, but for those made alive in Christ, we are able to cooperate with the Spirit in practicing the kingdom in a way that further enflames our hearts for Christ.

This is what discipleship is all about, and *You Are What You Love* is one of the most helpful resources capturing and clarifying this vision.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds