



What the Church Can Learn from the Mall

*“As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God. My
soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before
God?”* Psalm 42:1-2

*“Send out your light and your truth; let
them lead me; let them bring me to
your holy hill and to your dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God, to
God my exceeding joy, and I will
praise you with the lyre, O God, my
God.”*
Psalm 43:3-4

Compromised churches

If you're anything like me, you probably find it distasteful when churches try to model their worship after the latest trends in contemporary society. Matt Guerino expressed this frustration earlier in the year in his excellent ChangePoint article, [“We've Been Here Before.”](#) Mr. Guerino described a church that advertised its services with a promotional flier of a lady dressed up as the “church lady” from Saturday Night Live. She was posing next to the words “We're not you're grandma's church!”

It is certainly appropriate to object to the way many churches have tried to model themselves around the latest fads of contemporary culture. The consumerist, me-centered mentality

that is the essence of pop culture has little point of contact with the worship of God as laid out in scripture. Though it partly depends on how you define the terms, a “seeker-sensitive church” will normally always be a compromised church.

Nevertheless, there may be one area where it is appropriate for the church to learn from popular culture. At least, that is one of the things James K.A. Smith argues in his book [Desiring the Kingdom](#). Smith suggests that the church has much to learn from observing the mall.

A consumerist gospel

This is not because the mall is godly. Quite the contrary. According to Smith the mall is the nexus of all the icons of the consumerist gospel that saturate our culture. The “liturgy” of the mall presents to us a particular narrative of fall, redemption, and the good life which runs directly counter to the Gospel of Christ.

Yet the marketing industry behind the mall has understood one basic fact of human nature: we tend to follow after those images of the good life that have first captivated our hearts. The things we love tend to be cultivated through the embodied practices that educate our desire and, in so doing, shape our understanding of the good life. This understanding often happens

on a level far deeper than the cognitive mind is even aware.

By using the phrase “embodied practices” Smith is getting at the fact that those visions of the good life which grab our gut are formed through repeated bodily practices like shopping and viewing the advertising “icons” of the consumerist gospel, icons that promise to give us the good life if we avail ourselves of the right products.

It is not hard to see how this is true in the case of the products which coalesce to make the mall what it is. Smith observes that “the mall...[grabs] hold of our gut (kardia) by means of our body and its senses - in stories and images, sights and sounds, and commercial versions of ‘smells and bells’...” When our senses are constantly immersed in the stimuli of the consumerist gospel, our heart unconsciously begins to associate the symbols and implicit messages of the mall with the good life.

Aiming at the heart

What can the church learn from this? According to Smith, Christian worship should also seek to aim at the heart by training the body. In chapter 5 of *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith has a fascinating discussion of the elements of traditional Christian worship – elements which, ironically, many “seeker-sensitive” churches have thrown out in their quest for relevance – to show how these can help to train our heart to desire the Biblical visions of the good life.

It is important for the church to train our minds, but if Smith is correct it is even more important for the church to grab our hearts.

By Robin Phillips

Quote from James K.A. Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom*:

“Liturgies or worship practices are rituals of ultimate concern that are formative of our identity--they both *reflect* what matters to us and *shape* what matters to us. They also inculcate particular visions of the good life through affective, precognitive means, and do so in a way that trumps other ritual formations. In short, they are the rituals that grab hold of our *kardia* and want nothing less than our love.”



☞ Because there are competing liturgies (whether the mall or a cult or a defective version of Christian worship), how should we protect ourselves from being “formed” in the wrong image?

☞ Should the Church strive to be “relevant” or should the Church be transformational?

☞ Can you think of any changes that modern churches ought to make in order to better take advantage of the formative power of liturgy (biblical rituals that grab us)?

ETERNAL WISDOM, GOD MOST HIGH

LATIN 6TH CENTURY
REVISED BRIAN L. PENNEY, 2013

O INVIDENDA MARTYRUM
DIJON CHURCH MELODY

1. E - ter - nal wis - dom, God Most High, Cre - a - tor
2. The streams of earth, the clouds of heav'n, By You their
3. And so on us who seek Your face, Pour Liv - ing
4. Let faith dis - cern e - ter - nal light, Be - yond the
5. O Fa - ther, this we pray be done, Through Je - sus

of the earth and sky; Who bids the par - ted wa - ters
or - dered bounds were giv'n; Lest 'neath the blaz - ing light of
Wa - ters by Your grace; Re - new the fount of life with -
dark - ness of our night; And through the mists of er - ror
Christ, Your on - ly Son; O by the Spir - it let us

flow, In heav'n a - bove, on earth be - low.
day, The sun - parched earth should waste a - way
in, And quench the burn - ing fires of sin.
know, The path of truth the Scrip - tures show.
be Your faith - ful saints e - ter - nal - ly.

THE LORD IS MY SALVATION

BRIAN L. PENNEY,
FROM PSALM 27

TRADITIONAL ENGLISH CAROL

1. The Lord is my sal - va - tion, My
2. The wick - ed came a - gainst me, My
3. Of God I sought but one thing, And
4. Now shall my head be lift - ed, A -
5. Sing glo - ry to the Fa - ther, Sing

light - whom shall I fear? He is the strength of
flesh they would de - vour; Though hosts en - camp a -
this is my de - sire; That I could see His
bove my foes a - round; And I will sing God's
hon - or to His Son, Sing bless - ings to the

my life, My help when foes are near.
round me, The Lord is my strong tow'r.
beau - ty, And in His house in - quire.
prais - es, And make a joy - ful sound.
Spir - it: Our God, the Three in One.