Some of my best moments as a learner have emerged in a context of worship. At these memorable times I did not necessarily acquire a lot of information. But looking back, my life direction and desire for God's purposes have been shaped more in worship than in lectures. At times, formation has happened during worshipful class episodes. I recall a biblical teacher limiting us to stay after class and pray thankfully for the riches of faith in the passage we had just studied. That instilled more of an attitude of respect and appreciation for the Bible than the rest of the semester of studies. My spiritual formation teacher challenged me to go beyond just doing my assignments and to reflect deeply on where God was encountering me. I have learned about God's passion for mission and all cultures as worship leaders have led me in singing songs that anticipate the restructurality of heaven. Celebrating communion and Jesus' death being 'not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world' (I John 3:18) has left a lasting impression on my passion for global mission. Preachers who have shared what they have learned about God from popular culture have modeled for me a passion to thoughtfully engage culture, albeit in tension with the need to be critical and to redeem culture.

Desiring the Kingdom offers solid works for how worship and learning are connected, and how both worship and learning can foster formation and discipleship. It critiques processes that focus solely on what Christians think and the knowledge they accumulate (as with some worldview studies) and urges instead focusing on what Christians do and how their hearts and desires are shaped. Ferrell Smith, worship and education is not primarily about what we know but what we love. He writes (pp. 100-101) that, rather, work, worship and education will form us as Radical disciples who desire the Kingdom of God.

A valuable contribution of the book is its challenge to take a fresh look at the culture of church (especially its worship and education) and society (especially its shopping mall, nation states and universities). Smith invites his readers into Martin anthropologist sculptors and urges thinking about our culture with that perspective. He applies what Australian poet Michael Leunig playfully calls an "understandogram" to look at what endlessly cultural behavior. He argues for cultural awareness -- reading our institutions and practices to discern what they aim for, what they teach us about what it means to flourish, what the "good life" is, what their vision of the kingdom is, and how they direct our love. He urges us to test that we see people of love and passion, but those passions need forming and counter-forming and redirecting. No culture is harmless and treacherous when it comes to shaping us.

For example, Smith unravels the spin and idolatry of the shopping mall and the not-so-subtle messages of shopping to accumulate belongings to match up to others, to feel good, and to appear beautiful and successful. He also critiques the rituals of the military-entertainment complex and anti-terrorism rhetoric in television series. And he examines the literacies of university that elevate rational learning, foster workaholism, and encourage new students into domineering habits of fractionally pursuing pleasure. This reminded me of a significant learning moment at college when a lecturer pointed out students should not have to study, and work-life balance was a valued expectation setting up unsustainable workload patterns for ministry. Rituals and expectations beyond the classroom shape students just as much or more than what they learn in a classroom. Smith urges people to be attentive to how culture shapes us; "habits-forming, identity-shaping, love-directing rituals that capture our imagination and hence our desire, directing it towards a mode that is often antithetical to the inclinations expressed as the kingdom of God" (p.236).

After grounding readers in an understanding of culture as something that shapes desire, the book dives into implications for worship and Christian education. The longest chapter of the book explores how Christian social imagination is embedded in Christian worship. A high view of worship is presented -- one that helps us counter the mis-information of our broader culture. Smith links this with an alternative imagination that urges shaping worship as a pedagogy of desire that trains us to love the Father and desire the kingdom. When worship leaders call people of all cultures and backgrounds together, it reminds people of the radically inclusive call of the gospel. Prayers of confession are an opportunity for renunciation of sin that rob us of our capacity to represent God in the world. The offering draws us towards gratitude and sacrifice. The underlying theme of the book is that formation stills best helps people desire the Kingdom of God -- a hopeful underlying theme for all worship elements.

Disappointingly the shortest chapter of the book relates to education. Smith says we need Christian higher educators to offer not just information but a Christian worldview, to help students love and desire for the Kingdom. Service learning that takes students into community soup kitchens and on short-term mission trips will help. Foundationally it's not just about adding Jesus into the mix of courses but aiming to form critical disciples whose imagination is grabbed by the creation call to represent God and foster God's Kingdom. This relates back to worship and its why we need to integrate education with worship and discipleship. "Their theorizing and scholarship are going to be informed by Christian accounts of the world, our imaginations must first be led by a vision of the Kingdom. ... in the practices of Christian worship" (p.236). I would have loved to read more about the practices Smith alludes to that shape character and form imaginations in higher education. But I look forward to his future promised book on fully development programs.

Desiring the Kingdom itself the first volume of a promised three volume series of a philosophical theology of culture. It is written from a Reformed perspective and draws on literature and film as well as delving deeply into Christian Tradition. The book is a college level text that will be of interest to academic teachers and students of theology of culture. It also offers a thorough grounding for worship leaders and pastor in the transformative importance and elements of worship. And it points in helpful directions for a philosophy of education and vocational formation -- beneficial reflection for leaders at any level.