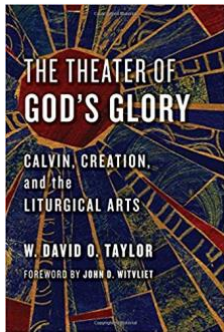


# [Review] *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, by W. David O. Taylor



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As I sit down to write this review, Giovanni Gabrieli's polychoral antiphonal music is playing on my headphones.<sup>1</sup> His music was famous in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as it still is today, because of how he composed for multiple groups of singers and instrumentalists staged in various locations in the performance space. Most of his music was written specifically for one or two cathedrals,<sup>2</sup> to make use of choir lofts opposite one another and other acoustic features. He created striking interlocking harmonies that emerge from the sound of one group responding to the other, overlapping in a thick, rich aural experience. Gabrieli had an innovative understanding of acoustics, allowing him to take advantage of unique features of cathedrals by setting up seemingly unbalanced groups of musicians to play off one another. Many choral recordings are available, but as a brass player (French horn) I am quite partial to this particular arrangement. I mention my listening habits because in Gabrieli's compositions, he loudly, beautifully, and quite unintentionally confronts Calvin's concept of *ideal worship*.

One reason I love Gabrieli's music is because it is part of an entire aesthetic package; his polychoral compositions are complex to perform and are highly dependent on the architecture of the performance venue

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<sup>1</sup> as adapted and performed by the Metropolitan Opera Brass on *Sacrae Symphoniae: Antiphonal Music of Giovanni Gabrieli*, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/sacrae-symphoniae-antiphonal-motets-of-giovanni-gabrieli/840231005>

<sup>2</sup> such as St. Mark's Basilica in Venice [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Mark%27s\\_Basilica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mark%27s_Basilica)



and the positioning of the performers. This music can't be performed just anywhere; the effect is easily lost without proper consideration of space.<sup>3</sup> Gabrieli embodies not just a certain musical style but even a particular theology that dominated the ideals of the Catholic church of his time. The arts had been elevated; the church aimed for an all-encompassing aesthetic worship experience. Worshipers saw visual beauty in the architecture, clothing, and symbols. They smelled the incense, heard (and sang) the liturgy, the music, and the Word. They touched the ground as they knelt, and tasted the bread and wine. The architecture was grand, with overwhelming richness everywhere. The sounds of Gabrieli's music would only ever be heard in this context, instilling a sense of awe and holiness, a grandiose performance of the glory of God. This is, in part, the kind of worship that Calvin reacted to, especially the ostentatious and potentially distracting nature of these ceremonies. In reacting against this environment, perhaps he pushed the pendulum too far to the opposite side of the worship spectrum. We can now read Calvin's thinking on worship superficially, easily encountering these kinds of ideas about him and assuming there is nothing more to learn.

I am not a theologian, so I read this book from the perspective of a lay person, a practicing intercultural ethnodoxologist who frequently encounters issues of worship, style, and theology in my work. We ethnodoxologists often wrestle with questions of contextualization and appropriateness, working alongside communities as they ponder what worship should be. This is like what W. David O. Taylor considers in his book, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*. Taylor wonders what we can glean from Calvin regarding the liturgical arts, and he invites us into the struggle to learn from this early Reformed theologian.

John Witvliet's foreword hints at the journey Taylor invites the readers to undertake:

Taylor doesn't merely describe or analyze Calvin. He doesn't merely venerate or dismiss Calvin. He wrestles with Calvin's thought—affirming it, challenging it, responding to it. At the end, Taylor is changed. Wise and engaged readers will be, too. (viii)

The best part of this book is the journey, as readers walk alongside Taylor, participating in their own “wrestling” with Calvin. Taylor wants to argue for a “positive theological account” of the liturgical arts, discovering what Calvin has to say—which is much more than a superficial reading of him might suggest.

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<sup>3</sup> On the Metropolitan Opera Brass album, the end of each track is usually 10–15 seconds after the last note, which gives some idea of just how large and resonant their recording space was, along with how much reverberation is constantly happening and affecting the chords and harmony.

Calvin is anxious about worship being corrupted by the world, and he conveys a consistently negative view of materiality. This is, in part, a result of the environment he lived in. (Remember the opening example.) This concern is still valid today, and we ethnodoxologists frequently encounter questions about contextualized worship and appropriateness. What can we learn from this conversation and the “wrestling” between Calvin and Taylor? The author returns to consider Calvin’s qualms further and reopen the conversation:

While it is obvious that the ceremonial shape of public worship has fundamentally changed with the coming of Christ, it is less obvious how the material symbols of such worship ought to be regarded. . . . Are they too high for the human intellect also or too high only for the human senses? Has the cognitive domain replaced the physical domain as the preferred locus for the mediation of knowledge and love of God? (52)

This quote gets to the heart of one issue Taylor contemplates: Calvin wants to separate the physical and the spiritual, the cognitive *thinking* and the physical *being*. This dialogue is still extremely relevant, and Taylor helps the reader grapple with these concepts, using this conversation with Calvin as the vehicle.

In the first pages of chapter 1, “Musical Instruments in Calvin,” Taylor paints a seemingly bleak picture of Calvin’s thinking on the arts, and the reader wonders how he will find anything here to wrestle with. However, this is a good reminder that the common characterization of Calvin and his view of the arts tends to be a shallow and stereotyped one. Calvin’s arguments are often characterized by a kind of dispensationalism: instruments were useful as elementary aids to the Israelites, but under the new covenant those should now be set aside. But that overlooks what Calvin says elsewhere. In the following chapters, Taylor tackles some of Calvin’s questions and concerns.

Chapter 2 examines Calvin’s theology of material creation. Here we begin to see that Calvin isn’t quite as black-and-white as some have supposed him to be:

Calvin also believes that a delight in earthly things may lead to a delight in heavenly things. “For in this world God blesses us in such a way as to give us a mere foretaste of his kindness, and by that taste to entice us to desire heavenly blessings with which we may be satisfied.” (41; Taylor quotes from Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Tim. 4:8)

The remaining chapters walk the reader through Taylor’s journey with Calvin as he explores material symbols of worship (chapter 3), materiality and mediation (chapter 4), creation in worship (chapter 5), and finally,

Calvin's theology of the physical body (chapter 6). In these chapters we read excerpts from across Calvin's writings, together with Taylor's musings and thoughts as he finds truth, encounters flaws and unanswered questions, and points out contradictions.

In chapters 7 through 9, Taylor draws from Calvin's writings to form his own Trinitarian theology of the liturgical arts. He repeatedly brings the conversation back to the Bible, maintaining a grounding in scripture that is unshakeable as he finds truth in Calvin yet also finds points of departure from his theology. Taylor challenges Calvin's interpretation of John 4:23–24 and the meaning of "in spirit and in truth" and how it is interpreted to imply simplicity. Taylor suggests an alternative to Calvin's thinking about this scripture, justifying this through a return to the scriptures and an evaluation of other theologians' thinking about the passage. Chapter 9, "The Trinitarian Space of Worship," parts ways with Calvin and brings us to Taylor's own theology of worship. The struggle with gleaning what can be learned from Calvin regarding liturgical worship has finally brought the dialogue to a climax, even a bifurcation, in which some unresolvable tensions have to be acknowledged.

Taylor sees a Trinitarian pattern of thought in Calvin that extends throughout his theology; nevertheless, in the liturgical realm—perhaps in part because of his context—he focused on the invisible, the internal, and the immaterial. Taylor has extended Calvin's thinking to ask what it would look like to take his Trinitarian thoughts elsewhere and apply them to liturgy and worship today. Calvin and Taylor together remind us that in worship we are not looking to *escape* from the material creation, but rather, worship looks towards the "preservation, healing, and liberation of the physical world" so that the arts and worship can be what God purposed for them (195). Calvin knew (and Taylor agrees) that we cannot escape the natural longing for heaven amid the brokenness of this world; this constant now-but-not-yet tension of God's promised reign is contrasted with the broken, as-yet-unhealed world all around us in which we long for our Messiah to come quickly.

John Calvin died in 1564, and Gabrieli was born c. 1554–57. This invites some speculation: was Gabrieli aware of this Reformation movement that Calvin represented? If he had still been alive to hear it, what might Calvin have said to Gabrieli about his music? Taylor plays the role of intermediary for us, finding common ground between the artistic fervor of the Renaissance and the austerity of the Reformation. Taylor concludes that the liturgical arts are very welcome in worship, with the right understanding and application. As mentioned earlier, however, it is the journey, the "wrestling" with Calvin, that delivers the greatest benefit to the reader; it assists us in letting go and trusting in the Holy Spirit to conform all these things for the glory of God.

It is not so much that the liturgical arts mediate a transcendent experience for the faithful, nor do they possess automatic capacities to mediate divine grace. Instead it is that the Holy Spirit enables these very creaturely things to serve the activities of public worship in order to conform God's people to the image of his Son. (189)

If the Spirit is the one who corrects "the inordinate desires of the flesh," conforming the lives of the faithful to the ordinate life of Christ, then it is with such a confidence in the Spirit's work that the faithful are freed both from undue anxiety over artistic "excesses" and for righteous pleasure in this theater of artistic abundance. To welcome this work of the eschatological Spirit in the liturgical arts is to welcome the work of the one who offers a foretaste of the age to come. (191)