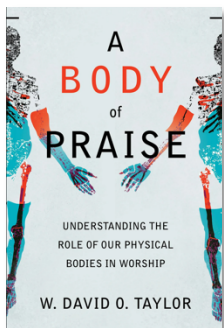


[Review] *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship*, by W. David O. Taylor



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Taylor, W. David O. *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship*. 1st ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 210 pages. ISBN 978-1-5409-6309-3

Concerned primarily with congregational worship, W. David O. Taylor (2023) approaches the subject of the body at worship by acknowledging the gift of Christ's incarnation and of our embodiment. Embodiment as a research field studies people's physical interaction with the world around them and how the body's physicality influences the immaterial. Taylor lays the groundwork for *A Body of Praise* with two claims: first, that the body is not a problem but is instead a glorious and "active particip[ant] in the transformative work of God within the context of worship," and secondly, that we not only *need* and *must* worship God with our bodies, but that we also *get* to worship the Creator in and through them (4–5). As an ordained Anglican priest, Taylor postures his reflections toward the freedom of worship in concert with the physical senses within sacramental, ritual disciplines. Currently, an Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, much of Taylor's published work centers on beauty, glory, art, theology, and the church. His background in liturgical, ritualized movements and sensate experience influences his understanding and approach to embodiment.

A Body of Praise was published in the aftermath of a massive shift in congregational worship wrought by social distancing orders enacted to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. It was released just one year after Gregg Allison's (2021) *Embodied*, which systematically lays out a practical Christian theology of embodiment across thirteen categories, from creation through the eschaton. *A Body of Praise*, along with *Embodied*, is significant, particularly for the Western Church, helping fill gaps in our understanding of what it means to live out a Christ-centered faith. Contesting the long-standing disconnect between body, soul, and mind inherited by the Western Church (in part through Western philosophies of neo-Gnosticism, Platonism, and Cartesian reductionism),¹ *A Body of Praise* contributes a uniquely Christian perspective to the interdisciplinary study of embodiment.

¹ (Allison 2021, 16) (Uzukwu 1997, 7)



The functions, powers, and meanings of the body are foundational to Taylor's assertions, as is his belief in the coherence and consistency of God's revelation (11). He structures the book to emphasize this, and then uses several lenses—historical, biblical, theological, scientific, artistic, and ethical—to explore what it means to worship in our own unique bodies, corporately and connectedly, through the incarnation. Taylor then contrasts and correlates the themes of discipline (that is, ritualized, prescriptive uses of the body in worship) and freedom (with regard to spontaneity and embodied worship outside of the context of congregational activity) (125–52).

Though Taylor does look at the intriguing quantum mysteries of singing together in corporate worship, such as the phenomena of entrainment and interactional synchrony in which neurons mirror each other and external movements sync up (87–89), he refreshingly does not limit his study of bodily expressions of worship to congregational choruses.²

Given his Anglican background, the author understandably devotes some attention to liturgical postures and expressions, such as the sign of the cross, passing the peace, anointing with water and oil, the opening and lifting of hands, and kneeling or standing at prescribed moments in the order of worship. He does not, however, prescribe or dictate Anglican, ritualized worship across the spectrum of the global church; rather, he sees that experience and knowledge are always rooted in specificity, discloses the specificity of his own experience, and declares that Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and other Christian expressions are likewise valid. Neither does Taylor elevate or canonize Western expression. The focus instead is on casting vision for possibility in worship (9). In this vein, he acknowledges that among many, a “power of the body is its capacity to communicate meaning in culturally contextual ways” that signal “who my people are . . . [and] who is with me in this moment” (24, 88–9). His point is, “that the culture of a time and place makes certain bodily activities of worship more *plausible* and *desirable* to a particular group of people, rather than preposterous and unimaginable” (35).

In concert with his claim, Taylor draws on the work of African theologian, Dr. Elochukwu Uzukwu (1997), who writes that Africans and the West “borrow gestural patterns” from each other and may do so “without doing harm to their fundamental vision of humans in the universe.” Uzukwu also “insist[s] that to *impose* a gesture in order to realize a uniform practice of Christianity is harmful” (Uzukwu 1997, 14–15). I think Taylor does well by bringing Uzukwu, Thettayil, Kim, and others into his considerations of the body in worship. He leaves room, however, for future research and dialogue with other scientists, theologians, practitioners, and scholars from marginalized communities and the Global South on how embodiment in praise and worship is perceived and experienced in broader intercultural embodiment discourse.

In keeping with the times, Taylor opportunely considers the challenges and freedoms that arise from digitally mediated worship gatherings. He offers much-needed language for congregants, leaders, and

² Incidentally, Taylor was the inaugural speaker for the Schrag Lecture Series at the Center for Excellence in World Arts in Dallas, TX. Privileged to attend the August 2022 lecture entitled, “Hardwired to Sing: Entrainment, Interactional Synchrony, and the Spirit-ed Magic of Corporate Song,” I was intrigued by the research he presented.

scholars to describe what is missed when movement, taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing (all of which are meant to reveal more of God’s glory and draw us nearer) are diminished in our corporate gatherings.

One of the most compelling chapters in this work is “The Way of the Body: Ethical Perspectives on the Body in Worship” (109–23). Taylor welcomes into his discussion voices and bodies that are often invisible or excluded in Western church congregational worship. His sentiments are resonant with Harold Best’s (2013) understanding of *imago Dei* and *anybodyness*:

. . . where the primal glory of *imago Dei* universally shows itself. No one is more “image of God” than another. This guarantees universal equality, personal worth, and steady dignity. Hence, prejudice, superiority/inferiority, domination, and the like are more than a direct affront to the moral laws of God. They attack God’s very nature. (2013, 14)

Taylor likewise affirms the unique gifts that the experience and presence of disabled persons render to our understanding of Christ’s crucified and resurrected body. He graciously presents arguments for digital spaces for worship, noting that “digitally mediated worship opens extraordinary opportunities for relationship, discipleship, and mission” for the homebound, terminally ill, shut-ins, and others unable to gather in person physically (122). He stresses that, “the point here . . . is not inclusion for inclusion’s sake but rather inclusion for the sake of holistic worship that many of us may be failing to enact, precisely because we have gotten the triune God wrong” (115). Taylor writes that,

over and against the tendency to compartmentalize our senses or to privilege the cognitive dimension of worship over against the kinesthetic, affective, imaginative, and relational dimensions, worship that keeps the bodies of disabled persons in mind is worship that invites all our senses and that provides entry points to prayer and praise through every aspect of our humanity. (114)

A Body of Praise offers that our ideas of normal and perfect are disrupted and that we are given an opportunity for “the experience of a deepened relational hospitality,” through recognition of our dependence (112).

While I was pleasantly surprised that Taylor considers the scientific perspectives of worship in Chapter 7, more scientific foundations and correlations for worship could have been presented and addressed. The chapter focuses on fascinating aspects of the psychology of color and the associative powers of the olfactory senses but could be strengthened by adding more of the physical science behind our capacity for awe and engagement in worship through the senses.

A Body of Praise is a noteworthy book for churches engaged in the proverbial cost-benefit analysis of online worship, as well as for those involved in architecting worship services that more holistically serve the Body of Christ.³ Through our bodies, we experience our spiritual lives on earth, contribute to the lives of others, and make meaning from what we aesthetically experience.

³ Constance Cherry’s (2010) *The Worship Architect* uses architecture as an analogy to present principles for how congregational worship services can be faithfully designed and organized.

For the ethnodoxologist and artist, Taylor’s book (particularly paired with Allison’s *Embodied*) offers a framework for theological aesthetics or “artistic ways of being religious.”⁴ How can we encourage the involvement of each of the senses in worship? This is key for engaging redemptively and prophetically with the world and the cultures whose people we serve, especially as ethnodoxologists and worship artists.

Readers who approach this text with a consideration not only of what it means for the church’s worship, but also for the personal experience of worship within a corporate setting, may find themselves entering into church services with a renewed posture of curiosity—emboldened to engage more fully in worship presenting their senses of smell, hearing, taste, touch, sight, and movement (as well as their mind’s devotional assent). The worshipper may become more keenly aware of their connection to others’ embodied presence within the congregation—mediated through the crucified and resurrected body of Christ and enriched by interactional synchrony. For those who wish to delve deeper into the topic of our physical bodies’ roles in worship, Taylor offers an extensive collection of endnotes from which to glean a wealth of general interest and scholarly resources.

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⁴ See Brown, Frank Burch, ed. 2014. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press.