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Taylor's "Glimpses of the new creation: Worship and the formative power of the arts" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Taylor, W. D. *Glimpses of the new creation: Worship and the formative power of the arts*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 300 pp. \$22.00. ISBN 9780802876096

W. David O. Taylor is an assistant professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. He earned his PhD in Theology and Liturgics from Duke University, under the tutelage of Jeremy Begbie, who wrote the foreword to this volume. “The argument of this book is that every choice of art in corporate worship, what we might call liturgical art, both opens up and closes down possibilities of the formation of our humanity” (p. 1). Taylor argues that the worship arts form us in their own ways, but should not be allowed to do so on their own terms (p. 17).

Taylor reminds us that the arts “bring us into intentional and intensive participation in the aesthetic aspect of our humanity” (p. 4). The arts engage our senses, express and enrich our emotions, and traffic in metaphor. Moreover, the arts remind us of our embodiment, and their meaning is discerned by context. Taylor maintains that “each instance of liturgical art possesses inherent powers, capable of forming a particular people in a particular context” (p. 11).

These distinctive powers must be unleashed with prudence. For instance, the visual arts and architecture possess such “powers” as color, perspective, shape, texture, and space. Therefore, the visual arts possess the power to focus reflection or to distract attention. The theater arts possess such “powers” as the incarnational (enfleshed) presence of a live performance, the responsive interrelationship of actors and audience, and resemblance to the divine drama of redemption. Taylor warns, however, that the audience may fall into passive spectatorship, and the performance may devolve into mere entertainment. He describes the similar “formative powers” of the musical arts, poetic arts, narrative arts, and kinetic arts.

Taylor emphasizes that worship is the human response to the divine initiatives of creation, revelation, and redemption. God is the subject who draws the worshipper into the Trinitarian life. Perhaps more could be said about how God as the object should inform our devotion. Just as the object determines proper adoration in human relationships (adoration for a parent differs from adoration for a spouse), the very nature of God entails that some manifestations of worship are unworthy of his character (Heb. 12:28-29).

Taylor advises a faithfulness to one's liturgical heritage while also exhibiting an openness to innovation, and he maintains that public worship is missionally charged (p. 226). One must also consider the worship arts ethically, including the relative investment of time, personnel, and resources (for example, church architecture as a reflection of beauty is its own gift, yet one may also consider alternative resource allocation).

Throughout the volume, a key concept is "discernment." Video-recorded testimonies can become archived remembrances of God's work in the community. But the "precisely edited, pre-produced testimonies, set to an evocative soundtrack" can leave the average member with a sense of inadequacy (p. 253). An unedited, unscored testimonial simply cannot match up to the sleek professionalism of the media presentation (p. 12). Taylor questions the technological imperative – we may be able to do something but this does not necessarily mean that we should.

The appendices helpfully supply further "questions for discernment" and "exercises for discernment," as well as summarized affirmations and advice (pp. 251–278). Recommendations for further reading and an index round out the volume. Readers may not necessarily agree with all of Taylor's own applications of "discernment," but the discerning librarian will recognize that his thought-provoking work will sharpen the views of patrons who are studying the arts and/or worship leadership.

Reviewer

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