



# Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter To Our Faith

*Matthew Lee Anderson*

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Our bodies matter. Christians today sometimes forget this, dangerously ignoring the importance of their physical selves when it comes to technology, sexuality, worship, and even death. Anderson's book will help readers learn what the Bible says about our bodies and grow to appreciate the importance of embodiment in our spiritual lives. It will also explore generational differences when it comes to how we perceive and use our bodies. Just as Christ's body was crucial to our salvation, our own bodies are an important part of the complete Christian life.

## Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter To Our Faith Details

Date : Published June 11th 2011 by Bethany House Publishers (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780764208560

Author : Matthew Lee Anderson

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Nonfiction, Christianity, Christian, Faith, Spirituality



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## From Reader Review Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter To Our Faith for online ebook

### Kevin Greenlee says

Matthew Lee Anderson, author of Earthen Vessels, has been told through Twitter than I am terribly mean and know only how to bruise and destroy. Thankfully, the person who told Anderson this was joking, since I don't think I could live up to that reputation - most of what I have to say about Earthen Vessels is good.

In the first half of the book, Anderson lays out a basic picture of what he thinks the body is, and who he thinks his audience is. None of his reflections on the body should be earth-shattering to any biblically informed Christian who has spent time reflecting on the body, but that's okay because his audience probably hasn't. His audience is Evangelicals, who many have accused of being Gnostic, while Anderson, in defense of us, can at best call us inattentive.

If Anderson is right that Evangelicals have merely been inattentive, then this book will do a lot of good if its read. He establishes that the body is our place of personal presence in the world, the temple of God and the vessel of our worship, and then goes on to explore specific question in reflection of this anthropology. Should Christians get tattoos? What should Christian sexuality look like? What about homosexuality? Anderson approaches all of these questions carefully, and he's clearly given them a lot of thought. Unfortunately, the sheer breadth of the material he's trying to cover means his arguments are often rather thin. He seems to be touching on the topics rather than giving them the thorough analysis they deserve. In the end, the approach seems perhaps more blog-like than book-like. Once again, however, I don't think this is really a problem, because I rather think the point of these chapters is, in the end, a plea to at least think about these things. Think about the body and worship, think about tattoos and the Christian body.

Throughout the book, I found myself at times agreeing with Anderson, at other times disagreeing. Occasionally his critiques of liberal theological positions seemed to me to rather miss the point of those positions. Then again, he, like myself, is a conservative, and its hard to understand the opposing mindset if you haven't spent time immersed in it. There was only one point in the text where I was seriously bothered by anything Anderson said, which was when he discussed yoga. I am not a practitioner of yoga, but I found his view to be narrow and perhaps a bit reactionary even (I plan on writing a separate post on the subject, though, so I won't go into more detail here).

In the end, if you're an Evangelical Christian, or count any Evangelicals as friends, I recommend you read this book. It's true that if you've given much thought to the body nothing here will surprise you, but at the very least it should spark some ideas in your head, and it will probably give you some ideas as to how to approach the Evangelical community with this topic. If you haven't given much thought to the body, then this book is an absolute must read.

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### Hope says

Although not an easy book to assimilate, Anderson expresses many important ideas that are worth considering. If our bodies matter to our faith then how should we respond to our culture's pressure to ignore male and femaleness? What about tattoos? Homosexuality? Cremation? He even introduces topics that I would never have connected with the theology of the body such as fasting and worship styles. You may not

agree with all of his conclusions, but this book will give you plenty of food for thought. I also appreciated Anderson's mention of several other authors who are thinking and writing on this crucial topic and I look forward to further study.

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### **Craig Hurst says**

“The body is a temple, but the temple is in ruins. The incarnation of Jesus affirms the body’s original goodness. The death of Jesus reminds us of its need for redemption. And the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope for its restoration” (p. 31).

This is the paradox of the body according to Matthew Anderson in his first book *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith*. From the curse of the fall in Genesis 3 the human body has been in decay. We live in a body of death both spiritually and physically. Adam brought death to our bodies in a way that God never intended at creation. But Christ has brought redemption to our bodies which began with His resurrection and will be completed when He returns (1 Cor. 15).

You would think that for a religion whose redeemer lived in a body which many at His time deemed to be evil (1 John), Christianity would have a lot more to say, at least positively, about the human body. We exist on this earth in our bodies and thus every function we perform is shaped by our bodies. And yet, much of the evangelical conversation (the little there is) about the body either misses the point, its target or is not shaped by the bodily incarnation of Jesus Christ, the bodies only hope of redemption. Anderson writes, “Whatever attitude evangelicals currently have toward the body, historical evangelicals aren’t as negative toward the body as we’re often told. The evangelical legacy with respect to the body seems to be more on of inattention than outright rejection or even a conscious ambivalence....evangelical attempts at understanding the body’s role in our spiritual lives seem to have been dominantly reactive rather than proactive” (p. 41). His charge to evangelicals to get more serious about a biblical discussion of the body is pointed:

“If conservatives evangelicals want to offer careful, gospel-centered responses to these various ‘isms,’ then we must overcome our inattention to the body and engage these communities on this ground in distinctly evangelical ways. It is not enough just to show that how they think about human bodies is wrong. We must also show them a more excellent way of thinking about – and of living in – these human bodies.” (p. 45-46)

*Earthen Vessels* is a mature, informed and gospel saturated exercise in thinking about the human body and the redemption Christ has brought to it. Anderson has his finger on the pulse of culture and how it has shaped the evangelical identity.

Reading *Earthen Vessels* will make you think you are reading the works of C.S. Lewis or G.K. Chesterton (though Anderson would humbly deny this praise), who he quotes often. His maturity of thought is beyond his age and one can only imagine how excellent of a writer he will be in the prime of his writing career.

Anderson is a writer, but as well, freely and vastly as he cites the works of theologians, sociologists, psychologists and the like, you would think he might have minored in each of these areas. The truth of the matter is, Anderson has done his homework and this book shows he has thought long and hard about the subject matter. There is no one or movement that is beyond his critique. He critiques various –ism movements as well as well-meaning evangelical leaders. His aim is not to destroy but to honestly evaluate what he believes to be misguided thinking on the part of popular leaders of our day. Of particular note is Anderson’s careful attention to the text of Scripture. For not being a theologian, his exegesis is on target and he delves

deep into the historical background when necessary (see esp. chap. 6 on tattoos).

While there is much to commend to this book, what I find most impressive is how gospel saturated Anderson is in chapter after chapter. He states:

"Evangelicals sometimes suffer from an anemic understanding of how the gospel shapes our lives. We alternate between playing the legalist card when people attempt to draw lines about how Christians should or should not act, and playing the libertine card when others sanction their immoral actions with the gospel. A Gospel-ethic, though, is a normative account of how our lives conform to the pattern of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is discerned and freely enacted through the power of the Spirit's indwelling presence." (p. 28-29)

Time and time again Anderson reaches back to Jesus and Scripture for the redemptive life they bring to our bodies. Earthen Vessels is not merely thoughts and observations on the body but it is an earnest call for Christians to view their bodies through the lens of Scripture and redemption in Christ and His resurrection rather than through the eyes of a dying world.

I highly recommend this book to anyone between the ages of 18-30 but everyone would do well to read it as an exercise in encouraging this generation of evangelical writers. This is the kind of book that you need to read, think about it and then go back and read it again. Earthen Vessels will make you think and will leave you amazed. I close with Anderson's own words:

"As long as we have bodies, we will remain in the world. But our calling is to discern the ways in which the structures and institutions that make our world are set up against the knowledge of God. The cross is the shape of a life that is in the world, but not of it. And when we know the power of the resurrection, we shall find ourselves wanting to participate in the sufferings of Christ, to manifest the same life that he poured out for us to a world that is desperate for hope and joy." (p. 230)

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### **Josh Bush says**

Earthen Vessels is written with a very academic tone, so not everyone is going to be able to get through it. Anderson spends several chapters setting the stage for the second half of the book by describing how our bodies are integral to our being, as opposed to just a carrier for our souls. We were created as a unified person, body and soul, with both being important to how we live out our faith. He is able to make substantive arguments on how we should approach everything that relates to our body from tattoos, to remaining single, to homosexuality. I found his take on tattoos to be unique and helpful, going far beyond the unpersuasive "it's permanent" argument we normally hear. I fully agree with his take on why it is so hard to have a civil argument about homosexuality, highlighting that homosexuality is treated as an identity by gay rights proponents, but as an activity by Christians, so we end up talking past each other.

The last few chapters do not necessarily flow together very well, reading more like a list of essays on things related to the body. But there are few resources that take on the discussion of the importance of the body to Christian faith, which means there is a lot of ground to cover.

If you can deal with an academic tone for a few chapters in the beginning, then this is going to be a helpful and useful book if the title peaks your interest at all.

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## **Jud says**

Matthew Lee Anderson's *Earthen Vessels* is a hard book to pin down. The author's voice is at once conversational and classical. (With titles like, "Preface: In Which I Clear My Throat," I was often reminded, stylistically, of C.S. Lewis or G.K. Chesterton.) And while he is not afraid of big words, he is somehow deceptively simple in his delivery. Imagine you have an old high school friend who grew up to be a philosopher and you guys get together for a cup of coffee – that's Anderson's style.

His tone belies the depth of his subject – "why our bodies matter to our faith" – but this is not a weakness. On the contrary, *Earthen Vessels* could have read like a text book, but it doesn't. It's a much, much easier read than it has any right to be.

Anderson presents as the basis for his book the idea that our physical bodies are "the place of our personal presence in the world." (pg. 233) As such, we cannot separate our bodies from ourselves as easily as we sometimes try to (philosophically, at least). And in fact, Christ took on a human body, and He "died to save and renew human bodies." (pg. 16) Therefore, we are inseparable from our bodies. There's a lot of very interesting philosophical delving here to elaborate and drive the point home.

Once that premise is established, Anderson takes us on a wide-ranging journey into topics as varied as pleasure, tattoos, homosexuality, and death and the implications they hold for our bodies and our faith.

*Earthen Vessels* covers a great deal of ground in its 230 or so pages. The book may leave you with more questions than it answers, but Anderson's purpose in these pages is to start a conversation rather than end it.

It takes a while to wrestle with all these topics, and it is not for the casual reader. As I've said, the book was easy enough to read, but understanding what you've read takes some serious thought. Unless you're some kind of genius, it may take a second or even a third read. However, it's worth the time. There's a lot of meat to chew on here, and that's something that is sorely missing in most Christian literature. I definitely recommend *Earthen Vessels*.

*I received this book for free from Bethany House Publishers for this review as part of their blogger review program.*

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## **Elizabeth says**

Based on the context in which I learned about this book, I expected it to be too conservative for my taste. But because it's body theology, I still wanted to read it.

As I began to read the 2 sample chapters (Chapter 1: Earthen Vessels, Chapter 2: Evangelical Inattention and the Secular Body) I kept having the urge to correct the masculine pronouns for the First Person of the Trinity and generic humans (and also the Second Person of the Trinity, but I recognize I am much more of an outlier there).

I admit that I didn't read these chapters all that closely -- in part because they weren't saying much that I

found novel and compelling. (It doesn't help that the book seems aimed at the evangelical milieu of which the author is a part; I am simply not the target audience for this book.)

I did like this:

"What's to say about the physical body? More than most evangelicals seem to realize. When we hear the words the body, our minds apparently meander over to Paul's great metaphor and the countless sermons we have heard exhorting us to take up our janitorial crosses and assume our place as the pinky toe of Christ's church. We are apparently more comfortable talking about the body of Christ than the body we walk around in." (p.36)

I had a violent urge to facepalm at this, though:

"In its most problematic form, feminist theologians read Scripture through the experience of women, rather than the other way around." (p.43)

Yeah... the author and I have some very different theological approaches.

I still intend to read it in its entirety, though (libraries ftw).

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### **C.J. Stunkard says**

Earthen Vessels is a serious, forthright admonition from Matthew to his Christian siblings to grow in their relationship in the Lord through a better understanding of their bodies. This synopsis may sound like another emergent or evangelical attempt to subvert tradition by connecting with God through some new practice skewed toward materialism or new age sensibilities, but Matthew's work could not be further from such an assumption.

This book is grounded in not only tradition but scholarship and theology. Matthew is well-versed in the thinkers of the past as well as the present, and he draws from them all when developing his approach. His humility in this process is front-and-center, for he is earnest in acknowledging and examining his own shortcomings, particularly when deconstructing ideas with which he disagrees.

I would divide the book into three sections: The Body and Personhood, The Body and Culture, and The Body and Family (or, Church). Each section is interesting in its own right and towards its own ends, with overlap throughout (making the work cohesive) and with particular rhetorical flare shown in portions on tattoos, sexuality, and corporate worship. Matthew engages his subjects with a thoroughness that I found personally humbling, as he raised ideas I had not previously considered on a variety of topics. Having gone through a personal journey of weight loss and increased focus on health and wellness, I have considered matters of the body and its importance often and deeply. To find a work that addresses so many gaping holes in my own outlook was of great benefit to me.

Conversely, in some ways Earthen Vessels feels incomplete, but in a fair way: one sign of a good text is the reader's desire that the author had continued and addressed more. I ended the book with further questions: What about obesity, both from sloth and health related issues? What about disease and frailty? What about the body as a tool of communication (body language), for praise or affirmation or sensuality? What about Christ's admonitions to remove those parts of the body that lead to sin? Frankly, Matthew may have answered these questions, and I simply failed to recognize them, but my point is that Earthen Vessels, full as it is, could use a sequel--one that I would be glad to read (after all, the body has over 2000 parts--according

to that soap commercial, anyway).

As I said, however, this is not a shortcoming. Rather, Earthen Vessels conforms to the old adage, "always, leave 'em wanting more"--a testament to its usefulness not only in bringing subjects to the front of the reader's mind but also presenting those subjects in way that welcomes further elucidation.

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### **Mathew says**

It's def not a topic you see very often discussed which is why I picked it up but it just wasn't very alive. The chapters seemed to drag and by the end of the book I was glad I was done. Helpful read but tedious.

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### **Eric Scott says**

If ever a great book was overwritten...

I spent three weeks reading this work, and I am exhausted. The topic was good. The writing was good. The sourcing was good. Everything was good. Much of it was great. But I feel like I just put down a nine volume encyclopedia and should now somehow comprehend everything there is to know about the physical body and its proper functioning in a material domain in accordance with God's plan.

Kudos to Matthew Anderson. He is clearly a great scholar and perhaps a literary genius, combining pragmatism with lofty philosophy and backing up his presentation with clarity and research. In a way, I admire the fact he was able to pack 250 slices of lean meat between two pieces of bread. It was just more than I can chew, swallow, or digest. I sense I left 80% of this great meal on the plate.

I would have preferred more chapter divisions. In fact, if he had written four books in a series I might have been able to enjoy them and I would have bought every one. It's a truly great read if you've got plenty of time and a cavernous mental digestive tract.

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### **Yiya says**

"Earthen Vessels" starts as a promising book. The author is interested in reminding us that our identity depends on God and not on the consumption-oriented society that we live in today. He also points out that humans, as social beings, constantly offer his body as a living sacrifice; he illustrated this point with parents taking care of a newborn, often losing sleep. He also makes a clear difference of what is culturally accepted but not biblical.

However, it all becomes really disappointing and contradictory. The good concepts introduced in the first part of the book are gone; the author even proposes that, as long as the heart is in the right place, the action should be accepted. This after pointing out the very true fact that Christians are at "risk of letting ideologies that oppose our Christian witness shape us more than Scripture" (p.104), in such a way that practices become the norm and "eventually we quit caring" (p.106). This just makes me wonder if the author is trying to justify shortcomings rather than being apologetic. For instance, one of his examples about our relation with our bodies is how our fingers would allow us to play the piano or not; he states that even a disciplined person won't be able to reach a determined goal if their body is just not made for that activity. Although this might be true for most of us, I wonder what people who have gone through impairing accidents or physically or mentally challenged athletes have to say about that. I strongly disagree with this kind of generalization the

author constantly includes in his arguments. If anything, God gets more glory from this kind of weakening impairments.

The overall feeling is that there is no direction at all; moreover, there is no aim and conclusions are never offered, as if there were no purpose to reach. It is a slow, lukewarm book in which the author displays his own knowledge and familiarity with humanistic teachings. Also, I strongly disliked the way in which he tries to include jokes, which turn out to me more cocky and disrespectful than funny; the latter, along with events that are used with the intent of illustrating a point, turn out to be highly distracting, taking meaning away from the text.

Unfortunately, the scope that this book could have had is not reached; because of its structure and lack of depth, it reminds me of a term paper by a very good student who knows a lot about the topic, but is unable to arrive to any conclusion. I do recognize there are some areas that can lead into a good debate - and a good learning experience, but do not expect to have questions answered nor issued clarified; on the other hand, get ready for misleading information. It could be interesting to have this book, just because of the numerous references included, although poorly used throughout the exposition of the text.

I received a complimentary copy of this book from Bethany House Publishers in exchange for an honest review. This did not bias my opinion on the book or the author.

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### **Jared Totten says**

What do tattoos, cremation, and homosexuality all have in common?\* They each reveal one's fundamental belief about the body, its design and purpose. While Christians should arguably have a higher view of the body than most, the average evangelical theology of the body often remains unexamined and merely reactionary towards cultural trends and spiritual concerns.

Matthew Lee Anderson challenges the unexamined and reactionary in his surprising new book *Earthen Vessels*. Not knowing what to expect of the latest blogger-turned-author (an ever growing breed) in his debut work, I found myself tearing through this book in a matter of days. How interesting can a Christian's book about the body be? As it turns out, very.

As already hinted at, Anderson artfully covers a spectrum of modern day implications for a deeper understanding of the human form. As one who resisted against all odds, I found the chapter on tattoos particularly interesting (definition of irony: in pursuit of individualism, rebellion, and self-expression, tattoos and their host bodies are now markers of conformity and consumerism). Homosexuality too got its own chapter, and the insights here alone make the book worthwhile:

...as long as those with same-sex orientations treat the fulfillment of their sexual desires as a necessary part of their identity, the most sensitive traditional responses to same-sex attraction and acts will inevitably be reduced to bigotry. (p. 146)

All in all, *Earthen Vessels* is solid and enjoyable, and Anderson has made a definite contribution to an important conversation that has long been overdue in evangelical circles. Two thumbs up!

\*I tried to come up with a punch line for this question but never succeeded. If you have any zingers, I'm all ears!

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## Dave Jenkins says

Our bodies matter to God. After all God created us in His image and likeness, and breathed life into us. Even while acknowledging that precious truth, I've never really thought very seriously, or ever read a book that seeks to examine the relationship of our bodies to our faith. Matthew Anderson in *Earthen Vessels Why Our Bodies Matter To Our Faith* writes to bring awareness to the evangelical Church (and broader I'm sure) about what the Bible teaches about the human body.

In his examination of the human body, Matthew delivers an integrated approach to a topic I wish more was written on more. Before reading this book, I wasn't even aware there was a conversation going on about the body at all. Having read Matthew's book, I now understand that this is a very important conversation to have. The reason this conversation about our bodies matter is we are flesh and blood. It's easy to forget this simply truth in the business of our everyday lives as we scurry about with our jobs, families, and so on, living as if our minds and soul were all that mattered. The problem is God created us from dust, and being physical beings in a physical world affects everything from our use of technology to our sexuality and our worship.

I've already mentioned that I greatly appreciate the integrated approach of this book, so let's crack open the book and take a look inside. Matthew opens up his book by outlining the reason the body is neglected and why this issue is important. The book continues in chapter four and five by looking at the body towards others and as shaped by the world. Chapters six through eleven look at the body as it relates to the issue of tattoos, homosexuality, spiritual disciplines and the Church.

The author contends that "if ever there was a question about the goodness of the physical body, the incarnation of Jesus Christ definitively answered it" (21). With this statement the author launches out on his intended goal in this book to "make much of Jesus and his work for us, and to help those who wish to know him more deeply bring their entire lives under his care and love" (18).

Since we live in a world that glorifies the body thinking through what the body is, is vital. The Greeks and the Romans worshiped the human body and we are just like them in this false worship except today we worship the human body through viewing illicit images through the internet, movies, and so on. While the means we view the beauty of the human body has changed from sculptures to pictures in magazines and screens on the computer the fact is the worship of ourselves and our bodies hasn't changed. The biggest reason I appreciate this book is Matthew doesn't let us off the hook for our false worship but rather points us to the One in Jesus who can fulfill our greatest longings and desires.

After all we aren't just minds, and we aren't just what we do, those are functions of what it means to be human. What we do and what we think should never be viewed as encompassing our identity. Our identity as humans isn't rooted in what we do but in God who created us, who loved us so much He sent His Son Jesus who lived a perfect life, died victoriously and rose triumphantly that we might be indwelt by His Spirit and enjoy Him both now as His adopted sons and daughters and more fully in His presence when we will be clothed in white.

*Earthen Vessels* is an important book that I hope my readers will consider getting. This book is a good place to begin if you're like me and not familiar with the conversation going on from an evangelical perspective about the human body. Whether you're familiar with this issue or not, I encourage you to read *Earthen*

Vessels, because it will help you to not only understand the biblical issues at stake, but also the other issues such as homosexuality, and our sexuality as they relate to the body.

Title: Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith

Author: Matthew Anderson

Publisher: Bethany House (2012)

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the publisher through the Bethany House book review bloggers program. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

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### **Katerina says**

American churches tend to focus on people's spiritual condition. Earthen Vessels is a needed reminder that people are both spiritual and physical beings. In Earthen Vessels, Matthew Lee Anderson considers the role our physical bodies play in our understanding of God. I only had time to read selections from this book, but those I read added to my understanding. I hope to come back to this book to read its entirety.

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### **Dean says**

So important. My 5 stars is really 5.5 stars. If we want to talk about worship music wars or technology or LGBT+ issues, it would serve us well to read this book and think about the theology of the body. A helpful preventative—or even corrective—to latent Gnosticism.

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### **Carol Bakker says**

4.5 stars

6/6/18

As I copied quotes into my journal I resisted the urge to buy a dozen copies of this book and hand them out to friends and family.

Anderson writes about the ways our inattention to the body and our grip on individualism affect our practices and habits. As a philosopher he thinks about the premises behind such disparate topics as schmaltzy sentimentality, cremation, sex, tattoos, body modification, fasting, posture in worship, video sermons, and the volume of worship bands!

The impulse that we own our bodies and can do with them as we please runs deep. It is one of our tacit, world-shaping beliefs that few of us every bring to the surface, but nearly everyone

affirms.

It was easy to like this book, I think, because I am in agreement with Anderson on most things. But it would be beneficial to read this book with those who don't and use the chapters as a springboard for discussion.

12/27/15

I vacillated between four and five stars. I'm really impressed with this book...this book that took me eight months to finish. Every time I read a section, I underlined, starred, check marked; but when I reached for a book, this book kept slipping to the lower section of my nightstand stack.

I don't have leisure right now to mine the book for quotes and untangle my thoughts into a coherent response (there is a baby girl in my house this week who supersedes Goodreads) but I will say this: Earthen Vessels is moving from my nightstand to my husband's nightstand.

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