

Dawn, Marva J. *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999. 377 pp. \$12.39.

A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World is one of many books written by Dr. Marva J. Dawn—theologian, author, musician, and educator. She currently works with Christians Equipped for Ministry of Vancouver, Washington, and serves as an adjunct professor of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. According to the book publisher’s web site, Dr. Dawn has earned four masters degrees as well as a Ph.D. in Christian ethics and the Scriptures from the University of Notre Dame. (Her being visually handicapped makes her accomplishments all the more impressive.) Dawn’s educational background with “emphasis on cultural analysis and character formation” (3) equipped her to produce this second book dealing with the subject of Christian worship.

Dawn wrote *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* for the church-at-large. The plural personal pronouns “we” and “our” are used on page two of the book to indicate clearly her desire for Christians to explore with her the importance and ways of being church to the world. Although Dawn is highly educated, her writing exhibits a tone of humility. This is commendable knowing that knowledge often “puffs up” (1 Cor 8:1, literal). The amount of “flak that people are getting” (4) today (“people” meaning Christians) over what is and is not appropriate in corporate worship services prompted Dawn to write the subject of this review. She hopes the book will “stand as a bridge, to offer tools for conversing together across differing viewpoints, and to urge churches to ask better questions before making decisions” (4). For a few years now, I have maintained that the greatest

idolatry in America does not occur on Friday nights but on Sunday mornings. So many churches only possess “a form of godliness” (2 Tim 3:5, NASB). Another purpose of Dawn’s writing is to call the church to a “renewed centering on God” (9) which “might lead to a resurrection of wonder in the Church” (9). And she hopes her thoughts will help “counteract the current push for worship to be the means by which people are attracted to God” (11). In other words, the substance of Christian worship—not the form—should wow the unregenerate mind.

Having taught courses on personal evangelism, I could not resist reading and critiquing Dawn’s ninth chapter—Don’t Let the People Cop Out of Witnessing. Great title! Here she draws out the distinctions between “what corporate worship is” and “what it means for followers of Christ to reach out . . . in caring and evangelism . . .” so that Christians “can be more faithful in our Churchbeing” (121). Dawn is correct. There are definite distinctions. But she also errs in saying that “worship is *for* God, in contrast to evangelism, which is *for the unbeliever*” (122) if she means believers no longer need to be “evangelized” after conversion. Christians and non-Christians alike need to hear and heed again and again the simple gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul wrote “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved” (1 Cor 15:1-2a, NASB). The Corinthian Christians already knew the gospel, but Paul explained it again.

The Greek verb from which we get “I evangelize” also means “I bring good news” in English. As is seen in the New Testament, Christians occasionally fall into either legalism or antinomianism thus perverting the gospel in which they should be standing, hence the constant need for even the elect to be frequently reminded of the good news. I heartily agree with Dawn that “evangelism . . . is done by all of us who realize that everyone around us needs God’s grace”

(123). Amen! But let us be quick to include both believers and unbelievers in the definition of “everyone” here. Later in the chapter, Dawn offers several “common hindrances to the witness aspect of Churchbeing” (127). She helps the church by identifying and making them known so we can get beyond them. After the list of excuses for not witnessing, she suggests what I consider to be a major reason for not evangelizing. “Perhaps we are merely religious consumers ourselves” (130). We all know that self-deception is rampant in our world. The visible church is no exception! Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 establish this sobering truth. All people, therefore, unbelievers *and* professing Christians need to hear the gospel. Doubtless, the readers of Peter’s second epistle knew the gospel, yet the apostle wrote “I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them” (2 Pet 1:12, NASB). All who name the name of Jesus as their Lord need “to make certain about His calling and choosing” them (2 Pet 1:10, NASB).

Initially, I decided to critique chapter 20 of Dawn’s book because I was intrigued by the fifty-cent word in the title—Why Is a *Catechumenal* [emphasis mine] Process Needed in Contemporary Culture? I almost always read slowly, but I slowed the pace even more for this chapter so as not to misunderstand or misrepresent Dr. Dawn. I agree with Dawn that the church today needs to utilize a catechumenal process, now that I understand the term. Catechisms are an excellent way to teach *people* the things of God. (The reason for my italicization of “people” in the previous sentence will be apparent later.) And I think that Dawn has provided a timely reminder to us all that only God can satiate man’s “*Sehnsucht*,” which manifests itself in a variety of ways.

More compliments are due for the positive contributions to the church that Dawn has made. But I now must be a Berean and critically analyze her arguments. The chapter is riddled

with theological error, most of which I think stems from her sacramental (neo-Catholic) view of conversion. I wrongly assumed that Dr. Dawn espoused a Reformed view of salvation, believing that unregenerate man is completely dead in his trespasses and sins. Throughout the chapter, I read much suggesting that through “a deep process of catechumenal formation, we can incorporate them (unbelievers) into the Body (the true church) that will truly satisfy their desire (the *Sehnsucht*) by nourishing their relationship with God” (241). What relationship I ask? In the next paragraph, she provides an antecedent for the “people” of the paragraph that contains my quotation above. She writes that “it is crucially necessary for churches to welcome such *seekers* [emphasis mine] into the training of carefully nurturing mentors . . .” (242). Seekers? There are no seekers. “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God” (Rom 3:11, NASB). To suggest that the church can inculcate a truly beneficial knowledge of God through a catechumenal process is utterly antibiblical. The church may plant and water seeds of the gospel, but only God gives increase resulting in real benefit to the ground (i.e., the hearer). Christians are responsible to preach and teach the Word of God. But God Himself must first *teach* sinners, or all our work will simply make judgement that much hotter for those who do not repent and believe the gospel.

Elsewhere Dawn writes, “Then, by a life-forming catechumenal process, such searchers can be helped to discover that their deepest yearnings are gratified as God fashions them to be selfless and truly themselves in relationship with him” (244). Searcher? There is no searcher! The catechumenal process, as important as it is, is not “life-forming.” God alone, through the sharing of the gospel, resurrects the life a sinner. Dawn should at least mention this fact lest God be completely robbed of His glory in salvation.

Dawn's language on the next page further blurs (or obliterates) the line of demarcation between believers and unbelievers. The lost do not need "character formation and a deeper relationship with the God alone who resolves their existential questions" (245). "Deeper relationship" implies unbelievers already have a relationship with God. Wrong! As Cornelius Van Til once said, God and unbelievers "are not on speaking terms." Unbelievers do not need another "life-transforming education process" (245). They need a *conversion event* wrought by God Himself which will inevitably lead to an epistemological revolution. Contrary to Romanism and other unorthodox "churches," conversion is not a process. It is a sovereign, point-in-time act of God whereby a dead sinner is made alive to Christ.

With Dawn I pity those who "have not been the beloved of anyone who was totally committed to them" (247). Ultimately, sinners only "love" so they can get some "love" in return. But we must not disregard the Scriptures when talking to those who have not really been loved by telling them that "they are the beloved of God" (247 and 248) if of no one else. The wicked are not the beloved of God! "For Thou art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with Thee. The boastful shall not stand before Thine eyes; thou dost *hate all who do iniquity* [emphasis mine]" (Ps 5:4-5, NASB). Unbelievers are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:3, NASB).

Dawn writes that unbelievers "need a genuine and vital community with a compensatory process of life-formation in order to survive and thrive" (249). Unbelievers need first and foremost to hear a clear, accurate, unadulterated, Spirit-charged presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church's primary catechumenal device (not a process) for unbelievers is the gospel. The people that need to be catechized are believers for only they have the Spirit of God, Who alone enables them to appraise spiritual things.

In the last paragraph of the chapter, Dawn remains theologically consistent by stating that the church must “offer the presence of God embodied in ways that draw seekers into hope and a home, a foretaste of the world for which we were all made” (251). I reiterate—there are no God-seekers. The way in which we offer the *initial* presence of God to unbelievers is through the preaching of the gospel. The church should not waste resources on “ways that draw seekers” when there are no seekers. And as horrific as it may sound to the itching ears of modern Christendom, not all people were made for heaven. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Romans 9:21-22.

One of my favorite Bible verses is 1 Peter 3:15. This prompted me to read and evaluate chapter 30 of Dawn’s book—Always Be Ready to Give an Account. Dawn wrote the chapter “to sketch some principles for faithful evangelism” (345). Most Christians only think of 1 Peter 3 when the subject of apologetics is at hand. Indeed, verse 15 is the magna charta of Christian apologetics, but that is not all. I concur with Dr. Dawn that “the third chapter of 1 Peter gives very precise instructions for evangelism to Christians who are being persecuted” (347). The bulk of the chapter is seven points of commentary (including some exegesis) about 1 Peter 3. At least two of her remarks struck me as incisive. In her comments about verse 15, she says the following about the verse clause “all the ones asking you” (348). Dawn writes “this phrase should at least prod us to consider whether our life provokes any question about the hope we display” (348). I have often said this when teaching on this passage.

During her last point, she says “Our witness is not for the purpose of making our congregation grow; it is simply because God is worthy of our worship and praise and witness” (349). Amen! Christians evangelize and apologize so that God is glorified. If, in the process, He chooses to save a sinner, so be it. The work is His prerogative. The church witnesses for the

sake of God's honor and glory. Yet, in the same context, Dawn writes "Worship leads to being Church, which leads to witness for the sake of the world" (349). She seems to contradict herself in this regard.

Earlier in the chapter, Dawn says "We can easily promote the gospel, for the kingdom itself is its own warrant for belief" (347). Is she saying that God's gospel is self-attesting and self-authorizing? I do think these two qualities of God's Word are demonstrable. But she should have unpacked such a loaded sentence. I seriously doubt that most readers of her statement know how much is contained within it.

I shall close my critique of Dawn's book with a final comment about another aberrant belief that she holds. Why? The doctrine of the Lord's atonement is fundamental to Christianity. It is not a point about which we can agree to disagree. In dealing with 1 Peter 3, Dawn sides with something William Fore wrote. In the process she declares that the church should "help people interpret their existence in light of what God has done for them in Christ" (347). Unless a person truly repents of their sins and lays hold of Christ by faith, Christians have no way of knowing if God has done anything salvifically for a particular unbeliever. Christ laid His life down for His sheep, not the goats. See John 10.