

Marva Dawn: Wanting People to Love God More



Writer, theologian, teacher, musician, and speaker, Marva Dawn is the author of almost twenty books. She received her Ph.D. in Christian Ethics and Scriptures from Notre Dame University. In addition, she holds four master's degrees. Her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* was reviewed in the winter 2003 issue of *Spectrum*. She will be the keynote speaker at the Association of Adventist Forums International Meeting in Hope, British Columbia, August 28-31, 2003.

Bonnie Dwyer Much of your writing seems to come out of your personal life—your love of music and worship, your community experience, and the lessons you've learned from your physical disabilities. I'm just wondering what's happening in your life right now that's affecting or influencing your spiritual life and writing.

Marva Dawn Well, there are too many directions. One, my book on money just came out, called *Unfettered Hope*, and I'm starting to get reactions to that one.

BD What kind of reaction are you getting?

MD It's my most complex book. It's gotten a reaction that it's brilliant. But my desire is that people will really take it seriously. How can we be so rich when so many in the world are so poor? And I think a lot of it is because we have let the ethos of our society—that everything is a commodity and purchasable—influence the way we think about Christianity. So that's one direction I'm thinking these days.

Another direction comes from the peace march I recently participated in at Edmonton,

Alberta. The speakers there were very good in emphasizing that we can't ask for peace unless we really work for justice. I am so grieved at the loss of life and damage and violence that's taking place in Iraq right now. I never think war is the solution, and I know that there are tyrants and there are evil people like Saddam Hussein, but I'm just not convinced that war ever solves anything. So that's a great grief to me right now.

The third thing is I just found out that I don't have cancer. They thought for a couple weeks I did have it, because there was a spot on my mammogram. (I already had cancer ten years ago.) So that was good news. I'm thinking about that right now with gratitude.

Because this is Lent, I'm also thinking a lot these days about how people like to reduce Jesus. On the liberal side, a lot of scholars don't like to believe his miracles and don't like to believe that the Gospels are true in recording his words. And on the conservative side, a lot don't like to really recognize that he demonstrated that God's way of working is through suffering. Lent is the time for us to think about that.

So by and large, both ends of the spectrum really like to ignore who Jesus really was, so I'm thinking about how I can write about that in a book that I've been working on called *Corrupted Words Reclaimed*.

BD How far along are you on that book?

MD I've been working on it for two years, but it keeps changing its form. And then it keeps getting interrupted by other books and essays.

BD How do you decide which projects to concentrate on at any particular time?

MD I don't know that I ever consciously decide. The family joke is I have my next fourteen books in my computer. The reason it's a family joke is as soon as I finish one, there's always some more. One will just start to bubble up and I get just adamant about it. The other thing is that I recognize how necessary it is by what I encounter when I'm out on speaking engagements. I had a couple books that I had planned on doing and then something else bubbled more vigorously. So *Corrupted Words* actually got set aside for two other books.

BD The money one?

MD The money one, yes and a little book on worship that's coming out

in April or May called *How SHALL We Worship?* That's coming from Tyndale. *Unfettered Hope* came from Westminster John Knox.

BD Does this mean that Eerdman's was not treating you well?

MD No, it doesn't mean that at all. It just means that I thought I should experiment with a wider audience perhaps. I also met a really wonderful editor from Westminster that persuaded me to write this book, *Unfettered Hope*, with them. The other thing is that I give all the royalties away, and I wanted to see if more royalties might be generated by another company, because I really care about the charities to which I give royalties. I want them to get as much money as possible.

BD How do you decide which charities to give to?

MD It usually relates to a theme of the book. For example *Unfettered Hope* is about money and the poor of the world, so its royalties are buying medicines for the homeless.

I care a whole lot about the homeless. Two of my other books' royalties go to homeless shelters in my own town. These agencies have a really high success rate of helping people getting into jobs and their own apartments, that sort of thing. So my book *To Walk and Not Faint* goes to one that has really wonderful counseling, medical care, sheltering, and tutoring for the children of the homeless. The other book, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*, goes to a group called Share House in our town. They also got the offering that we took up at our wedding.

BD Your comments on the church in that *Powers, Weakness* book were intriguing. You have had such a

variety of religious experiences. Was your father a Lutheran pastor?

MD No, Lutheran schoolteacher and principal. He taught eighth grade.

BD And you attended quite a variety of different religious educational institutions—Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical.

MD Yes, purposely.

BD And your writings are very ecumenical.

MD True.

BD So when you talk to and about the church, is there a specific church to which you are speaking? Where is your church home? Do you feel like you belong to a specific denomination?

MD Well, that's a bit problematic because right now in my hometown I help with three churches. I don't help a lot, because I'm out of town mostly. But two of the churches have me preach occasionally; two of the churches have me do Bible class occasionally. I have spoken for one church's book clubs; I've spoken for another's stewardship program. Because I'm helping at those three places, I feel a little homeless right now.

But my home church was a wonderful African American community in Portland that is now closed because the pastor tried to grow it too fast. I miss that community a lot, and I have not yet found a community to take its place. I'm content right now simply to help at several churches and wait until I feel really firmly committed to a community. I don't feel called right now to one particular community. I miss it though, terribly. I don't like this state of affairs, but I don't want to rush too fast. I have to see where I'm needed most.

BD In the *Powers* book you say that the church as a discussion community has been violated. Why are questions and discussions important for the Christian community?

MD Well, for several reasons. One, the church, for example, should be the place, in the United States where Democrats and Republicans could actually talk, where Christians could wrestle through how best to live out our citizenship in two kingdoms.

Similarly, the church should be the place where we learn together in our conversation how each person lives out their part in the priesthood of all believers. So that doctors and teachers and people of various occupations could have friends in the same occupation with whom they could talk about how to live as a Christian in that work. So that's another major conversation that needs to happen.

A third kind of conversation is the conversation for the community's business. Too easily churches just do majority vote, but don't really listen to the Spirit.

Another kind of conversation that needs to be held is the sort of conversation in which we share insights into the spiritual life, biblical studies, and devotional practices, and those kinds of things. So those are some of the sorts of conversations that I want to recapture. But we live in a world that just does not know how to build a community where we really share that intimately with each other.

BD Do you think that the church should be showing the world how to build community?

MD I'm not sure that we can. What I mean by that is to be community truly requires a central focus. Christians have that in our mission to glorify God and love

our neighbors. I don't know that any group outside of the church has that kind of focus. So we can't exactly model for the world how to be community, but if we were a better community we'd be more effective at inviting the world to participate in our community.

BD Church effectiveness is another thing you talked about in intriguing ways in *Powers*. How do you view effectiveness, the concept of evangelism, and the text that says, "Go into all the world and teach all nations"?

MD Well, the root problem is that we live in a society that measures effectiveness by numbers, and I don't believe numbers are the way to measure effectiveness. I don't think we can measure effectiveness. I think that we simply have to ask: Are we being faithful in carrying the gospel wherever we go? Are we being faithful in equipping missionaries to go in various places? Especially nowadays, are we equipping our congregation members to be in mission with our neighbors?

I don't think you can measure how effective we are because everybody tries to count up, "Have I added a whole bunch of people to the church?" That's not the question. "Am I in conversation with my neighbors so that they're coming closer to loving God and loving their neighbor as themselves?" That is the question.

People are at all stages in their seeking, so I don't know that there's a specific point where we can say, "Well, now, you're converted and yesterday you weren't."

There's a great book on evangelism—one of my favorites—by an Anglican in Canada. The book is called *Evangelism for "Normal" People*. His name is John Bowen. He says we have to recognize that

everyone is on a spectrum in various stages of relationship with God. Am I in all my conversations moving people on that spectrum more toward God rather than away from God?

BD That's a good way to look at it.

MD I think so. Because then, it's not like I'm trying to turn people into an evangelism project. . . .

BD . . . nobody likes to be a project. . .

MD . . . and convert somebody. Instead, I'm all the time wanting people to love God more because they have been with me.

BD That's a beautiful way to think about it.

You also mention the ministry of healing that the church has neglected. Can you talk to me a little bit about the healing that you see the church could be doing?

MD When Jesus sent out the disciples in Luke 9 and 10, he sent them out to do two things—proclaim the Kingdom and heal. And I've always been haunted by that, that we should be more aware of that. But I also believe that healing is a very large concept. I don't mean only physical healing; I mean emotional, mental, spiritual, economic, all kinds of healing. Social healing, too.

I encourage people to think more widely about how they pray for healing and to think about how they can contribute to putting legs on those prayers. If I pray for someone who is ill, am I going to take her flowers? Or am I going to clean her house so she can rest? Or could I baby-sit her kids? I think of all the healing that people have done for me for years by providing rides to the doctor when my husband was teaching school.

And on a larger scale, the church

could be much more active in the healing of the nations. Why don't Christians more adamantly ask the United States government to invest in things that bring life instead of things that bring death? Actively engage in economic building of the world rather than bullying the world with our superior military power. I'm sorry, I'm really grieved that the United States invests its wealth in the wrong things.

BD Well, let's take a rest from economics and war, to talk about Sabbath. Sabbath is a subject that Adventists love, and your Sabbath book was just so refreshing. How did you come to that topic originally? What was it that happened that made you want to address the topic of Sabbath?

MD I kept wondering why Christians pay attention to the other nine commandments and don't pay attention to that one. I'm not saying they keep the other nine, but at least most Christians pay attention to the other nine!

BD What kind of a response did you get to that book?

MD It is still the one that keeps on selling. My two books on worship had an immediate faster sell. They're my big sellers so far. I don't know what will happen with the other ones I've written. But the Sabbath one keeps generating more and more and more.

BD Do you have current questions about Sabbath?

MD I'm always exploring it just because my own practice ebbs and flows as do all our disciplines. I have been on the road so much lately that Sabbath is absolutely necessary to keep me sane, and the day goes so fast. Even though

I don't do any work, I don't know where it goes!

BD How does Sabbath affect your current worldview? And what kind of connection do you see to it in your concept of weakness?

MD The way Sabbath is connected to weakness is that the Sabbath day reminds us that we don't secure our own future, that God is the One who provides for our future. We take one day that we stop working for our future to remember that, so that the rest of the week, when we do our work, we remember it's God's work anyway.

I like that wonderful verse in Isaiah 26, "Lord, you will establish peace for us since you also have performed for us all our work." I really like that! We can know peace because we realize God did it all anyway if anything happens successfully through us.

As far as the worldview, I always say we ought to really employ Sabbath for the sake of the situation in Israel/Palestine because the Muslims would have their Sabbath on Friday, the Jews would have theirs on Saturday, and the Christians on Sunday—those Christians who are not Adventists—and among the three groups we could already have half the week when nobody would fight.

BD That's very good. What is your view of feminist theology?

MD Well, there's a whole range of feminist theologians. I sort of tease by calling some of them "the raging feminists" with whom I very much disagree because they are the ones who want to reject everything the Bible says about Jesus or using the name *Father* because they think it's patriarchal oppression and that sort of thing. I can't agree with that.

Recent Books by Marva Dawn

I'm Lonely, Lord—How Long? Meditations on the Psalms. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998.

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989.

Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001.

Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995.

A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999.

Truly the Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992.

Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

To Walk and Not Faint: A Month of Meditations on Isaiah 40. 2d ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997.

I'm quite biblically oriented and want to preserve the scriptural language, but there are feminist insights that I think are very important. One that theologians of the past have not paid enough attention to is feminine images for God that are used throughout the Bible, like the Hebrew noun *racham*, which means "compassion." That actually derives from the root meaning "womb," so it's talking about a relationship of mother and baby as far as the kind of compassion that God has for people. Isaiah uses that word a lot.

I think those kinds of insights are very important. The way Jesus treated women is extremely important. The fact that a woman was the first one to announce the resurrection is very important. So those kinds of insights I am very glad that some feminist scholars have brought these to the attention of the world. But I pick and choose quite carefully with the feminist

theologians, I value them on the basis of how biblical they are.

A lot of theologians have chips on their shoulders. They're out to prove that women can do things. I don't think that's a good reason for anybody to do anything. We don't do what we do to prove that women can this. We do what we can because God has called us, and equipped us, and trained us, and given us skills and the authentication of the community that values what we do.

BD Are you ordained?

MD Purposely not.

BD Why not?

MD Because I'm trying to help Christians recognize the priesthood of all believers. I'm trying to help people recognize that every single occupation is a place for mission. That seems to suit better the kind of work I do.

BD Thank you.