

A few highlights from *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*, by Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

(Page numbers will be followed by quotations from the book.)

1 – To worship the Lord is – in the world’s eyes – a waste of time. It is, indeed, a *royal* waste of time, but a waste nonetheless. By engaging in it, we don’t accomplish anything useful in our society’s terms.

Worship ought not to be construed in a utilitarian way. Its purpose is not to gain numbers for our churches to be seen as successful. Rather, the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it.

11 – “A Royal Waste of Time” intends to counteract the current push for worship to be the means by which people are attracted to God. Of course, people will be attracted when we worship well, but if we make such *appeal* the focus of worship, then *God* will no longer be. Worship is idolatry unless it is a total waste of time in earthly terms, a total immersion in the eternity of God’s infinite splendor for the sole purpose of honoring God.

27 – [on worship as a response to postmodernism] What good news it is for those searching for connections to hear that they are part of a wonderful history of grace, a genuine meta-narrative (see chapter 4) of a promising God who always keeps his promises! Our worship is a practicing of our history by a people who remember, and this master story (of which we declare some of the parts each week) gives us, over time, a frame of reference in which to understand ourselves and to know more profoundly the splendor of God’s presence in our worship and lives.

55 – The Christian community, to be genuine gift to the postmodern world, must deliberately be an alternative society of trust and embodied faithfulness to our story and its God. Rather than becoming enculturated and entrapped by the world’s values of materialistic consumerism, of narcissistic self-aggrandizement, of solitary superficiality, and of ephemeral satisfaction, members of Christ’s Body must be Church by choosing his simple life of sharing, his willingness to suffer for the sake of others, his communal vulnerability, and his eternal purposes. Leaders in the Christian community must constantly equip parishioners for the mission and ministry of communicating the Christian meta-narrative, of enfolding the world around them in God’s love, of deliberately choosing and living out the alternative values of the kingdom of God.

88-89 – If the Christ we follow sent out his disciples with no extra possessions (Luke 9:1-6 and 10:1-12) and warned would-be devotees that he had nowhere to lay his head (see Luke 9:57-62), then we must recognize that it is extremely difficult to live in a Christian way in a consumer culture. Furthermore, we have to ask if it is really possible to have genuinely *Christian* worship in such a culture – characterized as our society is by individualism (rather than biblical community), consumption (as opposed to generosity and sharing), manipulative advertising (instead of truth), and intentional fomenting of desires (in contrast to the scriptural recognition that human desires often derive from our sinful nature and must, therefore, be frequently held in check).

97-98 – [quoting Philip Rieff] Since consumers are “schooled in insatiability,” they can never be satisfied. Since their makeup consists “basically of unmet needs that can be requited by commodified goods and experiences,” they “should think first and foremost of [themselves] and meeting [their] felt needs.” They are taught that the highest value is “freedom, defined as a vast array of choices.” Consequently, “One of the most striking ways we are trained and reinforced in the consumptive way of life is exactly through a flood of ever-proliferating choices.”

This is exactly why I believe unremittingly that it is *utterly dangerous for churches to offer choices of worship styles*. By doing so we reinforce the idolatrous way of life that worship is intended to expose, disarm, and conquer.

103 – We dare not let worship be just another consumer item for which people shop.

121 – It is crucial for us to comprehend that arguments about appealing to unbelievers by means of a particular style of worship betray a serious confusion between worship and evangelism, to the severe detriment of both.

131 – We might attract lots of consumers if our worship services are merely entertaining, but, unless we continually increase the emotional hype, we cannot expect consumers not to turn away to other diversions when the difficulties of being a Christian surface – or else we merely continue contributing to their shallowness.

149-50 – There are five main reasons why I seem to be advocating traditionalism, but actually am not – and they all connect directly to the problem of keeping God as the Center. The first reason is that I speak strongly against those who throw out the traditions without understanding them. But I am equally opposed to those who cling to the traditions without understanding them. The issue is not the traditions themselves, but the problem that many don't bother to learn why the Church has worshiped with certain forms for hundreds of years. And the major value of those forms is that they are enormously God-centered. . . .

The second cause for my seeming to be a traditionalist is that I urgently warn churches not to sacrifice substance for style – but that does not mean that I am opposed to contemporary forms and styles of music. The question is not which style is better, since both new and old genres can contain faithful words. The issue is whether we are choosing a particular piece of music for its content or simply because we want a certain style. Many congregations are jumping too easily to the fad of “contemporary” services simply because that is what sells these days without serious questioning of why a church should do so.

154-55 – In all of this I am not rejecting new styles and forms for worship. I am only rejecting the false questions. Style is not the issue. The genuine worship of GOD is.

189-91 – [several arguments here against splitting into “traditional” and “contemporary” services] 1. If we set up different kinds of worship at different times, this fosters the “vendors/consumers” disposition and promotes the notion of marketing religion. It is difficult enough . . . to avoid the consumerism of our culture. Causing people to shop for the musical style they prefer makes it even less possible to wean them from this mentality.

2. The division into a “traditional” and a “contemporary” service is destructive to community because these terms are so poorly defined and the result is a narrowing of the community's appreciation. Which tradition do we mean? . . . Similarly, what is meant by contemporary? . . . Do we mean choruses from Taizé, pop songs, or the esoteric music of contemporary composer Krzysztof Penderecki? . . . Congregations are limiting themselves to two kinds of sounds instead of recognizing that there are hundreds – and that almost all of them could be helpful in revealing the splendor of God.

3. . . . Older music, written in eras that were more objective in orientation, most often stresses content, whereas new music is frequently more directed to loving God. Both are needed, so they ought not to be separated.

5. When congregations divide the Body into a “traditional” and a “contemporary” service, this often separates the old from the young according their preference for what they know. The result is that young families no longer worship next to those more experienced in the faith who could be mentors to them – and the old are bereft of the vitality of the young.

14. . . . certain styles of worship services almost inevitably entail the problem of a star clergy and cult of personality, which are inimical to the biblical picture of Christian community in which all gifts are equally important for the Body. The last place in which anybody ought to be famous is in the Church.

15. It is important to learn to sing songs I might not like for the sake of the community. Notice that I did not say “songs that are of questionable theology” or “songs with little musical merit.” But if tunes are interesting and singable and if the words are theologically sound, then a Christian should be willing to sing it for the sake of brothers and sisters for whom it might be especially useful spiritually. . . . By such willingness the whole community learns to appreciate a wider diversity of musical styles for the sake of caring for each other in the Body.

256-57 – Just as worship needs to be filled with details so that young people get a larger, more interesting view of God’s splendor, so worship needs to be filled with reasons for them to be there. We have all heard the plaintive cry from kids, “Why do I *have to go* to church?” Here are some answers that I give them:

1. We’re not *going to church*; YOU *are* the Church – and we go to worship so that we learn how to be Church.
2. We need you with us in worship because those who are old and tired need your smiles and vitality.
3. The congregation cannot get along without you. Just as your body needs every single part – like your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your hands and feet – so the church needs every single person to make it whole. Perhaps this Sunday some persons will need you to be eyes or hands for them.
4. You need the gifts of worship because you will learn things there that will make sense later. Almost every week I learn something that comes up in the days that follow.
5. If you pay close attention to the words of the songs and the Scripture readings and the liturgy, you will learn all kinds of new things about God. Since God is infinitely incomprehensible, all of life is an adventure in getting to know him better, but worship is especially rich with his presence.
6. Attending worship will teach you skills for your Christian life – skills like how to pray, how to sing, how to sit quietly in God’s presence, how to study the Bible.
7. I need you to come to worship because I have cancer and am taking chemotherapy, which makes me too sick to sing, so I need you to stand beside me and sing for the both of us. . . .
8. The congregation needs the talents you bring to worship – your singing voice in the hymns, your ability to learn new songs quickly, your ability to read the Scripture lessons well, your help with the ushering, your warmth and friendliness in the “Passing of the Peace,” the answers you give during the children’s sermon, your modeling of reverence for the other children. (This point makes us realize how much more all our churches need to do to engage the children more practically in the actions of worship.)
9. When I preach, I need to watch you to see if what I am saying is understandable to people your age. I need you to give me critiques when the worship service is over.
10. Most important, God needs you there because he loves to be with you in his house.

302-13 – [This chapter discusses criteria for the evaluation of music. Below are the questions Dawn suggests we ask, each of which is explained in detail in the book.]

1. What is appropriate for displaying the character and interventions of God?
2. Are these lines appropriately written?
3. Is this music appropriately written? [i.e., are we giving God our best?]
4. Are the music and text appropriately coherent?
5. What is appropriate for forming the character of the followers of Christ?
6. What is appropriate for developing a sense of the Church catholic?
7. What is appropriate for building community in this place?

8. What is appropriate for the level of the congregation's ability to participate?
9. What is appropriate for including more of the gifts of the people in the worship space and time?
10. What is appropriate for envisioning the reign of God with all its truth, beauty, and goodness?
11. What is appropriate to create a missional activity?
12. What is appropriate for the level of pain in the world?
13. What is appropriate for this time in the Church year?
14. What is appropriate for the texts of the day?
15. What is appropriate for this place in the worship service?
16. What is appropriate to evoke the recognition that we need more, to create a hunger and thirst for worship again next week?

[Note: These excerpts are provided to give you a sense of the arguments made in the book, but they are obviously very selective. Please don't rely too heavily on these excerpts in assessing Dawn's thesis positively or negatively, but check out the complete explanation in her book.]