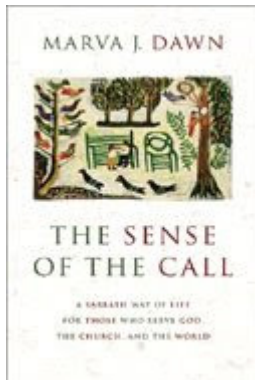


Review: The Sense of the Call



One of the reviews on the back cover of Marva Dawn's *The Sense of the Call* declares "What a holy oddity Marva Dawn is." I would have to agree. I found this book intriguing, beguiling, annoying, insightful and stimulating – sometimes all at the same time.

The subtitle of the book is "A sabbath way of life for those who serve God, the church, and the world." And so, on the front cover, you have these two key words – "call" and "sabbath" – which become the substance of the inside of the book.

The underlying link that Dawn wants to draw between "call" and "sabbath" is not always clear, but it rests in an understanding of the Kingdom of God. Sabbath pertains to the ultimate rest of our souls in Christ and so is integral to living life within the Kingdom of God to which and in which we are called to activity and purpose in life. Dawn unpacks her intention for the book:

"For us to experience the fullness of God's well-being in the midst of the rigors of our work, we who seek to serve the Church and the world constantly need a profound sense of our call. In a nutshell, the sense of our call is that God's Kingdom reclaims us, revitalizes us, and renews us and thus reigns through us before others, on behalf of others, sometimes in spite of others, and always with others... When we grasp this sense of our call, we are set free for a Sabbath way of life: a profound resting in the Kingdom's grace instead of perpetual struggle to "do our work"; an endless ceasing, by grace, of those attitudes and actions and attachments that hinder the Kingdom's reign; an exuberant feasting that radiates the Kingdom's grace-full splendor; an

ardent embracing of the Kingdom's gracious purposes."
(pp13-14)

It is difficult to critique Marva's basic framework – it is not only carefully thought-through and deliberately articulated, it is obviously contained within a gospel premise and the uniqueness of Christ for salvation. Sometimes she is hard to grasp – I still don't quite know exactly what she means by even the four section headings of "resting," "ceasing," "feasting," and "embracing." Sometimes her opinions on various experiences in the world (particularly with regard to frustrations with technology etc.) reflects her own perspective more than universal truth. Yet this thoroughly experiential, practical, spiritual, liturgical, contemplative book is well grounded and useful.

Indeed, this book is immensely practical. I found reading it to be an experience that was full of little "convictions" prodding my attitudes and actions and routines with quiet whispers of "does this match what you believe?" When I read a book and something strikes me I often make a note of it inside the front cover – in this book my notes have spilled over on to the title page.

I would recommend this book to any Christian – although I would probably qualify that by saying any Christian who is *serious* about serving God in "the church and the world." Without that inner motivation this book would be some nice thoughts, with that inner motivation this book does a prophetic task – speaking truth in ways that bug you till you take stock and consider not just the truth, but its application in all of life.

Perhaps the best way to communicate an overview of this book is to share some of these gems and give you a taste of this well-rounded meal that Marva Dawn offers to Christians who wish to live like they are just that – Christians.

With regard to patience:

“That is why we need utmost patience – or perhaps we should resurrect the old rendering, “long-suffering.” It will cost us loads of long hours, myriads of conversations, scads of sorrow, masses of disappointment and frustrations to engage people in the instruction and mission of the Kingdom. The only thing that makes it worth the bother is that the Kingdom is the only treasure worth having.” (p18)

With regard to being spiritual (I recently stole this concept for use in a sermon series on Ephesians 1):

“I use the word spiritual... not as it is usually used in English to denote some nebulous entity, some obscure dimension of us beyond the material. If we think of every aspect in our connection to God who is Spirit, as the whole spiritual sweep of our lives, then the term spiritual encompasses everything, for all of us relates to God – intelligence, attitudes, talents, affections, body, actions, our whole being.” (p40)

With regard to our direction in life:

“It is a beautiful mystery that we never quite know in what directions we might be led as we embrace our call... Mother Teresa was once asked about her summons to care for the needy, and she responded that she was not called to serve the poor. She insisted that she was simply called to follow Jesus and that’s where He led her.” (p65)

The point of church:

“...it is crucial that we keep remembering that the Church’s true work is not therapy. We have trouble recalling that because our society’s excessive consumerism is rooted in the significant turn that Philip Rieff documented in his well-

known aphorism, "Religious man was born to be saved, [contemporary] psychological man is born to be pleased." In other words, culturally, we have turned away from knowing that we are sinners who need a Rescuer from beyond ourselves to believing that we should be made comfortable and happy. We can see the effects of this societal expectation in those who complain that a worship service did not "uplift them." Wouldn't it surprise them to be reminded that its purpose is to kill them so that they can be resurrected into an entirely new creation?" (p132)

About the joy of adversity:

"Somewhere I heard the quotation, "You can acquire anything in solitude except character." We need the whole community to test us, to refine us, to enable us to develop aspects of character including strength, kindness, and wisdom that we cannot gain without trials. We all need critics and rebukers, malcontents and misfits – even if (especially if?) these cause us pain – so that our feasting is virtuous and honorable." (p219)

About community as a vehicle of evangelism (a concept that we've considered a lot at Connections):

"...What if churches recognized that the major means for evangelism in the early Church was the remarkable unity existing among individual members in the community of saints and the harmony between what they believed and what they lived? In other words, they were a Body of people demonstrating an alternative/biblical manner of being." (p236)

And finally, on the slowness of ministry (something all church planters should consider):

"Many people want to do ministry in a grand, glamorous way.

But the work of spreading the gospel happens with continued, often hidden engagement over the long haul. We can't nurture faith or live it in the world in one dramatic quick fix of heroism; it is more like a long pregnancy (sometimes years long

!) till Christ is birthed in others (see Gal. 4:19-20)."
(p257)

