

Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernaciling of God, by Marva J. Dawn

reviewed by [William Brosend](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

Marva Dawn's book is summed up by its title. Dawn opposes power, embraces weakness and fears that the church's embrace of power and fear of weakness has resulted in allowing all too little space in which God may tabernacle.

The book is based on Dawn's 2000 Schaff Lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Both the lectures and the book seem to have grown out of her 1992 Notre Dame Ph.D. dissertation on the concept of "the principalities and powers" in the works of Jacques Ellul. Dawn begins by criticizing the "feebleness" of Walter Wink's "theology of the powers." She argues that "Wink is wrong to reduce the powers in such a way that we do not recognize that they are indeed creatures, with a life and integrity of their own." Yet Dawn does not offer her own definition of "power" or "the powers"--a curious omission--nor does she explain how we are to understand powers as "creatures with a life and integrity of their own."

Her second chapter offers a series of short word studies of New Testament terms--*dunamis* (power), *teleo/teleioo* (end/complete), *skene* (tabernacle)--and a paraphrased sampling of verses from various New Testament books, designed to show that "a theology of weakness pervades the New Testament." She then argues that the church, and especially church leaders, choose the "fallen" ways and means of the world rather than the "seven practices" modeled by the early church in Acts 2:42-47 (teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, signs and wonders, economic redistribution, worship).

Her book concludes with an exploration of what the church should be, grounded in a reading of the "whole armor of God" in Ephesians 6:10-17. Here the practices are less clearly prescribed by the biblical organizing principle, and the correlations are less obvious. For example, under the "breastplate of righteousness/justice" Dawn

calls for reclaiming the practice of hospitality in ways that emerge from our weakness, not our power, and for advocating justice for crime victims as well as criminal offenders and ex-offenders. In the section on the "shield of faith" Dawn illustrates "Messianic faithfulness" as "consistently opposing violence in all its forms," which is nothing less than "God's method for building shalom in the world"--an illustration in tension with her earlier criticism of Wink for "reduc[ing] the powers to the problems of violence," when "the way of Jesus is much more than nonviolence."

Dawn's argument is that churches, by "following the methods of the culture around them," act as "fallen powers" and must recover a "theology of weakness" wherein "by our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses, we display God's glory." The thesis is compelling; her development of it often is not. She criticizes Wink for failing to "distinguish adequately between various terms" in his 56-page examination of "specific, key New Testament passages" in *Unmasking the Powers*. But her own examination devotes little more than a paragraph to "power," a paragraph more noteworthy for its errors than its insights. For example, Dawn claims that Matthew and Mark use the noun *dunamis* only "in phrases ascribing power to God and in connection with the right hand of power." This ignores, among other texts, Matthew. 25:15 and Mark 5:30, 6:5, 9:39. She also gives no consideration to the important noun *exousia*, "authority."

Dawn's discussion of weakness (*astheneia*) ignores Paul's rhetorical strategies in his various uses of the term and theme, while the book-by-book summary of "other biblical texts on weakness" offers questionable translations. For example, 1 John 1:8 is rendered as "We deceive ourselves if we think we aren't weak with sin." Dawn has inserted into the text the very term she seeks. And her decisions about what constitutes examples of "weakness" are arguable. Why, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:4 is the fact that the "saints have been steadfast and faithful in the midst of persecutions and afflictions" emblematic of weakness?

Perhaps these problems are the unavoidable result of transforming an oral performance into a written one: an audience of readers, accustomed to exploring footnotes and cross-checking references, has a different standard of demonstration than an audience of listeners. Not that the book lacks citations, references and footnotes. In fact, the preponderance of quotations, which make up more than 30 percent of the text, is possibly the book's greatest flaw--too much Ellul and others, not enough Dawn. The few autobiographical statements suggest that Dawn has a

compelling personal theology of weakness to share. More of that and less of other authors would have enhanced her argument.