

She Tells It Like It Is

Nobody accuses Juanita Bynum of beating around the bush. Not afraid to confront, she aims for the heart and bluntly calls the church to repentance.

As Juanita Bynum reaches for her microphone, a jam-packed audience at Trinity Broadcasting Network's Atlanta studio stands in anticipation. They've come to hear one of the most sought-after preachers in the country, a woman who is usually introduced with the imposing title of "prophetess."

Dressed in her signature preaching garb—a black blazer and a full-length black skirt—the speaker for the hour tells worshipers: "Let's give God some glory." A rumble of praise erupts, signifying the start of a service filled with prophetic utterances from this 44-year-old former flight attendant who, some say, resembles gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.

"If God has done anything for you, you ought to praise Him!" Bynum shouts.

Subtle hand gestures between her and a TV-crew member indicate a slight problem with her earpiece, but technical difficulties don't stop Bynum. Tonight, as usual, she will tell it like it is.

She's real. She's hard-core. She's not afraid to call preachers and pew-sitters alike to repentance.

Her high-volume oratory is hot enough to fry sacred cows. She doesn't back away from controversial topics—including the presence of immorality in churches.

With Bynum, audiences might as well stick their feet out when she first approaches the podium. Toes will be stepped on.

“There’s no pretense in her messages. She tells the truth,” says Leonie Chandersingh, who lives in Orlando, Florida, and watches Bynum’s preaching on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

Bynum cuts to the core when she ministers, and people love it. Over the years, millions have watched her on television and hundreds of thousands have scurried to conferences, revivals and churches to hear her.

It’s Bynum’s confrontational preaching that has opened huge doors for her to minister. She spoke before a crowd of more than 80,000 women at the 1999 Woman, Thou Art Loosed! Conference sponsored by Bishop T.D. Jakes. She receives thousands of preaching invitations a year.

Her No More Sheets book—a message about sexual purity drawn from bits and pieces of Bynum’s personal life—sold big numbers after its release in 1998. Matters of the Heart arrived in bookstores October 2002 and sold more than 300,000 copies in nine months.

The book, which addresses the sinful condition of the human heart and how God wants to give every person—who will accept it—a new heart, skyrocketed to No. 1 on Christian Retailing magazine’s Top 100 Books list.

That positioned her with respected authors, including Bruce Wilkinson and Stormie Omartian. And at times Matters of the

Heart competed with California pastor Rick Warren's megaseller, *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

"It's much more of an appreciation than an attraction," says Bynum of the popularity of her message. "I think people are getting a little bored with the praise team, the preacher and the choir."

A Reality Gospel

Bynum can preach so well that people often swoon before she's finished with a sermon. However, it is not as much her loud-volume shouting as her transparency and vulnerability that have endeared her to audiences.

Her Pentecostal style is due in part to men and women who influenced her while she was growing up in Chicago. Her most lasting impression of ministry came from the God-fearing home where she grew up with her sisters, Janice, Kathy and Regina, and her brother, Thomas. She smiles when she reminisces about her childhood and the simple life she lived.

"My sisters and my brother and I would eat mayonnaise sandwiches and drink Kool-Aid," she recalls. "We had fried chicken on Sundays. And I mean every Sunday."

Even as a child Bynum felt pulled toward evangelism. "When we were children, we pretended to be every profession. I was always the evangelist," she says.

It was Bynum's parents, Thomas and Katherine, who planted seeds of the gospel in their children's lives. The Bynums made

certain their children went to Sunday school and church faithfully—at St. Luke Church of God in Christ. There were times when her mother would interrupt Bynum's playtime to make her sit quietly so she could learn to hear the voice of the Lord.

Bynum recalls how others who attended her childhood church inspired her. "I remember when the evangelist spoke, it was with the authority of God," she says. Today, Bynum speaks with the same authority—an ironic thing indeed considering that the denomination in which she found the Lord as a child still does not ordain women as pastors.

Bynum has never let gender prejudice—or anything else—stop her from fulfilling her mission. But she did not go into the ministry without some serious detours. She admits that during her early adult years she experienced the worst the world has to offer.

That included a brief failed marriage. But when she decided to get her life right with God during the 1980s, she heard charismatic Bible teacher Joyce Meyer on the radio. Meyer's preaching inspired Bynum to leave her messy past behind. She began to pursue God with passion.

Today, when she gets started in the pulpit, those who are listening are no doubt headed for a confrontation with the Holy Ghost. "When people come to hear me speak, I do not sugarcoat the gospel. I speak the truth because situations in life are real," Bynum says. Her sermons confront everything from pride to lust to fiscal irresponsibility.

"God is sending stuff to purify you. It's not about what they

did; it's about how you responded," Bynum told worshipers at pastor Rod Parsley's Dominion Camp Meeting in Columbus, Ohio. "We have too many racehorses in the church. You can win races, but we always got to rub you down and pat your coat and say how wonderful you are. Go somewhere and die—to your flesh!"

Although the crowd usually shouts "Amen!" in response to her teaching, Bynum is looking for a deeper response. She wants people to change inwardly.

They often do change, mostly because they connect with Bynum as soon as she steps into the pulpit. Her defiant demeanor and the I-mean-business look on her face catches people off-guard. And her sermons are peppered with what some people call "Bynumese," snappy words and zinger phrases she uses to grab an audience's attention.

Black women, especially, find empowerment in Bynum's brash message and diva attitude. Essence magazine, a secular publication with 7.6 million readers, most of whom are African American women, published a feature article on Bynum in May 2001 because her message on sexual wholeness "connected with the sisters."

In Bynum, these women see someone from their world who has overcome every cultural barrier they face: She's financially successful, she's not controlled by the black religious establishment, and she's boldly telling both men and women to live holy. Her popularity has enabled her to rise above many barriers of race, class or gender.

Reality Check

Bynum's star began to shine in the 1990s. She was traveling extensively, conducting revivals and preaching for large ministries. She launched her own TV program, Morning Glory, which aired in cities around the country. But the preacher who was known for her straight talk was shocked when God told her she needed "a new heart."

In her best-selling book *Matters of the Heart* (Charisma House), Bynum wrote openly about her challenges. "God said, 'Let Me show you some little things ... ' He started surfacing things about my personality, things I had reasoned were 'just me'—but really, they were errors in my heart. He said: 'The sad thing is, you are so far away from Me. You are nowhere near Me, though you think that you are.'"

God's correction, Bynum says, occurred after she sponsored a conference in 2000. When 7,000 people showed up for an event that was slated for 10,000 attendees, she considered the meeting unsuccessful. The Holy Spirit showed her that He cares more about meeting people's needs than about numbers.

Bynum says those days are behind her now. But out of her trials came another sermon, a song and a book, all of which define her as a changed person in Christ. Maybe that is why she has learned to deal with the pain and bruises of ministry without allowing bitterness or resentment to take root in her heart.

She says she has no "spiritual scar tissue" from her challenges in ministry. Bynum only wants to grow from her experiences.

Bynum knows there is a price to being a preacher of the

gospel—and she has had her share of criticism from those who don't like her theology or the glass-shattering volume of her preaching voice.

"I don't care that people criticize me," she says. "I take no stock in opinion; I only take stock in what the Lord thinks of me. You can only be drawn to those you have been called to. People have told me, 'I have criticized you for years, but I heard a message that you preached and it blessed my life.'"

Perhaps that is why Bynum and Thomas Wesley Weeks III decided to keep their July 21, 2002, wedding a secret until they announced it in October during a TV interview on TBN. Because Bynum is a well-known minister, the couple opted for a quiet wedding day.

Bynum says their special day was private and intimate. But in April, the two publicly exchanged their vows before 900 family members and friends during a lavish ceremony in a New York City hotel on Wall Street. Weeks, a third generation bishop, is the pastor of New Destiny Cyber Center Church in Washington, D.C.

Though Bynum wears many hats in ministry, it is probably her call to the office of prophet that has opened doors for her to minister both nationally and internationally.

But unlike some modern-day prophets in the charismatic arena, Bynum doesn't spend much time prophesying nice, pleasant messages.

In fact, she considers her ministry to be, at times, "a rebuke to the body of Christ." She knows that it is the Holy Spirit

who convicts people of sin. She has seen Him “cut and heal people all at the same time.”

What is God saying to this prophet? Bynum told Charisma that the Lord is telling her that we are in a season of revival. Bynum says: “Whenever you see war going on, it’s time for revival. It’s time for the body of Christ to wake up to its responsibilities. Souls will be saved.”

She insists that God is no respecter of persons. He uses her because He sees her heart; the same heart He had to purify before giving her a higher level of prominence in ministry, she says. As a result, she hears God’s voice and responds to it prophetically. Her mandate from God is clear: Speak the truth.

That is why Parsley invites Bynum to minister at his church regularly. He wants people to be changed by the power of the Spirit through the Word. “Prophetess Bynum has as strong and clear of a prophetic voice as I have witnessed in 25 years of ministry,” Parsley told Charisma. “She continues to make a call to the church to be restored, sanctified and purified—these three things must happen in order for the church to fulfill the Great Commission.”

But it is not just megachurch pastors who feel this way. Thousands of regular churchgoers feel the same. Valli Manley, from Bronx, New York, says Bynum ministered to her in a revival meeting nearly 10 years ago. “What she spoke came to pass. Down through the years, I would encourage myself with her words,” Manley says.

Bynum is careful about where she ministers. After praying over

her invitations, she determines what it is that a pastor expects of her. If a church invites her to a celebration service, such as an anniversary, and Bynum is going through a time of personal purification, she will either postpone or decline the offer.

“The two don’t match,” she says.

It is impossible for Bynum to accept every invitation that comes across her desk, but those who follow her had an opportunity to hear her preach at the Weapons of Power conference held in St. Louis in August. Her annual event grew from 7,000 attendees in 2001 in Pensacola, Florida, to 24,000 in Tampa in 2002. This year, Bynum scratched the word women from the title of the conference because she knows (and so does anyone who has heard her) that her message is for men and women.

Everyone from R&B singer Mary J. Blige to elderly grandmothers to Christian men in leadership want to hear Bynum preach in her characteristic no-nonsense style. How is it that an African American woman is one of the most sought-after preachers in the United States today? Bynum says the church can no longer let gender be a barrier to ministry.

“It is the Spirit of God who brings about equality, not the flesh,” she says. In her view, the term “women in ministry” is no longer synonymous with being an usher or serving communion. Women’s roles in the church have expanded to preaching, teaching, prophesying and to other areas.

Evidence of this is reflected in the many women whose ministries were birthed from Bynum’s mentoring program. Some

of the women who enrolled in the two-year course are now in full-time ministry. Others make up the 16-person staff of Juanita Bynum Ministries, which has offices in Waycross, Georgia, and in Queens, New York, at Bynum's home church.

Whether she's standing on stage at the Georgia Dome or staring into the lens of a TV camera, Bynum preaches truth.

"People no longer want to live in a fictitious world," Bynum says. "Things are too real for them. Problems are real, and that is the reality that we live in."

And Bynum plans to keep her message real. Doing the work of the Lord isn't just a calling for a woman who spent her childhood pretending to be an evangelist. It's now a mandate from God.

SPECIAL MOMENTS

A Cinderella Wedding

Juanita Bynum got a childhood wish when she was married in front of 900 guests.

Driving through any of the five boroughs of New York City during rush hour can take its toll on most motorists. But heavy traffic didn't stop guests en route to the palatial Regent Wall Street Hotel on April 17. They were determined to

attend what had been unofficially billed as “the wedding of the century.”

Ladies and gentlemen, meet prophetess Juanita Bynum and Bishop Thomas Wesley Weeks III.

On that chilly, overcast spring day, about 900 guests—including relatives, close friends and a quorum of Christian celebrities—shuffled through the revolving doors of the hotel’s grand ballroom. What awaited them on the other side resembled Paris in April: gurgling fountains, a 10-piece orchestra, lots of soft candlelight, and the aroma of roses, calla lilies and cymbidium.

In the midst of this fantasyland, the bride appeared—wearing a platinum-colored satin gown designed by Tony Coralle and Peter Abony. The bodice, which was covered in Swarovski crystals, blossomed into a full skirt with floral embroidery trimmed in even more crystals. The 50-foot train, which reversed to a deeper shade of platinum, nearly covered the 200-foot aisle that Bynum walked down arm-in-arm with her father, Thomas Bynum.

“As a young girl, I dreamed of having a beautiful wedding,” Bynum told Charisma.

She got her wish.

“Prophetess Bynum looked like a 21st century princess prepared for a royal coronation,” said Joyce Rodgers, an evangelist with the Church of God in Christ, who traveled from Texas to attend the wedding. Other guests included Texas televangelist John Hagee, who assisted with the ceremony, and an eight-

member camera crew from the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

The wedding party was huge, with more than 80 men, women and children participating. Bynum's bridesmaids lit up the processional wearing shimmering pink dusters with rhinestone buttons. Bynum and her dressmakers created the two-piece ensembles especially for the occasion.

"Juanita's wedding was fit for a queen," one guest from Chicago said.

It also required a queen's budget, no doubt, but Bynum left room for some reminders of her humble beginnings. Guests dined on chicken, macaroni and cheese, and an eight-tier wedding cake. Since this was a Pentecostal wedding, there was no alcohol.

Bynum's pastor, John Boyd Sr. of Brooklyn, New York, officiated the ceremony, while Hagee instructed the couple in the meaning of covenant. The groom's father, Bishop Thomas Weeks Sr., pastor of New Deliverance Church in Baltimore, also participated in the ceremony.

Chaplain Jerry North of Milwaukee says the wedding was "one of the most spiritual, and naturally beautiful weddings that I've been to in my life." He was particularly impressed by the spontaneous outburst of praise and worship that occurred after Weeks and his bride exchanged vows.

Despite the grand scale of the wedding, Bynum and Weeks actually said "I do" in July 2002 but kept their marriage quiet until they announced it during a TV interview on TBN's

Praise the Lord program.

There was no fanfare the first time they said their vows last summer. Bynum wore a white sweatshirt, Weeks wore jeans, and he presented her with a \$36 ring. But at the official ceremony in April, Weeks gave Bynum a carat diamond ring—which was shown on TBN when a video of the ceremony was aired several times in May.

A Message for the Heart

Demand for Juanita Bynum's books is growing across the country.

Like a prophet from the backside of the desert, Juanita Bynum seemed to emerge from nowhere. But today she is everywhere.

She often hosts the Trinity Broadcasting Network's Praise the Lord program. She also has two worship recordings on the market.

But this tough-talking preacher is not content to stay inside the church walls. Today Bynum is infiltrating the mainstream marketplace, particularly through her new book.

Matters of the Heart can be found in airports, hotel gift shops and grocery stores. It was listed recently as a Top Ten inspirational title in Wal-Mart stores. WaldenBooks, a chain with 800 mall stores, selected it as a featured "Walden Picks"

in May.

Bynum sold 300,000 copies of the book in nine months, and it still hovers at the top of Christian sales charts. Dale Wilstermann, director of trade sales for Bynum's publisher, Charisma House, says one-third of the sales of *Matters of the Heart* have been outside traditional Christian stores.

"Bynum clearly is having an appeal in the broader marketplace," Wilstermann said.

It's obvious from the response to her conferences that Bynum's core market consists of black women—many of whom were hooked after the release of her first book, *No More Sheets* (1998). In it, she candidly admitted past failures and called women to sexual purity.

By talking so frankly about sex, Bynum won the hearts of millions of sisters who relate to her "listen to me, girlfriend" approach to faith. "I once had a problem with the same issues that Juanita preaches about," says one of Bynum's fans, Gwen Johnson of Nashville, Tennessee. "I'm glad God has raised up a voice who is not intimidated by the enemy."

In *Matters of the Heart*, Bynum takes a go-for-the-jugular approach, but this time it's not specifically aimed at a female audience. Bynum believes everyone—even the preacher—needs to examine his or her heart and respond to God with repentance.

Matters of the Heart has already been released in Spanish. And Bynum is working on additional book projects. *Matters of the Heart Devotions for Women*, which takes readers on a 40-day

journey, releases in November. Next spring, a children's book titled *A Heart for Jesus* will be aimed at kids ages 4 to 8.

Pat Matuszak, editor of the new CharismaKids line, says the book will reach the children of women who attend Bynum's conferences. "Our hope is that the women whose hearts have been touched by Juanita Bynum will find a wonderful way to draw their children into a relationship with Jesus," Matuszak says.

Also on the horizon is *My Father's Portion*, set to release next summer. It is designed to help Christians understand how the Holy Spirit's anointing works through appointed church leaders.

Says Bynum: "We've got to change our perspective toward the man and woman of God, or we will keep getting a message on Sunday instead of a word from God."

Vanessa Lowe Robinson is a freelance writer who lives in Queens, New York, with her husband, Jerome, and their two children.