

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS A PARTY

Picture yourself in Jerusalem amongst the thousands of feastgoers going up to Mount Zion. Once a year all the people of Israel were to bring a tenth of all their earnings to Jerusalem. Imagine it, a tenth of the whole country's income! And it wasn't to be used for mission work or for charity or even for the Temple. It was to be used for a **GIGANTIC PARTY!** - a wonderful celebration every year called the Feast of Tabernacles.

The celebration on Mount Zion was anything but a bore. There was lots of food and plenty to drink. There was dancing, singing and exuberant celebration everywhere. No wonder David when he was young could sing, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let's go up to the house of the Lord.'" What kid wouldn't be thrilled to go to a gigantic party? Not even a spoilt brat would have said, "I don't want to go! Church is boring!"

Everyone was invited to the party from widows who hadn't had a fun night out for a year to poor kids who couldn't have come up with the ticket for whatever might have been the ancient equivalent of Disneyland.

If you're wondering what all this partying was about - this annual party, which we still keep each year in the church, is all about the Kingdom of God or to use Mr Armstrong's words, the Wonderful World Tomorrow. It has been planned by God to be a foretaste of what he has in store for all of us when His kingdom comes in all of its fullness. I use the term "party" loosely in describing the Kingdom of God. The reason I use term party is because it springs to mind an immediate image to our minds, doesn't it? When we think of a good clean party we think of fun, excitement, good times and something to be really looked forward to and that's one of the many things God's kingdom will be.

The church as Mr Armstrong used to say is the Kingdom of God in embryo so the way we live now should be a foretaste and reflective of the way of life of the Wonderful World Tomorrow.

With that as background I want to illustrate one of those very simple but wonderful principles, an attitude of life, that when we live by it will greatly enhance our quality of life, and not only ours, but all those who we come in contact with. **That simple principle is to MAKE LIFE FUN FOR OTHERS!** Now I don't want to promote the misconception that we should be smiling and happy all the time but I do want to show us how we can all help make life fun for others in our families, at work and in our lives in general.

The way we live now is a powerful witness to the people of the world as to what God's way of life is all about. The way they view God's way can be either dull and boring or fun and fulfilling by the way we live our lives.

To start off with, let's look at the family. One of the purposes of the family is to provide each other's emotional needs and not only to share each other's burdens but also to share each other's joys and fun times. Though sadly, too many are not, the family should be a haven in a heartless world. In a world where people live on tiptoe as they play roles that require them to please people who may not like them, the family is supposed to be a setting in which they can relax and be themselves.

The joy of a family should be first above everything else in a family. The family should eat together if at all possible. Meal time should be an unhurried time of sharing together and learning from each other. I remember reading a story about a family in which each family member had an obligation to share something funny that happened during that day. When they got together at meal time they knew they were in for a good time. Meal time was party time at their house. Every family member was made to feel that their contribution was important.

Telling and re-telling the cute and funny things that have happened creates a sense of belonging and a sense of shared history. It is part of what makes people feel their importance in the family fun. I remember Ross Beath once asking the dads in the church when he gave a sermon on family unity, "Fathers, are you fun to be with?" The more your kids enjoy being with you, the closer the bond you'll create with your kids and the more willing they'll be willing to follow your example.

The book of Proverbs says, "The sweetness of lips increases learning" (Prov.16:21). We can say the same basic things to the same people and have two different results purely because of the way we package what we say. When we talk to others in our conversation or when we're teaching others, including our kids, we should try and make what we're saying as enjoyable as possible. If we make what we say interesting and fun to listen to people will enjoy it and learn from it more.

One thing I feel parents should do with their kids and we all should do with each other more is to dream together and talk more about the things we're looking forward to most about the World Tomorrow. When I'm feeling a bit down I like to read some of the exciting things I've got written about it and that always seems to lift my spirits. I feel that if a lot more young people in the church thought about it more and it was a lot more real to them and they were really excited and looking forward to it then they'd value what they had in the church a lot more. If they realise it's not automatic that they're going to be a resurrected God being with God's powers when the Kingdom comes soon then they'd probably make a lot more effort living God's way to the fullest and not just half-heartedly.

Caring and commitment are the pillars of every good marriage but the main reason why romance is so popular and talked about is because it's the fun part of marriage. Just like any of the ways to make life fun for others, to romance your

fiance, husband or wife takes thoughtfulness to find out what they like and consider fun and some creativity to come up with those ideas and follow through with them. All those little fun things that are special between two people can really help bond them much closer together.

When I use the term fun I don't just mean humour. Humour is a big part of it but fun can mean anything from light-hearted conversation to deep, meaningful conversation to talents we can share with others that they can enjoy.

A classic example of this fun loving attitude toward work is the example of a former president of one of America's top colleges. Each summer John Coleman would take a job as a garbo in a town where he was unknown. He brought something special to the job. He brought a colourful array of stories to tell his co-workers, he taught them how to sing on the job and he taught them clever ways of stirring those uppish people who treat garbos like trash. This college president-come-garbo taught his new friends how to make their work day into a party.

Even when imprisoned the early apostles were able to create a party atmosphere to the bafflement of their wardens and fellow prisoners when they prayed and sang praises to God. Undoubtedly this celebrative lifestyle was part of what made early Christianity so infectious.

Whatever the church may have gained or lost since then the loss of that joyful spontaneity and the loss of that first love can be ill afforded. It is a big part of providing what Jesus called "the abundant life".

After the blessings and victories which God had given Israel David led the people in a dance that may well have been a combination of break dancing, the jive and the bunny hop. 2 Samuel 6:16 talks about "King David leaping and dancing before the Lord." To put it in the vernacular David really got down and this is probably one of the reasons why God called him a man after my own heart.

This energizing joy that comes from God as one of the fruits of the spirit makes us into people who can't help share our laughter and fun. I remember reading about a couple of practical jokes one man likes to play on people in busy elevators. Both involve turning around and facing the people instead of the door as we're conditioned to do. When the elevator doors would close he'd say "Now I suppose you're all wondering why I called you here today?" just to break the ice and another time he mentions where he got into one of those express elevators at the World Trade Centre in New York with a whole bunch of sombre businessmen he smiled and said to them "We're going to be travelling together for quite a while you know. What do you say we all sing?" The reaction he got was wonderful. By the time they got to the 50th floor they were all laughing and singing "You are my sunshine." That was his way of giving them something and making their day.

A misconception that one can get from talking about the idea that the Kingdom of God is a party is that we should be smiling and happy all the time. There can be some who suggest we have no right to be sorrowful which is rubbish. There's a balance to be found in everything. Christians are allowed to cry. Indeed the sensitivities that come from caring for others make us prone to tears and feeling the hurts of others. What is different about our sorrow is it doesn't lead us to despair as those who don't have hope. We should empathise for what others go through but also we should be positive and help others enjoy life to the max and make the most of it.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher, understood well the notion that the joyfulness and celebration that go with a good party are usually traits inherent in the partygoers own personality. Partying, as Kierkegaard points out, can be an attitude toward life that one carries into the work place and which transforms that setting into something that tastes of the Kingdom of God.

In describing what an ideal Christian is like, he presents a person whom he calls "The Knight of Faith". This man, says Kierkegaard, looks like a "tax collector". There is nothing special about him. As he comes home from work, he thinks of the cherry pie his wife has baked for him and how much he will enjoy it. With deep appreciation he breathes the air. He experiences everything that an ordinary person might experience, but he does so in an extraordinary way. The Knight of Faith is resigned to whatever life might bring. With childlike anticipation, he smiles benevolently at the world and accepts its wonder. He lives with a sense of gratitude and this makes him a man to be envied.

There is a time to be sober and a time to have fun and there is a time to work and a time to play but wherever we are if we take on the attitude of making life fun for others we point beyond these limited signs of the Kingdom to the great party that is on the way.