

Party at My Church

A Biblical Metaphor for Worship Services

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Church should be a party!

When we started Fellowship of the Parks, I had what I would call (for lack of a better phrase), a biblical vision for what our worship services should be: a party.

Before this, most of my life experience had led me to believe that church was an event that you attended to sit quietly and listen as a distant and removed speaker addressed a large gathering of well-dressed people. Church was to be experienced by silent spectators. The occasion was formal, and you would dress and speak appropriately. In such an environment, there may even be a guest of honor. One might hope to shake hands and make some small talk with this special individual, but one would not necessarily expect to build a relationship with the guest of honor. The prominent person may say something moving to inspire listeners with a well-delivered speech or a moving story. However, the connection would be somewhat distant. Priority was given to manners, titles, and a sense of reverence for the guest of honor.

When I was in seminary, I had an opportunity to hear the President of the United States deliver a live speech in Dallas. Someone who had connections with the right people invited me. I wore my best (and only) suit at the time. I made sure I was presentable and tried to ensure that I would not embarrass either my friend or myself. It was a tremendous event in a formal sort of way. It was exciting to be near such an important person. However, I did not get to shake the President's hand, and I honestly can't remember much of anything that he said in his speech. What I do remember was that there were a lot of "good" people in the room that were formally and figuratively patting each other on the back as various people railed against the political opposition.

In an odd sort of way, it reminded me of church - at least the way I perceived church.

When I read the calling and immediate aftermath of Levi the Tax Collector becoming Matthew the Disciple in Luke 5, I imagine a much different picture.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call righteous, but sinners to repentance." Luke 5:27-31

Levi the Tax Collector was a religious and social outcast. As a tax collector, he made his living by taxing the people more than had been required by the Roman Empire. The religious leaders despised him, and the majority of the people thought of him as a traitor and a thief. I would imagine it was very difficult for Levi to find people who did not hate him. I'm speculating here, but his closest friends were possibly willing to associate with him because he had money and a

small amount of power. I would suggest that he was receptive to Jesus' invitation to follow for two reasons: First, he knew the hollowness of his own life, and he needed something to change.

Second, Levi probably knew about Jesus. Stories had circulation, and Jesus had developed a reputation for connecting with common people; for connecting with social and religious outsiders. Outsiders like himself. He may have hoped that he would find some understanding and connection to his teacher/prophet, but he probably did not have the courage to initiate such an encounter. So, when Jesus approached Levi and invited him to follow, Levi did not hesitate to respond. Levi immediately repented. He abandoned his sin and his livelihood. In essence Levi abandoned everything - with one major exception: His FRIENDS.

Levi the Tax Collector transformed into Matthew the Disciple as he agreed to follow Jesus. The text implies that Matthew immediately designed, planned, and threw a party to honor Jesus - the guest of honor, so that his friends (other religious and social outsiders commonly referred to as "sinners") could meet and connect with Jesus.

When I really looked at the text, it became apparent to me that this was a picture of what church should be. Obviously, this was not what I had experienced so many times previously in church.

This gave me a whole new perspective. Church should not be a formal and boring type of event for a select few "good" or "appropriate" people. Instead it should be a place where disconnected people feel connected; where people become more intimate with a guest of honor who sees the potential in their lives. The party is thrown to honor the guest of honor, but the participants are shown the value that they are worthy of an invitation and hospitality.

The importance of this metaphor was strengthened in my convictions as I visited a church in Las Vegas. I slipped into the church service a bit late and sat down next to a person who was obviously struggling with his sexual identity. He was a middle-aged man who was either living as a cross dresser or had gone through some degree of changing his gender. I could not help but notice his face. This was not for the reason you might assume. I detected the obvious years of pain and struggle that projected from his sad, lonely eyes. Throughout the service, I would strain to discreetly watch his increasing participation in the worship. He exhibited a tremendous level of comfort. In fact, I was the only person in the room who even seemed to notice his presence as any other than completely normal. The church appeared to be very welcoming and hospitable. Great efforts were made to communicate to all types of people and, most of all, to honor Jesus.

Biblical truth was not compromised but communicated in love.

Other attendees in the congregation seemed to have no discomfort in greeting and even shaking the hand of this person. As the worship continued, I noticed tears streaming down his face. During the pastor's clear and relevant message, this person seemed to listen intently: reflecting, laughing at humor in the service, and once again allowing the tears to silently flow down his/her cheeks. At the end of the service, the man responded by making a courageous decision to discreetly seek prayer and talk with a minister in a hospitality room after the service. I slowly followed to watch from a distance. I know this sounds creepy, but I wanted to see how the minister would respond. He reached out with a smile and an appropriate embrace. Though I could not hear or know the aftermath, I could not help but swallow hard and struggle to hold back tears of joy as I was convinced of the grace, mercy and love of God. I will never forget the love and hospitality that the church showed by the great party they threw for Jesus and how they connected their guests to Him.

Jesus is Jesus, the guest of honor. We do church for the primary purpose of worshiping God - who is revealed through Jesus Christ. Some have suggested that a "party" is inadequate to describe the atmosphere of a church worship service, citing that it should be reverent in order to awe a holy God (1). Additionally, some have suggested the party atmosphere as being one that gives too much attention to the other guests (i.e. seeker, or sinners) (2). To these criticisms I would respond:

1. God has revealed himself through Jesus Christ who was and is the incarnation of God. The focus of the N.T. church is that God has made himself known - that he is knowable through Jesus. If Jesus is truly the guest of honor in our worship services, then the focus of the service should be making Him known: how God and His Word relate to the problems, insecurities of life, etc. Therefore the worship should be intelligible with people being able to engage God through the use of explained, illustrated, and applied Scripture. Songs should be chosen that not only honor the guest of honor, but also communicate to and compel participation by participants. That is if it is a good party. Parties should facilitate relationships both between the guests and the guest of honor, and between the guests themselves.
2. Though the term "seeker" has caused confusion over the years when applied to church services, this should not indicate that the worship service itself is not about worship. At Fellowship of the Parks, we do not have "Seeker Services". We worship the guest of honor (Jesus). Yet we invite the tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and others who are broken but may be open to attending a party where they can meet Jesus. Seeker simply means that we are hospitable to all people. Regardless. We want them to feel welcome and provide the best atmosphere possible where connection can be fostered.

Matthew represents those of us who are Christ Followers. We have not forgotten what it means to be broken and lost. Because we have been brought into a relationship with Jesus, we desperately want others to know the same joy, forgiveness, acceptance and connection. Therefore, we are the ones throwing the party. We are faithful in honoring the guest of honor by trying to invite, accommodate, facilitate a connection to as many people as possible to the guest of honor. We do that by:

1. Making every effort to invite our sinner/seeking friends. We do that through personal invitations and using direct mail together to bring as many people as possible to the party.
2. We plan, pay for, and serve at the party. Matthew not only invited his friends, he opened his home, and went to great efforts to throw a party. He provided the accommodations, the food, the ambience, and all that was necessary for his friends to meet Jesus. For us today, in the context of the church, we:
 1. Give faithfully to provide the party room, necessary staff, food (bagels, cookies, Starbucks coffee, etc.) and all that is necessary for a great party - including the invitations to many other things on a "to get/to do" list.
 2. Serve. We become willing to greet, direct traffic, care for infants, put up signs, landscape, stuff worship programs, (help make sure kids are having their own party with Jesus), etc. Once you become a follower of Jesus and FOTP, You commit to take an active role in throwing parties for Jesus where he is honored.

Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything

is now ready. 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, there is still room.' "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'" Luke 14:16, 22-23

The disconnected, the broken, the lost, the sinners, the outcasts. An effective N.T. church will always be criticized by religious moralists who are more concerned with protecting their own than reaching out to the sick. As Jesus said, I believe sarcastically to the self-righteous, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

Obviously, there are those that pose the question: "What about Discipleship?" We believe deeply in discipleship and helping people learn and grow through the study of Scripture. However, we will never seek to shelter ourselves from the world around us. Our focus at Fellowship of the Parks is and will always be to seek out those who are far from God and invite them to discover a connection with Jesus Christ. We believe that this means that we are people who throw parties. Our discipleship emerges from our willingness to follow a Jesus who calls us to be people who are welcoming and compassionate to the outsider.

At FOTP, we believe that Discipleship is a by-product of throwing parties. When we engage people and connect them to Jesus - we grow. Classes, music, personal devotion, etc. provide fuel in fulfilling the Great Commission. Not an end in themselves. The more intimate we become with Jesus should result in more of a willingness on our part to throw parties - which results in greater intimacy with God.

My vision for FOTP is that we who are transformed and become followers of Jesus Christ, throw parties to honor Jesus. That we invite and throw the most hospitable parties possible so that others can meet Jesus and have their lives transformed and become party throwers themselves. That we throw as many great parties as possible so that everyone has the opportunity to sit at the banquet table and know Jesus.

I am very grateful to be the pastor of Fellowship of the Parks. There are many stories of people who have come to the party at Fellowship of the Parks, become connected to Jesus, and experience a changed life. We continually seek to bring people to the party.



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