

Playgrounds, Programs, and Preaching

by Brad Harrub

Most of us have been there at one point or another — looking for somewhere to eat on a busy street. It never fails, whenever adults are really craving something good, one of those fast food restaurants with a playground appears out of nowhere. With neon lights and giant slides beckoning, it immediately captures the attention of anyone under the age of twelve. Suddenly the backseat becomes a chorus of little voices begging to go to the restaurant with the playground. In fact, most children choose their favorite restaurant not for the food, but rather the presence and size of the playground and the type of toy that comes in the value meal.

History will record that 25 years ago playgrounds in restaurants were almost as scarce as dinosaurs. Today, you can find two or three within the same city block. Kids love it because they get to play. Parents dread it because the food is not very healthy and is often less than appetizing, (and more than a few of us have had to bend and snake our way up through the tubes in order to rescue a crying child who made it to the top, but was too scared to come down!).

But the playgrounds work! They entice children (and their hesitant parents) by the millions. In fact, the majority of fast-food restaurants under construction today possess these colossal recreational areas.

Interestingly, this concept of attracting larger numbers through entertainment did not stop with fast-food restaurants. Churches now actively promote pleasure and amusement as a means to increase numbers. Coffee shops and fitness centers are now expected in many religious settings. In fact, a Methodist church near our building has contacted Walt Disney World designers in an effort to make the children's part of their new addition (currently called "Wacky World Studios") magical eye-candy for kids. Some New Testament Christians will be quick to follow their example.

If we look back in the church 25 years ago, we find that people were content to come and sit through Bible class and worship without being entertained. Not so today. Today, entertainment is expected. Even many churches of Christ have abandoned gospel preaching and the Great Commission, and instead are trying to increase attendance using "playgrounds." One of the first questions many parents ask when visiting a new congregation is: "What programs do you have for my children?" Thus, the questions come: Is there children's church? Is there a youth room with couches and video games? Do you all use drama or skits? Do you allow praise teams? Are there church league sports teams? Do your young people go on trips? What do you have for me?

As more and more churches abandon God's original plan for evangelism for their own man-made gimmicks and games, someone needs to ask the question: "What's really being served?" For you see, those restaurants with playgrounds are great for

entertainment, but eating there consistently would quickly deteriorate the health of most individuals.

During the mid-1980s, senior citizen actress Clara Peller played a crusty old lady who slapped the counters of neighborhood hamburger joints and loudly asked the probing question "Where's the beef?" Her point was that there was not much there. Likewise, many churches today have moved toward entertainment and have no "spiritual meat" to offer. It's all fluff and cotton candy.

The writer of Hebrews poignantly admonished:

“[F]or though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (Heb. 5:12-13).

Churches offering entertainment and "feel good" sermons may be appealing to the eye, and taste good at first, but man cannot live on cotton candy. Likewise, man cannot grow spiritually in a setting where the whole counsel of God has been replaced with sermons covering only the love and grace of Almighty God.

What is our priority in selecting a home to worship our Creator? If we are only interested in "play grounds" and "what's in it for me?" then these entertaining buildings will serve the purpose. But if we are assembling to pay honor and praise to Almighty God, then we should be more concerned with the meat that is being served. It's high time we teach ourselves and our children that it's not about "I-Me" but rather the great I AM. Only when we have our priorities in the right place will we find ourselves walking into a worship assembly focused on God rather than ourselves.

Paul, in his second epistle to young Timothy warned:

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:3-5).

That time has come. People have completely forgotten why it is we gather together as a body of Christians. They enter a worship setting believing they are in the "audience," and they expect a "good show."

John 4:23 states: "But the hour is coming, and is now, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."

God is the audience. Therefore, everything done in worship should be in accordance with his will, and should be done to glorify and praise him. Has our desire for entertainment blinded us from true worship? Unfortunately, the abundance of new programs, games, and "playgrounds" tells me the answer in many cases is a resounding yes.

Skip the playground and go find a steakhouse. Jesus, in speaking to the scribes observed: "The first of all the commandments is: `Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:29-30). May that love for the Lord burn in our hearts, creating a desire to please him rather than constantly seeking to entertain ourselves.

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