

Is the kingdom of heaven one big party?

Charismatic preachers often exhort congregations to be more exuberant in worship times by stating that life in heaven will be one big party. Citing a few passages from Revelation where angels and saints praise God in song, they insist that the atmosphere of heaven is a continuous celebration of joy; a celebration full of exuberance, dancing, exultation, singing, and joyful revelry, i.e. one big party. Since this is the case, they say, believers should now be exciting, outgoing, demonstrative and exuberant during worship in church; anything less is a diminishing of our birthright. But is this picture right, and is revelry a suitable expression of worship?

Some passages used to defend this idea

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honour and glory and blessing!" And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honour and glory and power *Be* to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!" Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever. Rev 5:11-14

All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honour and power and might, *Be* to our God forever and ever. Amen.' Rev 7:11-12

And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark *and* over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God. They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: 'Great and marvellous *are* Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true *are* Your ways, O King of the saints!' Rev 15:2-3

After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honour and power *belong to* the Lord our God' ... And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne, saying, 'Amen! Alleluia!' Then a voice came from the throne, saying, 'Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!' And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' Rev 19:1-7

All these passages demonstrate that heaven is a place of unfettered worship. Far from heaven being a realm of revelry and carousing; of unhindered, uninhibited personal expression, the character is one of reverential fear, submission. The focus is upon God, not upon subjective pleasure; people here do not rise up and dance, but fall down on their faces and worship. At the consummation of salvation after the Second Coming, there is rejoicing and happiness, but this is still in the context of total submission and reverence for the character of God.

And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Matt 22:1-3

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Matt 25:10

These two parables were told to teach a specific lesson, the first to show that submission to King Jesus is required for people to be part of the kingdom, the second to show that disciples must be ready and prepared for the Second Coming. The fact that the consummation of our salvation is likened to a wedding banquet is not an excuse to be party animals in the presence of God. The wedding image is used to show the joy of consummation of God's purposes on Earth, the celebration of the bridegroom united with his bride (the church).

The new world is not one long wedding celebration; the wedding marks the beginning of God's purposes for man in fellowship with God, not the end of them. Neither is the wedding itself a riotous party. This is a Middle Eastern wedding not a Western one. The heavenly wedding banquet is certainly joyful, but is not an occasion for riotous frivolity and carousing like an English night-club.

The charismatic idea of 'party'

Dancing

Churches in Charismatic circles often indulge in spontaneous dancing during worship, especially certain types of Pentecostal churches. This is also frequently observed in churches established by black Africans, including churches that are not denominated as 'Pentecostal'. It is not uncommon for visiting black African preachers to exhort congregations to rouse themselves from apathy and join the heavenly party by dancing and shouting. I have witnessed this in Baptist and Independent churches. However, other Charismatic churches encourage more formal types of dancing that are supposed to be of a certain ethnic origin, such as Jewish folk dances in Jewish Root congregations.

The foundation for these expressions is that praise to God is supposed to be in the context of joyful celebration, or a party, and that dancing is fitting in such a situation.

Dancing is a form of self-expression and is not conducive to genuine worship. There are no instructions from the apostles on dancing in church (therefore it is not acceptable) and no precedent for dancing under the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant we see that dancing was a feature of Canaanite religion which Israel was to shun. It is first mentioned as a corporate activity in the idolatrous worship of the golden calf when Israel sinned greatly against the Lord. Dancing is also seen as an expression of joy in Jewish social circumstances, but not in formal worship (1 Sam 30:16; Ps 30:11).

There are three verses that appear to condone dancing in connection with worship (Ps 149:3, 150:4; 2 Sam 6:14) but this was part of the cultural activity of the period and nation along with many other features that are cancelled under the New Covenant. In these, dancing is associated with musical instruments, but these are certainly cancelled in the New Testament, which is why there is no mention of them anywhere. All these things were part of the Old Covenant ritual that was made obsolete in the cross, along with the slaughter of bulls and goats. The sacrifice of animal offerings, the ritual of the temple, the massed musical instruments, the courses of priests, priestly vestments, the external

worship and festal days have all been cancelled under the New Covenant as merely external and fleshly, being replaced with spiritual worship that needs no external visual aids.

Dancing is also a staple ingredient of occult rituals. Many variants of world religions and occult sects encourage dancing to throw off self-restraint and encourage passivity, thence trances and mysticism. People who dance themselves into a frenzy or a trance are easily manipulated by shaman leaders. People in such a condition are suggestible and can be convinced about anything in this state, or even hypnotised to do something unusual, such as walk on hot coals or be bent over a sharp edge backwards.

As with many other features, Charismaticism strives to establish liturgical activities that are human strivings to copy Old Covenant forms that have been cancelled. Dancing is one of them. In some more radical Charismatic groups dancing is an overt occult method of increasing passivity so that leaders have more authority.

Overthrowing self restraint

Charismatic preachers have frequently stated that the congregation should not think but drink! From this they draw allusions to the idea of worship being a party and so they encourage people to cast off self-restraint. Misinterpreting Scripture, they aver that being filled with the Spirit is similar to being intoxicated and that the only way to fully experience God is to yield self-control and become completely passive, just like a drunk.

This follows the historic examples of both mysticism in Christian sects and occultism in false religions. Both are founded upon the abandonment of self-control and the giving over of one's consciousness to the spirit being manifested in the gathering. The exuberant behaviour which often follows this lack of self-control is claimed to be evidential of the party atmosphere which God desires. Thus the lack of self-restraint leads to wild behaviour, shouting, dancing, jumping, falling over, screaming and so on; all the sorts of things evidenced by worldly people who are drunk after a party. As well as being on a par with drunken unbelievers, this behaviour is also comparable to the wild orgies of demonic fertility religions or the worked up trances of occult shamanism.

Contrary to all this, the fulness of the Spirit always leads to a stronger self-control than we had when we were unbelievers. The fruit of the Spirit always includes self-control (Gal 5:23). Parties are where self-control is abandoned in exuberant behaviour. The Holy Spirit never endorses such behaviour and always works to prevent it. A person filled with the Spirit evidences self-control, not dissipation.

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit. Eph 5:18

Self-indulgence

What are worldly parties? They are places where people engage in self-indulgence of various sorts. People attending parties in the world look forward to eating lots of free food, drinking lots of free alcohol and letting their hair down in dancing. It is also commonplace that the loss of self-control is followed by immorality, another form of self-indulgence.

Self-indulgence is the very opposite of discipleship in Christ. Those who truly follow Christ mortify the flesh and carry their cross. That is, they are given over to the death of their self-life in order to manifest the life of Christ.

Now this is not mysticism and the death of human consciousness or will but the death of our natural fleshly choices to please ourselves. It is the death of our inherent natural desire to sin. The root of our Adamic nature is pride in rebellion to God, and this is what we must

die to. The old nature is to be put off and the new nature, the nature of Christ himself, is to be actively put on (Eph 4:22-24). Christian repentance is to turn from our old ways and follow Christ after a radical change of thinking. We must die to partying and live in the Spirit.

The very spirit of partying is self-indulgence, but Christians are to reject such self-indulgence and put on Christ.

Celebration

Charismatics often use the word ‘celebrate’ in their teaching and songs to describe their form of worship. Indeed, some meetings are called by this name to designate large regional gatherings where people can express their revelry from various backgrounds.

The mass noun ‘celebrate’ means, *‘the action of marking one’s pleasure at an important event or occasion by engaging in enjoyable, typically social, activity’* (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Thus ‘celebrate’ is an expression of the flesh to express joy.

Though it appears in some Bible translations several times, there is only one genuine reference in the Hebrew text to ‘celebrate’ (Lev 23:41) and this word means ‘to keep the feast’, not indulge in joyful revelry. ‘Celebrate’ in the NKJV is usually a poor translation of the Hebrew verb ‘to keep’, as in to keep the feast.

So there is no Biblical warrant for using the word in connection to Charismatic worship, and certainly not for using it to name a certain unbiblical sort of gathering. Furthermore its chief English meaning is of an expression of the flesh to mark social joy and is thus not a suitable word for using in connection with true worship.

From using ‘celebration’ in connection with worship, and even for certain meetings, Charismatics encourage the idea that worship meetings are some form of corporate revelry; an excitable fleshly expression of joy. Excitable expressions of joy are not the basis for divine worship at all. While there is, of course, joy in knowing that our sins are forgiven, worship is all about meeting God and Biblical worship emphasises submission, reverence and fear before the king as suitable expressions of it. The most common Greek word for worship [*proskuneo*] means exactly this, ‘to bow and kiss the hand’ as a commoner to a king. This is the opposite of jumping up and down or dancing.

Charismatic celebration has no fear of God, and yet godly fear is the beginning of righteousness, wisdom and the basis of worship.

The purpose of God is contrary to the idea of partying

Meetings are always decent and in order

God has given instruction, nay command, that Christian gatherings must always be conducted in decent order,

Let all things be done decently and in order. 1 Cor 14:40

This means ‘in a seemly manner’ and properly organised. To this we could add many other verses, such as Rm 13:13, Col 2:5; indeed such a statement is entirely in accord with the teaching of God everywhere.

If, therefore, it is a command of God that meetings on earth today must be decent and in order, and must avoid all forms of indecency, or wild behaviour, how can it be conceived that suddenly God will allow this to change after the Day of Judgment? How can God

endorse wild partying in heaven when he condemned it on earth? How can just men made perfect behave with more indecency than the time before they were fully sanctified?

The idea of heaven being a big party is incredible and contrary to Scripture.

The meaning of 'kingdom'

The marriage supper of the Lamb is the consummation of the kingdom and the fulfilment of all its potential. In Luke 22:18 Jesus prophesied that he would not drink wine again until the kingdom comes. He does this at the wedding supper, which we will examine shortly. So the wedding supper is the consummation of the kingdom; with the supper the kingdom is fully established and perfected.

So, the wedding supper is identified with the kingdom. What does the kingdom of God represent?

Essentially, the kingdom of God is the place where God's will is obeyed and all his commands are carried out. The kingdom is the location of the king's reigning power; thus kingdom subjects are those under the control of the king. The kingdom speaks about the power, authority and rule of the king on the one hand and obedience of the subjects of the kingdom on the other. From our point of view, the kingdom is all about our obedient service to the king, fulfilling all his requests.

From this it can be seen that the idea of partying has nothing to do with the idea of the kingdom. Indeed, the notion of exuberant self-expression in the presence of the king is preposterous. If individuals were amusing themselves revelling in a medieval court in the presence of the king they would have been executed for treason.

The kingdom of God is not a place of partying but a place of willing obedience and service to the king.

The analogy of the wedding banquet

Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed *are* those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!' " And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God." Rev 19:9

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God. Rev 19:17

'Supper' is the Greek word *deipnon*, meaning a formal meal, usually at evening. This is not the word used for partying at all, which would be *komos* and which is found in Romans 13:13 where it is translated as revelry,

Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

Here Paul tells believers not to be party animals at all, let alone in church meetings. Indeed, both Paul and Peter elsewhere command that we should avoid partying like the world,

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: ... envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Gal 5:19-21

For we *have spent* enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles -- when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. 1 Pt 4:3

'Revelries' here is the same Greek word, *kmos*. Notice that revelling (or partying) is condemned along with murder as a work of the flesh.

So, the apostles do not use the normal Greek word for 'partying' in connection with the consummation of God's kingdom at all. It is a formal banquet, or dinner, to celebrate the victory of Christ and the fulfilment of God's decrees.

The word 'supper' used for the marriage supper of the Lamb, is the same Greek word used for the Lord's Supper celebrated week by week in genuine Christian churches (*deipnon*). Just as there is no sense of partying in the Lord's Supper, there is no sense of partying in the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is the same word that is used in the Last Supper of Christ and the disciples. In all these cases the mood of the participants is not a riotous party but one of solemn reverence. The Last Supper was the foreword to the cross; the Lord's Supper is the weekly commemoration of the cross and the marriage supper is the fulfilment and consummation of the cross.

The sense of partying is as far removed from the context of the banquet of Christ at the end as can possibly be imagined.

Is heaven one big party or not? What is our purpose in the new world?

Those who promote the idea of heaven being one continuing party, for the joyful indulgence of the partygoers, utterly fail to understand the purpose of God in the decree of salvation. God has not saved us, at great cost to himself, in order for us to be constantly revelling, but for a purpose. This purpose has to do with testimony and testimony has to do with work.

When the plan of God began in Eden man, as yet in holiness and innocence before the Fall, was set to work. His job was to act as God's steward on earth with authority over all things. As such he wisely named the animals and would have tended to the garden as a delegated authority; but he fell. Adam and Eve were not occupied with partying, though there was much they could have celebrated, but were to obey God's will in working as his delegated ruler.

When Jesus was on the earth as God's servant, modelling for us the perfect way to obey the Father and perform his will on earth, he said categorically,

But Jesus answered them, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.' Jn

5:17

In describing his ministry Jesus proclaimed that he was working and also tells us that the Father has not stopped working. God's rest on the Sabbath day was rest from the work of creation but not rest from spiritual activity. Indeed, God continually works every second in his providence to keep the world going and to ensure that seedtime and harvest do not fail. Without God restraining sin in the world all the atoms of material creation would fly apart, only the divine will keeps them operative (Col 1:17).

Jesus and the Father were both active in constructing the work of salvation, but after the ascension, both are active in preserving the world and safeguarding the elect in that world. Divine work does not stop. After the Last Day when heaven and earth are united in one glorious creation, that work will continue where the saints are united with Christ in working for the divine testimony. The new world is not the end of things but the beginning

of the operation of God's eternal plan for mankind as his delegated representative in testimony to his glorious character. At the moment that testimony is spiritual, but in the new world it is also material since we will have perfected bodies like Christ. We will work to manifest the divine testimony. The idea that we will be partying and revelling is virtually blasphemous as it denies the entire intention of God in salvation.

Conclusion

The nub of the issue is this: Biblical worship is based on the fear of God and the submission of the worshipper to a glorious creator, Saviour, king and master. It involves the subjection of the worshipper, a denial of the flesh, coming with nothing in his hand to abase himself and submit to the majestic God. Charismatic worship, being one big party, is the opposite of this. It is centred round the elevation of the flesh and the stimulation of the senses. The party atmosphere creates an opportunity for the indulgence of the flesh, which overflows with self-expression. This self-expression becomes self-satisfied via the stimulation of the senses; the worship is sensual and soulish, not spiritual. At worst, the worship becomes mystical and occult when it panders to the lowest of the senses by encouraging passivity and emptiness.

Christian worship centres upon God; Charismatic worship centres upon the flesh.

The other key issue regards what the elect will do in the new world. Charismatics state that this is the fleshly enjoyment of a continuing party. The truth is that heaven will be on earth and God's will done by glorified men as it is currently done in heaven by angels. As now, that will involves working according to a specific plan which is centred in the testimony of God to the universe. At present this testimony is spiritual and invisible; then it will be material and obvious. The elect in a glorified earth will be working and worshipping, not carousing and revelling.

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