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The Silas Code: *How Pain Replaced Play as a Theological Value*

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Theologically, the church has moved closer to the code of the Albino monk than to the code of the child on the merry-go-round.

Pain has replaced play as a spiritual value, and spiritual misery has been codified into our church practices. The "sinners" of the world are depicted as laughing and partying on the road to hell while the church has mistakenly taken the opposing position—frowning and suffering and beating itself on the narrow way to the Pearly Gates.

The church no longer considers fun to be spiritual—and by default we have left fun to the world.

Youth ministries stand precariously in the balance, seeking to be relevant to fun-loving teenagers, but often viewed suspiciously by the larger church that accuses it of lacking spiritual depth and discipline.

Whatever Happened to Play?

While we've adopted the theological code of the monk—holding in high honor the self-flagellating path of suffering and painful self denial—we've also forgotten what every child learns: the code of the playground—the rules of recreation, mandatory recess, and holding hands with your friend as you skip along. (When was the last time you skipped anywhere?)

The church has elevated disciplines of suffering and restraint (fasting, silence, pious humility) without balancing them with God-given human virtues (play, fun, laughter). On the theological seesaw, we've stacked weights of suffering and denial on one side, leaving the "lightweight nonessentials" of play and fun stranded high in the air. We've equated spirituality with the serious. We've become (post) modern Pharisees who believe that those having fun at the party without us must be sinners. And so we continue to live lives of fun-less heresy. We follow the code of Silas, where servants are known only by their scars.

In recent years churches have made some progress. The seeker-sensitive movement may have been more about reintroducing the "worldly" values of fun and play back into church than it was about any other cultural bridge. But even these gains have come slowly, and not without criticism from church leaders. As churches explored more relaxed, fun models of worship to appeal to those on the outside, critics discredited them for watering down the gospel. It's not easy to overcome hundreds of years of theological imbalance.

Disciples or Masochists?

Our models for saints are stoic, unsmiling portraits. Think about it: picture your favorite saint in your mind. Is he or she smiling and laughing? Do you ever think about this saint having fun? The straight-laced, scowling ancient images of what it means to be a saint have affected our beliefs and upset the balance of what it means to be both human and spiritual.

Of course we must acknowledge that discipleship involvessacrifice and denial of self. Fasting is a spiritual discipline that teaches us lessons we cannot learn any other way. God can place a "thorn in our flesh" for our ultimate betterment. But as we study these biblical ideas in pursuit of all things spiritual, we tend to emphasize our "thorns" to the exclusion of everything else. We find our own thorns and jab them into our sides, hoping we can manufacture spiritual depth. Our lives become imbalanced, and we begin to think that if we don't suffer, we aren't spiritual. Thus we become less and less human.

Yes, we must acknowledge that we share the sufferings of Christ, but have we considered that we might also share his humor and joy? God has called us to be followers of Christ, not Christian masochists.

As we slap the leather strap against our backs, we remember that Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow" (Luke 9:23). But because we can't find a direct quote from the Gospels with Jesus saying, "Don't forget to have fun," we eliminate fun from church. We shouldn't forget, however, that Jesus also says he comes to give us life more abundant. We shouldn't forget that God created sea creatures to "frolic" there, or that Jesus welcomes little children, saying the kingdom belongs to "such as these."

When did the Church lose sight of the balance between the painful paths of denial and the positive affirmation of God-given fun?

When did we start equating fun with sin?

Is Pleasure Evil?

The first historical clue to the puzzle is found in the 18th- and 19th-century church—when it made a distinction much like the political distinction of separation of church and state. During this time period, the church created a theological division: if something wasn't "sacred," it was "secular." In other words, if the subject matter wasn't something directly about God, then the church would have nothing to do with it. The results of this dividing line can be seen in the changes over the last three centuries in regard to church architecture, art, and practices. The clues may not be as obvious as a Rose Line down the center of the sanctuary floor, but they're there all the same.

During this period, Protestant churches especially began to devalue art, beauty, and anything that brought pleasure. The results are visible. For example, few church buildings contain any theology of architecture—the value behind them is Spartan utility of purpose. Form has bowed to function.

Furthermore, many churches have dispensed with works of art in sacred spaces—they've been cast aside as frivolous. Since beautiful, artistic, and "enjoyable" things are no longer linked to spiritual purposes, they're removed from sight. This is where it began.

Franky Schaeffer describes this theological break in his book *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts*: "A strange truncated unscriptural view of spirituality grew up. First spirituality was seen as something separate from the rest of real life…. Thus, certain things increasingly were regarded as spiritual and other things as secular…. If God is only the Creator of some divided platonic existence which leads to a tension between the body and the soul, the real world and the spiritual world, if God is only the Creator of some spiritual little experiential 'praise-the-Lord' reality, then he is not much of a God" (27-28).

Once the church stopped valuing all things beautiful and enjoyable as God-given, it quickly painted targets on the backs of all things fun and playful as well. In this theology, fun with no spiritual element is on the secular side of the line, and having fun in conjunction with spiritual topics is considered sacrilegious. Fun is left out of church.

This is bad theology. It wrongly ignores that fundamentally we're creations of God, made to enjoy all that our Creator has made around us and in us—as a celebration of God.

Pleasure, enjoyment, laughter, and fun are God's inventions—and it's time the church reclaimed them.

So Dark the Con of Bad Theology

We're stuck in a Pharisaical pattern. Putting fun and play in a category with "worldly things" leaves us with only tough-minded disciplines of denial. Like the Pharisees we've filled the void with our own unbalanced concepts of a spiritual life. And like the Pharisees we impose our brands of painful piety on the next generation.

The pattern is perpetuated for the same reasons that college fraternities and sororities keep torturing the next generations of pledges. The rationale goes something like this: *We went through hell week to join. Although it was painful and we hated it, we'll make sure the next generation goes through it, too. Why? Because we had to go through it.*

And so we hand our youth the images of unsmiling saints and a depiction of the Christian life boiled down to sterile, utilitarian duty, where fun is frowned upon and play is absent. Like the Pharisees we won't help youth break the cycle of unbalanced church life because it's all we've known. We continue to teach the few "honorable" spiritual disciplines, not even considering that "play" might be one of them.

And so a secret has been buried for generations—one that the church keeps trying to cover up. It's been hidden by monks wielding leather straps. At great risk and facing inevitable criticism, I'll say plainly what's been

hidden. Here's the theological secret the church doesn't want spoken within its walls: God created fun.

Re-Creating Recreation—Bringing Balance to the Disciplines

We must restore balance to our theology and reintroduce play as a spiritual value in the church. We must restore balance to our spiritual disciplines and recover the lost theological value of recreation. If life at its best is found in Jesus, then fun and play are redeemed in his name. Because of Christ's redemption, Christians know the joy of life in God—and they should also know the fun of God-given play. For this truth to be realized again in the church, we must restore our theology of fun. But how?

First, by truly viewing God as Creator.

While on the surface this is an accepted, central theological principle of the church, is it really? Because if it is, then we must accept that God is also the Creator of fun. We should make no apologies for this. We must no longer equate fun with sin. We should look for ways to integrate fun into our community gatherings and worship.

Second, by embracing fun as a value.

To do this we may have to balance our emphasis on self-inflicted suffering with relearning how to enjoy God's creation and gifts. We should recognize seasons of somber reflection (such as Lent), but we should also recognize seasons of celebration—and times of pure fun for fun's sake. And let's not spiritualize it by holding the event at church and calling it "fellowship." Is it not authentic community if we play together at the park and simply enjoy each other's company?

Third, by intentionally integrating recreation in our youth ministries.

Games don't always have to be a warm-up before the lesson. Sometimes games can teach the lesson. Youth ministry has always had an advantage because most of the time we remember to play. But even so, play has taken a back seat theologically. We separate "play" time from "spiritual" time. We use games to draw kids in, like the sugar to help the medicine go down. Restoring our theology of play means integration of the two—with no difference between the fun time and the lesson. We should creatively use fun time to enrich our spirituality and, yes, even teach us what it means to follow God.

Fourth, by imparting to youth the permission (and grace) to be human.

Sometimes we separate play and spirituality so far from each other that we forget what it means to be human. Being human means to laugh. It means to play. It's built into us by our Creator. Youth should be allowed the space

and the grace to grow in that. They won't always get it right, but the more we let teenagers be human and laugh and play, the more they'll learn to laugh at themselves and not take the perils of adolescence so seriously.

So let the secret out—God created fun, and we'll hide this truth no longer.

And when you tell this secret to the world and our youth, feel free to smile—maybe even laugh. Go ahead. It won't hurt. It's not supposed to. And that, my friend, is the whole point.

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