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The God of Fun

By David de Bruyn

Did you have fun?” smiles the parent as the child arrives from the Sunday School class. I wonder if Hebrew parents asked their children that question after watching the slaughter of the Yom Kipper goat on the Day of Atonement.

Fun, fun, fun. Fun is seemingly the unquestioned, undisputed right of children. Learning at school must be fun, and curricula are now judged on how much fun they make the learning process. School vacations must be fun, and a veritable industry of vacation activities and entertainments now exists. Sports must be fun, and it is the supposed inherent fun of beating others at games that I suppose makes sports so central to our culture. Eating breakfast must have fun pictures on the box, fun toys inside and fun sugary food to boot. Observe the mountain of toys in the average Western child’s bedroom. What he or

she needs most is fun, and Mom and Dad will buy it. Brushing our teeth must be done with fun-shaped toothbrushes, and fun-tasting toothpaste. Bathing must include toys, so that fun may be had in the act of cleaning oneself. Pajamas must have fun pictures on them, and so must the blankets. And at the top of this fun-list is television and console games. Television producers and game developers have been masters at satisfying and creating the appetite for fun. Immediate, interesting, amusing, startling, comical, rambunctious images keep the fun going. And a child without a steady diet of TV or games has no fun, you see.

Perhaps I am not exaggerating when I say that our culture regards fun as the greatest good when it comes to children. Fun is the supreme goal for children.

I am not sure at what point this supreme value loses its centrality, but at some point, an abrupt course change is made. The bored young humans are heartlessly introduced to the truth, “Life’s not all about fun, you know!” This cynical statement is a rather cruel and violent encounter to reality, since nothing in all the child’s prior existence could have revealed this fact. From the

rising of the sun to the going down of the same, the child is to have fun.

I don't know all the origins of this fun-as-supreme-value ethic. I suspect much of it began with Romanticism's idealizing of the child as the paragon of innocence and virtue, and therefore thinking it deserving of a childhood of uncomplicated play. Perhaps it is just the machinery of affluence: too much money, and too much spare time.

As a parent and pastor, I am concerned with how this idea will shape the religious imagination of my children, and the children in my congregation. I'm worried about how teaching our children to love fun above all else will become a major stumbling-block to their worship. Because the fun-ethic has not escaped church life.

Observe what we ask our children when they come out of Sunday School. "Did you have fun?" Indeed, that's what we expect from our children's programs: fun. The materials must be colorful and fun to look at. The activities must be interesting and fun to do. Fun games need to be played. The songs must be full of movement, comical gestures and catchy tunes. They must be fun to sing. The lessons must be funny, zany and fun to listen to. And we judge them a success if our children return with the ultimate value statement: "That was fun!" When someone has a talent for fun-making, we remark, "He's really good with the children!" Yes, if a child thinks church is fun, they will like it. And

hopefully, we reason, they'll become Christians.

The problem is this: at what point, and in what way, do we graduate our children to the understanding that God is not fun? The fear of the Lord is not a "fun" experience. Singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" is not fun. One thinks of words like sobriety, awe, hope, or adoration to describe the experience, but fun is not one of them. Preparing sermons is not fun. I enjoy doing it, and am greatly enriched by the intense study of God's Word. But it isn't fun, like a silly game on my phone, or playing fetch with my dog. Nor is listening to a patient explanation of God's Word a fun experience. Illuminating, encouraging, disturbing, challenging, provocative, perhaps, but not fun. Prayer is not fun. Intense concentration, focus and meditation on God's revealed character is penetrating, revealing, satisfying, exhilarating and exhausting. But it is not fun. And the Lord's Supper is never fun. Daunting, intimidating, heart-rending, welcoming, refreshing, but never fun. Worship is not fun, and yet we think fun is the key to creating little worshippers.

We face several large obstacles to overcome the fun-ethic.

First, our church cultures simply takes it for granted. It is the way we do things. Therefore, to question it is to disturb the way the machine runs. Object to the fun-machinery of modern ministry and you're just a troubler of Israel who doesn't know how to lighten up and have fun.

Second, pragmatism guides our methods. We want our children to be in church, and to worship, so we figure that fun ought to be brought in to hook them on church. This is not different from using rock and pop music, promising your best life now, or offering a car raffle in the foyer of the church. We think that ends justify means.

Third, we create and sustain this appetite in so many ways outside of church. I grew up in the fun culture, and pass it on without thinking. But what did children do before the world smothered them with its fun-obsession? They found things to do and make. They learned things. They helped at home. Where they could, they read. They played music with their families. They worshipped at church. And they played. In other words, they were little humans preparing for their adult lives. We, on the other hand, consciously look for ways to entertain and amuse our children, to keep the fun levels high.

If the affections of our children seek fun above all else, they have inordinate affections. And it is up to those who shape children to think about how to shape what they value.

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We are always shaping our children's affections, by what we love, and what we expect from them. If we expect them to not only play, but work and serve, they learn that fun is not central to life. If we

insist that they must learn, even when that learning is not fun, we teach them what learning is like in real life. If we send them out to amuse themselves with sticks and rocks and mud and dead birds, like children always have, we shape them to find and create enjoyment, not wait for it to be given to them. And more to the heart of the matter of the affections: if we teach them to be motivated by the truth, goodness and beauty of things and actions, we teach them to value things for what they are, not merely for what they supply. If we remove fun as the governing arbiter of value, we prepare them to love things for what they are worth, not merely for what kind of ephemeral thrill they provide. If we insist that they learn to live with their initial boredom with worship, we teach them to postpone their judgement on what they do not yet understand. In other words, we prepare them to be worshippers, not consumers.

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FUNNIES

A collector of rare books ran into an acquaintance who told him he had just thrown away an old Bible that he found in a dusty, old box. He happened to mention that Guten-somebody-or-other had printed it.

"Not Gutenberg?" gasped the collector.

"Yes, that was it!"

"You've thrown away one of the first books ever printed. A copy recently sold at auction for half a million dollars!"

"Oh, I don't think this book would have been worth anything close to that much," replied the man. "It was scribbled all over in the margins by some guy named Martin Luther."

A woman was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car.

She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that her the fever was getting worse. She said, "You might find a coat hanger and

use that to open the door."

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who at some time or other had locked their keys in their car. Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this."

So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful.

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"

He said, "Sure". He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank You So Much! You are a very nice man."

The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour."

The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh, Thank you God! You even sent me a Professional!"