

Families That Play Together Stay Together

Pr Les Ackie

It has been said that, ‘having fun is serious business’. Play is a critically important component of a happy family life. Recreation and laughter are not only essential to our emotional health, they are also vital for our physical health. Solomon stated, “A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones” (Proverbs 17:22). In this passage the Bible was way ahead of its time, for modern science confirms that laughter lowers blood pressure; reduces stress hormones; boosts immune function by raising levels of infection-fighting cells; aids the production of disease destroying antibodies, increases muscle function and triggers the release of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers.

According to Dr Stuart Brown founder of the National Institute for Play, “play shapes our brain, helps us foster empathy, helps us navigate complex social groups, and is at the core of creativity and innovation”. In his book *Playful Parenting*, Dr Lawrence Cohen, states that “Play is children’s main way of communicating . . . Playing is connection.” At a basic level, play fosters the desire to ‘be with’ one another.

Relationship analyst John Gottman states that even the way we play teaches our children valuable life skills. He comments that in play mothers tend to adopt the role of teacher, engaging in constructive play. However, fathers tend to assume the role of playmate often engaging in rough and tumble play which teaches the child lessons in emotional regulation and impulse control.

Unfortunately, attending to the cares of this life can often lead us to downplay the vital role of connecting with one another through play. Sadly, there are too many parents for whom fun is a bad word. There are unfortunately many Christians who seem to believe that laughing is sinful and that we are living in far too serious a day and time to waste on what they consider frivolous activities and amusements. However, 19th century revivalist Charles Spurgeon once said of miserable Christians, “Sad tones may fit an undertaker but not someone who is called to preach Good News! They might as well bury the dead, they’ll never influence the living. If you would lead men to heaven, wear heaven on your face.” By the same token, why would our children be attracted to a religion that elicits no joy in us and brings them no happiness?

Too many erroneously believe that Jesus’ description as a man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3), means that He must have been miserable most of the time. I recall as a child watching Robert Powell’s ethereal and often dour portrayal of Jesus in the TV series *Jesus of Nazareth*. I also recall finding Bruce Marchiano’s more cheerful and affable portrayal of Jesus in *The Visual Bible*, much more appealing. Yet some recoil from the idea of a Jesus who joked with His disciples and rolled around on the ground in celebration with a beneficiary of His healing grace. While we can engage in much speculation about the demeanour of Jesus, it seems incongruent to common sense that He who is the fountain of life would not exude an effervescent personality of joy and happiness. Jesus said to His disciples, on one occasion, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your

joy may be full (John 15:11). The fact that Jesus was like a magnet for children speaks volumes as children seem to have a built-in radar for infectious joy. We are informed that, “We should be cheerful; for there is nothing gloomy in the religion of Jesus” (Gospel Workers, 417).

We should never take the experience of fun and laughter for granted. As families we benefit from creating the space for the things which cultivate joy and meaning. We need to cast aside the restraints of mistaken piety and at times exercise the freedom to be downright silly in order to experience the blessing of godly play. Mark Twain once advised, “Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth”. Let's purposely carve out time as families to do the things that make our hearts sing.