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ISSN: 0799-1711

PROFESSIONAL  
THEOLOGICAL  
JOURNAL FOR  
THE CARIBBEAN  
COMMUNITY

# CJET

VOLUME  
18

2019

Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology

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**A THEOLOGY OF JOY: AN EVANGELICAL  
RESPONSE TO CARNIVAL IN TRINIDAD &  
TOBAGO**

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## INTRODUCTION

Carnival is deeply rooted in the culture and lifestyle of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The event, described by many as “the world’s most exciting festival,” is a mixture of culture, history, music and dance. For more than 200 years, revelers from the twin-island republic have used the annual event to epitomize national joy. Amidst the excitement, Christians find themselves divided regarding the appropriateness of the activities that are associated with the festival. Is carnival the most appropriate way to symbolize joy? Do Christians have a functional substitute? These and similar questions will be answered in this theological reflection on joy, as expressed in carnival.

There is no theatrical event that can mobilize mass-participation in any Caribbean island as Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago is able to do. It is believed that as many as 15% of the 1.5 million residents, actively participate in Carnival. Months of planning and competition culminate in two days of glitter and dance. The creativity reflected in costumes is unparalleled in the region. The rhythm of calypso music and the unique contribution of the steel band combine to present one of the greatest theatrical shows on earth.

Despite the indigenous elements, carnival did not originate in Trinidad. Actually, there is no evidence of the festival prior to 1783, when the French-speaking planter immigrants and their African slaves arrived.<sup>1</sup> The festival finds its roots in Roman Catholicism and can be traced to the twelfth century in France. Then, it was called “The Feast of Fools” and celebrated by

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<sup>1</sup> Darryl Barrow, “Carnival in Trinidad and Religion: An Exploration of Trinidad’s Culture and Theology”. Cf. Gervase M. Bushe, *Growing up Wild in Trinidad* (Volume 1). (SC: CreateSpace, 2008), 194-201.

junior priests who used the occasion “to make fun of traditional symbols and invent their own ludicrous symbols.”<sup>2</sup> Today, centuries later, the occasion is still characterized by fun.

Etymologically, carnival is believed to have come from two Latin words, *carnus* and *vale*; meaning, “good-bye or farewell to flesh.”<sup>3</sup> It does seem apparent that both history and etymology concur that the essence of the festival is a fling of the flesh. Another word often associated with carnival is *bacchanal*; from *Bacchus*, a Roman and Greek mythical deity representing life and revelry. The term introduces the idea of revelry and drunkenness.

Masquerading is another feature in contemporary carnival celebrations. A similar feature was evident in the twelfth century celebrations of the “Feast of Fools”. Ingvild Gilhus used the term “reversals” to describe the “contrary behavior”. “The reversals,” she contends, “represent transformations from human to animal, from male to female, and from spirit to body.”<sup>4</sup>

In his analysis of West Indian Literature on carnival themes, Lloyd Brown argues that “the element of play-acting finds its most natural symbol in the mask of the carnival’s road marcher, and in the masquerade of the carnival bands.”<sup>5</sup> Citing Derek Walcott, Brown observes that masquerading confers “a fleeting mobility on its participants.”<sup>6</sup>

The parallels between the contemporary and twelfth century carnivals are amazing. For instance, “The Feast of Fools” focused on releasing tension to create arousal in the participants. It was as though the energy which kept the religious system together was let loose. In essence, there was movement from the orderly to the ludicrous, from form to lack of form. “This movement was the prime characteristic of the Feast of Fools.”<sup>7</sup>

Today it would appear as though carnival is primarily an opportunity to display creative ingenuity. In this study, I will argue that that display of creativity is as much a mask as the masks displayed. An insightful analysis of non-Christian literary critics will confirm that contemporary quest for joy is no different than the twelfth century quest for joy. How ironic that 800 years ago, in their quest for joy, the festivities were referred to as *asinaria festa*, the “Feast of Asses”.<sup>8</sup>

It will soon become very evident that my reflections are not intended to analyze the value of culture or the usefulness of indigenous art forms. Instead, I am arguing that the quest for joy in carnival is elusive. Financial institutions will confirm that participants do not usually have “the last laugh.”

### CARNIVAL: A THEATRICAL SPECTACLE

Carnival celebrates a vitality and passionate sense of life itself. In addition, carnival is a folk-art form with distinctive metaphoric structures. In a sense, carnival has its own stylistic tradition. It is this dimension of carnival that prompted Errol Hill to conclude that Trinidad carnival is “the greatest annual theatrical spectacle of all of all time.”<sup>9</sup> Apart from the

<sup>2</sup> Ingvild Salid Gilhus, “Carnival in Religion: The Feast of Fools in France. “ *Numen*, Volume 37, Fasc. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Barrow, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Gilhus, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Brown, “‘Making Style’: The West Indian Writer and the Carnival Tradition. “ *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 18, Nos. 3 and 4, 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Gilhus, 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Errol Hill, *The Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* ( Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1972), 3.

opportunities to be creative, some believe, carnival brings emotional relief to many persons. Barrow's analysis ably illustrates this point:

There are many people who do regard carnival as a good escape releaser. People have been experiencing stress, strain, and certain inhibitions, brought on by social conventions. Carnival allows people to release their pent-up energies and desires.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, what Barrow sees as an asset in carnival, Ismith Khan in *The Obeah Man*<sup>11</sup> sees as symbols of a deep-seated social malaise. Michael Anthony will very likely concur with Khan. On the one hand Anthony sees carnival as a celebration of life itself; however, on the other hand, there is uneasiness. There is some uneasiness with the manner in which the masks and play-acting of the masquerade demonstrate that carnival itself is an elaborate game of sorts.<sup>12</sup> As alluded to earlier in this paper, it is an exploitive game played for the benefit of commercial interests that profit from carnival.

I must agree with Brown that there is some underlying irony of the carnival spirit. "The libertinism and the masquerades are both a form of escape and even more problematically, a celebration of the life in defiance of all those ills which partly inspire the need for escape in the first place."<sup>13</sup> Here again Walcott is on target in his poem 'Mass Man'. "Carnival is expected as a kind of sham behind which we may discover images of pain and despair."<sup>14</sup>

Much of this pain is reflected in the calypso. Whereas one can choose to focus on calypso as art, and glory in the calypsonian's ability, the reality of what is communicated cannot be ignored. Pain is too often trivialized in order to solicit laughter. To use frivolity as a coping device for pain can be compared with using a band-aid to relieve someone of cancer.

The increasing use of alcohol may also be another coping device as well as a vital part of merriment. This excessive use of alcohol is compounded by an upsurge of unwanted pregnancies and increasing incidents of sexually transmitted diseases. These social problems are attested to by national statistics and special governmental programs to curb this malaise.

Hence, it is not enough to rejoice in the creative opportunities carnival brings and ignore the price the nation pays. Entertainers should be discouraged from trivializing reality as a mere artistic expression. Participants must be challenged to provide answers and not merely analyze the condition of a nation. When asked about trivializing reality, one popular calypsonian told his interviewer that he was an entertainer and not a pastor. In essence, his role was to ensure laughter. One must again ask, who has the last laugh?

Ash Wednesday, the day following carnival, is no laughing matter. The abandoned costumes, piles of debris and inebriated bodies, paint a picture of gloom, so unlike the laughter that prevailed hours earlier. When added to the cases of marital unfaithfulness, unwanted pregnancies and sordid list of social evils, one is left to ask: Is this the price a nation should pay for joy?

Canon Knolly Clarke believes the Church should educate her members on the evil aspects of Carnival, so that the festival could be enjoyed without revelers abusing freedom.<sup>15</sup> But isn't this a case of dealing with symptoms and not with causes? The debauchery at carnival is only

<sup>10</sup> Barrow, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ismith Khan, *The Obeah Man* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Anthony, *The Games Were Coming* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), 96-101.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Gulf and Other Persons* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Barrow, 13; citing Canon Clarke in his unpublished paper, "Views on Carnival in Trinidad", November 1987, 2.

one of the ways people chose to cope with pain. In other words, carnival merely provides a context for social abuse. Social analysts will confirm, following carnival, many face additional pain.

In attempting to analyze carnival celebrations, many persons limit their analysis to the cultural and aesthetic aspects of the festival; and the reasons for involvement in such celebrations are often overlooked. Earlier, I argued that “release from tension” was a characteristic feature of the twelfth century “Feast of Fools”. In describing the timing of carnival in the early nineteenth century in Trinidad, one historian noted that carnival was conducted “in the driest and coolest time of the year, before the worst rush of the cutting of the canes begins...”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the need to release tension characterized both periods in history.

Before the emancipation of slavery in 1846, slaves were excluded from carnival.<sup>17</sup> At least two factors may have accounted for this. The first concerned the social mixing with the non-slave population. In addition, it seemed too risky to provide opportunities for slaves to release tension. Such a move could have created security risks and a diversion from the oppressive nature of slavery.

However, following emancipation, “the ancient lines of demarcation between the classes were obliterated and as a consequence carnival degenerated into a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes.”<sup>18</sup> Carnival provided such therapeutic relief for the masses “that the white elite of the society withdrew from participation...”<sup>19</sup> One white commentator referred to carnival in 1847 as “squalid slender...cheapness being the grand requisite.” Despite the absence of the characteristic “white” elements of the nineteenth century, the guise of foolery and desire for pleasure were evident.

This pleasure principle has not been limited to carnival in Trinidad. Similar festivals in Latin American countries feature themes of pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Here are at least two additional features to carnival in Latin America; there is a strong Roman Catholic influence, and carnival is routinely celebrated on the eve of Lent. This period is characterized by prayers and much abstinence. It is evident that the timing of carnival was intended to serve as a last fling, before the holy season of reflection.

It would therefore seem safe to conclude, that the desire for pleasure in carnival has always been associated with the release of some kind of tension.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, the annual affair would be expected to reflect the feelings of the populace at the time of celebration. The elitism that was evident in pre-emancipation celebrations and the uncontrollable exuberance that characterized the post-emancipation celebrations would confirm this opinion.

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Pearse, “Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad,” in *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean*, ed. Michael M. Horowitz (New York: The Natural History Press, 1971), 530

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 538.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 539.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 540.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Janet L. DeCosmo, “Reggae and Rastafari in Salvador, Bahia,” (In *Religion, Culture and Tradition in the Caribbean*, edited by Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 39, 56-58.

<sup>21</sup> Nandi Bynoe, ‘Brief History of Carnival’ (accessed 14/9/18): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvMaMbEN\\_RY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvMaMbEN_RY).

This line of reasoning posits serious questions concerning contemporary celebrations. Critics would agree that amidst the pageantry to which I referred earlier, carnival today encompasses undesirable and lewd behavior. Are these a reflection of society? The fact that single-parent births in November (nine months after carnival) exceed any other month in the year might provide some clues to an answer. In addition, the issuance of free condoms by the government shortly before carnival celebrations, also speaks volumes concerning the expectations of the government as the annual event approaches. Here the government is attempting to reduce the negative social impact of carnival. Rather than offer a hurried critique, Christians need to examine their own response to this social malaise.

### A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Because of the multi-religious nature of the Caribbean islands, any loosely defined use of the word Christian can prove to be misleading.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term will be used in reference to any religious community that recognizes Jesus Christ as its founder. These communities reflect at least three basic positions on carnival celebrations.

Catholics and Anglicans display a sense of tolerance to carnival. Some priests from both traditions have participated as masqueraders. One prominent Catholic layman expressed the view that “carnival and creativity are synonymous”. In addition, Cecil Colthrus believes “a Christian’s involvement can bring about this creative idea in all its radiance so that all that is said and done give glory to God.”<sup>23</sup>

Anglican Canon, Knolly Clarke, believes that “carnival is a National Festival and that people should celebrate carnival if they wish to do so.”<sup>24</sup> It forms part of the historical development of our country, and very much part of our culture.”<sup>25</sup> In response to the question of inappropriate behavior, Clarke believes it is up to the individual to decide how to conduct himself on carnival days.

Another basic position on carnival is held by a group of churches that see the Catholic-Anglican position as being too liberal and the evangelical position, too fundamentalist. Here are churches that want to be more open to culture. For instance, the general feeling among Methodists is that there is still too much good in carnival to allow the festival to be destroyed. Hence, the annual festival is endorsed, with expressions of concern about lewd behavior.

Evangelical churches tend to be much less tolerant in their response. Some believe the unconfirmed pagan origins make carnival unacceptable and even abominable. When added to the debauchery mentioned earlier, carnival in every form is anathematized. Interestingly, the Hindu and Muslim communities share similar ethical concerns.

In all the responses, very little analysis centers on the legitimate quest for joy. Although valuable, too much time is consumed in discussing culture, patriotism and inappropriate

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<sup>22</sup> Burton Sakeralli, “Christianity: Syncretism or Obeah?” *Groundings: Catholic Theological Reflections on Issues Facing Caribbean People in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* 32 (2014): 59-68.

<sup>23</sup> Barrow, 11: Citing Cecil Colthrus in an unpublished paper, “Carnival and the Christian”, 1987, 1.

<sup>24</sup> “In Trinidad and Tobago to ‘Dingolay’ refers to any activity that is undertaken with spontaneous, joyful, and carefree abandon.” E. G. Flett, “Dingolayin’,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 12; Citing Knolly Clarke in an unpublished paper, “Views on Carnival in Trinidad”, November 1987, 1.

behavior. In the process, the issue of lasting joy is being ignored. Furthermore, many contend that carnival breaks down ethnic and societal walls. For how long after the celebrations is this apparent utopia evident? Would a social audit confirm “a clean bill of health?”

Some evangelicals testify that after experiencing a personal faith in Christ, no longer was there an ongoing desire to participate in carnival. Some of this may be nothing but religious conditioning. However, other converts, without that conditioning, no longer sense the need to participate. How does one account for this change?

I will argue that at least two things may be able to account for that change. In the first place, there is a spiritual conviction that calls for a dissociation from activities that do not foster growth for the new faith in Christ. Despite the rhetoric to undermine these convictions, increasing incidents confirm the validity of the testimonies.

However, because cultural and artistic expressions are so much a part of carnival, any attempt to divorce oneself from carnival can be perceived as being anti-cultural and unpatriotic. The issue for evangelicals is not anti-culturalism and/or the lack of patriotism; it is the appropriateness of carnival celebrations. Are there more appropriate ways to celebrate joy? Can a Christian worldview accommodate a theology of joy?

### A THEOLOGY OF JOY

Harvey Cox ably summarizes the gist of this chapter, in his contribution to *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*. In this volume he appeals for “a theology which is a rediscovery of the celebrative aspects of life, the goodness of the flesh, the wonderful gift of joy, and that which . . . affirms our hope for the future.”<sup>26</sup> Is such a theology possible?

The Bible breathes a spirit of joy and gives a strong base from which to begin this exploration. Many might even be surprised to discover that there are more New Testament references to joy than to all of sadness, weeping, mourning, anguish, anger and distress put together.

Jesus embodies joy.<sup>27</sup> His personal style makes it natural for him to express his understanding of the coming kingdom in terms of joyful celebration as in a marriage feast, a welcome home, the acquisition of a treasure, the finding of a lost coin, or a lost sheep. In attempting a psychological definition of joy, J.A. Hadfield believes that

*Joy is the affective tone which accompanies the expression of any one instinct in conformity with the sentiments of the self. Thus we speak of the joy, and not the pleasures of motherhood, for although the mother is for the time being entirely dominated by this emotion, its expression is in complete harmony with the feelings of the self.*<sup>28</sup>

At least four truths emerge, as one attempts to unpack Hadfield’s definition.

Firstly, there is the consistency between the expression. This truth establishes the intrinsic relationship between the expression and the individual expressing same. Hence, one’s state of mind will affect one’s expression. Here is an appeal for authenticity. Unless one’s state of

<sup>26</sup> Harvey Cox, “The Problem of Continuity,” in Frederick Herzog, ed., *The Future Hope: Theology as Eschatology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 80.

<sup>27</sup> Editor’s note: The Lucan writings about Christ are replete with joyous moments, despite many episodes of trials and tribulation. In Luke’s second volume, for example, it can justifiably be said that “[t]here is more than enough divine joy to go around!” *The Book of Acts: A Concise Caribbean Commentary* (Kingston: DeoVolente, 2018), 104.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals* (London: Methuen, Methuen, 1920), 151. Emphasis added.

mind and expression of joy are compatible, authentic joy cannot be experienced. The people of Israel experienced this in Babylon. Their “tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?’” The issue here is not geographical. Rather, the issue concerns the consistency between their state of mind and their singing songs of joy.

Earlier I cited Derek Walcott as one who contended that for many, carnival was a kind of sham, behind which one can discover images of pain and despair.<sup>29</sup> Could such persons experience authentic joy? Wouldn’t carnival celebrations be sublimation, in that it merely compensates for something authentic? Or, to borrow the words of Lloyd Brown, wouldn’t carnival be “a celebration of life in defiance of all those ills which partly inspire the need for escape?”<sup>30</sup> A biblical understanding of joy requires authenticity and as such does not parallel the joy of carnival which is inconsistent with the realities of the celebrants.

Hadfield’s definition of joy further suggests that joy expresses itself in movement. Liturgical dancer, Celeste Schroeder, observes that “joy is marked by living movement.”<sup>31</sup> She contends that God the author of movement has choreographed life with the distinctive of motion; the sea, wind, rivers and the earth.

Interestingly, even Jesus, in his admonitions to his generation, recorded in the gospel accounts of Matthew 11: 16-19 and Luke 7: 31-35, remarks on the people’s lack of response, neither dancing or mourning, their physical response or lack thereof revealing an inner reality.

In Hebraic culture, both mourning and dancing took physical form from the sways and rolls of lament to the joyful bursts of dance. The Psalmist echoes the relationship between joy and dance in proclaiming, “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever” (Psalm 30: 11-12).

It is in this area of movement, the church has much to learn from carnival celebrations and non-church related activities. Attend a football game and see the exhilaration and exuberance displayed by supporters. There is a consistency between the depth of emotions and the exuberance in movement. Christians claim that an encounter with God demands emotional involvement. Terms like ecstasy, rapture and wonder are often used to describe encounters with God. However, there is often the absence of exuberance in movement that parallels the alleged emotional encounter Christians claim to experience.

One is not arguing for an exuberance in movement that is similar to the carnival-type expressions. Instead, one is arguing for an exuberance that is compatible with the depth of, and sobriety of the emotions experienced in encounters with God. The absence of that exuberance leaves more doubt than conviction, that an encounter had really taken place.

Far too often Christians allow cultural norms, and often foreign cultural norms, to dictate the nature of their exuberance in movement. This results in an inconsistent lifestyle that baffles any coherent thinker. For instance, imagine a Christian known for vigorous outbursts at sporting activities; every area of her life is characterized by similar outbursts, except when she is in worship. How can this inconsistency be reconciled?

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<sup>29</sup> Walcott, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>31</sup> Celeste Schroeder, “Dance as a Posture of Joy,” *Crux*, Vol. 30 March 1994, 1.

Carnival challenges the Christian to harmonize emotional encounters with exuberance that reflect the essence of the alleged emotions. The spirit of this exuberance was demonstrated after the Lord led Moses and the children of Israel through the Red Sea. It was during that outburst “Miriam...took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her with tambourines and dancing” Exodus 15:20).

In the third place, Hadfield’s definition of joy suggests that joy is a response. In this regard, one cannot ignore the stimulant that triggers the response. In Hebraic culture, dance was associated with joy, but particularly to joy as a response to God’s grace. In various ways, God participated in the ‘dailyness’ of the lives of his people. Often, their response was a deep joy which affected the totality of who they were. As a dancer, Schroeder contends that “a physical gesture usually is a response to what is already occurring within our inner life.”<sup>32</sup> She sees dance as merely one posture in the rainbow of movement. Is one therefore equating the carnival dance with dancing before the Lord? Certainly not!

In that dancing before the Lord should reflect the character of the Person for whom the dance is being offered should self evident. In addition, the dance is not intended to be a release of the dancer’s tensions. Instead, the dance should be a reverent response to an awareness of God’s personhood or His sovereign acts. As a result, dancing for the Christian should be characterized by reverence and grace—it is actually an act of worship, in that it is an offering to God.

Indeed, dancing at carnival is a response, However, it is evident that that response is not as a result of any divine stimuli. In some instances, the stimuli reflect a need to release tension. Unfortunately, there are cases of immoral intentions. These stimuli produce responses that are far removed from reverence and grace; hence, the incidents of debauchery and anti-social behaviour.

There is a fourth dimension of joy that is implied by Hadfield’s definition. This concerns the spontaneous abandonment that is inherent in joy. It is in this area that expressed joy contains risk. Risk is inevitable because spontaneity is involved. Spontaneity incorporates the idea of charting virgin territory. Like Siamese twins, spontaneity and abandonment go hand in hand. Children best illustrate this as they sometimes throw themselves into the arms of parents without notice. However, this apparent reckless behaviour is undergirded by a trust in the person to whom the child is abandoning self.

For the Christian, expressing joy is no different. It is spontaneous in that one does not program it. One cannot program a response; whenever that is attempted, the response is devoid of authenticity. However, the absence of programming should not suggest unrestrained behaviour. Spontaneity, as all of life, is under God’s control and as such should reflect propriety that befits worship.

In addition, the abandonment that is such an integral part of expressing joy, is not nebulous for the Christian. It is an intentional surrender of one’s body to holy ecstasy, to awe and wonder. Schroeder’s description of dance approximates the point being made. “The posture of dance,” she argues, “is full of risk. If I jump I must believe the ground will receive and cushion my body. I continue to push past my own boundaries, reaching and pulling into gravity, my body takes me beyond where I think I can go ... in a sense it is throwing ourselves into life completely.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

It is the kind of abandonment in which we experience states of elevated bliss. Isaiah may have experienced this when he was entrusted with a vision of the Lord (Isaiah 6). The psalmist may also have experienced this abandonment when writing Psalm 150. When touched by the wonder of God, the psalmist passionately called on the instruments of music to exult in praise to God; and, just in case he omitted any instruments from his list, he abandoned caution and proclaimed, “let everything that has breath, praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6).

One must admit carnival encourages abandonment. A cursory study of the calypsos and the revelry that accompany the celebrations are indicative of a freedom that celebrants do not enjoy at other times in the year. However, because this abandonment was never stimulated by noble impulses, the outcome cannot be compatible with the awe, rapture and sense of bliss that results from abandonment to God. Abandonment that results in dehumanizing behaviour, exploitation and abuse, cannot represent acts of God.

For instance, celebrations among the Jews in the Old Testament were a normal part of life. Such occasions were joyous and served to bind families and the nation. However, amidst the celebrations, the Jews were expected to consider those who were less favoured. The Sabbath and sabbatical-year ordinances were designed to foster social and economic equality and inculcate important covenant community principles. For instance, these ordinances encouraged forgiveness in the remission of debts, respect for persons created in the image of God in the manumission of slaves, and the practice of generosity and the idea of stewardship in the redistribution of the covenant land. In other words, biblical celebrations were intended to bring relief and delight to all and not to an elite group of investors.

Jesus was outraged at that kind of abuse in the courtyard of the temple. Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for their thoughtlessness when they met as church to participate in fellowship and communion. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructs them to discontinue the practice of getting drunk on wine that leads to debauchery. In each case cited, the biblical principle is clear: the ministry of the church is to enhance and not degrade.

Unfortunately, the evangelical community finds itself incapable of intelligently challenging the degrading elements of carnival. The silence, inconsistent responses, total withdrawal from the activities, and thoughtless criticism, are indicative of the confusion that exists among many churches.

Much of the anti-carnival rhetoric concerns non-issues. At times it becomes hilarious as one hears local preachers condemning the evils of carnival before their own congregations, who already share the ministers’ views. Interestingly, outside of those protective confines of the local church, nothing further is said. The church has not as yet earned the respect of the community to respond intelligently to the issues of carnival. To the best of my knowledge, no one has attempted to respond to carnival as a nation’s quest for joy.

One of the challenges facing the evangelical community is the apparent inability to have a united voice. Hence, no sense of consensus is evident. That alone weakens one’s position in addressing a national issue. Apart from the need to provide a united stance, the community needs to be able to speak with perspicuity.

Equivocal criticisms have created embarrassment and have marginalized evangelicals as anti-cultural and unpatriotic. Unfortunately, the charges are often true in that many worship experiences are so foreign in content that listening to a recording may leave doubts as to the location of the service. Many find it easier to duplicate foreign outreach programs, rather than utilize indigenous resources. In other words, evangelicals have earned for themselves titles

that are foreign, outmoded and insensitive. In light of these evaluations, one is prone to ask: **can** this image be reversed? Can carnival be redeemed?

### CONCLUSION

Considering the national acceptance given to carnival, one can appreciate the sense of being overwhelmed--a feeling so often experienced by some concerned evangelicals. However, with the assurance that this battle is the Lord's, there is hope. After much introspection, the church needs to establish a clear sense of mission to do something definite about carnival. For instance, someone needs to determine what is the best course of action to be taken. Should the church withdraw or attack? Or, is infiltration a more desirable approach? Whatever the choice, there are consequences to be faced.

Attempts will also have to be made to affirm culture. There are various elements that are amoral and can be appreciated and affirmed. The same applies to creative artistic expressions. For instance, there is nothing wrong with calypso and the steel band. Because these art forms have been used almost exclusively for non-Christian causes does not negate the value of the forms.

Christians need to remember that only 300 years ago, the singing of hymns was not generally accepted in many churches. John Bunyan for instance, attempted to introduce hymns in his church and split the congregation as a result. After his death in 1691, the church reached a compromise. Those consciously opposed to the hymn could either sit through the hymn singing in silence or remain in the vestibule until that portion of the service was over.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the hymns which are commonly accepted in church today, were rejected yesterday. Hence, evangelicals need to be able to determine that which is constant from that which transitory. To be able to make that distinction can result in significant attitudinal changes and benefit to people of God.

There are certain situations where carnival can provide opportunities for ministry. Participation can provide opportunities for restoring dignity and respect to people. Celebration can acquire new meaning. Themes from real-life situations and biblical characters can educate, inform and entertain without resorting to debauchery. Family emphases and intentional attempts to instill values can be taught in some of the most artistic ways. Culture and creativity could be affirmed without sexual overtones. Lewdness and exploitation can be overcome with strong and intentional counter-strategies. One has every reason to believe that enthusiasm can be generated without drunkenness. Participation can provide opportunities to demonstrate authentic rhapsody and praise. In addition, here is an opportunity to reinforce the construct that there is a difference between hilarity and vulgarity.

It is not enough to be saying how it ought not to be done. The time has come for intelligent, intentional alternatives. Biblical joy is infectious and should be evident every moment of the day and not only at carnival. However, the demands for relevance are too great for the church to respond in silence. *Selah.*

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<sup>34</sup> Steve Miller, *The Contemporary Christian Music Debate: Worldly Comprise or Agent of Renewal?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 119.