

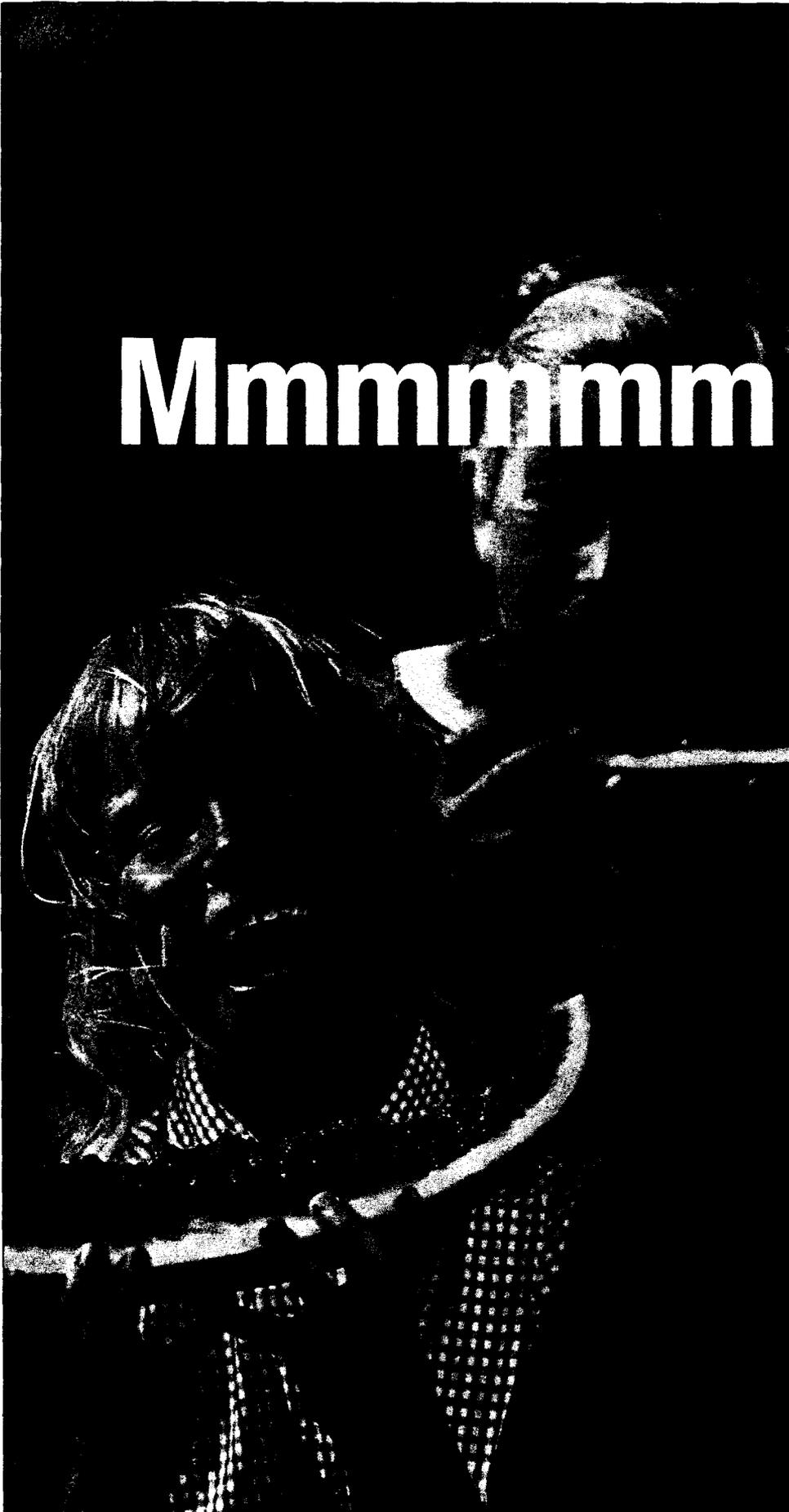


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Mmmmmmm . . . Good

Celebrating the

In Basel, Switzerland, you celebrate *Fasnacht* (Mardi Gras) after the Lenten season has begun, just to show how Reformed you are. Even though the bridegroom is indeed absent (Matt. 9:14-15), why should we follow the millennium-old church discipline of fasting for all 40 days before

Easter comes? Even many Roman Catholics make the tourist trek to Basel for a second fling during Lent before sobering up for the prescribed church regulations. I must admit it was a lot of fun as a student in Basel in 1956, dressed in my red-and-white-striped pajamas for

costume, dancing through the winding inner-city streets behind the many *fiif* and drum corps, sitting in cafes to feast on Swiss quiche and beer while discussing Barth and Cullmann's theology. Although Lent has been a sometimes thing for our Dutch Reformed faith tradition, we usually are pretty sober faced.

So have you ever wondered about God's basic gift of pleasure to humans and why so many Christians are afraid to enjoy their sensual nature? Is there a redemptive way to eat and drink with joy, to relish chocolate, to satisfy one's sexual desires? Or does one

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gift of sensuous pleasure

by Calvin Seerveld

evil hedonistic age and the constant atrocities around the world put the kibosh on followers of Christ satisfying the sense experience?

PLEASURE IS GOOD

When God created them, God saw the radiant sunrise and colorful sunset as good (Gen. 1:14-18). The Lord is tickled at watching trees suck up water and grow verdant foliage; God likes the feel of darkness when beasts in the forest stalk prey (Ps. 104:14-23).

God was happy to make Joseph good looking; young Joseph had a fine figure, says the Bible (Gen. 39:6). And part of the promise the Lord gave God's people for the time coming when all tears will be wiped away from our faces is that God will serve up choice meat and full-bodied wines (Isa. 25:6-8). God respects what is visible, sensible, shapely, and pleasant to the senses.

Although it was humiliating for God in Jesus Christ to become a man (Phil. 2:5-8), God became incarnate, embodied, fleshed, as we men and women are. God was not ashamed to walk around on two legs, to eat fish, to sweat and urinate. That's the good way God created us men and women to be. The fact that Jesus grew up, became tired, hungry, and thirsty but was without sin (Heb. 4:14-16) is something worth thinking about.

Our bodily processes like digestion, defecation, sleeping, maturation, and aging are normal marvels of the Lord's

creative ingenuity. It pleased God to make us not unchanging, disembodied spirits or ethereal ghosts but concrete, tactile, sensing bodily creatures. God even wants to resurrect us *bodily* somehow from the grave (1 Cor. 15:42-50), so important is our corporeal, creatural nature to the redeeming Almighty Creator.

To take delight in the warmth of ordinary sunlight on your skin and to be refreshed by a cool glass of water on your dry palate is a pure gift from God. To feel the fabric of silk or wool between your fingertips and to have your flesh breathe through cotton underwear is a wonder of experience often unnoticed until you lose such sensations. The smell of freshly baked bread and the aroma of a brew of coffee, especially if you are tense, can be moments of grace in your life. Even a stab of pain can be a redemptive warning that your tooth, a muscle, or a bone needs repairing.

Human senses situate us smack in God's fantastic world. It is the actual hug of a mother or father that impresses a child with love, not just the stated intention. It is the pressure of a kiss on lips or cheek and the gentle touch of a caress that signal commitment, restrained passion, and promise. It is the tone of voice,

as much as the message itself, that carries the meaning of compassion or hate implied in words.

The delicate song of a husky alto voice or the bell-like ring of a countertenor touch a person's humor with cheer. The tactility of Barlach's wood



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sculpture (see p. 18) invokes tenderness that makes one long for Jesus' handclasp of forgiving acceptance. The spacious feel of restfulness in a room where the architect has considered light sources, ventilation, human proportions and movement patterns, drastically affects the quality of life possible in its environs. Whenever our sight or hearing is impaired, and if we become insensitive to taste, odors, or touch, then we men and women are more than *challenged*: we are deprived of a goodness in God's world, no matter how much we over-compensate. Sense pleasure is a God-



Ernst Barlach, *Das Wiedersehen*, Christ greeting Thomas after the resurrection, walnut wood, 1926.

cation begs for more and more, especially if your existence is troubled or you want to escape feeling miserable.

God has set creational limits to our senses to protect us against sinning: the intense satisfaction of an orgasm is relatively brief; at a certain point our taste buds become surfeited by sweets; the immense kick of a tobacco high in our blood gradually smokes out our lungs; too much alcohol depresses our spirits and corrodes our livers.

If we become enslaved by pleasures, we are punished by becoming cruel to our bodies or to others in a way that lays our passions waste (Titus 3:3). Sensations wear out, even as we try to prolong or intensify them. Inordinate pleasures choke our life to immaturity, taught Jesus (Luke 8:14). Indulging sense

satisfaction disproportionately seems to block the development of more complex human delights and tends to reduce human joy to mere enjoyment and the exuberant wonder of happiness to a dull state of lassitude.

The devil is a maniac and tries to make us humans manic on pleasure, to make us go overboard. That's what the principality of hedonism is all about: you are caught in the power of calculating how to get the most pleasure possible without suffering a hangover, or worse. Then desire becomes an insatiable craving, things sensuous turn sensual, and you become distracted by the enchantment of pleasure as a coveted luxury. The hedonistic man or woman restlessly hyperventilates in the pursuit of sensational revelry. People driven by seeking pleasure become aggressive,

warlike, covetous, blinded by lust (however respectable looking), and therefore become good for nothing (see James 4:1-3). God's gift of pleasure is ruined into a distraction.

THE PHARISAIC PLOY

There is more than one way to trick a sinner. If the devil leads us men and women into prostituting pleasure by getting us to worship it so we become playboys and playgirls, the opposite evil of long historical standing is to promote a killjoy spirit.

Ancient Greek and Roman Stoics and Cynics (the "dogs" the apostle Paul said to beware of, Phil. 3:2) believed pleasure was by nature evil. You should steel yourself against being sensitive to whatever is delectable, they said; don't become dependent on material delights outside the control of your mind because then you are at the mercy of what is not rational. There is no *veritas in vino* (truth in wine). Physical satisfactions below the belt are not human—that's your animal nature, the source of everything destructive to humanity and society! Flee bodily desire, and shun what is pleasure-friendly if you would be virtuous. If you don't develop apathy, said the Stoics, you will become a pathetic figure.

It was easy for Christians to adopt this pagan, spiritualistic denigration of what is fleshly physical because the whole Jewish legalistic tradition in force among the early followers of Christ had localized sin to specific things you should and should not do: don't touch a dead body, wash your hands before eating, don't

given richness and was created to be good.

THE DEVIL'S GAMBIT

"Has God said you should never drink a rum and Coke or taste liquor? Don't you know that even the Scriptures say, 'Wine is good for what ails you'" (see 1 Tim. 5:23)?

Satan is a mastermind at corrupting what the Lord God has made good. Satan does it by isolating creatural good, exaggerating its importance. So the devil perverts what God gives us in trust by seducing us into making pleasure an idol that stands by itself supposedly for us to manipulate. Pleasure then becomes something we live for, instead of our receiving pleasure as a gift, an accompanying surprise to normal activities.

Once we humans aim to get pleasurable sensations we have walked into the devil's trap. That's because sense gratifi-

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travel more than a stone's throw on the Sabbath, attend worship at the new moon (see Num. 19:11-22, Isa. 1:10-20, Matt. 15:1-2). But whenever a community issues taboos as a foolproof method to manage evil and ensure its members become good, that group of people is begging to become self-righteous.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had that problem, looking down their noses at profligate women and tax collectors (Matt. 11:16-19, John 8:3-11), blind to the fact that their own hearts were bigoted cesspools of greed, slander, and murder (Luke 16:14, 18:9-14, 23:13-25). Such authoritarian church leaders who have guilty sexual consciences are terribly hard on others—forbidding the pleasures of marriage, demanding abstinence from certain foods, rejecting sportive activity—and hopelessly wrong, writes God through Paul to Timothy, because whatever God has created is good if it can be received with prayerful, celebrative thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:1-10).

The spiritualism of the ascetic, denying the pleasures given us by God, is even worse than the materialism of the secularist who idolizes such enjoyment into a distraction. Such Pharisees pretend to be righteous when we really are only aggressive, selfish, abusive, inhuman (*astorgoi*, devoid of normal feeling), conceited, hardened sinners. Avoid both godless and counterfeit godly people, says Scripture (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

REDEMPTIVE SCRIPTURAL DIRECTION

Beware of scoffers who use the media to wallow in their lascivious passions, laced with impieties (Jude 18). Also beware of the hypocrites who are so uptight about the distraction of pleasure that they reject what God made good (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

The Bible sings with approval about the intoxicating sensuous pleasure of sexual love enjoyed by those whose

vows of troth are sure (Prov. 5:15-19, Song of Songs 4:9-15, 6:2-3, 7:10-8:3,6-7). The refrain of Ecclesiastes affirms ever more certainly that to enjoy food and drink and have pleasure in your work and fun with your spouse, if you have one, are gifts from God to receive and celebrate, especially when you are young (11:9-12:1), since such providential pleasures are basic to a life of loving God-service.

It was Jesus himself who demonstrated the need to turn the Pharisaic ethic upside down by converting the large vats of water set aside to wash and purify hands and feet before meals into gallons and gallons of choice wine, better than California's best, to make merry at a wedding (John 2:1-11). Jesus' deed, his first miracle, is not a license to get drunk at wedding parties, but it certainly ends the strain of abstemious killjoys.

It is not the sensuous pleasure of tasting fresh sourdough bread, mature Brie cheese, and a glass of red wine by candlelight that makes you impure; it is the ascetic work-righteous, sanctimonious lust in your heart that makes eating and drinking sinful (Matt. 15:1-20). It is not the sexual ecstasy of bodily intercourse that serves a false god; it is the disparagement of gentle marriage or the desire to possess another person for your own benefit that converts sexual joy into private rape, however legal it may appear.

The Lord created us sensible, bodily humans to enjoy God's gift of pleasure, but we find multiple, devious ways to smear its enjoyment with evil. The prayer of the tormented Augustine in his *Confessions* as he struggled to be both passionate and pure is terribly poignant: "Give me chastity and continence . . . but not yet!" (8.17).

Unlike the argumentative, controlling hypocrites who pretend never to have

committed murder or adultery (Matt. 5:21-30), the believer Augustine demonstrates the truth of the revelation in James's letter: that the distracting temptation of pleasure can produce in the faithful followers of Christ an enduring, seasoned maturity for receiving the Lord's good gifts (James 1:2-8).

Whether we respond with thanksgiving to our created capacity for godly pleasure—for example, the experience of a healing, reassuring massage—or prefer to forego enjoyment of the Lord's gift of pleasant sensuous gladness during Lent, let us magnify the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31-33).

I hope that if you feel anemic in pleasure, handicapped by a lack of pleasure or a world-and-life vision that avoids pleasure, you will feel invited by our Lord—since Christ's bodily resurrection has taken place—to join hands with the sense-deprived villagers of the film *Babette's Feast*. Dance a lovely, sensuous circle of praise to God, who created us and pleasures for us to offer them back to our Maker and "fully to enjoy God forever" (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 1).



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