

This devotional was given during Women's Awareness Week 2007 at the General Conference Morning Worships in Silver Spring, MD. The devotional may have some portions specific to the writer. If you use the material, please edit to be sure it is understood that these are the writer's personal experiences.

**The Original Celebration Movement:
Biblical Perspectives on a Balanced Life**
By Bonita Shields

When I attended public middle school, I considered becoming Jewish.

It wasn't that I stopped believing in Jesus, or that I had embraced Jewish beliefs. My motives were far from being spurred on by conviction. The reason was it seemed that every other week my Jewish classmates got out of school to have parties.

The teacher would inform us, "Scott won't be coming to school for the next couple of days because he's Jewish and his family is celebrating Yom Kippur."

"Mayra won't be with us this week because her family is Jewish and they're celebrating Hanukkah..."

An entire week!

I decided not to convert – giving up Christmas and Easter Holidays would have been too much for me.

I was asked to share with you this morning a biblical perspective on a balanced life. I considered talking about the Sabbath, and the rest and balance that that brings – or should bring – to our lives each week. I also considered sharing the wisdom of Jethro, and how he finally persuaded his son-in-law Moses to give up the idea of being Superman by trying to be the sole judge of more than a million people. And I've already heard someone share this week about the need for spending time with God. So I've decided to reach back into our Jewish roots and share an aspect of life that we tend to neglect in our Western, fast-paced, driven, individualistic society: *celebration*.

God's Original Celebration movement

If you read through the Hebrew Scriptures (aka the Old Testament), you'll find what I call "God's Original Celebration movement." In the book of Leviticus we find several festivals that God instituted. We tend to view them as "the ceremonial laws," and, thus, legalistic. I want to highlight a few for you:

- **The Feast of weeks** (known as Pentecost in the Christian calendar) is found in Lev. 23:15-21. What is the purpose of this feast? To celebrate when the wheat was harvested.

- **The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths)** is found in Lev. 23:33-44. The purpose of this feast was to celebrate the close of the grain, olive, and fruit season. It's called the Feast of Booths because men would build booths close to their crops so that they could harvest it quickly before the storms would destroy them.
- **The Feast of Dedication (or Lights).** This feast, known by most people as Hanukkah, is referred to only in John 10:22. It was instituted by Judas Maccabees to celebrate the restoration of the Temple and the dedication of its new altar after its three-year desecration by the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes IV (168-165 BC). It lasts eight days.

Throughout Judaism I find the idea of celebrating. David danced before the Lord, singing and dancing. He also gave his people bread and date and raisin cakes with which to celebrate. In the book of Nehemiah we see how the people, upon hearing the laws of God read, proceeded to weep. But Nehemiah said, "Don't grieve. Don't be sad. Eat delicacies, drink sweet drink, and celebrate. Share your food with each other, and with those who have none. Do not grieve. For the joy of the Lord is your strength."

What does all of this have to do with our discussion of balance?

I don't think God gave these commands about these and other feasts so the people would have enough laws to obey. And Nehemiah is an excellent example of our misguided belief that to hear and obey God means we are to live in sackcloth and ashes. I think God commanded His people to celebrate because we can become so driven, that we forget to celebrate life, and to celebrate the God who gives us that life – today.

A friend said once with an air of frustration, "Life is *so* daily." And I can resonate with that – especially when doing laundry. But I ask questions of you that I ask of myself, "Am I trying so hard to accomplish more and more and more, that I've lost the ability to enjoy life at the daily level? Am I so stressed to complete the things on my to-do list, so I can check them off and go on to the next ones that I'm missing the moments of Life?" Have I bought into the erroneous idea that I must be in a state of constant busyness in order to be active in the Lord's work?

I find my soul *craving* for the dailyness of life – sans laundry, of course! I hear through Scripture the Lord calling His people to celebrate life – today. Is it possible that if we seek more things from the *dailyness* of life to celebrate, the mundane would take on more meaning? And is it possible that if we recapture the ability to appreciate life for what it is now, rather than seek to start up the next project, so we can finish that one, and go onto the next project...that our driven search for more – things as well as activities – will cease to control us? That what we have and are will be enough?

The Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles remind us to celebrate the basic gift of life – food. Hanukkah reminds us to celebrate God's deliverance and watch care. With our modern conveniences, and having our fruit, vegetables, grains, etc., brought to us in

plastic wrap, I think we forget how much there is to celebrate in the gift of having food to harvest. I can't help but believe that our being so far disconnected from the land, and from the dependence on the elements for our livelihood and sustenance, clouds our minds to how truly dependent we are on God for life. We could celebrate after we come home from the supermarket and unload our bags into the cupboards...and we could call it the Feast of Trader Joe's.

Celebrating doesn't require the commercialism and posh extravagance that characterizes many celebrations. And please don't feel compelled to try to keep up with the outrageous standards that have been set up for celebrating in our society. What is required is a grateful heart.

When was the last time we celebrated life for the simple reason that we enjoyed living it? What if we celebrated when we learned something new? What about celebrating that good news telling us the cancer wasn't malignant? What about celebrating the discovery that your teenager turned down some peer's offer to experience drugs? THAT'S worth celebrating!

While pastoring at Spencerville Church, one Sabbath I decided to take my small group leaders to an Orthodox Jewish Synagogue. I wanted us to experience a synagogue service as close to the biblical service as possible.

The Friday afternoon before, I went to the synagogue office to speak with the office assistant. I wanted to make sure that none of us offended anyone, so I had her give me a "practice run" of how we should conduct ourselves that morning, such as wearing of veils and yamachas, as well as walking thorough the proper doors.

As the assistant and I were standing in the foyer talking, a group of boys came through the foyers, hands firmly planted on each other's shoulders, dancing, and singing. I asked her what that was all about. She said, "Oh, they've just learned a portion of the Torah, and they're celebrating!"

Let us stop trying to steal tomorrow from God's hands. Let us celebrate life, and how God is blessing us – today. Let us be faithful in doing the work that God has called us to do – without trying to do next week's and next month's work today. Let us remember that God is the author of the original celebration movement.

I still haven't converted to Judaism. But I'm still trying to figure out how I can get off a week of work to celebrate that I got around to cleaning my house.