

Two Parties—or what's true religion?

The next party Tony related took place in Hawaii.



He had arrived in Honolulu late at night, ravenously hungry. At 3:30 in the morning, everything was closed except a side street café—"one of those sleazy places that deserves the name 'greasy spoon.'" Not wanting to touch the filthy menu, he ordered a cup of coffee and a donut.

The solitude of the early morning was broken as the door of the diner swung open, and, much to his discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocatively dressed and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place and their talk was loud and crude. Feeling completely out of place and just about to make his getaway, he was suddenly stopped in his tracks when he overheard the woman sitting beside him say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on!" said the woman sitting next to Tony. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I don't want anything from you. I mean,

why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

That conversation changed Tony's plans. Waiting until the women were gone, he inquired of the man behind the counter whether the women came in every night.

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one that was sitting right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A smile slowly crossed the owner's chubby face and he answered enthusiastically. "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" "Hey! Come out here!" he shouted to his wife, who was cooking in the back room. "This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her right here tomorrow night!"

His wife, obviously happy about the idea, exclaimed, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, but nobody ever does anything nice for *her*!"

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry. "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning Tony was back at the diner. He had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" When the diner was decorated from one end to the other, it really looked good.

Word must have gotten out, because by 3:15 it seemed like every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes ... and Tony!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. Tony had everybody ready. "Happy Birthday!" they all screamed in unison!

Never had anyone been so flabbergasted ... so stunned ... so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter, everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to her. The fight to hold herself together was lost when the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, and Agnes broke down in huge sobs. Finally composing herself, she

looked down at the cake and slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I ... I mean is it okay if I kind of ... what I want to ask you is ... is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then looking at Tony she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

Getting off the stool and picking up the cake like it was life's dearest treasure, she walked slowly toward the door. As they all stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, Tony broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Tony prayed for Agnes. He prayed for her salvation. He prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. He prayed for the salvation of the others. When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter, and said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, he answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry paused a moment, then he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. *I'd join a church like that!*"

Tony summed up his story this way. "Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning? Well, that's the kind of church Jesus came to create. He doesn't know where we got the other one that's so prim and proper. But anybody who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with whores and with all kinds of left-out people. The publicans and sinners loved Him because He partied with them. The lepers of society found in Him someone who would eat and drink with them. And while the solemnly pious could not relate to what He was about, those lonely people who usually didn't get invited to parties took to Him with excitement: Our Jesus was and is the Lord of the party."

Tony added as an afterthought, "Now it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do."

I began thinking about some questions: Why do people throw parties? What would keep me from throwing a party similar to one of the ones above? Maybe I would feel uncomfortable or ill at ease to find myself in a situation like this. But if so, why would I feel that way? What would keep us from being willing to put ourselves on someone else's level? What would keep us from operating outside of the norm? Would it be easier to do out-of-the-box things if we were already in the habit of doing so? I'm sure if Jesus were here physically, I'd have a good chance of finding Him in a similar situation.—Throwing a "party" for those who have never had one!

It's food for thought, isn't it? I think we could all gain from asking ourselves similar questions and letting the Lord show us His answers. Who knows, you may find yourself throwing a party under conditions you might never have dreamed of before if you are willing to ask Him to show you how to effectively reach the "unreachable"—those who need Jesus' love so desperately.

Isn't it wonderful to know that His love through you will make a big difference in the lives of the many lonely people in your part of the world?