

On Concerts. And Facebook Posts.

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If, like me, you grew up in the church culture of the 80s and 90s, it's likely that you experienced the phenomenon of a CCM Concert. For those of us who grew up in the great state of Florida, the sparkling diamond in the Christian Concert Crown was the much-hyped "Night of Joy," held each year at Walt Disney World. It was ostensibly an evening where youth groups from all over the state would ride questionably-safe school buses in and would enjoy any number of popular Christian bands who were performing all throughout the amusement park that night. But let's be real: The true reason my friends and I were there was 1. To see what cute guys were in attendance, and bonus! Their presence must mean they were Christians, so that automatically meant they were dating material, and 2. To ride a few Disney rides and, pretending we were scared, scream until we lost our voices, which in reality was just a ploy to 3. See what cute guys were in attendance, and bonus! They'd notice us by our adorable screams.

We had, of course, carefully chosen just the right pair of acid-washed, high-waisted shorts to pair with our oversized, tucked-in-and-tightly-belted tees and perfectly coordinated with our scrunchie. Now, everyone knew you wore the scrunchie around your wrist so as not to mess up your highly-hairsprayed spiral permed hairdo, at least until the Florida humidity of approximately 8,000 % melted said hairspray, and then the scrunchie was ready to perform its God-intended purpose. But not until the cute guys had seen your hair in all its crunchy, Aussie-scented glory.

I have fond memories of those sweaty, Diet-Coke-fueled concerts. They were innocent and fun and we all rode the sticky bus seats home with tired feet and worship-depleted vocal chords. But I recently read a Facebook post about this Night of Joy event and found out that Disney World was cancelling the event after 34 years. The facts (which were not fully explained on Facebook....gasp!) are that a nearby amusement park has its own very popular, competitive worship night, and that Disney World, which has expanded exponentially in the past three decades, still hosts Christian groups for concerts in its other venues and in other ways. These details were lost on the Facebook post commenters, however, who emphatically stated that the cancellation of Night of Joy meant, and I am not joking, that Christians were being persecuted.

Since we Christians love to invoke the scripture about "speaking the truth in love," I am going to lovingly lay down some truth:

We have no idea what persecution means.

We could ask the families of the men ISIS lined up on the beach; the men who, simply because they were Christians, had their heads sliced off of their bodies as the seas behind them turned bloody.

We could ask Abraham Ben Moses, who has been imprisoned in Indonesia for talking about his faith to a taxi driver. And whose wife left him for this action of his.

We could ask Twen Theodros, imprisoned since 2004. She took beatings on behalf of a fellow prisoner who was too weak to survive them, and she has spent these 14 years in prison simply because she attended church and worshiped her God.

We could ask the men who, instead of looking under every headline for imagined persecution, night after night, walk into the grittiest, nastiest clubs in the darkest parts of town. Who risk their lives posing as men who want to buy young girls for sex. Who offer to do despicable things to those girls and then, risking their own safety, rescue those girls, quite literally saving lives. Who undertake these dangers over and over again because they believe in the holy words that teach us that we are all equal, that there is no slave nor free, no male nor female.

If we use the word “Christian” to describe ourselves, then we need to use other words just as intentionally. The word “persecution” is one we cannot toss about. We can humbly and carefully educate ourselves on what it means, and then do something to help those who know exactly what it means.

In the meantime, if you live in Florida, I’m sorry you won’t get to experience the fun that is Night of Joy. I’d humbly suggest that you take the money you would have spent on that night and donate it to a family whose father or sister or mother or daughter or brother has been arrested. Someone who is experiencing persecution. Someone who knows.

If Night of Joy were still a thing, I’d probably take my kids. Or better yet, send them without me. In the wisdom that comes with old age, I’ve learned the important things in life: That rollercoasters and over-40 equilibrium don’t line up. That the ozone doesn’t appreciate my former hairspray addiction. And that those cute boys are all grown up and having knee replacement surgeries. But thanks for the memories, Night of Joy. At least the ones I still can remember.

(For more information on these stories and more, see the websites for Voice of the Martyrs and The Exodus Road).