

# BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR PROSTITUTE

Story by Tony Campolo

Do we have an intense yearning for the souls of men and women who do not know God? Are we only concerned about the so-called respectable? How do we feel about drug addicts? How do we feel about prostitutes? How do we feel about alcoholics? The following story is told by Tony Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College, which illustrates the concern for the lost, even prostitutes. He tells the story of his visit to Honolulu for a Christian conference. Early in the morning, he ventured out of his hotel to find a coffee shop. He found a tiny coffee shop and walked in and sat down. The following is his description of the events:

The heavysset guy in a greasy apron behind the counter came over and asked me, "What do you want?" I told him I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened, swung wide and to my discomfort in marched 8 or 9 provocative and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was garrulous, loud and crude. I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman sitting next to me say, "You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39." Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Do you want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

"Come on," the women sitting next to me said, "Why do you have to be so mean? I'm just telling you that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you that it is my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Tony Campolo said, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the woman left and then I called over to the counter to the heavysset guy and asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?'" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me", I asked, "Does she come in here every night?" "Yeah," he said, "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why do you want to know?" "Because," I replied, "I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throwing a birthday party for her, right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over that heavysset man's chubby cheeks. He answered, "That's a great idea. I like it. That's great. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don't think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her." "Well, look" I told him, "If it is OK with you, I'll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I'll decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake for her." "No way," he said, "The birthday cake, that's my thing. I'll bake the birthday cake. "Two-thirty the next morning," Campolo says, "I was back at that diner. I picked up some crepe paper and other decorations at the store, and made a sign of big pieces of cardboard that read, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had that diner really looking great. The word must have gotten out on the street because by 3:15 that next morning every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There was wall-to-wall prostitutes—and me."

"At 3:30 on the dot the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready; after all, I was sort of the informal master of ceremonies of this whole affair. It was my idea, so when they came in we all jumped up and screamed and we sang, 'Happy birthday, Agnes!' And you know, I've never seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry.

When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she just lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, in his gruff voice mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes, blow out the candles.' Then he handed her a knife, and he ordered, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake." Agnes looked down at that cake, and then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean, if I don't, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure, Agnes, that's fine, you want to keep the cake, keep the cake, take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asked. Agnes looked at Tony, 'I live just down the street a couple doors; I want to take the cake home, is that OK? I'll be right back, honest.' She got off her stool, she picked up that cake, and she carried it out of that diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all stood there just speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in the place.

Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray together?" Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice he said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thought a moment, and then almost sneered as he answered, 'No you don't; there is no church like that. Because if there was one, I'd join it.'"<sup>1</sup>

As we reflect upon this story, we should ask ourselves: What is it that would entice a man to throw a birthday party for a prostitute? We cannot help but wonder if it is not a desire for the Day of Pentecost to stay alive and for others to repent and to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit and to be transformed by the power of God's Spirit into a fighting force for the cause of Christ. Is not this kind of behavior the kind of behavior manifested by Jesus in His dealings with sinful humanity? Following the healing of a paralytic (Matthew 9:1-8), Matthew gives an account of Jesus' reaction to the Pharisees' condemnation of Jesus because He ate with "tax collectors and sinners":

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" <sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'<sup>a</sup> For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (9:9-13)

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Brett Blair, "Episode II: Birth of the Church," for this story (cited verbatim). See "Episode II: birth of the Church" [ONLINE]. Available from [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com) [accessed 14 May 2009, located under SERMONS. To access the sermons on this website, one has to pay an annual fee of 69.00 (Level I).