

FAQ's about Carnaval

What is “Carnaval”?

Carnaval is a five-day festival preceding Ash Wednesday and the 40-day Lent season that leads up to Easter on the Roman Catholic calendar. Roman Catholicism requires self-denial and sacrifice during Lent. *Carnaval* allows people to release their passions before Lent begins. Excessive partying, samba parades, and indulgence of sensual appetites are typical. Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday culminates these excesses. The following day is Ash Wednesday—a day to confess and seek absolution for the excesses for the start of Lent. Those who go to confession receive a cross-shaped ash marking on the forehead as a sign they have been absolved of their *Carnaval* sins.

The decline of Catholic religious practice in many areas of Latin America has given *Carnaval* a life of its own. The festival has become a time when anyone, Catholic or not, can cast off moral restraint and do what he or she wants without suffering social or legal consequences. This is particularly true in Uruguay, since Roman Catholicism has a relatively weak impact on the culture.

How is “Carnaval” celebrated in the Latin American areas where International Missions works?

Brazil

- The *Carnaval* activity for which Brazil is most famous is the *Carnaval* parade. Held in many cities, the most infamous is in Rio de Janeiro. Samba music and dancing, elaborate costumes and floats, and myriads of scantily-clad women are hallmarks of these parades.
- Dance halls are full of people in flimsy costumes or other inadequate clothing, dancing to samba music all night long.
- *Carnaval* promotes excessive drinking and drug use to break down restraints. Many accidents (especially traffic-related) and homicides result.
- The libertine atmosphere, bare skin, and alcohol and drug abuse facilitate licentious sexually activity. A spike in STDs and unwanted pregnancies is inevitable.
- Widespread festivities receive intense media coverage. Most workers have nearly a whole week off work. Productive activity ends.

- *Carnaval* shapes Brazilian culture. What is accepted during *Carnaval* gradually becomes accepted in society.
- *Carnaval* creates a spiritual prison for participants, taking them deeper in sin and farther from a holy God.

Panama

- *Carnaval* is celebrated in Panama City, the nation's capital, during the five days preceding Ash Wednesday with much music and dancing. The highlight is a Grand Parade on Fat Tuesday. Groups representing the many cultures of Panama come from throughout the country to participate.
- Over-the-top folkloric festivals in all the small provincial cities on the Peninsula de Azuero and reaching its high point in Las Tablas are well known. Hundreds of thousands of Panamanians and foreigners travel to take part in the debauchery.
- It is increasingly common for the parades and TV programs to be totally unacceptable for the general populace. Homosexual parades with male “*Carnaval* Queens” are common. Nudity in the street and free sex in public venues is widespread.

Uruguay

- *Carnaval* Week is considered the annual national festival. While *Carnaval* is celebrated throughout the country with important events in several interior cities, the main activities are in the capital of Montevideo.
- Although officially given only two days of public holiday for *Carnaval*, the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday, most shops and businesses close for the entire week. Homes and streets are grandly decorated, humorous shows are staged at open-air theaters, and “tablados” or popular scenes (fixed and movable) are erected in the commercial districts.
- Many neighborhoods form drum and dance groups to enter in the official *Carnaval* competition. Each group has a *Carnaval* queen, typically a teenage or young adult woman wearing very little clothing, who represents her neighborhood in the city *Carnaval* parade.
- Everyone receives a month off work (either January or February). Productivity in Uruguay slows significantly until after Easter.

How does “Carnaval” reveal the spiritual needs in Latin America that exist year-round?

- *Carnaval's* pleasure-seeking and excessive indulgence reveals the deep longing of the human heart for happiness and meaning. The emptiness Latin Americans sense without Christ drives them to seek to satisfy that spiritual hunger. They are in desperate need of the knowledge of God's love extended through Christ that will bring wholeness and complete satisfaction to the soul.
- Without the knowledge of biblical truth and the opportunity to hear the gospel, many turn to worldly pursuits and sensual amusements to fill the void or to dull the aching they feel within. These do not bring lasting joy and satisfaction. Only through a personal relationship with Christ can they have abundant life.
- Many turn to the religious system they know in hopes of finding peace: the traditions of Roman Catholicism, spiritism, and pagan religion. The rules and rituals of man-made religion, regardless of how sincerely they are embraced, cannot atone for the sin that separates them from God. Their attitude about religion in general becomes jaded, but many continue to practice with some measure of hope for eternal peace. We know the answer is not to be found in religion, but in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

How do Free Will Baptists in Latin America deal with the “Carnaval” influence during the celebrations?

- In Brazil, the wantonness of *Carnaval* is extremely tempting for believers, especially the newly converted and spiritually weak. Evangelical churches traditionally plan spiritual activities to keep Christians away from this atmosphere. Taking advantage of the days off from work, many churches plan regional spiritual retreats or camps in areas removed from the temptations of *Carnaval*.
- In Panama, most Christians prefer to conduct family camps and make an exodus from the cities during *Carnaval*. However, in recent years some of our churches have chosen to take a more aggressive and pro-active approach to the

situation. Evangelistic campaigns and revival services have given a mission-mindset to the churches. Last year, the Good News Church in Chitré held a week-long evangelistic revival campaign with good results and participation.

- In Uruguay, since people are off work, a Family Camp is held at Aguas Buenas for the FWB churches. Usually attendance numbers 100-125. Classes are held during the day with preaching services in the evenings. Recreation and fellowship contribute to the value of the camp experience.