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‘Two guys go into the temple. One says to God...’

Humour, Scripture, and Christian discourse

by James and Kate Williams

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath
Swinburne¹

The Bible...is the...genesis...of comedy
Daniel Russ²

Where there is humour there is hope, and where there is hope there is humour. Persons whose faith and trust are in God, not just in themselves, are better able to have a sense of humour about themselves, their achievements, and their failures.
Conrad Hyers³

Summary

Godliness and humour have tussled in Christian history. There is more humour in the Bible than flat readings in contemporary churches might suggest. It has didactic and social functions within the larger comic framework of salvation history. We visit the shape of creation–fall–redemption to see the perversions of humour and its redeemed uses in social critique, effective communication and in strengthening community within the family of God.

Introduction

Humour is a funny thing. When you look too closely at it, it slips away, like a banana skin underfoot... There’s nothing worse than trying to explain a joke to someone who didn’t get it, except possibly having to have a joke explained to you. Formal definition is impossible, because of the variety of things that ‘humour’ might describe.⁴ It is manifested and perceived in many ways within a culture, and jokes vary from culture to culture. Under the banner of humour come puns and other wordplay; non-linguistic ambiguities; sarcasm; scatology and mention of taboo subjects; the misfortune of others, especially in slapstick; observations of absurdities in life; the ridiculousness of others or ourselves; the grotesque and other exaggeration; the out of place or unexpected; irony; gallows humour; satire; parody and lampoon; practical jokes.

Humour, laughter and comedy overlap but we have settled on the following working distinctions. Humour is a mode or guise of small units of communication, built on shared understandings of the world which it expresses and further reinforces. Comedy is a mode of larger units of communication and describes a narrative framework with a happy ending. Laughter, the spectrum of amusement from a smile to a guffaw, is the currency of humour.⁵ Feeling the fabric of humour, displayed in the list above, is not quite enough, because it is a dynamic tool for eliciting laughter and creating/reinforcing groups. It necessitates a shared understanding of the world. By laughing you show that you belong. And by laughing you show that other people don’t belong. So we, the readers and hearers of ‘humour’, are most significantly implicated in its value or corruption as we *laugh* at it, thus potentially granting assent or approval.

This paper will ask ‘(how) should we use humour?’, and in doing so will obliquely address the question ‘(when) should we laugh?’. Different people will find different things to be funny, and while some of this may be put down to culture or personality, ultimately Christ is Lord of all, demanding that our minds are transformed (Romans 12:2) and that we take every thought captive (2 Corinthians 10:5).

1 ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, in *Poems and Ballads*, London, 1866, pp.77–84, line 35.

2 ‘The Bible as Genesis of Comedy’, in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan, Dallas, 1984, pp.41–59.

3 *And God created laughter*, Atlanta, 1987, p.5.

4 Wylie Sypher, ‘The Meanings of Comedy’, in Henri Bergson, *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy*, George Meredith and Laughter, Garden City, 1956.

5 Laughter is of course not just associated with humour, but other uses (expressions of joy, embarrassment, etc.) are not our focus. For a stimulating treatment see Karl-Joseph Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Essay*, trans. John Bowden, London, 1994.

The dour Christian?

The dour Christian has persisted as a staple of visual and print media, partly as a result of a misreading of our intellectual and cultural heritage, partly because humorists within the church today garner little media attention.⁶ The image is fed by the fact that Christians may refuse to laugh (often rightly so) at the things the world laughs at and may criticise things the world likes to do, and sometimes Christians do speak and act in a humourless fashion.

Scriptures like Ecclesiastes 3:4 and Romans 12:15 enjoin a balance, however, a strong tradition in Christian thought, stemming from the patristic period, values weeping over laughing: 'This is not the theatre for laughter, neither did we come together for this intent, that we may give way to immoderate mirth, but that we may groan, and by this groaning inherit a kingdom'.⁷ Chrysostom's 'theology of tears', prefigured in Augustine, running through the monastic Rule of Benedict, has been highly influential.⁸ It called for the imitation of Christ, who 'never laughed', and the endurance of suffering – as we wait for the return of Christ in this vale of tears, and as the world persecutes us. Roman Catholic inheritors of this theology are often caricatured as permanently weeping, with a morbid fixation on Christ's physical pain, and Reformed Protestants are scorned for relentless gravity and repression. In the last two centuries theologians both liberal and evangelical have pursued agendas which largely overlook humour or comedy in the Scriptures.⁹ This neglect has influenced much popular theology and many church attitudes.

However, not all Christian thought has agreed with these dominant ideas, nor has all pagan thought been amenable to mirth. Cultural anxiety about humour and laughter, and antipathy to it, predates Christianity. There is no simple correlation between Christian faith and the suppression of humour.¹⁰ It has been argued that the influence of Stoicism and Neoplatonism, the ascendant philosophical traditions, was decisive in the decline of humour in the first centuries after Christ.¹¹ Medieval Christianity enjoyed the carnivalesque – involving folk festivals, plays, costumes, popular theology, and even the clergy. Luther and other early Reformers were well aware of the power of humour as their attacks on the papacy show. Among the illiterate peoples of Europe much Protestant teaching was spread through frequently humorous woodcuts.¹² During a flourishing of political and ecclesiastical satire in seventeenth-century England nonconformists and Anglicans wrestled with the issue of public Christian use of humour and satire.¹³ Even the world sometimes noticed Christian humour. In the late nineteenth century Americans Moody and Sankey bemused *Punch*: '[They] interpolate jokes twixt their prayers and their praises... And under a guise of seeming profanity, / As comic evangelists preach Christianity'.¹⁴

Well, where are we now? Humour *is* found in the church, but possibly without us plugging it in to our theology. It is most significant and widespread in our teaching of children. We know intuitively that humour and comic drama convey messages vividly. But do the Scriptures justify the use of humour in Christian teaching?

Holy humour?

Does the Scriptural text ever entertain us in the course of teaching us? The answer is a resounding 'yes'. In Proverbs 26:13–16 exaggeration and the grotesque are used to ridicule the sluggard's sinful way of life – so lazy that he will not even bring his hand up from the bowl to his mouth. He 'is a figure of tragicomedy, with his sheer animal laziness (...he is *hinged* to his bed, 26:14), his preposterous excuses ('there is a lion outside!' 26:13; 22:13) and his final helplessness.'¹⁵ Like contemporary rabbis Jesus weaves humour into his teaching. 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye...?' (Matthew 7:3–5). Our imagination is captured, and the mnemonic value of such humour is as clear as the speck in your brother's eye.

Test our contentions by looking for humour in these passages:

Puns/wordplay – the naming of people throughout Genesis, such as Jacob and Esau (25:25–26); Jeremiah 5:13 plays on *ruah*, 'word', 'wind' (with implications of flatulence) in the mouths of false prophets.

Ambiguity – Haman is led up the garden path (Esther 6).

Sarcasm – Paul's anger at the Judaizers (Galatians 5:12).

Scatological references – Eglon's servants thinking he was relieving himself (Judges 3).

Mention of the taboo – sex and prostitution (Ezekiel 16:33); priests and prophets vomiting drunkenly (Isaiah 28:7–8).

Misfortune of others – Balaam humiliated by his donkey (Numbers 22); the Philistines' god Dagon flat on his face and the people covered in tumours (1 Samuel 5).

Absurdities/the ridiculousness of others – Abraham and son repeating old and increasingly silly errors (Genesis 12, 20, 25); arrogance of the builders in Genesis 11; bizarre and repetitive episodes in Samson's career (Judges 13–16).

The grotesque – Eglon's fat belly swallowing up Ehud's blade; Nebuchadnezzar reduced to an animal (Daniel 4).

Things unexpected, out of place or incongruous – a camel through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:23–24); stagey bargaining in front of Sarah's corpse (Genesis 23); the LORD's mockery of creatures asserting their superiority to their creator (Isaiah 10:15).

Irony – Jesus' teaching throughout the gospels; Philip's comment that nothing good comes out of Nazareth (John 1:46); Caiaphas noting that it is better for one man to die for the people (John 11:50).

Satire – against the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14; but also through Jeremiah and most Minor Prophets.

Parody/lampoon – the LORD's mimicking of Pharaoh (Ezekiel 29:3–5); the LORD's taunt to priests and prophets (Isaiah 28:9–10); Israel's priests are dogs calling for beer (Isaiah 56:9–12).

Scripture itself provides grounds for taking humour seriously. Simply by being there in such abundance it makes the case for a Christian use of humour in teaching God's message today. Those who brought God's word and those who taught God's people under the Old Covenant used humour, as did the Word of God who came to inaugurate the New Covenant. As a communicative device, it punches the point home and aids memory: it was never just icing on the cake, or a warm-up joke to soften the crowd. Humour provides the ideal mode for promoting what is high on God's agenda; exposure of folly and hypocrisy, and the puncturing of human pride.

Isaiah 44:12–17 is bitter comic relief set within stern denunciations of Israelite idolaters. Attention to the detail of idol-making shatters the mystique of these 'gods' and shows its absurdity by exposing both their created existence and just how much effort

6 Compare the press coverage of Ship of Fools' 'The Laugh Judgement' with the frenzy over those who dared to oppose the BBC's televising (on 8 January 2005) of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

7 *St Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, New York, 1888, Homily VI.5.

8 *The Economist* reports that 95 per cent of 'important Christian scholars' have disapproved, equating humour with idleness. www.economist.com/science/displayStory.cfm?story_id=4246393

9 Very recent theological studies have begun to take humour and comedy seriously, such as Hyers' *And God created laughter*, Thomas Jemielity's *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, Westminster, 1992, and William Whedbee's *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, Cambridge, 1998.

10 See G. K. Chesterton's witty rebuttal of Swinburne's pale Galilean in *Orthodoxy*, London, 1908.

11 Jakob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by parallels in the Talmud and Midrash*, Reykjavík, 1965, p.38.

12 R. W. Scribner, *For the sake of simple folk: popular propaganda for the German Reformation*, Cambridge, 1981.

13 See Annabel M. Paterson, *Marvell and the Civic Crown*, Princeton, 1978, pp.178–223.

14 *Punch*, 20 March 1875, p.123.

15 Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Leicester, 1964, p.42.

goes into constructing them.¹⁶ The carpenter sees the value of wood as fuel to warm him but is then blind to the history of his relationship to the idol, asking it to save him though it is made of the same stuff. The welding of another idol is pronounced ‘good’, an ironic echo of God’s creative activity, before it is carefully nailed down for its own safety (41:7): how ridiculous to trust in such an unstable deity!

Paul’s extended critique of the Corinthians’ acceptance of false apostles is replete with sarcasm, mockery and exaggeration – ‘You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!’ (2 Corinthians 11:19) – designed to shame them into repentance. However, the prophets of Baal, arch-corrupters of the people of God, come in for more than harsh words. ‘At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened”’ (1 Kings 18:27). Here sarcasm was public humiliation, the shame that accompanied God’s judgement against them for apostasy. Hypocrisy is wittily rebuked in Luke 11:47–48. The Pharisees claim to honour the prophets by building tombs for them, but Jesus observes that there is another reason for digging someone’s grave – killing them (just as their fathers did).

The account of the call of Moses reveals him to be almost a parody of a prophet. He is shown wriggling to the *n*th degree to avoid speaking for God (Exodus 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13) despite patient offers of all manner of crutches. These are funny in themselves – what extra help is needed with God alongside? An effect of laughter is to shrink its object, so Exodus makes us laugh at Pharaoh, yes, but also at Moses and Aaron. Thus the glory goes to God. Judges expresses this most clearly in the call of Gideon. A boy hidden in a winepress threshing his wheat is hailed as a ‘mighty warrior’ by the angel of the LORD, and is only convinced of God’s honesty after some trivial demonstrations of miraculous power involving damp wool. When Jonah (ironically named ‘Dove, son of Faithfulness’) is ordered to preach repentance at Nineveh, he heads in the opposite direction. When brought back and forced to the city he gives the most perfunctory of warnings before storming out. Nevertheless, the whole city repents but after God’s incredible, ‘foolish’ grace to the Ninevites Jonah winds up not grateful but ‘angry enough to die’ (4:9). ‘When we look at...his self-centeredness and narrow-mindedness, his extreme behaviour, his self-contradictions, we laugh at him and, as we laugh, realize that we are laughing at ourselves’.¹⁷

A divine comedy?

This humorous figure Jonah finds himself trapped in a comic narrative. He clings to an essentially tragic (without hope) view of human relationships, wanting to see a lack of reconciliation as morally superior to the actions of ‘a God who relents from sending calamity’ (4:2), whereas the narrator and God have a comic vision of the cosmos, in which reconciliation is not only possible, but actually happens. The other main themes of the comic vision are reversal of fortune and rejoicing – expressed through a ‘u’-shaped plotline (harmony tested and restored).¹⁸

The book of Esther is a festive comedy written for and by a persecuted people: the ‘u’ shape is everywhere. It opens with grotesquely abundant feasting (which lampoons the excesses of the Persian royal court) and closes with abundant killing, and then another feast. God’s people are safe, and through the foolishness of the foreigners we see a mini rags-to-riches tale for our plucky Jewish heroine. Hidden identity, the bluff but shallow potentate, a stock villain, ironic reversals of fortune, an episode redolent of a sexual farce (7:8), and a statesman trapped by the legal reverberations of his own careless words all reveal that we are dealing with comedy.¹⁹

On a much larger scale, the whole narrative of salvation can be read as a divine comedy. Scripture is riddled with smaller comedies, supported by humour, and with themes that contribute to or express the comic. For example, ‘Jesus’ terse comment that “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12) is not only a fundamental biblical theme but a fundamental theme in the history of comedy.²⁰ However, the foundation of these themes is the ‘u’-shaped plot of salvation history itself, creation–fall–redemption. This story culminates in rejoicing, the rejoicing of God and of people reconciled to God, people who have died and been raised with Christ to enjoy eternal life. Grace is the ultimate reversal of fortune. We will move towards practical suggestions for the present by visiting humour in creation, fall and redemption.

It has been suggested that humour is part of the image of God.²¹ Or at least, Hyers observes, ‘seriousness we share with the animals; in laughter we laugh alone’, citing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in which Aslan reassures the talking animals he has created of the legitimacy of laughter, ‘Now that you are no longer dumb and witless, you need not always be grave. For jokes as well as justice come in with speech.’²² Adults laugh, on average, about 17 times a day; children perhaps more frequently.²³ Being humorous is an aspect of our creativity and being the object of humour is an aspect of our creatureliness. We are socialised and humbled through being laughed at. People are made of mud (turned into bones, blood, hair, sweat, brains) and our bodies are pretty funny. They do odd things, make odd noises and constantly remind us of our limitations. We are irreducibly physical, and this is not something to be ashamed of – it is our *sin* that we are to be ashamed of. A gnostic privileging of asceticism (which tries to escape the material world) unnaturally suppresses our common created and dependent humanity, taught in Genesis 1 and 9, and reiterated by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:3–5. We should not be surprised that laughter has a positive effect on health.²⁴

Since the Fall, humour has formed a close association with sinfulness. Often it is perverted – by sin and the spiritual deadness of mankind. Christians may feel that laughter is sometimes inappropriate because it demonstrates (among other things) a lack of compassion. Political satire, though an important social conscience and restraining force in public life is very often guilty of this. The presenter and panellists of the TV show *Have I Got News For You* are in the caricature business, and have no time for the complexity of the people they slice through. Worldly humour is often destructive through thoughtlessness or because the sole purpose is to amuse or shock. The later TV series of *Little Britain* parade UK vices, often dwelling on horrible and grotesque people behaving in a terrible fashion. The writers are clever but don’t know when to stop – superficially colourful but cynical and devastating at heart.

Humour is also misused in more intimate settings. Jokes at the expense of other people highlight our self-importance and clearly lack love and humility. Humour can be used to avert scrutiny or intimacy: we all know a ‘class joker’ who disrupts to divert attention to his wit and away from his flaws. We employ coping mechanisms in stressful settings that arise in a fallen world which may not always be ‘wrong’. Black humour used as a defence mechanism when referring to emotionally difficult subjects in some situations can signal a willingness to engage more deeply – e.g. the man who, to make light of a potentially awkward situation, intro-

20 Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, p.41.

21 For example, Paul Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human*, Eerdmans, 1996; and strong implications in Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, Leicester, 1996, pp.148–152.

22 Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, pp.17–18; Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*, London, 1955, p.110.

23 R. A. Martin & N. A. Kuiper, ‘Daily occurrence of laughter: Relationships with age, gender, and Type A personality’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 12:4, 1999, 355–384.

24 See www.umm.edu/news/releases/laughter2.html for a study that found that humour is good for the heart. Also, more generally, see the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (<http://aath.org>).

16 See Aaron’s hilarious, pathetic precedent for self-deception regarding idols in Ex. 32:4–24.

17 Hyers, *And God created laughter*, p.96.

18 Whedbee, *Comic Vision*, p.9.

19 Ze’ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, Atlanta, 1998, pp.149–51.

duces his terminal illness to colleagues or friends with, 'The bad news is I've got cancer, the good news is I'm biodegradable'.

The best humour, seen among both believers and unbelievers, is redemptive in orientation, part of the comic family and full of hope. In an argument, humour can gently or uproariously sweep away the sinful battlements built by pride, which desires always to be taken seriously. It aims for the reintegration of those it has singled out. Paul was not slow to use this humour against churches which were flouting the gospel or its implications: there are flashes all through his dealings with the Corinthians, especially in his play on wisdom and folly that opens 1 Corinthians.²⁵ 'If anyone among you thinks he is wise by this world's standards, he should become a fool, in order to be really wise... We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ!' (1 Corinthians 3:18, 4:10a). Any sarcasm is designed to break the Corinthians' infatuation with false apostles and call them back to truly faithful living as the community of God. Less severely than that, the teasing which seeks to knock the corners off others and shape a person for life within a community is a tremendous tool. Being able and willing to laugh at oneself demonstrates a healthy humility and potential for character growth: when we see the ludicrousness of a situation (or our behaviour) we are enabled to put it in perspective.

Conclusion: humour is a useful thing

Looking outwards first, let's have some atheist jokes! The church would do well to make an effort to boldly mock rather than be on the back foot all the time. This is not to say that the church is to be crass and insulting, or to try and gain credibility with the world through wit. Far from it, our calling is to be identified with the foolishness of the cross, and not be ashamed. It is the wisdom of the world that is truly foolish, and humour is a possible weapon in our demonstration of this. C. S. Lewis often used a gentle humour in his defences of the faith (for example 'Fern Seed and Elephants', on the myopia of New Testament critic Rudolf Bultmann). At other times there can be scope to be more acerbic, though we would do well first to examine ourselves carefully.²⁶ Christian humour is of course richer than mockery, and ought to be woven into our proclamation and challenge to the world. In Os Guinness's words: 'How do we speak to an age made spiritually deaf by its scepticism and morally colour-blind by its relativism? The prosaic sermon and the laboured apology have proved ineffective... One contribution must surely come from a wide rediscovery of the prophetic fool making of the divine subversive.'²⁷ The most powerful foolmaker, the literally divine subversive, was Jesus himself: he compelled his listeners to view the world with new eyes by using shock and humour.²⁸

And what about our response to the humour of the world? This is problematic, not least because often you can't tell how suitable

a joke will be until it's too late! Something to bear in mind is whether what we hear, see or read is redemptive in orientation. There is a good deal of excellent political and social satire around that can do good, but if the comics' tone is one of cynicism this tendency can have a corrosive effect, undermining hope and the possibility of transformation. Paul will not have the Ephesians indulge in 'obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking' (Ephesians 5:4). The recent poll conducted by Ship of Fools (www.shipof-fools.com) of the most offensive religious jokes transgressed Paul's advice there and in Philippians 4:8, which urges us to meditate on what is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy.

Looking inwards, we should nurture humour in our community life, to make us aware of who we are as the people of God. Adrian Plass has worked hard at this, exposing hypocrisy and deflating pride in the church through parody, exaggeration, ironic observation and satire in his stories, sketches and novels. This is the kind of humour that can also be part of the ebb and flow of conversation: it has magnificent positive relational value. 'We can laugh together, without being threatened, at the absurdity of our own actions; laughter becomes an open window, through which the truth can pierce the soul.'²⁹ Second, we should employ humour to make people sit up and listen, both adults and children, bringing a penetrating freshness to our teaching and learning. The lecture style of expository preaching in many evangelical churches has much to commend it, but we may have inadvertently suppressed the 'story' as Jesus employed it. C. S. Lewis has taught generations memorably, wittily turning our perspective on its head in *The Screwtape Letters*.³⁰ But humour should not be forced, and some will be more gifted at using it than others.³¹

As those who have hope, who together belong to the assembly of the Lord, Christians can benefit socially from humour. The distinctiveness of the church comes partly through the way she speaks and defines herself against the world. In addition, our identity in Christ requires us to act in a loving way towards others for their good – which applies both to those within the family of God and those outside it. Overarching this, we want to see God glorified – just like Paul, we ought to be eager to 'demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God' (2 Corinthians 10:5). There is so much possibility to redeem humour, this wonderful gift which glints with affinity to the One characterised as full of grace and truth.

29 Murray Watts, ed., *Laughter in Heaven: The Christian Message through Drama*, Bromley, 1985, p.5.

30 In the same spirit is Chris Fabry, *The 77 habits of highly ineffective Christians*, Leicester, 1997. For more Christian humour follow the links at www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/index.php

31 Kieran Beville, 'The place of humour in preaching', *Evangelicals Now*, November 2003, p.16.

Guest contributors James and Kate Williams arrived in Cambridge seven years ago. They studied mostly literature for their degrees and are planning their escape route. In the meantime they are delighted to be part of the community of Rock Baptist Church. In their spare time they teach English as a foreign language and the piano, and work in local government and (sometimes) the Jubilee Centre.

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