

The place of humour in the Christian life

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Humour is a more or less universal human phenomenon across time and place, and the study of humour has fascinated philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists for centuries.¹ The emotional and even medical benefits of a good laugh have been well documented: mirth is the stress reliever, the mood enhancer, the resilience builder that no pharmaceutical quite comes close to.² But of course, the Bible could have told us that anyway, for ‘a cheerful heart is good medicine,’ says the Lord (Prov 17:22).

Nevertheless, too often humour seems to elude our attempts to define and analyse it – not least because the perception and expression of humour varies so vastly according to personality, life history, social and cultural context, and much more besides. Humour is enigmatic even while it is all-pervasive. How, then, are we to go about constructing a coherent theological account of humour and its place in the Christian life? What does it mean to bring our humour, like every other part of our created humanity, captive to the law of Christ?

Some schools of thought

There has been a long history of engagement with the phenomenon of humour in the Christian tradition, from which at least two significant trends in thought have emerged.

‘Humour is un-Christian!’

The first perspective is perhaps best characterised as a collective of intermittently stated opinions (albeit spanning several centuries) than a rigorous body of scholarship. Its defenders would hold to the view that humour has no place in the Christian life because it is undignified, frivolous, and an affront to the majesty of God.

One of the earliest known proponents was Clement of Alexandria, who, while acknowledging the ubiquity of laughter as a human phenomenon, deemed it permissible only in the rare cases when it was not irreverent or disrespectful (*Paedagogus* 2.v). A hundred or so years later, Basil of Caesarea advised that the Christian ‘ought not to indulge in jesting; he ought not to laugh or even to suffer

¹ Steven B. Jackson, ‘What’s Funny?’ *Psychology Today* blog, 18 May 2012, accessed 9 May 2016. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culture-conscious/201205/whats-funny>.

² The popular conception of a link between humour and health tends to be better supported anecdotally than empirically. For a systematic literature review on this topic, see Rod A. Martin, ‘Humor, Laughter, and Physical Health: Methodological Issues and Research Findings’, *Psychological Bulletin* 127 (2001): 504–519.

laughmakers' (*Letter 22.1*). For Basil, humour was antithetical to the spiritual virtue of self-control.³ The medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen took a stricter line still, opining that laughter was a sin because it offered relief from the labour that God had ordained as a consequence of the Fall.⁴

As late as the 20th century, one Methodist writer tried to mount a case that the Christ of the gospels was entirely humourless. In a rather conjectural chain of reasoning, he argued that Jesus' Jewish heritage would have precluded his having a sense of humour, because the history of the Jewish nation is so tragically gloomy.⁵ Somewhat more controversially, he proposed that Jesus' perfect human nature must have comprised an equal division of masculine and feminine attributes, and 'no doctrine of current psychology seems more generally conceded than that women...are defective in the sense of humor'.⁶

Outside the realm of theological commentary, it is notable that some modern-day psychologists have posited a basic incompatibility between religious persuasion and appreciation of humour. A 2001 personality study published in the journal *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* concluded that the incongruity and absurdity inherent in humour conflict with the desire for truth and certainty expressed by those who trust in a sovereign deity.⁷ In a follow-up article, the authors reasoned that religious faith and practice also stand opposed to the playfulness, risk-taking, ambiguity, and broad-mindedness that humour demands.⁸

'The Bible is hilarious!'

In a contrasting vein, a number of contemporary authors have worked hard to examine and defend the use of humour in the texts of Scripture, often arriving at the conclusion that humour must be fundamental to Christian life because the Bible is so funny. These enthusiasts seem intent on prising Christians away from the kind of dour earnestness that prevents them seeing the wealth of irony, absurdity, satire, linguistic sleights of hand, innuendo and slapstick leaping off the pages of both the Old and New Testaments, and so encouraging them to embrace the possibilities for well-informed laughter that careful study of the Scriptures can yield.

³ Duncan Bruce Reyburn, 'Laughter and the Between: G. K. Chesterton and the Reconciliation of Theology and Hilarity', *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3 (2015): 20.

⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

⁵ Henry F. Harris, 'The Absence of Humor in Jesus', *Methodist Quarterly Review* 57 (1908): 460.

⁶ *Ibid*, 462.

⁷ Vassilis Saroglou and Jean-Marie Jaspard, 'Does Religion Affect Humour Creation? An Experimental Study', *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 4 (2001): 34.

⁸ Vassilis Saroglou, 'Humor Appreciation as Function of Religious Dimensions', *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 24 (2003): 144–5.

Certainly many Biblical scholars would agree that an appreciation of humour as a literary technique can sharpen our insights into the meaning and message of the inspired texts. Take, for example, the narrative of 1 Samuel 5, where the Philistines capture the ark of God and place it in their temple before the statue of their god Dagon, only to find on the following two days that Dagon has fallen flat on his face before the ark as though in worship, progressively losing more bits of his body in the process. The story provokes a chuckle in us that reinforces the foolishness of pagan idolatry. Further on, the Wisdom book of Ecclesiastes presents a clownish picture of the ‘fool’ who falls into his newly dug pit, quarries stones only to be injured by them, and fails to charm his pet snake before it bites someone.⁹ The humour is a little blacker here, perhaps, but we may still feel a permission to laugh sheepishly at the one who singularly fails to learn the lessons of the human condition that the book intends to convey. And, of course, Jesus’ teachings contain many sharp-witted rhetorical devices that serve to reinforce his message: his use of hyperbole, wordplay, lively imagery, and incisive knack for cutting the self-righteous Pharisees down to size often raise a smile as we read, if only a self-consciously wry one as we quickly recognise our own faults and foibles exposed in his words.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there seems to be a risk with this avenue of scholarship that it can become overly speculative or defensive: seeking to tease humour for humour’s sake out of as many corners of Scripture as possible; reading comic side-details into narratives that are simply not given to us in the text; and perhaps displacing more important questions about the place and purpose of these passages in the grand scope of God’s revelation.

Moreover, if laughter is the primary expression of humour, then another problem to be dealt with here is that, at least at face value, laughter itself is not a particularly positive thing in the Bible. In fact, the majority of its references to laughter are made in the context of mockery, derision, or scorn. Sarah laughs at the prospect of giving birth in her old age (Gen 18:12); a desolate Job laments that he has become an object of laughter to his friends (Job 12:4); the elders of Jerusalem laugh at Nehemiah’s men as they try to rebuild the city’s walls (Neh 2:19). And of course, God himself laughs at the foolishness of those who would oppose him (Ps 2:4), and surely nothing can be more profoundly un-amusing than mankind’s rebellion against his Maker.

In the end, although the exponents of Biblical humour may have a part to play in helping us become better readers of Scripture, this approach feels somehow disjointed and unsatisfying as a starting point for understanding the place of humour in the Christian life. Even if it could be proved that the Bible is every bit as witty in its rhetoric as these writers would have us believe, this does not so

⁹ Étan Levine, ‘The Humor in Qohelet’, *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 73.

¹⁰ Richard Buckner, *The Joy of Jesus: Humour in the Gospels* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1993), 7.

easily translate into a practical theology of humour for our everyday walk with Christ. For this, I invite us to consider instead the power of paradox.

The power of paradox

Broadly speaking, paradox is defined as something inconsistent with common experience or having contradictory qualities. It signifies a breakdown in our inbuilt or conventional systems of order and logic.¹¹

Humour trades on paradox by exhuming the incongruous and unexpected occurrences that permeate our daily existence.¹² It challenges our mental frameworks and assumptions, often leading to a more authentic encounter with truth.¹³ The well-worn saying ‘*God has a sense of humour*’ speaks to this very idea: usually the protagonist tells the story against themselves, recounting an ironic turn of events that demonstrated the superior wisdom of God in the face of their own intentions and expectations. Not all of life’s paradoxes are humorous, of course, but nonetheless paradox remains one of the primary building blocks of humour.¹⁴

While we may not often express it this way, Christianity itself is grounded in profound paradox. God’s intervention to save fallen mankind and re-steer the course of human history consisted in a fundamental disruption to the known world order, centred on and flowing from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The gospel is paradoxical to its very core. Incarnate God, crucified Messiah, resurrected body.¹⁵ The message it preaches is, humanly speaking, filled with contradictions. The impoverished are blessed (Matt 5:3), the foolish teach the learned (1 Cor 1:21), persecution is privilege (Acts 5:41), to die is gain (Phil 1:21). As this revolutionary new world order begins to play out, systems and expectations are overturned in startling form. Contrary to the claims of psychologists, Christians can be eminently comfortable with absurdity, ambiguity and risk, for the redemption story they have come to own is anything but staid and predictable.

This is not the same as saying Christianity is comical. Yet for those who would argue that humour is un-Christian, the burden of proof lies in showing why men and women who have grasped the paradox of redemption should be forbidden from entertaining the everyday incongruities and surprises of a world turned upside down and inside out by the saving work of God. In their desire to honour God’s transcendence by divorcing humour from the divine, these detractors have perhaps downplayed the glorious, paradoxical reality that the transcendent God became immanent in the person of Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself.

¹¹ Russell Heddendorf, ‘From Faith to Fun: The Role of Humor in a Secular World’, *Implicit Religion* 7 (2004): 144.

¹² Jackson, ‘What’s Funny?’

¹³ Reyburn, ‘Laughter and the Between’, 42.

¹⁴ Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (London: Libra, 1964), 43.

¹⁵ Doris Donnelly, ‘Divine Folly: Being Religious and the Exercise of Humor’, *Theology Today* 48 (1992): 391.

Taking the paradox of Christianity as the starting point in this discussion likewise allows us to nuance, and where necessary reign in, the claims of those whose theology of humour derives solely from a literary analysis of humour in the Bible. When we consider that at least one of the gifts of humour is to dismantle our prejudgements and misconceptions of how the world works, we can approach the more amusing parts of Scripture expecting to be taught truth, not simply entertained; and we can rest content that much of the Bible is written with no intention or need to be funny.

Redemption-shaped humour

What follows is a proposed framework of three guiding principles for understanding the place of humour in the Christian life. An important premise underlying this framework is that our redemption, while already sealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, will only come to full fruition when he returns to translate us from mortality to immortality and take us into everlasting fellowship with God in the new heavens and earth. It is this hope of our eternal future that shapes the trajectory of our lives now, as we seek by the Spirit's help to align our minds and hearts and actions with the realities of the moral world as it was created and as it will be restored.¹⁶ The Spirit's work further consists in inaugurating and sustaining a new faith community built on reconciliation, grace and peace, foreshadowing the day when all of creation will be brought into harmony under Christ's just and righteous rule.¹⁷

Together, this means that the Christian life consists in a new way of understanding ourselves, a new way of seeing the world, and a new way of doing relationships. Each of these layers of transformation is grounded in the paradoxical realities of redemption, and each can tell us something about living and laughing with paradox.

A new way of understanding ourselves: humour as humility¹⁸

In the light of Christ's completed work of redemption and its future consummation at his return, the Christian gratefully acknowledges the paradox of 1 John 3:2 – that we are children of God, yet what we will be has not yet been made known. We are regenerate, yet imperfect; sanctified, and yet being sanctified. In this context, humour – and perhaps especially a readiness to laugh at ourselves – keeps a check on our pretensions and vanities and thrusts us back on the grace and omniscience of God.¹⁹ It is interesting that the very physical nature of

¹⁶ Andrew J. B. Cameron, *Joined-up Life: A Christian Account of How Ethics Works* (Nottingham: IVP, 2011), 165–6.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 170.

¹⁸ The categories of 'humility', 'honesty' and 'hospitality' as employed in this discussion are derived from Reyburn, 'Laughter and the Between', 24. The expansions and comments that follow each heading are the author's own.

¹⁹ Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 38.

laughter involves a temporary loss of self-control.²⁰ If we shut up our defences and fail to embrace the humorous aspects of our finitude, then we risk taking ourselves so seriously as to be ungracious and unteachable, and at worst undermining the unshakeable security and significance we have in Christ.²¹

Yet there is a difference between a humour that gently self-deprecates, and one that unashamedly makes light of what is impure and ungodly, not least if it serves as a cloak for ongoing personal sin.²² Perhaps this is the kind of humour Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians entreating them not to indulge in ‘obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking...but rather thanksgiving’ (Eph 5:4). Such humour may well come in the guise of humility, as a person publicly names their faults and failings, but it has lost sight of the trajectory of redemption by trivialising those things that have no place in the Spirit-governed life. Like the Ephesians, perhaps we would do well to give first thought to thanking God for what he has saved us for, rather than joking about what he has saved us from.

A new way of seeing the world: humour as honesty

The redeemed Christian life moves us towards a right and honest perception of the world around us, and particularly the paradoxical reality that we are living in the ‘now but not yet’. We are caught up in the groaning creation of Romans 8, glimpsing its deliverance on the horizon, straining towards its release and restoration. Because they know a new creation is coming, Christians can sit loosely to a ‘common-sense’ worldview that allows the visible reality of everyday life, and human interpretations of it, to have the final word.²³ An honest sense of humour wryly acknowledges the absurdities, contradictions, and limitations of our present existence even as it keeps one eye on the full and final renovation of the created order, when all such things will be done away with.²⁴

The ‘humorous’ Bible passages surveyed earlier are essentially funny because they provide an honest commentary on life as viewed through the lens of redemptive history and hope. The incident of Dagon and the ark would be quite serious if only an expensive statue had got broken, but we laugh because we look with a new-world perspective at the ridiculousness of puny humans trying to contain and control the living God. In the tragi-comedy of Ecclesiastes, the final joke falls on the one whose worldview is so constrained by the momentary and futile that he strives after *hebel* – a vapour.²⁵ The sharp-witted rhetoric of the gospel narratives serves to expose and embarrass the Pharisaic spirit that would systemise and

²⁰ Charles L. Campbell, ‘Ministry with a Laugh’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69 (2015): 198.

²¹ Donnelly, ‘Divine Folly’, 393.

²² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana, 1942): 59–60.

²³ Joel S. Kaminsky, ‘Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure’, *Interpretation* 54 (2000): 373.

²⁴ Walter G. Moss, ‘Wisdom, Humor and Faith: A Historical View’. Cited 6 May 2016. Online: <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>: 28.

²⁵ Levine, ‘The Humor in Qohelet’, 75.

control life on human terms and for personal gain.²⁶ In doing so, it brings a clearer vision of the freedom and fulfilment Jesus inaugurated at his first coming and will consummate at his return.

Once again, though, an honest sense of humour is open to misuse. C. S. Lewis cautioned against the humour of ‘flippancy’, which makes a joke even out of the virtuous and sacred, and approaches every serious discussion as though there is a self-evident humorous side to it.²⁷ The flippant, and his close cousin the cynic, may think they are providing a pragmatic observation and critique of human life, but in reality they stand opposed to the joy and sharpened perception that a now-but-not-yet perspective on the world should offer.

When her vision of God’s power was weak and blinkered, a cynical Sarah resorted to disbelieving laughter to reconcile the paradoxical prospect of having a child. It is only after the birth of Isaac that her laughter came to express a joy to be shared by ‘everyone that hears’ (Gen 20:6–7).²⁸ The story had turned against her, but for her good. God indeed has a sense of humour.

A new way of doing relationships: humour as hospitality

As Paul’s letter to the Ephesians so carefully explains, present Christian community and fellowship is an expression of the eternal spiritual unity effected by the redemptive work of Christ. We are journeying together towards our shared destiny of the heavenly city, where there is no division or inequality, and God alone reigns.²⁹ The paradox of Christian unity is that we are at the same time fully liberated from, and yet fully indebted to, ‘the other’ – or in the words of Luther’s famous maxim, ‘a perfectly free servant of all’ (*On Christian Liberty* 2).

The world does not understand this. It makes every man his own king, yet ironically enslaves him to the standards, the whims, the perceptions, of his friends and society and culture. It is little wonder that so much of the humour of our age is fundamentally purposed to demean and mock ‘the other’, so that the teller of the joke may retain his sense of control and superiority. The writer of Proverbs shows how destructive and unloving is the humour that simply makes another look foolish: ‘Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbour and says, “I was only joking!”’ (Prov 26:18).

As noted earlier, much of the language of laughter in the Bible seems to fall into this category of mockery and derision, of an imbalanced relationship between weak and strong. The Biblical accounts of laughter expose the injustice and cruelty of flawed human relationships. But they also remind us that it is God who literally has the last laugh. Only the one, true, holy God is entitled to laugh his enemies to scorn (Ps 2:4). In our redemption we too are caught up in that victory, freed from

²⁶ Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 77.

²⁷ Lewis, *Screntape Letters*, 60.

²⁸ Heddendorf, ‘From Faith to Fun’, 143.

²⁹ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 163.

the fear, selfishness and worldliness that held us captive to others, and empowered to laugh in their service.

Determining what sort of humour helps or hinders Christian fellowship in any given circumstance is, I suspect, largely a matter for individual discernment, if not trial and error. There is, assuredly, a time to laugh (Eccl 3:4) – but there will also be a time when reverence and gravitas are more fitting to our service of God and others than a hearty chuckle. We can welcome and explore opportunities for communal laughter without turning every church service, fellowship gathering, or pastoral conversation into a comedy routine. Nonetheless we can be assured that at its best, hospitable humour has the capacity to strengthen the body of Christ, breaking down barriers of pride, fear, rivalry and bitterness, contributing to a sense of belonging and safety, and encouraging a shared openness to the paradoxical realities of life in the last days.³⁰

Conclusion: coping and hoping

Humour is not the same as faith or a substitute for faith. A cheerful heart may be good medicine, but it is not the cure of souls. For all its ability to relieve our stress and enhance our mood and build our resilience, if we have no other resource *but* humour to deal with all that is awry and amiss in this world, our laughter becomes only a cover for our sense of meaninglessness.³¹ In the face of life's paradoxes, humour allows us to 'cope' where faith allows us to 'hope',³² because faith is always anchored in the greater paradox of God's redemption. Our humour becomes captive to the law of Christ when it flows out of an understanding of ourselves, the world, and other people that looks back with thankfulness to his first coming and forward in expectation to his second. With the Spirit's help, humour has the powerful potential to keep us humble, honest and hospitable as we walk the path of the redeemed life towards our eternal home.

*'Grant me now, Lord, an enchantment of heart... So that I may learn again that life is never quite as serious as I suppose, yet more precious than I dare take for granted, even for a moment.'*³³

³⁰ Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, 35.

³¹ Brad A. Binau, 'Humor Reconsidered: The Cultivation of "Accurate Perception" as a Contribution to the Care of Souls'. *Pastoral Psychology* 58 (2009): 675.

³² Heddendorf, 'From Faith to Fun', 144.

³³ An extract of a prayer attributed to Ted Loder, cited in Binau, 'Humor Reconsidered', 674.

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