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# "Everyone Who Hears Will Laugh With Me": Humor and Telling God's Truth

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# “Everyone who hears will laugh with me”: Humor and Telling God’s Truth

ROLF JACOBSON and KARL JACOBSON

## HUMOR IS SERIOUS BUSINESS

Robert Jenson once wrote, “It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel...It is the church’s constitutive task to tell the biblical *narrative* to the world in proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the content of that narrative.”<sup>1</sup> One might add that the church must speak the gospel in a fashion that is *appropriate to its context*. That is, the church must speak in a fashion that is faithful to Scripture and tradition, but in a register that is fitting to whatever context in which it finds itself—in a way that translates the gospel message into language and symbols that can be understood.<sup>2</sup>

It is our contention that speaking the gospel in our context includes humor. At the very least, humor has a legitimate role in speaking God’s truth. We might be willing to argue that if the church is to speak the gospel to today’s culture, it will be *required* to incorporate humor into its witness.

The assertion that humor is a legitimate means of speaking about serious

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* 36 (Oct 1993) 19.

<sup>2</sup>The most complete exploration of how the context shapes the church’s proclamation of the gospel is Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

*Since humor is an essential part of human nature, speaking the truth, including the biblical truth, seems to require the use of humor. Humor exposes our flaws and opens us to new vistas—or in theological terms, it preaches both law and gospel.*

matters seems widely accepted today. After all, Americans are thoroughly accustomed to mixing “humor” and “news.” Consider that the most popular and long-running television newsmagazine show, *60 Minutes*, traditionally ended with Andy Rooney’s lighthearted, humorous commentary. In a similar vein, television shows that offer a humorous take on current events—such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, or Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*—have been shown to be as informative and have as much “substance” as traditional television news shows.<sup>3</sup> The readiness of mainline Christians to mix a little laughter in with their faith is evidenced by the runaway sales and popularity of *The Lutheran Handbook*—which contains articles such as “How to Stay Alert in Church,” “The Five Grossest Stories in the Bible,” and “How to Avoid Getting Burned at the Stake.”<sup>4</sup>

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*if the church is to speak the gospel to today’s culture, it will be required to incorporate humor into its witness*

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None of this is to say, however, that God’s people always knew what to do with humor. The sixth-century *Rule of Benedict*, which was one of the most influential documents in the first millennium of the church’s existence, definitely frowned upon humor. “Do not speak words that are idle or suited to laughter,” it stipulated. And, “buffoonery or words which are useless and provoke laughter—these we condemn on all occasions with a perpetual ban, and the disciple is not permitted to open his mouth for such conversation.” Traces of such skepticism towards humor still can be found today. Eugene Fevold described one group of Danish Lutherans that was characterized by “strict standards of conduct, such as abstinence from common amusements.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, when one of the authors of this essay was invited to give a presentation to a church group about *The Lutheran Handbook*, a woman took her leave of the presentation with the comment, “I don’t think that humor belongs in church.”

All of this raises some basic questions. First, how should we chart the basic dimensions of humor? Second, how—in a theological sense—does humor tell the truth?

## CHARTING THE BASIC DIMENSIONS OF HUMOR

Although this is clearly not the place to attempt a comprehensive theological exploration of humor, we can chart here three basic dimensions of humor: humor

<sup>3</sup>Julia R. Fox, Glory Koloen, and Volkan Sahin, “No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign,” *Journal of Broadcast and Electronic Media* 51/2 (June 2007) 213. The study found that for those under the age of thirty, programs such as *The Daily Show* were a primary source of information about politics, having supplanted broadcast news programs.

<sup>4</sup>Kristofer Skrade, ed. *The Lutheran Handbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Eugene Fevold, “Coming of Age: 1875–1900,” in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 268.

as an essential part of human nature, humor as a form of human intelligence, and the role humor plays in both perceiving and confessing the truth about the world.

*Humor is an essential part of human nature*

In his masterful study of humor, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Peter Berger wrote, “The comic is an exclusively human phenomenon. It is also universally human.”<sup>6</sup> Two things are to be noted here. First, of all God’s creatures, human beings alone possess a sense of humor. Other creatures experience pleasure, such as a cat purring when being petted or a dog bringing a Frisbee and “requesting” to play fetch. But only humans make jokes or find situations humorous. Only humans communicate through humor. When one connects this insight with Gen 1:26–28, which says that of all God’s creatures, only humans were created “in the image of God,” one is tempted to suggest that part of what it means to be created in God’s image is to have a sense of humor. God laughs (for example, Ps 2:4), and so do we.

Second, humor is a universal human characteristic. Every culture has humor. Although senses of humor are culturally embedded and culturally specific (jokes often do not translate across cultural boundaries), no culture has been documented that lacks humor completely. This suggests that humor is constitutive of human nature. To be human means having access to humor. Conversely, to be without a sense of humor is to be less than fully human. As Berger has noted, “humorlessness is a cognitive handicap: It shuts off the possibility of certain insights, perhaps prevents access to an entire sphere of reality.”<sup>7</sup>

*Humor is a form of human intelligence*

Humor includes dimensions of both *intention* and *perception*. In terms of intention, sometimes a person is humorous intentionally; at other times, a person is humorous unintentionally. In terms of perception, sometimes a person “gets a joke” or finds a situation humorous; at other times, a person fails to “get a joke” or does not find a situation humorous. To put it starkly, having a sense of humor requires both “sending” and “receiving.” This implies that humor is a form of intelligence, of cognition. Just as an individual with a gift for thinking numerically will be able both to formulate mathematical thoughts and to understand the mathematical thoughts of others, so an individual with a gift for humor will be able both to make the most jokes and also get the most jokes. Both intending and perceiving humor are forms of intelligence.

*Humor helps us both perceive and tell the truth about the world*

Few humorous children’s tales are more quoted in serious academic work

<sup>6</sup>Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 14.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 152. Regarding those who are humorless, Berger wrote, “Some of them, perhaps, were born that way; these are the ones to be pitied. But others have made themselves such; they can be condemned for it.” These he identifies as the gomanic, the fanatic, and the tyrant (153).

than Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes."<sup>8</sup> The well-known tale is a satirical attack on human vanity, hubris, and insecurity. The tale is a classic example of how humor can allow people to grasp the world as it truly is. The tale works on two levels: both the *general level* of truth and the *particular level* of truth. First, it says something true about human nature on the general level—it tells us something true about ourselves. In the tale, the emperor's new clothes are said to be invisible to those who are either basically unintelligent or unfit for their jobs. At the end of the story, the child points out that the emperor has no clothes on—"He isn't wearing anything at all!" People experience the ending of the story as both funny and true. Moreover, the "funniness" and the "truth" of the story cannot be separated. The funniness of the story ("people are really like that") and the truth of the story ("people are really like that") are identical. Moreover, the humor of the story allows us to admit that *we are really like that*. The spontaneous laughter that occurs at the end of the story disarms our defensiveness, so that we can admit that we have all been like the king at certain moments in our lives. As such, it allows us to face our own insecurity, our own vanity, our own pretentiousness.

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Second, the story can function as truth telling at the *particular level*. Because the story is so widely known, its punch line can function as a sort of shorthand in particular settings. We have all experienced the story this way. For example, a political leader gives a speech and announces "a new plan"—for job growth, or foreign policy, or education, or crime reduction—but the plan includes basically no specifics and no new ideas. Or the CEO of the company for which you work announces a new initiative. Or a church leader announces a new evangelism program. Or the general manager of your favorite sports team announces a new direction. At the end of any of these speeches, the person sitting next to you turns and says, "The emperor has no clothes." You know exactly what she means. She means that the truth about this *particular* situation is that the leadership is not up to the challenge.

The reality is that humor is tremendously effective at exposing the not-so-pleasant realities of life in a broken world. This is so, whether one is exposing the general realities of the human condition or particular instances of brokenness. Again, Berger's analysis is helpful: "The comic experience provides a distinctive diagnosis of the world. It sees through the facades of ideational and social order, and

<sup>8</sup>Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," in *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen: A New Translation from the Danish*, trans. Diane Crone Frank and Jeffrey Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 105–110.

discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones.”<sup>9</sup> One reason that humor is so effective at unmasking the sickness behind the social “facades” is that humor can call attention to inconvenient details. In order to pretend that “everything is okay,” a person has to find ways to conveniently ignore certain data or certain facts. Through exaggeration, or parody, or irony, the wielder of humor easily draws attention precisely to the most inconvenient details. Like Toto, pulling aside the curtain and exposing the “wizard” who is pulling the lever, humor draws our attention to “the man behind the curtain.”

But a caveat, and a very large one: humor is often better at tearing down than it is at building up. Granted that humor is very effective as a debunking, unmasking, exposing, truth-telling agent, “but this procedure does not necessarily lead to a more valid view of things than the one that has just been debunked.”<sup>10</sup> This suggests that there is a moral quality to humor—or rather, a morally neutral quality to humor. Like all forms of human intelligence, humor in itself is neither laudable nor edifying. Humor can be used to tell the truth, or to lie. Humor can tear down something that is imperfect, but what it builds up might be even worse. What matters, finally, is the end to which humor is employed.

## HUMOR AND TELLING THE TRUTH

### *The theological use of the law*

In the previous section, we argued that humor is particularly apt at unmasking pretensions, exposing flaws, and drawing attention to the inconvenient truths we would rather ignore. In Lutheran and Reformed circles, this sort of truth telling is often referred to as “preaching the second use of the law.” Martin Luther, writing in the *Smalcald Articles*, put it like this: “The foremost office or power of the law is that it reveals inherited sin and its fruits. It shows human beings into what utter depths their nature has fallen and how completely corrupt it is.”<sup>11</sup> For the reasons described in the last section, humor is a good preacher of the law. This is particularly true when humor is employed as satire, sarcasm, parody, or irony. A few examples will highlight this aspect of humor.

The prophet Amos may have been the most practiced at preaching the law through humor. Take, for instance, the prophet’s biting parody in Amos 4:4–5:

Come (בֵּאֵר) to Bethel—and transgress;  
to Gilgal—and multiply transgression;  
bring your sacrifices every morning,  
your tithes every three days;  
bring a thank offering of leavened bread,  
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;  
for (וְעָ) so you love to do, O people of Israel!

<sup>9</sup>Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 34.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 150.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* III:2, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000) 312.

In this passage, the prophet, with wicked sarcasm, parodies the priestly “call to worship” that a typical Israelite might have heard at one of the worship centers—such as Bethel, Gilgal, or Jerusalem. Compare the above passage from Amos with a typical call to worship from the psalms:

O come (בֹּאִי), let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!  
For (כִּי) he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand. (Ps 95:6–7; see also 100:2–4)

Both passages follow the same pattern: imperative calls to worship (“come” בֹּאִי), followed by a “reason for praise” (“for” כִּי). In the psalms, the reasons for praise are usually something about God, such as that God is good, or “a great God.” In Amos, however, the prophet turns the form on its head and uses it to accuse the people: “For so *you love to do*.” The passage is a parody that is bitterly ironic. According to James Luther Mays, this parody of a call to worship “must have been spoken during a festival assembly at Bethel [one of the two chief shrines of the northern kingdom].”<sup>12</sup> Mays continues:

When Amos took up the chanting rhythmic summons “Come ye to Bethel...,” the pilgrims would have thought he was one of the cultic functionaries playing his usual role!...But hardly had the summons begun than it struck a shocking dissonance: “Come to Bethel!—and rebel!” The Israelites who had come for at-one-ment, to establish peace with their God by sacrificial communion meals and to receive his blessing to secure their welfare, were told that their piety was in fact the very opposite—an offence against, a breach with...the God whose community they sought.<sup>13</sup>

The Pentateuchal law called for worshipers to present their offerings three times each year (Exod 23:14–17). Amos sarcastically says that the worshipers present their tithes “every three days.”<sup>14</sup> Micah scores a similar point when he mockingly asks if the Lord will be pleased if the people offer “ten thousands of rivers of oil” (6:7). The message, driven home so efficiently by means of sarcastic humor, is simple: God is not pleased by ritual observance—no matter how earnest—that does not connect to faith in daily life. What God desires of them, in the words of Micah, is to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Or, in the words of Amos, to “let justice roll down like waters” (5:24).

In many and various ways, the prophets employed this brand of humor in order to lay bare the sins of the people. A few more examples:

- Isaiah of Jerusalem called his audience to examine their sin by addressing them as “rulers of Sodom” and “people of Gomorrah” (1:10).

<sup>12</sup>James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 74.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Notice that the NIV misses the prophet’s sarcasm. Rightly concluding that offering a tithe of the harvest every three days would be impossible, the NIV mistakenly emends the text to read “every three years”—thus smoothing over the prophet’s rough tongue.

- Drawing on vineyard imagery that was typical of Israel’s love poetry (see Song 4:12–16), Isaiah famously sang a “love-song” for God’s people, in which he compared the people to a vineyard that bore fruit of “bloodshed” rather than “justice” (5:1–7).
- Amos pretended to sing a funeral dirge for a slain maiden—the deceased woman of his song turned out to be “maiden Israel” (5:1–2).

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- Hosea bitterly mocked the priestly practice of offering animal sacrifices of atonement for the people’s sin. On the one hand, the priests were supposed to teach the people how not to sin by following law. On the other hand, the priests literally fed themselves on the food offered as sacrifice. Hosea mocked this priestly conflict of interest: “They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity” (4:8). The result, Hosea said, was that the more priests there were, the more (rather than less) sin there was in the land.
- Jesus got into the game on more than one occasion.<sup>15</sup> To cite just one example, note the sarcasm in Jesus’ denunciation of the ritual lives of some of his contemporaries in Matt 23:23. Jesus depicts them carefully weighing out on their scales ten percent of their harvest of “mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Notice especially the word “weightier”—one assumes the pun was intended.<sup>16</sup>

Examples could be multiplied. Humor is, indeed, an effective preacher of the law. It tells the truth about us, exposing our true condition. And once we know the truth about ourselves, what we need (in the words of a colleague) is a different sort of preacher—a preacher of good news.

### *The gospel*

We began this essay by quoting Robert Jenson’s dictum that “it is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel.” This is true both in terms of understanding the church’s overall purpose and in terms of thinking about how the church should use humor. If the only thing that humor could do were to preach the law, then the church would finally have little or no use for it. The purpose of preaching the law is to make the path straight for the gospel. But humor, it turns out, is also a good preacher of the gospel.

Perhaps the best way to understand how humor can function to convey the good news is to understand that humor says something about the future. When

<sup>15</sup>See Gary Webster, *Laughter in the Bible* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1960) 105–116.

<sup>16</sup>The Greek adjective βαρύτερα quite literally means to be heavy.

someone laughs in the midst of suffering, loss, or sin, such laughter can bear witness to the belief in a better future. Helmut Thielicke has suggested that if comedy were given a place in theology it would be in the realm of eschatology.<sup>17</sup> In the laughter of the faithful, God's future breaks into the now.

The title of our essay is drawn from the story of Sarah. Sarah laughed at her future precisely because it was so desperately laughable. God's messengers show up and promise her—a woman barren into her 90s—a child. Sarah's humor in response to God's promise had two sides to it. First, Sarah laughs in scorn, unable to believe that this could be true; she laughs at God's promise as no true promise, no real possibility, just laughable words (Gen 18:12). Sarah is not done laughing however, and her second fit of laughter is joy-filled and hopeful. She laughs because of God's promise that has come true and that ushers in new possibility (Gen 21:6). Sarah laughs when she holds her son in her arms, and even goes so far as to name her son Isaac, or "he laughs." Sarah laughs in joy at God's realized promise. And what's more, Sarah laughs at herself, at her doubt transformed into faith. This is gospel laughter, a humor engendered and empowered by the good news.

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There is tension—in Sarah's story and in our own—between two extremes: between realistic expectations and trusting a promise, between disbelief and faith, and between the grim logic of barrenness and the hope of a laughing baby. Our experiences, both the good and the bad, may incline us one way and then another. Neither the grim logic nor the harsh humor of the law can stop that pendulum swing; only the foolishness of the gospel can bring us to some stable center where faith and hope break forth in healing and hope-filled laughter. Reinhold Niebuhr noted that the "intimate relation between humor and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence."<sup>18</sup> The two extremes of our present, lived reality, and the promises of a new future made possible by God are often incongruous. Ask Sarah.

Jesus knew this as well. In Luke's version of Jesus' great sermon, Jesus presents the incongruous promise of the "blessings and woes," which appear on the surface to be the precise opposite of what one would either want or expect. Those who are blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, the excluded, the

<sup>17</sup>Cited in Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 215.

<sup>18</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times—Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946) 112.

reviled,<sup>19</sup> and the defamed. To these Jesus says, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). Those who have the most reason to laugh in derision at the promise are those who will, in the end, laugh best and longest. Because of the good news. Because of Easter. This is the purpose of the gospel, to break into the world with Easter joy. To intrude into lives that need a good laugh.

An essay on the relationship between humor and telling God’s truth could not be complete without at least a reference to perhaps the funniest book ever written about Jesus: Christopher Moore’s fictional send-up of the Jesus story, *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal*.<sup>20</sup> The book is irreverently funny—no, that isn’t strong enough. The book is blasphemously hilarious. If you do not have a strong stomach for the sort of humor that inches up to toe “the line” of propriety—and then takes two giant steps across the line—do not read Moore. But in the process of being blasphemously funny, Moore’s book also, at moments, succeeds in telling the truth about the message of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

## THE LAST LAUGH

Niebuhr wrote, “Faith is therefore the final triumph over incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence.”<sup>22</sup> To laugh Easter laughter that only God can teach is to stare into the empty tomb and confess a faith in the promise of life beyond death. Laughter bears witness, in the words of Webster, to the faith that “God always has the last laugh. It may be delayed; evil may appear to have conquered. But in the end, God prevails.”<sup>23</sup>

One final note about the relationship of laughter and religion. Religion, the Bible, and believers have often been the target of the derisive laughter of comedians and critics. This sort of laughter can be hard to endure, in part because it all too often rings true. There is, however, an important sense in which the laughter of the faithful is a vital part of our proclamation of God’s foolish good news. In 2009, Regina Spektor released a song called “Laughing With” in which she reflected on the incongruity of those who make fun of God, until troubles arise and the laughter must stop. Spektor’s statement might be characterized as a pop-music version of the “no atheists in a fox-hole” proverb. But there is more to what Spektor has to say. She sings,

God could be funny  
When told he’ll give you money if you just pray the right way

<sup>19</sup>This word “reviled,” *ὄνειδίσωσιν* in Greek, has a sense of suffering the ill humor and scorn of one’s detractors.

<sup>20</sup>Christopher Moore, *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* (San Francisco: Perennial, 2002). Moore says of his treatment of Jesus, that it “is a story. I made it up. It is not designed to change anyone’s beliefs or worldview, unless after reading it you’ve decided to be kinder to your fellow humans (which is okay), or you decide you really would like to teach yoga to an elephant, in which case, please get videotape” (438).

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Moore’s “Joshua” rebuking the disciples’ refusal to believe that the kingdom is not to be brought in by force; *ibid.*, 392–393.

<sup>22</sup>Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs*, 130.

<sup>23</sup>Webster, *Laughter in the Bible*, 159.

And when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini  
Or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Claus  
God can be so hilarious  
No one laughs at God in a hospital  
No one laughs at God in a war  
No one's laughing at God  
When they're starving or freezing or so very poor<sup>24</sup>

Spektor finishes her song with a wonderful incongruity of her own, "No one's laughing at God / We're all laughing with God."

Or, to put it another way, we have heard the good news. And we are laughing—with Sarah, with Paul, with God. ⊕

*ROLF JACOBSON (associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota) and KARL JACOBSON (assistant professor of religion at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota) are, as they noted, "frequent sources of embarrassment to their children, spouses, and parents." With several others, they helped author Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008) and Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009).*

<sup>24</sup>Regina Spektor, "Laughing With," originally released on *Far*, Sire Records, 2009. See the lyrics at <http://www.elyrics.net/read/r/regina-spektor-lyrics/laughing-with-lyrics.html> (accessed February 13, 2012).