

"What is Humour?"

As I watched a DVD featuring Bob Nelson, who is called "a funny man and a godly example of being salt and light in a world that so desperately needs a sense of humor", I wondered what is so Christian about this? He is not irreverent; perhaps we can classify Nelson's sense of humour as low comedy. It has little or no intellectual appeal, but undertakes to arouse laughter by jokes, or "gags," and by slapstick humour and boisterous or clownish activity. But may we call "slap stick comedy" humour?

A.D. Dennison, a Christian cardiologist, says in his 1970s best-seller *Shock it to me Doctor* that he recalls one man who sped up to a drugstore and asked the druggist if he had anything for hiccups. The druggist, without a word, hit the man between the eyes and knocked him to the floor. The man slowly got up and graciously asked again. "Sir, do you have anything for hiccups?" The druggist replied, "You don't have them any more do you?" The man responded, "No, I never did, but my wife out in the car does." Is this Christian humour? It may be clever and bold, but the joke is devoid of compassion and respect for others.

Distorted Humour

During World War II victims of tyranny often used humour to preserve their sense of personal self-respect. Laughter provided them with a little private world in which they could reduce the pompous power of Hitler and his cohorts to the level of the ridiculous. It was typical of the Nazi mentality that they could not stand humour. Someone told the story that Herman Goering, Marshall of the Reich, on the way to England suddenly said, "Look down below us is London, it is nearly destroyed." But at that very moment, Joseph Goebbels, head of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, killed Goering's enthusiasm, "Sst! We are still above Hamburg!" If someone told such a story in public, he could count on going to a concentration camp.

Another type of humour often used during war is called "gallows humour." Soldiers are known on occasion to engage in hysterical laughter when nerves are tense before the battle. They speak flippantly of the possible dire fate, which might befall this or that man of their company. "Sergeant," a soldier is reported to have said before a battle, "don't let this little fellow go into battle before me. He isn't big enough to stop the bullet meant for me." The "joke" was received with uproarious laughter by the assembled comrades. But when the "little fellow" died in battle the next day, everyone felt ashamed of the joke. At any rate, it was quite inadequate to deal with the depth and breadth of the problem of death. But as the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, points out: "If we persist in laughter when dealing with the final problems of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy, we also reduce it to meaningless. That is why laughter, when pressed to solve the ultimate issue, turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy."

Definition of Humour

Many people love to hear a funny story. They like a good laugh. And why not? But what do we laugh at? Our "funny bone" may be tickled for different reasons. For example,

Reinhold Niebuhr notes, "We laugh at a proud man slipping on the ice, not merely because the contrast between his dignity and his undignified plight strikes us as funny; but because we feel that his discomfiture is a poetically just rebuke to his dignity." The crudest person can make fun, which can lead to folly. So often jokes are told at the expense of others, or of another church or political party, or race. And ever since television, there is now little difference between crude fun and humour.

Humour is different from fun. Humour is a term used in English since the early eighteenth century to denote one of the two major types of writing or speech (humour and wit), whose purpose is the evoking of some kind of laughter. With humour, we mean more than having a feeling for a joke. Real humour, instead of being something merely light or superficial, depends upon profundity. "A humorous rejoinder," said Kierkegaard, "must always contain something profound." Trueblood observed, "It is not possible to have genuine humor or true wit without an extremely sound mind, which is always a mind capable of high seriousness and a sense of the tragic." Thackeray commented, "Humour is the combination of wit and love." Someone else defined humour as "the kiss which joy and sorrow give each other."

Humour shows a certain refinement of spirit. It can bring inner liberation from the tensions we so often face and where-in we can see our lives in more realistic proportions. It can restrain an explosion of anger. It can deliver us from pessimism, and save us from despair. With humour we can expel jealousy. Good humour is a wonderful educational tool. It is a means to restore order in a classroom with a smile. With humour, a salesman sells twice as much at the market than his competitor without a smile. A sense of humour is indispensable for leaders who have the duty of organizing their fellow men in common endeavours. It reduces the frictions of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable. When we lose our sense of proportion and humour, controversies in the church become battlefields. We look for "heretics" then in each corner and even tend to look under our bed before we dare to go to sleep. We can be so busy with controversies we can no longer hear the footsteps of our approaching Lord, whose coming is at hand. And how sad it is to see people spend time and energy to paint their position in bright colours and put others in worse light than warranted. We may not build bomb-free shelters where criticism cannot enter. And humour can be an effective tool for evangelism. It is easy to visit people who are with you, but it is hard when they are filled with bitterness against the Lord and His church. With tact and humour, we can make contact with people who are filled with criticism against church members, and especially ministers.

Real humour blossoms only where God's Word has taken root. "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones," says Solomon (Prov. 17: 23). But a Christian remembers that he is always in the presence of God, and his speech is the gift of the Creator. As Augustine put it: "Speech is not simply our possession; it is God's gift to us. To recognize and acknowledge this gift in truthful words is to offer grateful praise to the One from whom it comes."

Laugh at Yourself

Dr. Dennison believes that the ability to laugh at yourself is good for your mental well-being. He writes, "I am campaigning for everyone I know to enter the existential battlefield of life with an easy laugh, a sensitive "funny bone, " a jolly retort, a sense of humour, the ability to laugh at one self." People with a sense of humour do not take themselves too seriously.

All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. The ability to laugh at oneself can only be obtained when one realizes his own imperfections.

One of the qualifications of a missionary is a sense of humour. While learning a new language and customs, it is easy to make embarrassing blunders. When we were serving in the Philippines, I made mine. A good laugh at myself helped me survive.

Despite her desperate circumstance, Naomi had enough sense of humour to poke fun at herself. She described herself as a pitiful, elderly woman when she told her two daughters in law, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?" (Ruth 1:11). Because Naomi could laugh at herself, she was freed from thinking too much of herself. When you can laugh at yourself, you show you know your own weaknesses. A Christian who is used to living his life, the life of his family, his church, his nation under the judging eye of God, does not boast about his moral achievements. He sees much pride and folly in seeking to inflate his own prestige. He becomes impressed by the fact that, ultimately, Jesus Christ alone is without sin. He does not defend the indefensible. To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies mixed with laughter are a high form of wisdom. But there is another side to laughing at oneself. If we keep laughing when we have done something wrong, if we cannot recognize the real evil of sin, laughter turns into folly. If we continue to laugh, after having recognized the depth of evil we have committed, our laughter becomes the instrument of irresponsibility.

Humour in the Bible

The Bible deals with very serious subjects. But it is too bad that while the Scripture has indeed a message concerning heaven and hell, sin and salvation, we lose sight of the literary beauty, and the humour of the Bible. There are critics who regard the Bible as deficient in a sense of humour and they can point to the fact that there is little laughter in the Bible. But the Bible is filled with humour. Humour in the Bible appears especially when idolatry is mocked. Isaiah pokes fun at a man who carves an idol from wood. "It is a man's fuel for burning," he says, "some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares a meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships.

He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god'" (44:15-17). Daniel also describes the folly of idolatry. He writes about the defeat of the king of the North and the carrying away of the gods along with all the treasures into Egypt. The gods in which people put their trust are no more than lifeless things.

God Laughs

Our Creator God watches us from heaven. What does He notice? Although we are created in His image we are like dust in a weigh scale, drops in a bucket, grains of sand. In other words, we should not think that we are in charge of the world. The psalmist says, "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps. 2:4). This is the only instance in the Bible in which laughter is attributed to God. God is pictured laughing at man and having him in derision because of the vanity of his imagination and pretensions. God mocks kings who plan to divide the world amongst each other, while God says to the Messiah, "I will make the nations as your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (vs.8).

But there is not only the laughter of derision recorded in Scripture. God also reveals a real sense of humour. When the human race wanted to build a city with a tower that reaches the heavens so that they could make a name for themselves, "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building" (Gen. 11:5). God acts as if the tower of Babel is so small that He can't see it from heaven. He had to come down to see it. He views the tower-builders as ant-like creatures. When Israel is threatened by the Philistines, God uses a most unlikely means to save His people so that the Messiah could come in the fullness of time. What does He do? God writes history with a small stone from a brook. Young David with a small stone smites Goliath and Israel was rescued. The eighteenth century writer Voltaire, produced a range of anti-Christian literature. His ideas were an important influence on the intellectual climate leading to the French revolution. I believe God's humour is shown in the establishment of a Bible society in Voltaire' house.

Jesus and Laughter

The *Heidelberg Catechism* confesses "that the eternal Son of God took to himself - a truly human nature so that he might become David's true descendant, in all things like us his brothers except for sin." (Lord's Day 14 q.a.35). So when we speak about Jesus and humour, we are not disrespectful, We accept His incarnation as real. He was seen as the carpenter's son.

Christ's characteristic humour depends, for the most part, upon a combination of ideas rather than upon a combination of words. But it is very important to understand that the purpose of Christ's humour is to clarify and increase understanding rather than to hurt. When Jesus teaches His disciples about being light bearers in this dark world, he uses sly humour about where to put light. The message is about the necessity of witness, but the failure to be a witness is rendered laughable when Jesus asks, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?" (Mark 4:21). Since the

lamp mentioned has an open flame, and since the bed is a mattress, it is easy to see that in this situation the light would be suffocated or the mattress would be burned. The appeal here is to the patently absurd. The sensitive laugh; they get the point. When Christ said not to cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6), He was employing the patently absurd to make His point. Christ tells us that we are not to waste precious words or time or effort on those who chronically resist the Gospel. We must remember, of course, that the joke about casting what is precious before the pigs, was even more preposterous for a Jewish audience than it is for us. The rejection of pork was deep-seated in their consciousness.

Christ's major weapon against the Pharisaic attack was laughter, and He used it fully. The point at which they were most vulnerable was their manifest self-righteousness. There is no one more ridiculous than the one who claims to be perfect. Jesus asked the Pharisees, who accused Jesus of casting demons in the name of Beelzebub, "If I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?" (Matt. 12:27). Jesus pokes fun at the critics, since everyone who listens will realize that the subtle question has no possible answer. Christ's question really means, "By what demonic agency do you perform your miracles?" It is easy to see that the humorous question is a far more effective rejoinder than a serious argument about demons. The severest critics of Christ could not stand ridicule, for seriousness was their central strength.

Conclusion

What is the secret of true humour? The answer is found in the Gospel. It is to know that you are a forgiven sinner, to have no illusions about the self, and no inclination to appear morally better than you are, either in the sight of man or of God. This release from bondage of sin - gives joy. The joy that is completely independent of all the chances and changes of life. This joy expresses itself in an exuberance of which laughter is not the only one, but certainly one, expression.

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