

**A THEOLOGY OF HUMOUR - A SERIOUS LOOK AT THE LIGHTER SIDE OF GOD**

An attempt to establish whether or not there is humour within the character of God, and whether our response to him should be changed as a consequence.

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by

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Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the New International Version, Anglicised version.

## **Introduction**

*"Humour distorts nothing, and only false gods are laughed off their earthy pedestals"*

In the tradition of the Christian Church, God has been portrayed as a God of wrath and judgement, love and mercy, authority and power, but rarely (if ever) as a God of humour. This paper will seek to establish whether that is an omission that needs to be corrected, or whether God is a god without humour. We will examine the structure and content of humour and look at the biblical revelation to establish whether humour is part of the Divine character. In the final section, we shall seek to draw conclusions from this about Christian theology and practice.

## Humour Dissected

*"Humor (sic) can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."*

The problem with humour is that it is not funny once one delves beneath the skin and finds oneself among the academic entrails. However, the study of humour is an integral part of this paper, even if it is not an in-depth study. Whilst it is true that a full dissection is not necessary to identify a frog, at least a study of the frog's anatomy helps in sorting out the frogs from the toads. In this section of the paper we will attempt to discover the essence of humour, and attempt to identify the various forms of humour.

### The essence of humour

The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines humour as "a mental quality which apprehends and delights in the ludicrous and mirthful: that which causes mirth and amusement." The Oxford English Dictionary defines it thus: "a. That quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun. b. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject." These definitions are dry and tell us very little about the components of humour, concentrating as they do on the funny side of humour. This must not be played down. However there is more to humour than merely being something that makes us laugh. Humour has a darker side to it as well, but both sides share the components of humour: they merely make different uses of them.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition hints at this, by referring to oddity. It is within the realms of oddity that we find the distinctive components of humour. Arthur Koestler provides two graphs that help us to see this more easily (see below). In Fig. 1a we see what happens in a tragedy; Koestler uses Shakespeare's Othello as an example: the tension increases in the play until the climax when Othello strangles the unfaithful Desdemona; then it ebbs away in a gradual catharsis.

Koestler uses an anecdote to illustrate the difference between this and humour. In the story a Marquis at the court of Louis XIV entered his wife's bedroom to find her in the arms of a bishop. He walked to the window, threw it open and started blessing the people in the street.

"What are you doing?" cried the anguished wife.

"Monseigneur is performing my functions," replied the Marquis, "so I am performing his." In this episode there is also an increase in tension, but it is brought to an abrupt end as the Marquis' unexpected reaction relieves the tension in an explosion of amusement and even laughter (Fig. 1b).

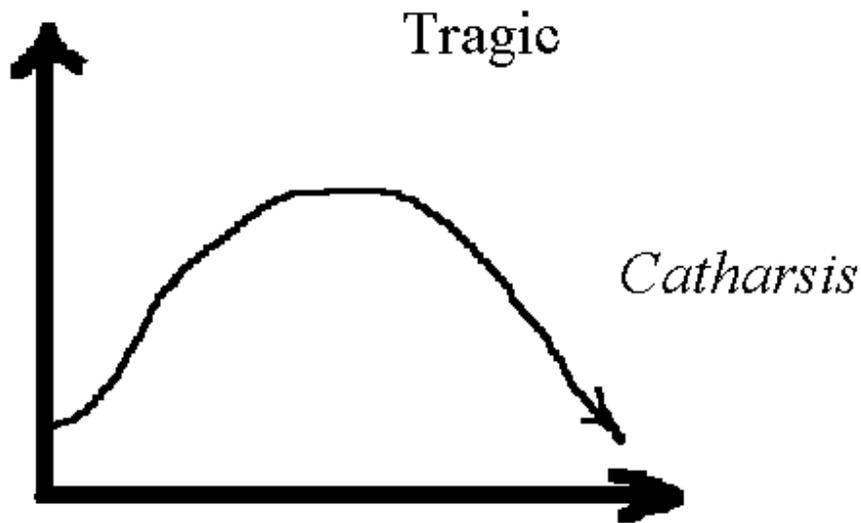


Fig.1a - the axes are time (x) and tension (y)

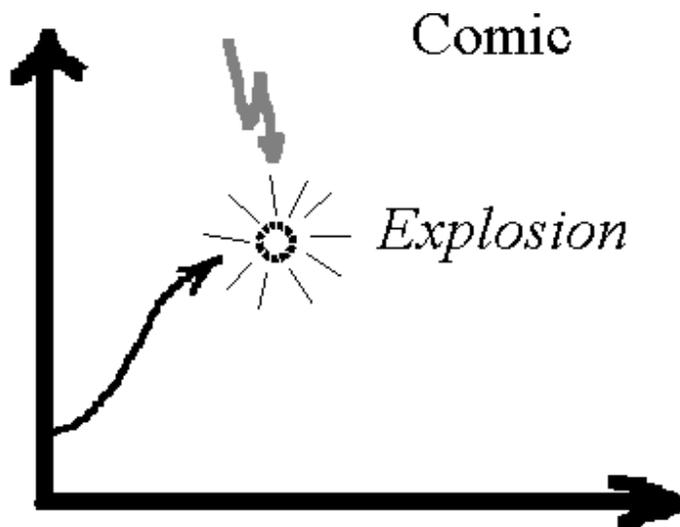


Fig. 1b - the axes are time (x) and tension (y)

Koestler was attempting to illustrate what causes laughter, however, in so doing he has put his finger on the essence of humour - it arises from an incongruity. John Drakeford reaches this conclusion in his book 'Humor (sic) in Preaching'. He goes on to list the various types of humour that arise, and we shall examine these below. Dr Jonathan Miller hints at this when he writes concerning humorous discourse and describes it as like a "sabbatical let-out in one part of the brain and one part of our competence to enable us to put things up for grabs; to reconsider categories and concepts so that we can redesign our relationships to the physical world, to one another, and even to our own notion of what it is to have relationships." It is the concept of humour as a sabbatical from reality that is profoundly attractive. The concept assumes a deviation from reality in order that a sabbatical let-out can be taken from that reality in the brain. Once again the foundation of humour is the concept of oddity, incongruity or deviation from the norms of reality.

(The concept of humour as a sabbatical from reality is one to which we shall return in chapter three).

This suggestion that humour arises from some form of incongruity or deviation from that which is expected is given substantial weight when one examines the origins of the word. It arises from its medieval use to describe any of the four cardinal body fluids - blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy (black bile). It was thought that the relative strengths of these fluids determined an individual's physical and mental condition. When any one fluid predominated, then a person's character would be dominated by that 'humour', and that person was said to be in a 'humour'. An example would be Molière's *Misanthrope*, Alceste, who has a superfluity of melancholy and finds it impossible to see any positive attributes in anyone, even his beloved Celestine. We would probably call such a person eccentric today, but that does not obscure the fact that the origin of the modern concept of humour clearly has links with incongruity and deviation from the accepted norms of reality.

Now that we have discovered what seems to be the essence of humour, it will be instructive to examine the various forms of humour and see whether they have this essence as part of their essential ingredients.

## **The various forms of humour**

In this section we shall attempt to provide a summary of the main forms of humour that will provide the basis for our exploration into whether God does have a sense of humour and use humour in the revelations of himself that he has given us. One of the difficulties that we face is that there is no universally accepted list of the main forms of humour. We shall commence by looking at John Drakeford's summary mentioned above. He prefaces his exploration with these words; "[Humour] is almost impossible to define, but once we are confronted with it, there is an immediate subjective response that makes us say, "Isn't that funny?"

### **Absurdity**

Drakeford includes incongruity as his key concept. This includes the absurd, which he illustrates with a story of a little girl in tears looking at a picture of Christians being thrown to the lions. Her aunt tried to comfort her; "Sad, isn't it?"

"Yes," cried the little girl, "there's a little lion not getting any." Here the incongruous perception is so far out of step with reality that it conjures up a situation or image that is humorous.

### **Bisociative humour**

A close relative of the absurd is bisociative humour, in which the concluding section gives an entirely new meaning to the original thought. For example, a gravestone reads as follows:

ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF J. MacFARLANE

Drowned in the Water of Leith

BY A FEW AFFECTIONATE FRIENDS

### Exaggeration

A further example of incongruity is exaggeration or hyperbole. It can be a form of lying if it is motivated by deception, but it is also a useful tool for enabling one to take a healthy look at oneself. For example, comedians frequently exaggerate ordinary everyday objects and situations until they take on absurd proportions and enable the audience to laugh at themselves without feeling victimised. The success of Rowan Atkinson's Mr Bean can be attributed in no small part to Atkinson's uncanny knack of observing everyday behaviour and exaggerating it to humorous proportions. For example, the audience can identify with someone who has problems getting a reception on their television set, when the reception is fine when one is close to the set, but it goes as soon as one sits down. Mr Bean goes to the extreme of trying to fool the television into thinking that he is close to it by taking off his clothes and putting them on a chair next to the television so that it appears that he is still there.

Exaggeration differs from absurdity because it is a distortion of normal behaviour or situations, whereas absurdity is a completely different perception of reality. It is worth mentioning at this point that hyperbole is one of the principle forms of Semitic humour.

### Wit

The next form of humour we shall identify is wit. Mark Twain said of wit that it is "the sudden marriage of ideas which before their marriage were not perceived to have any relationship." This often takes the form of a statement that has a punch line that comes with a twist. Drakeford gives the example of an astronaut who is strangely silent after walking on the moon. When his companions ask what the matter is he replies, "I saw God."

"You did!" they exclaimed. "What's God like?"

"She's black!"

The twist comes with the unexpected description of God as being a woman and being black, cutting through the traditional assumptions that God is a white male.

### Play on words / pun

This is one of the most widely used forms of humour, and exists within virtually all languages. An example of this in the Old Testament follows the account of Samson's slaying of 1000 men with the jawbone of a donkey:

Then Samson said,

"With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them" (Jdg. 15.16, NIV)

This could be translated as 'With a donkey's jawbone I have made a heap or two', since the Hebrew for 'donkey' sounds similar to the Hebrew for 'heap'. Indeed, there is a further pun in this passage as the place is subsequently called 'Ramath Lehi', which means 'Jawbone Hill'.

### Surprise

Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, wrote that laughter is "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing." This seems to match Koestler's theory (above). We must be wary of reading 'humour' in place of 'laughter', however the two are linked, since one does not usually find laughter (save for perhaps a nervous giggle, hysteria or induced by physical stimulation) without having perceived humour, even if that perception is in the subconscious. If this is so, then it is more correct to say that laughter may result from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. The cause of that laughter is humour.

It is perhaps the surprise element of humour that Kant has perceived. The listener, or observer, is following a sequence of events and anticipating the next one when, suddenly, it moves off in a different direction altogether. Surprise is perhaps more than one of the different forms of humour, although it can be merely that. It is also a form of incongruity in itself, and thus may form the basis for other forms of humour, (see for example Wit, above).

### Ridicule

This is a darker and less positive form of humour. It is usually associated with drawing attention to the inadequacies or differences of an individual, or group of individuals. Also known as mocking, ridicule works because the majority (usually) perceive themselves to be better than the minority, perhaps in physical appearance, or in intellectual ability. It is a cruel form of humour, and its use often draws attention to inequalities. That a situation or behaviour is perceived as stupid, however, suggests that the observer (and ridiculer) does not see his or her own behaviour as being ridiculous. This is a close relative of parody and exaggeration, but is delivered in a less positive manner.

### Irony

The last form of humour that we shall identify is irony. This may also be a 'darker' form of humour. The humour is found not in the statement made (spoken or visual) but in the tone of that delivery. For example, "I really enjoy studying Greek," can have two meanings, depending on the manner in which it is spoken. It could mean that the speaker really *does* enjoy studying the Greek language, or, if it is spoken with sarcasm or irony in the voice, it could mean precisely the opposite. Of course the problem with irony is that it is difficult to portray in the written word. It is possible with the use of italics, or with the clever use of language, but it still relies predominantly on the perception of the reader to notice the irony. Irony may be used in a positive fashion, to draw attention to a particular aspect of the subject matter, but is best used when it is subtle and perhaps

not noticed by many people, or when one first encounters it. In the form of sarcasm, on the other hand, it is always negative, and rarely subtle: often having the same intention and effect as ridicule.

## Associated aspects of humour

We have already mentioned laughter above, and we need to examine this a little further. In this section we will look at joy and hilarity, laughter, and finally at the concept of 'sense of humour'.

### Joy and hilarity

Although these two are not strictly aspects of humour, they are closely associated with humour. They can exist independently of humour, for example, one might feel joyful because of the weather, or because of a pleasing experience, perhaps 'religious', although not necessarily. Joy, like humour has many different forms, which include exultant joy, optimism, gladness, pleasure, courage and hilarity. These are all positive responses to someone or something. They may be evidence of the presence of humour, either intended or perceived, but this is not necessarily the case.

Hilarity is often associated with an outburst of laughter. It is a form of pleasurable excitement that can be caused by physical stimuli, for example tickling, or by a stimulation of perception. This is not very far removed from the incongruity of humour.

Humour can be joyful, resulting in joy and hilarity, but one must not forget that it can also be 'black', causing a mood of despondency and despair as the incongruity highlights something in life that is hopeless or helpless.

### Laughter

Laughter can be brought on by physical stimulation, as can hilarity, and may also be brought on by psychological trauma in the form of hysterical laughter. We shall not be including hysteria in our definition of humour as it is not caused by perceptions of incongruity, rather it is a psychoneurosis, and is caused by physical, emotional or psychological imbalances. We shall also be excluding laughter caused by physical stimulation as this physiological response is not caused by incongruity.

Laughter in response to humour is frequently involuntary. It is an explosion of inarticulate sounds of the voice under an outside influence. It induces a feeling of well-being as endorphins are released in the brain. Endorphins are opiate-like substances and the release leads to a 'high' of emotions. Laughter is a very positive reflex action, and in its pure (non-hysterical) form is nearly always induced by perception of humour. The perception may be one's own, or one may be induced to laughter merely by experiencing the laughter of someone else (who has perceived humour). The intensity of laughter may indicate the degree of incongruity that one perceives, or it may be due to a particular susceptibility to the effects of endorphins.

Frank Muir, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* comments: "A joke has a measurable potential of laughter; there are snigger-sized jokes, guffaw-sized jokes, and hearty-laughter-sized jokes. Humour has no such limitations. A piece might only give the reader quiet pleasure. On the other hand if it catches the reader off-guard and in the right mood ... its effect

can be violent and prolonged, inducing... uncontrollable surges of laughter, hiccups, and a curious snoring noise in trying to regain breath." Hilaire Belloc has a similar explanation about laughter: "Genuine laughter is the physical effect produced in the rational being by what suddenly strikes his immortal soul as being damned funny."

Laughter is not a barometer of humour. It may indicate the presence of humour, but not the 'quality' of the humour, since the response is subjective. Absence of laughter, however, does not necessarily indicate an absence of humour, again because the laughter response is a subjective one, and what one person perceives as being humorous enough to laugh may not stimulate the perception of another. It should also be noted here that laughter may be a form of irony. Hollow laughter is a means of conveying (mostly negative) ironic intent without having to use words. Furthermore, we must again remind ourselves that humour is not always funny or amusing, and what is not funny is not likely to induce laughter.

### *Sense of Humour*

This is the faculty of perceiving humour, usually associated with humour that is amusing. It is commonly seen as a positive attribute, and an absence is usually associated with someone who does not find the same things amusing as one does. In this paper we shall be looking to see if God has a sense of humour. We do not mean in the exclusive 'does he find the same things funny as I do' sense; rather we shall be looking to see if God has the faculty of perceiving humour in all its forms, as well as the faculty of delivering or creating humour. In other words, does God find things humorous; and does he intentionally create humour? It must be noted that even if the Biblical revelation of God does not display *all* the forms of humour that we have identified that does not deny the presence of a sense of humour.

## **God and Humour**

*"God cannot be solemn, or he would not have blessed man with the incalculable gift of laughter."*

Humour is an integral part of human experience, and one could say that therefore it must be part of the experience of God because we are created in his image. Such arguments in favour of the proposition that God is a god of humour are persuasive in their simplicity. We suggest that since humans have a sense of humour, and God made humans, therefore God must have a sense of humour to give one to us. This ignores the fact that humans sin: an activity which is beyond the experience of God. It is conceivable that humour is one of the consequences of mankind's fallen condition, and not part of the perfection which God created and which existed before the Fall. It does not follow, therefore, that since Jesus was fully human he must have had a sense of humour, since he was without sin. It is fallacious and indeed dangerous to apply anthropomorphisms to God without some external evidence to support it; which is why we are examining the biblical revelation of God.

In our search of Scripture for the humour of God we shall be looking at God in the Old Testament, Jesus in the New Testament, and then humour and God in the New Testament beyond Jesus' teaching. It must be stated that there is humour in the Bible, but many of the instances of humour in the Bible do not relate directly to God. Rather they relate to his people and incidents in their lives. We shall ignore these instances, since the appearance of humour in the Biblical text is not *per se* evidence that God is a God of humour, it may be wholly attributable to the character of the inspired writers smiling through the text. Furthermore, there are some instances of humour that are perhaps not intended, but are perceived by readers. Again we shall attempt to ignore these passages because they tell us little about the humour of God, and much about the humour of the reader. This section of the paper is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of humour in the Bible, but a selection of paradigm cases that may serve to illustrate truths about God.

Since the Bible does not automatically point to humour we shall be looking at evidence for humour, such as laughter, joy and behaviour that fits in with our definition of humour - an incongruity or deviation from what is expected. The difficulty that we face when dealing with God, however, is that we do not know what 'behaviour' is incongruous or unexpected in him. We can, however, perceive incongruities in his relationships with men and women.

## God and humour in the Old Testament

### Laughter

Of the 35 times the NIV translation uses 'laugh', or a derivation of it, in the Old Testament, only three actually refer to God laughing. These are all in the Psalms - 2:4; 37:13; and 59:8. They all refer to God laughing at his enemies:

*2:4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.*

*37:13 ...but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.*

*59:8 But you, O Lord, laugh at them; you scoff at all those nations.*

The Hebrew root is *sâhaq*. It is most usually translated as 'laugh' or 'laughs', in a joyful context, but is also translated as 'fight hand to hand', 'mock', 'scoffs' and 'scorned' elsewhere in the Old Testament. There can be no doubt that there is an association with this sort of derisive laughter in these verses. But is this laughter linked with humour?

It seems that it is a form of ridicule. The Psalmist sees God as vastly superior as his enemies and is drawing attention to this. One wonders whether there is a degree of 'anthropomorphisation' by the Psalmist here. However, he is expressing a truth about the infinite superiority of God, above and beyond the capabilities of his enemies, and one has to accept that laughter is *attributed* to God in this context. At first, this makes one uncomfortable, how can a God of love mock his enemies? We understand this sort of behaviour to be rooted in hate and malice, because when humans do it it is usually in the context of exploitation of the weak, or bullying. Here, however, God is not exploiting anyone, nor is he bullying anyone. It is possible that the laughter is pure - God finds the efforts of his enemies to be humorous because of the incongruity between their attempts and his omnipotence. If the laughter is tainted with mockery, however, there can be no question of arrogance because there is no *undue* assumption of importance by God.

There are also occasions when God is described as the One who is the source, or giver of laughter. There are some occasions, for example Job 5:22, where the cause of laughter at one's enemies is the security found in a covenant with God. This is similar to the derision of the passages from the Psalms, above, but it is the laughter of those who have a relationship with God, rather than *his* laughter that is described. There are other occasions where the laughter is altogether different. These are occasions where it is something positive that the Lord has done that causes an individual to laugh. God's activity is not the cause of the laughter, but it is the result of it that leads to rejoicing and laughter.

*Genesis 21:6-7 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."*

This passage is extremely interesting, as it is the conclusion of a story in which we may discern the humour of God. Abraham and Sarah were both old, and Sarah was 'barren', yet God had promised

that Abraham would have an heir by Sarah (Gen. 18:10). Sarah's response was to laugh at the ridiculousness of the promise (perhaps mockingly, perhaps because she found it funny). We might say that she was laughing at the incongruity of the situation - a centenarian and his barren wife to have a child - and she was also laughing at God. Into this apparently impossible situation God works a miracle, and Sarah's response is recorded in Gen. 21:6, above. Why will there be such laughter? The answer is in Gen. 21:7, it was the sheer impossibility of the situation. The source of the laughter was God. It was he that contrived this humorous situation.

A similar theme can be found in Psalm 126:2. The exiled Jews had returned to the Promised Land, and this Psalm recalls that and rejoices in all that God has done for them.

*Psalm 126:1-2 When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."*

What is interesting here is that in verse 1 there seems to be an element of disbelief that the exiles have been brought back. The impossible has happened, and it is the Lord who has brought it about. The response of the people is to laugh exuberantly, in a similar fashion and for the same reason that Sarah laughed. God again is the source of the humour that leads to laughter.

In Job 8:21, Bildad the Shuhite implies that God is the source of laughter, joy, and, we might infer, humour. We must be wary of basing our theology on Job's friends. The advice that Job receives is mostly spurious and unhelpful, and if we were to take it out of context would lead to some very strange conclusions about the nature of God. However, this passage seems to find echoes in the Genesis 21 and Psalm 126 passages.

*Job 8:21 "[God] will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy"*

The similarities between this verse and Ps. 126:2 are remarkable, and we should note that Job accepts this, along with Bildad's other theological advice as something he knows to be true (Job 9:2). The problem with Bildad's advice is not so much that he has got his theology wrong, but that he has wrongly diagnosed the causes of Job's afflictions. The truth that God is the source of laughter is not negated by Bildad's inappropriate pastoral advice.

In summary, it seems that God is the source of laughter, and that he himself might even laugh. What this tells us about God's humour is that he is the One who creates situations that are incongruous and which lead to human laughter, and that he himself finds the puny attempts of his enemies to be amusing, which the Psalmist portrays as God ridiculing them.

## Joy

There seems to be a similar theme running through the passages that refer to joy in the Old Testament. The predominant theme is that the cause or source of the joy is the Lord. We have noted in the previous chapter that joy is not an aspect of humour, but is related to it. Joy may exist independently of humour, as in Lev. 9:24, when fire from the presence of the Lord consumed the burnt offering, "and when the people saw it, they shouted for joy..." It may also indicate the presence of humour, especially when associated with laughter, as in Job 8:21 and Ps. 126:2, above. It is not possible to say decisively therefore that joy indicates the presence of humour, but we can say that joy indicates the presence of pleasure, some of which may arise because of humour. This shows the response of people to God's presence and activity in their lives, not the nature of God's humour, or sense of humour. It will be of greater assistance to us to see if there are any circumstances in which God rejoices, and to see whether there is any humour present there.

Predominantly in the Old Testament, God's joy is the result of something his people have done. For example, in Dt. 28:63, and again in Dt. 30:9, we read of God's joy. The NIV does not use the word 'joy', or any derivatives of that, but the sense of the Hebrew, *sûs*, is 'rejoicing'. Indeed, the word is translated in the NIV at over half its occurrences by 'rejoice'. The joy is experienced by the Lord when his people obey him and worship him. This is not as a result of humour, but because it pleases God to receive the worship and obedience of his people.

Perhaps the clearest use of joy, linked with ironic humour in the Old Testament can be seen in the book of Job. We have already seen Bildad the Shuhite's advice to Job about God and humour, and it seems that in the latter stages of Job we find some of that humour unveiled. In the first 37 chapters, Job and his friends have been trying to make sense of his predicament. In chapters 38 - 41, God gives his answer. Instead of giving a deep theological explanation about the nature of suffering, and the unfairness of life, God treated Job (and us) to a poetic and descriptive glimpse of his control over Creation. As we read this, we sense joy. Not joy that comes from a relationship with people, but a sheer enjoyment of Creation for its own sake.

This joyful revelation was designed to help Job understand his place in Creation and is punctuated with taunts by God to Job. For example:

*Job 38:2-3 "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me."*

The instruction to "Brace yourself like a man" is humorous. God Himself has just asked who dares to question *him*, and then he tells Job to brace himself like a man. Job can only brace himself as a *man*. He has no other option! The incongruity between God the interrogator and Job's bracing himself like a man to try to answer God is also humorous. We can see similar humour in the following verses:

*Job 38:21 "Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived for so many years!"*  
[irony]

Job 40:2 *"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"*

Job 40:7 *"Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me."*

### Irony and Humour

In chapters 38-41 of Job there is much irony and humour. God describes all the powerful things he can do, and the question that is consistently repeated (and is implied when it is not explicitly asked) is "Can you do this?" By the time God has finished with his speech, Job is a broken man, repentant and contrite:

Job 42:2-6 *"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*

Clearly it was God's purpose to help Job reach this point of understanding from the outset of this encounter. This suggests that one of the rationales behind the humour of God is that of teaching. Humour is a valuable tool for teaching. As we have seen in the first chapter of this paper, Dr Jonathan Miller has suggested that humour is a sabbatical from reality that enables us to take a step back from everyday reality and to reappraise our priorities. That seems to have been God's intention with Job - to help him step back from his problems and survey them in a wider perspective. It clearly worked.

We can see a similar use of humour in God's encounter with Jonah. This time the humour is not verbal but visual and tangible. Jonah was angry that God had been merciful to the Ninevites because of their repentance, apparently because he felt he had had a wasted trip - he knew that God would let them off, right at the beginning. God responded with a question: "Have you any right to be angry?" Jonah did not continue the conversation but stomped off and sat outside the city. When God provided Jonah with a vine to provide him with shade, Jonah was happy, but when God 'provided' a worm to chew the roots of the vine so that it withered, Jonah was "angry enough to die." God then pointed out that if Jonah was that concerned about the destruction of a vine that he did not even cultivate, how much more should God be concerned about 120,000 people in Nineveh? The humour here is in the way God taught Jonah about compassion. He could have just told Jonah about his compassion, but Jonah needed to experience a loss. That God provided the vine, and that he took it away again suggests that he was almost playing with Jonah's volatile emotions, and the vine became a visual illustration to demonstrate the point God wanted to make.

Jonah 4:10-11 *But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and may cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*

The humour is found in the very last verse of the book, in the rhetorical question that God leaves Jonah to ponder. The immense incongruity between Jonah's concern for his vine and God's concern for people is obvious and humorous.

Is there also a similar humour in the tragic account of the Fall in Genesis 3? Why, one wonders, does omniscient God call out to Adam, "Where are you?"? Did he really not know where the naked-conscious man and woman were, or was he playing games with them, perhaps to help them find the courage to tell him what they had done? It is perhaps not insignificant that both Job and Jonah, and indeed the Fall narrative, are regarded as allegories by many commentators and scholars. The suggestion is that the stories, and perhaps the people themselves, were fictional, and were told as means of explaining truths about God. We will not enter into a discussion about the factual nature of these stories, but it is worth noting that even if the events are not true, that does not negate the theological truths that can be drawn from the stories, in the same way that one can draw theological truth from the parables of Jesus.

It would not do to ignore the Old Testament prophets in this section of the paper, although it has to be said that they were, on the whole, a singularly unhumorous group. The subject-matter of their prophecies probably did not lend itself too readily to humour, but there were humorous incidents. Hosea is called by God to marry a prostitute, or adulterous woman - to make a prophetic statement. The man of God is to marry a blatantly sinful woman! On various occasions the prophets mock the wayward people of God and worshippers of other gods, for example Elijah on Mount Carmel mocks the prophets of Baal suggesting that they "Pray louder! He is a god! Maybe he is day-dreaming or relieving himself, or perhaps he's gone on a journey." The problem with these and other accounts is that, with the exception of Hosea's unorthodox marriage, they generally reflect the humour of the prophets who were delivering 'the word of the Lord' through their character, as opposed to reading a dictated message, although God is still the source of the message.

### Conclusion

So far we have seen that the Old Testament does suggest that there is humour in God. He finds the efforts of his enemies to be amusing, to the point where he ridicules them. He creates humorous situations that lead people to laugh, and is the source of laughter. The laughter and delight come from the great things that God has done, and anticipation of the things he can and will do. God experiences joy and pleasure when his people worship him, and apparently enjoys Creation for its own sake. He uses irony to help people understand something of his nature and their position with him. He is even prepared to create humorous situations to make his point.

It seems that the God of the Old Testament is not just a God of wrath and judgement. He has a lighter side to his character, indeed he appears to be rather playful at times; enjoying exploring the incongruity between his omnipotence and mankind's inflated opinion of their own importance. One is conscious, however, that if the Job, Jonah and Adam encounters are more allegorical than literal, the humour could be attributed to God by the writer. Whilst this means we cannot be decisive about the humour of God, we certainly have some pointers. We will now look at the New Testament to see if these themes are continued. We shall look at Jesus, the ultimate revelation of God, in a separate section, and then the rest of New Testament revelation that is written in the light of Christ.

## God and humour in the New Testament

The reason for looking at Jesus and humour in a separate section from the rest of the New Testament is found in his person. He is "the image of the invisible God". He is fully God and fully human at the same time. It is this miracle and mystery of the incarnation that makes Jesus unique in history, and which makes him the ultimate revelation of God. Jesus himself said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." If there truly is humour in God then we ought to find it in Jesus. Furthermore, if we find it in Jesus, we can say confidently that there is humour in the Godhead: either because Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and/or because he is part of the Godhead, and his nature and humanity are part of God's nature - there is a man in heaven.

### Jesus' use of humour

Christians are comfortable with the image of Jesus as the "man of sorrows... familiar with suffering". This is perhaps an odd thing to say, but it is true. We are constantly (and rightly) reminded of Jesus' passion, since it is the centre of our Faith. But this seems to have led us to a distorted picture of his humanity, ignoring the lighter side of humanity. If Jesus was fully human then he must have laughed, he must have experienced joy, he must have found things amusing. In short, he must have had a sense of humour.

One of the problems that we face in attempting to discern that sense of humour is that it was not the purpose of the Gospel writers to tell us how funny Jesus' jokes were, or how much he enjoyed to laugh and play. Their purpose was to show how, through his life, death and resurrection, he revealed himself as the Son of God who came into the world to redeem the world. Nevertheless, if Jesus had a sense of humour - as we have surmised from theological deduction that he must have to be fully human - it may well show in his teaching, and perhaps in his actions.

When we are attempting to find humour in teaching from a different culture and different era we may discover that it is not funny in our Twentieth century British culture. We must remember, however, that humour does not have to be funny to be humour, and that humour is still humour, even if it is culturally bound. Bearing all this in mind, we will look firstly at Jesus' use of humour in parables and secondly in his other teaching and sayings.

### Humour in Jesus' parables

In his book, 'The Humor (sic) of Christ', Elton Trueblood attempts to discern humour in Jesus. He commences his chapter on Christ's use of irony as follows: "Humor, such as that employed by Christ, is akin to dialectic, in that it can lead to the unmasking of error and, thereby, the emergence of truth. The humorous thrust clears away confusion, somewhat as the logical analysis does." We have already explored this aspect of humour, but it is interesting that Trueblood uses it about Jesus. In other words, he suggests that Jesus' use of humour is 'educational'. This is not necessarily always so. All we can say is that the humour revealed in the gospels is used in that manner, but we do not conclusively know whether Jesus used humour for its own sake, for

entertainment, since no such instances are included in the gospels. Similarly the argument that the gospels are silent because Jesus did not use humour in that manner is erroneous.

Trueblood highlights humour in three of Jesus' parables, which we shall examine first, and then we shall look at the use of humour in the others. We will not examine all the parables, but will attempt to identify the humour in a sample from the gospels.

### *Patches and wineskins*

The first parable that Trueblood examines is the double parable of new patches on old clothes and new wine in old wineskins (Mt. 9:16ff, Mk. 2:21ff; Lk. 5:36ff). Trueblood comments about this parable, "The parable of the new wineskins is perhaps our best parabolic example of Christ's humor (sic). In thinking of it we see that the humor really sharpens the point already made, that it is not a corny anecdote told for the sake of the joke, but that he is, nevertheless, really joking." The humour that Trueblood has identified is partly found in imagining the slapstick results of doing what Jesus says shouldn't be done. The patch tears the clothes, and the still-fermenting wine splits the rigid leather wineskins as it expands. The reason Jesus told the parable was to try to explain that he had not come to patch up the old Judaism, but to bring in something new. Trueblood suggests, however, that Matthew and Mark have both been edited, and that Luke has the punch line, which is difficult to interpret if taken seriously.

Lk. 5:39 *"No-one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"*

This seems to undermine what Jesus is telling those around him about the nature of his ministry - why is the 'old' better than the 'new' that Jesus brings into the world? If one allows that he may have been ironic here, then one finds truth within the humour. It has been said that the seven last words of the Church will be, "We've never done it that way before!" This is a modern adaptation of Jesus' comments, which may be paraphrased thus: "The old wine was good enough for us before, so why should we change now?" Jesus knew that his ministry would meet with opposition, that the new wine would prove to be too unsettling for many, and his final comment about the nature of his ministry has that barbed point on it.

### *The Dishonest Steward*

The second parable that Trueblood studies is that of the unjust steward. Here the dishonest steward is seemingly commended by his employer for his prudence, and worse still, there is an exhortation to use worldly wealth to gain friends 'so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.' It seems that you can buy your way not only into the hearts of people, but also God! Trueblood attempts to resolve the difficulties that this presents us in the face of Jesus' other teaching about money as follows. "[Christ] is making a statement so preposterous that the sensitive hearer is supposed to be able to see that the clear intent is the exact opposite of the literal statement. ... This is, in Christ's teaching, the extreme case. It is so extreme that the people who fail to take it humorously are bound to make themselves seem ridiculous."

The apparent message of this parable is, 'if you want to get ahead in this world, steal and be dishonest, and the world will respect you, especially if you are clever enough in the way you do it.' The punch line comes when the Pharisees sneered at Jesus for this teaching. Was it because they

missed the humour, or because they saw themselves as being in the firing line? In any event, Jesus explains his true purpose in verse 15:

*He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."*

The humour is obvious when one sees the parable in the light of this passage. Furthermore it too has a barb to hook it into the hearts and minds of listeners. The irony is easily missed in the written text, but to miss it leads to difficult exegesis.

### *Talents*

The third parable that Trueblood takes as an example of Jesus' use of humour in the parables is the parable of the 'Talents'. This has traditionally been interpreted literally, with no concession to the possibility of humour. This parable, thus interpreted, is the foundation stone of the Protestant Work Ethic, but Trueblood finds three problems left unanswered by this solemn interpretation. If the nobleman represents God, he is portrayed very differently from Christ's portrayal in the rest of the gospels. Here he appears vindictive and lacking mercy, compared to the Father of the Prodigal Son, for example. The second problem is the preposterous nature of the rewards - out of all proportion to the amount gained. The third problem is the cruel and unusual treatment at the end of both versions. In Matthew, the 'worthless servant' is thrown "outside, into the darkness, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." In Luke, the ending is even more vindictive and cruel:

*Luke 19:27 "But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be a king over them - bring them here and kill them in front of me."*

If this is God, then he is out of character! If Jesus told this story seriously, then there is no solution to these problems, but if we suggest that Jesus told the story jokingly, there may be an answer. Trueblood admits that his hypothesis of humour in this parable is "on far less certain ground" than the previous two. He suggests that the humour hypothesis will resolve the problem by proposing that, "Christ is lampooning the popular or conventional conception of God." This picks up a theme of the perceived injustice of God that Malachi observed a few centuries before.

*Mal. 3:14f "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'"*

In other words, God is grotesquely unjust. What is the reason for this supposed lampooning? Trueblood answers, "In short, the entire problem of evil is involved whenever men try to have an adequate conception of the character of God. The danger is that men will fail to see God in terms of redemptive love, which is as far removed from sentimental permissiveness as it is from harsh vindictiveness. If Christ wanted to overcome the popular view of God as the One who is possessive and who plays favorites (sic), the best way to accomplish this might be to make the picture so preposterous that men would begin to laugh at themselves for their former assumptions. They might not see the point if Christ were to talk directly about God, but perhaps *could* see the point if he were to talk about a grotesquely unjust and mean-tempered man."

This would make the nobleman the villain of the story rather than the hero as has traditionally been supposed. It is not a picture of God, but a picture of what God is not. Trueblood is keen to remind readers that this insertion of humour into the parable is on less firm ground than the previous examples, but he finds the humourless alternative even more difficult to comprehend. One shares Trueblood's doubts and discomfort about this interpretation of the parable, but it has shown us, along with the wineskins and the unjust steward, that humour can be a valuable tool for exegeting Jesus' parables, and should not be overlooked, especially when faced with a difficult exegetical problem. On the other hand, one should not be too ready to explain away any difficult teaching as being irony on the part of Jesus, as one could discard truth in one's desire not to be challenged. Indeed, it appears that unless the 'humour hypothesis' leads to an interpretation that challenges convention, one might say that it is unlikely to be a correct use of the exegetical tool.

### *Other humorous parables*

This does not mean that there is no humour in Jesus' parables unless it is irony. Humour is one of the master story-teller's most useful tools for keeping the interest of his audience. In Luke's account of Jesus' teaching on prayer, for example, we have several examples of humour. There is the man whose friend has paid him a visit at midnight who wakes up another friend to borrow some bread, and sons being given snakes instead of fish and scorpions instead of eggs. The humour here is not what we might term funny, but when one thinks of the incongruities it might raise a smile. The man whose friend has just paid him a visit at midnight would have been justified in telling him to go away, but instead of doing that he goes to the extreme of waking up another friend in order that he might feed the first one. The reason that the second man gets up is not out of love for his friend but to get rid of the persistent pest in order that he might go back to sleep. From this parable, and the fish and egg illustrations, Jesus draws a parallel with the way in which God gives to those who ask.

This is where the humour is most obvious. If we give in the way that he describes, begrudgingly in one instance and giving good gifts to our children, then imagine how much more God wants to give you - even the gift of the Holy Spirit. The difference between human giving and the divine gift is incomparable.

In the parable of the wise and foolish builders, the humour is also obvious. The stupidity of the foolish builder is humorous in it, and when contrasted to the wise man, is even more so. Once again, however, there is a point to the story, which is revealed by Luke's account of Jesus' parable.

*Lk. 6:46-49 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, which dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."*

In this parable, as in the last, it is not necessary to see the humour in order to exegete the passage. The humour is inherent within the story and in the comparisons made therein. This is similar to

the use of humour that we identified in the Old Testament, namely that comparisons between human activity and knowledge and God's character and activity are made to focus the human mind on God, and to puncture inflated human egos as the truth behind the humour hits us. The humour allows us to identify with the characters and laugh at them, and at the same time laugh at ourselves as we identify with the characters.

### *Humour in Jesus' teaching*

We have looked at Jesus' parables to see how he used humour, and they serve as an example for our study of his use of humour in teaching. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish teaching from parables, as Jesus often used everyday objects and situations to illustrate what he meant, and these are often humorous. It may be, therefore, that there is some overlap between the previous section and this one, for example, the snake and scorpion in place of fish and eggs might not be classed by some as a parable, in which case it will fall into this section.

### *Irony*

Trueblood notes that irony is the form of humour used most frequently by Jesus. The irony is distinguished from sarcasm because it is free from the desire to wound. A delightful example is found when John the Baptist's two emissaries arrive and tell Jesus that John is enquiring whether Jesus really is the Messiah. Jesus' response is gently ironic: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor..." This is so clearly referring to Isaiah 61, a passage that refers to the year of the Lord's favour and the coming of the Messiah, that there needs to be no direct reference to it. Jesus could have simply said, 'Yes,' but he affirmed his identity by an ironic reference to prophetic Scriptures. In other words, "What do you think, John?"

Another example is in the Sermon on the Mount. The section from Mt. 6:16-7:12 contains many ironic sayings that lose some of their effect if the irony is missed. For example, in 6:16, Jesus tells us that those who look sombre when they fast and distort their faces to let everyone know they are fasting have already received their reward. What is the reward? It is probably the pleasure of believing that men think well of you for fasting, but it is also surely going around with a distorted face! In the section concerning not worrying about the future and about provisions (Mt. 6:25-34) there are ironic comparisons between the worrier's food and clothing and God's provision for the birds and flowers.

Jesus concludes this part of the sermon with the statement: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." This seems fatalistic on its own, but in the context it is possible that Jesus was quoting a contemporary Jewish proverb in an ironic fashion that conveyed the message, 'Don't worry unduly.' This backs up his earlier sayings.

### *Jesus and the Pharisees*

It is in his encounters with the Pharisees that we encounter much of Jesus' humour in his teachings and sayings. He never excluded the Pharisees, but allowed them to exclude themselves from the

Way by their inflexible adherence to the Law and hypocritical attitude towards Lawbreakers. Perhaps the most obvious example is found in Mt. 23 where he pronounces seven woes on them. In particular there are humorous illustrations about dirty cups and whitewashed tombs.

*Mt. 23:25-28 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."*

In this condemnatory passage there is humour. No-one would be so foolish as to wash the outside of a cup whilst on the inside it was still dirty. No-one would bother to prepare the outside of a tomb without checking first that it was empty. But the Pharisees did! They were so concerned about external appearances and the fulfilment of every jot and tittle of the Law that they forgot about what concerns God - the inside. By comparing the Pharisees' behaviour with such obviously foolish activities Jesus is holding a mirror of ridicule up to them, and daring them to look in it to see how they really are. The tragedy is that they were too proud to look.

### *Jesus and his disciples*

Jesus did not reserve this humour for those who were in opposition to him. He used it with his disciples and with those who came to him as well. Was there a smile on Jesus' face when he changed Simon's name to Peter? He knew Simon well enough to know how inconsistent he was, and indeed Peter proved that in the following transfiguration encounter, and in denying ever knowing Jesus shortly after professing that he was willing to die for him. Trueblood suggests that the naming was drenched in irony - calling Simon 'Rocky' in the same way we might call a six foot four inch man 'Shorty'. This may be going too far, but perhaps it helps us to understand a little of Jesus' wit. On another occasion, after the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus rebukes them with humour.

*Lk. 22:25-26 Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."*

Trueblood suggests that the name 'Benefactor' is the sort of name that a tyrant or dictator takes to try to make the people idolise him. The irony is that he is far from being a benefactor, the opposite in fact. This humour is then taken into the situation that Jesus was facing, the desire for greatness, and the irony of the 'benefactor' is reversed, so that the greatest are to be like the youngest, and the rulers like servants. This message is amply illustrated in the person of Christ, but it seems that the disciples had missed the obvious (which is why Jesus washed their feet). This illustration may have helped them to understand.

### *Jesus and others; hyperbole*

Jesus' use of humour with those who came to him is also interesting. Many have pondered and come up with interesting interpretations of the camel going through the eye of a needle. The explanations have ranged from the literal interpretation - that it is impossible, and hence just as impossible for the rich man to enter the kingdom of God - to the ingenious 'Eye of the Needle' gate into Jerusalem - at which camels had to have everything unloaded from them before they could pass through, with the implication for the rich that they need to 'unload' before they can enter the kingdom of God. If, however, one bears in mind the Jewish penchant for hyperbole in their humour, a third interpretation is possible. In other words, it is very difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, but not impossible. The humour here is to take the impossibility to the extreme. It could be argued that the disciples' wonderment at who could enter the kingdom suggests the literal is more likely, but the effect of the hyperbole is to emphasise the difficulty, which may also lead to wonderment. Other examples of Jesus' hyperbole are the gnat being strained out but a camel being swallowed, and a plank being ignored in one's eye in order that a speck of dust might be removed from one's brother's eye.

### Conclusion

In all Jesus' teaching and encounters, the humour that we see is there for a purpose. It usually serves to assist in the illustration of some point that Jesus wishes to drive home, either with the dramatic use of irony (as in the parable of the steward) or in allowing the hearer to look again at themselves in the light of it. In some cases the humour seems to add colour and character to the stories that Jesus told, in others the humour has a barb that hooks it onto the conscience of the hearer and makes it more difficult for him to shake off the implications of what Jesus has said. In any event, we miss Jesus' use of humour at our peril, for to miss it is to leave us with difficult and sometimes irreconcilable exegetical problems. To see it is to add colour, warmth and personality to what are sometimes perceived as dry texts, and to a Saviour who was fully human and fully God.

### Humour and God in the New Testament beyond Jesus' teaching.

In this section we will be looking at God and humour outside the context of Jesus' teaching in the New Testament. This section may prove to be the most controversial as it calls into question many of the preconceptions that people have about the New Testament and God's activity therein. For example, is it possible that there is humour in the incarnation of Jesus? Is there an element of humour in the resurrection of Jesus? What about the Church, is there humour in the institution of the Church? One has no desire to be irreverent, and one has no desire to be controversial merely for its own sake, but if we are to construct a theology of humour we need to examine these integral parts of the Christian faith and theology.

### *The Incarnation*

If ever there was an ultimate incongruity, the Incarnation must be a prime candidate. God Almighty becomes man, yet he remains God whilst not compromising his humanity. The importance attached to this reality can be seen from the amount of time and attention the early Church gave to trying to formulate a doctrine of the Incarnation, and the plethora of heresies that undermined the orthodox doctrine by overemphasising either the Divine or human aspects of Christ. However, the mere existence of an incongruity is not prima facie evidence for humour.

We have stated that humour is based on incongruity, but not all incongruity is humour. Can we say, therefore, that there is humour in the Incarnation of Christ? There is certainly joy and wonderment in the New Testament accounts of the announcement to Mary and the birth of Jesus, and when the pregnant Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, who was carrying John the Baptist in her womb, Elizabeth reports that, "as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." There is an unprecedented celebration by angels at Jesus' birth, and Simeon and Anna rejoice in the Temple when Jesus was presented there by his parents when he was eight days old.

What do we make of all this joy and celebration? Certainly much of it can be attributed to the fact that the Messiah has come and this has been recognised by those who rejoice. But there is more - why did all the angels rejoice? Was this because all heaven was rejoicing that God's plan of salvation was reaching its climax? We cannot say that it was because they were laughing at the incongruity of the incarnation, since we do not know if the angels were laughing, however they were certainly rejoicing. The reason for this rejoicing was that the Saviour had been born, Christ the Lord. The angels must have known the true identity of this Saviour. We can speculate that there was also an element of rejoicing at the way in which God was carrying out this salvation, taking human flesh. To say that there is humour in the incarnation is, at best, speculation, but there is at least an incongruous event that leads to great joy, and this is not that far from humour.

### *The Resurrection*

One feels that to bring humour into the passion of Jesus is going too far. It is a time of solemnity and pain, of violence and injustice. There is nothing humorous about the death of an innocent man (albeit incongruous), and there is nothing humorous about the abandonment of Jesus by the Father. However, the resurrection is a different matter.

The resurrection is a celebration of the victory over death: a celebration and vindication of Christ's ultimate sacrifice, and the prototype for the resurrection of mankind. The resurrection is also a great incongruity - the dead are now alive - and here, one feels, there is humour as well as joy and wonderment.

One might say that the resurrection is God having the last laugh. The powers of evil and destruction were ultimately defeated as their apparent victory over God turned into subjugation and destruction as the Son of God was raised from death to life. The resurrection was no mere resuscitation as that of Lazarus was, this was a complete reversal of all that had led to Jesus' death, and the resurrection body of Jesus was one that would never face death again, unlike Lazarus. If there was rejoicing in the company of heaven at the birth of Christ, one cannot imagine the joy at his resurrection. The reason why there was no great company of angels to proclaim the fact this time was that the disciples would do that job - once they had come to terms with it!

It is in the resurrection appearances of Jesus that one observes much of the humour of the New Testament, outside his teaching. The appearance of a man who was recently dead, into a room with locked doors, and a greeting with the words, "Peace be with you" certainly lends itself to comic interpretation. Of course that was not the primary purpose of the appearance, nor was it the primary purpose of the writers who recorded the appearance, but it is still humorous if one

considers it objectively, although this is not evidence that God intended humour. One suspects that Jesus would have had a smile on his face as he saw the bewildered and astonished expressions on the faces of his disciples change to sheer exultation and joy. And what of the encounter with Cleopas and his companion on the Road to Emmaus?

Luke tells us of the encounter and preserves some of the humour for us.

The first thing that we notice is that when Jesus appeared "They were kept from recognising him." Why was this? Was it so that Jesus could spend time with them, explaining the things that they had experienced? Was it because, as Michael Wilcock suggests, "still their hearts were cold," or was it because, as Leon Morris suggests, "It was in God's providence that only later should they come to know who he was."? These suggestions are speculative. It is equally as plausible that Jesus was playing with them. His apparently innocent question, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" is met with incredulity by Cleopas; "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Jesus compounds the humour by asking, again with apparent innocence, "What things?"

Even after they had explained to Jesus all that had happened and told him of the empty tomb, Jesus did not reveal his identity but exclaimed, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" All of a sudden this stranger who had apparently been unaware of all the events of the last few days has a detailed knowledge of the events, as predicted in the Prophets! The humour does not end here. As they reached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further. The verb *prospoieomai* only appears in the New Testament at this place, and has a connotation of pretence; 'making a show of', or 'making as if'. Did he really mean to go on further? The use of *prospoieomai* suggests that he did not, but was playing with them. It is only at the point when Jesus broke bread with them that Cleopas and his friend had their eyes opened and they recognised Jesus. It is also at that point that Jesus vanished from their sight! But the humorous encounter does not even end there. Cleopas and his friend ran all the way back to Jerusalem, back to the room where the disciples were meeting, and "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them." This was the punch line on an increasingly humorous situation.

It seems that God kept them from seeing who Jesus was initially, as Morris suggests. But the question "Why?" remains unanswered by the text. Was God was playing with them? If our observations from the Old Testament are correct, this would not be out of character. The other resurrection appearances also contain similar humour, for example the failure of the disciples to recognise the stranger on the shore of Galilee as Jesus until after he had repeated a fishing miracle that he had performed before his death. God, it seems, was not only having the last laugh over death but also the first laugh over the founder-members of the Church!

### *The Church*

It seems inconceivable that God would entrust the spread of his good news of salvation to a bunch of amateurs like the disciples. That in itself is humorous. Instead of a host of angels, God selects a group of fishermen, tax-collectors and others from assorted occupations to take his message to the ends of the earth. Perhaps the reason was that people would be more likely to respond of their own volition to a message preached by men, rather than being in awe of angelic evangelists. Whatever the reason, God did not leave them alone. The Holy Spirit's arrival in power at Pentecost

was God's way of maintaining a divine presence in the work of spreading the gospel, empowering the disciples to speak and prompting the hearts of listeners to respond. To a degree, the arrival of the Holy Spirit takes the edge off the incongruity of the Church's mission: it was not left *solely* to that group of men and women, but it was (and is) still a risk to leave it to men and women, relying on their responding to and being open to being empowered by the Spirit, to deliver the most important message ever. That it was a risk is seen in the events of Church history: from the disciples through the early churches to 1993, and beyond.

When one leaves the narrative accounts of the gospels and Acts, and enters the realm of the letters and Revelation, one finds a dearth of humour that can be attributed to God. Of course there is irony in Paul's writings, for example, but here we face the same difficulty that we faced with the Old Testament prophets - the message is not dictated, and the humour may therefore be attributable wholly to the writer rather than to God. Humour here may be a useful tool for exegesis, but it does not help us with this paper. In the next chapter we will draw together the conclusions that we have reached about the Humour of God, and attempt to apply them to the late twentieth century Church.

## A Theology of Humour - The Punch-Line

*"If you're not allowed to laugh in Heaven, I don't want to go there."*

We have seen from the Bible that God is a God of humour. We will attempt to draw certain conclusions from this humour concerning God, our relationship with him, and our relationships with One another within the Church.

### *God is the source of laughter*

This suggests that the ability to perceive humour is part of mankind's innate being. If God is the source of laughter, he is the one who gave it to humanity as part of the gift of creation. On particular occasions his activity leads to the laughter of individuals. We have concluded that God does have a sense of humour. If humans are made 'in his image', and we too have a sense of humour, it does not take much thought to see where that sense of humour comes from. If this is so, then we can surmise that before the Fall mankind's humour was devoid of the destructive elements that it has today.

We have all experienced painful jibes in the guise of humour on various occasions. Mockery in the hands of men and women can be a weapon that cuts deeper than any blade. In the hands of God, however, it is not tainted with the desire to hurt or abuse. It is part of what amuses God to see the efforts of his enemies to frustrate him and his plans. We must be careful not to attempt to use mockery in the manner that God uses it, for to do so is to elevate one's status above others, contrary to the 'first shall be last' principle that Jesus taught his disciples.

### *God's humour teaches and rebukes.*

God's sense of humour educates those who experience it. The educational experience is not a painful 'telling off' but a warm-hearted pointer in the right direction. It would appear that this is a much more beneficial and positive use of humour than mockery.

God does rebuke us, of that there can be no doubt. The messages delivered through the prophets were often condemnatory. But God sometimes seems to use humour to help his people understand him. At this point we refer back to Jonathan Miller's sabbatical from reality. Humour allows us to look at ourselves in a manner that is less painful than being told 'straight', but is nonetheless searching. Jesus used humour in this fashion, and one feels that in the hands of God, humour is a loving form of rebuke. Thomas Carlyle wrote, "True humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love." In the hands of man, it has the potential to have the same effect, but also the potential to be destructive and heartless. The former use of humour is to be encouraged, particularly in sermons and Christian 'educational' material, as a means of communicating truth. The latter use of humour should be vigorously discouraged, and attempts should be made by all in leadership to eschew the use of humour that harms.

An example might be to mock or mimic someone in the congregation from the pulpit to make a point in the sermon, or worse still to get a cheap laugh. Such a use of humour not only degrades and humiliates the person, but demonstrates a marked lack of sensitivity and compassion on the part of the preacher who is apparently delivering the 'Word of God'. At such times one suspects God is leaving him to it. The problem is that non-Christians see ministers and vicars in particular as representatives of God and may be offended and put off seeking him. Furthermore, if the congregation senses an opportunity to entertain others, they may pick up on the ridicule of the individual concerned, or feel that since the preacher did it, it must be all right...

On this subject, Karl Barth wrote the following words. "As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory. This is our perplexity. The rest of our task fades into insignificance in comparison." Barth in his theological reflections has unearthed the incongruity of preaching, and whilst one does not wish to write much on homiletics, it is worth bearing this incongruity in mind if one intends to preach: the incongruity being the lofty ambition of speaking of God and the inadequacy of our ability to fulfil that ambition unaided. All that preachers can do is seek God's assistance, and seek to remove any potential for offence that they might give - the offence of the gospel is surely more than sufficient for the average person!

### *The playful God*

This is one of the most important things we have discerned in the writing of this paper. God has a sense of fun, of play. In the later chapters of Job, God seems to be enjoying his Creation for its own sake. The image of a boring old man in a white robe is dispelled in the face of this revelation; the sorrowful, sombre Christ is seen as inaccurate; the God of wrath and judgement is seen with a pleasant smile on his face. It would be quite wrong, however, to throw away all these images of God. He is a God who judges, he is angry at sin and its effects; Jesus was at times sorrowful and sombre, not least during the Passion. What is needed, and what one hopes has been achieved, is a more balanced picture of a God who is sad when people reject his love, who mourned the death of his Son, yet enjoys the company of mankind, whom he created for that purpose, and has a sense of humour and fun that he is not afraid to enjoy and share with them.

Some may fear that this portrayal of God diminishes his greatness, or is even blasphemous. This is not so. Surely a God who is not afraid to enjoy himself is greater than a god who must always remain austere for fear that some might not take him seriously. God is sufficiently great that he need not fear the opinions of men - that will not diminish his greatness - and he has made us sufficiently in his image that when we see the humorous side of his nature, we are attracted to him. As William Ingo once said, "I have never understood why it is considered derogatory to the Creator to suppose that he has a sense of humour."

### The Church and God's humour

We began this paper by suggesting that the presence or absence of the humour of God has implications for his Church. Now that we have established the presence of his humour, we need to explore the implications further.

We have already mentioned the inappropriate the use of humour in preaching, above, and we must not lose sight of that. At the same time, we must not be so serious in preaching that we put off even the most lugubrious of people. Humour is a useful tool for communication of truth: Jesus demonstrated that brilliantly. It is also a useful tool for exegesis, when used to illustrate truth and challenge with it, rather than using it to explain away the challenge.

Humour should invade the serious and weighty aspects of the Church, bringing a little levity and light. Of course there are times when humour is probably inappropriate, as it was in the passion of Christ (for example during the celebration of Communion, or Eucharist) but there are equally times when a sombre attitude would be inappropriate (for example during celebrations of the resurrection). In the same way as our perception of God needs balance, so does our worship of him. What is being advocated here is not a descent into mirthful disorder, but a recognition of the place of humour in worship. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the growing churches in this country are those that use contemporary forms of worship, and are generally described as 'lively'. Their sense of joy is infectious to those who attend (although they are as prone to falling prey to excesses as the rest of the Church), and one wonders whether they might not be presenting the humorous side of God to the world, albeit unwittingly.

If the Church is truly to be the body of Christ, his representatives on earth, we need to reflect him in our life-styles. Again one wishes to emphasise that this is not a call to flippancy, but a call to recognise the importance and significance of humour. It is an anathema to find a Christian who never smiles, and who is never amused, who is never joyful, who has no sense of humour, for that is to deny the presence of the living, laughing, humour-loving God in the person of the Holy Spirit in the life of that Christian. At the same time, the 'happy-clappy' Christian who never admits to having any problems denies the serious side of that same presence: to deliberately misquote Bill Shankly's cliché about football: Christianity is not a matter of life and death, it's more important than that.

Reinhold Niebuhr suggests that humour has an even more important role than we have previously suggested. "Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer." Niebuhr's argument behind this startling statement is that faith, like humour, deals in incongruities. The existence of humour and laughter at it is the starting point on the journey to discovering the greatest incongruity of them all - that God should love those who rejected him, and that he would be prepared to die for them. If this is correct, the omission of humour from much of the Church's activities over the last 2,000 years is all the more lamentable. Not only is humour the prelude to faith, it is a gift for teaching and evangelism, and the absence of it in our faith has the opposite effect.

What this paper has endeavoured to show is that the Church has missed much of the humour of God for the best part of twenty centuries, and in so doing it has misinterpreted and misapplied much Biblical truth and has portrayed an inaccurate, boring, overly-serious image of that God to the non-Christian world. Murray Watts in the introduction to his collection of sketches, 'Laughter in Heaven', sums this up perfectly.

*"There is no place for a church which never resounds with the laughter of faith. Such a church commits a crime against humanity: it has become boring. There are many serious obstacles to spreading the gospel, but this is one of the worst. It is no good blaming the*

*world for being blind to the truth, when we are blind to it ourselves. If we are not free, how can we liberate others? If we are not faithful to the uniqueness of the Resurrection experience, to the delight and heavenly joy which is ours for eternity, if we are dull, we shortchange our fellow men. ... The laughter born on that Easter morning is a gift from heaven, which draws us closer to that day, when 'God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'"*

Amen.

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