



Understanding humour: Some thoughts for preachers

Humour is notoriously difficult to define. This article seeks to offer a framework for understanding humour and how it is expressed, including some discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of using humour in preaching.



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'A time to weep, and a time to laugh', words that express part of the rich tapestry of life described in Ecclesiastes chapter three. I doubt if there are many who would disagree with the sentiments expressed in this verse as they are emotions that we all experience at different times in our lives. Humour is very much part of the fabric of daily life, and can be used positively in a variety of ways – to diffuse potentially explosive or embarrassing situations, to set people at ease, to educate and to entertain. It can also be used in negative ways that are divisive, subservive and offensive.

Humour lives in the lives and hearts of every human being, and those who are very serious are regarded as 'humourless' and thought to be missing out on something. Robert Darden suggests 'the ability to see humour in things, or to create comic tales and rituals, is among the most profound and imaginative of human achievements. The comic sense is an important part of what it means to be human and humane. Without it we return to brutishness, and the Philistines are upon us.'¹

Three theories of laughter and humour

Humour is notoriously difficult to define. Just as it is impossible to tell a joke that everyone in the world finds funny, a universally accepted definition of humour remains elusive. However, John Morreall points a way forward with his suggestion that there are three main theories of humour:² the *superiority* theory, the *relief* theory and the *incongruity* theory.

According to the superiority theory we laugh at others because we feel superior to them in some way, this

can be based on physical, intellectual, racial, gender or many other differences. This theory explains much of the unpleasant type of humour that is not acceptable within society today.

In the relief theory, laughter is regarded as 'the release of pent-up nervous energy'.³ It is through Freud that this theory was popularised. He believed 'laughter arises if a quota of psychological energy which has earlier been used for the cathexis of particular psychical paths has become unusable, so that it can find free discharge'.⁴ According to Critchley, 'the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity'.⁵ The problem is, the relief theory is quite abstract and, because Freud's psychical energy is difficult to define, the concept often has to 'be saddled to another theory of humor'.⁶

The incongruity theory suggests that humour arises from the sense of incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens. It is the unexpectedness of what happens that lies at the heart of this type of humour. Personally, I think this is the most helpful theory of humour.

Humour, comedy and laughter

Humour, comedy and laughter are related terms but they do not share a common meaning. The *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* defines humour as 'the quality of being amusing'. Comic is defined as 'causing or meant to cause laughter', and 'relating to or in the style of

comedy'. Laugh is defined as 'to make the sounds that express lively amusement'.

James and Kate Williams argue that although the terms overlap they are distinct: 'Humour is a mode or guise of small units of communication, built on shared understandings of the world which it expresses and reinforces. Comedy is a mode of larger units of communication and describes a narrative framework with a happy ending. Laughter, the spectrum of amusement from a smile to a guffaw, is the currency of humour.'⁷

Humour is based on a particular perception of reality and everything that comes together to form that reality. That perception also involves seeing the instances of

of humour, writes, 'It draws the boundaries of the group and ipso facto defines the outsider.'⁹

Here we come up against one of the greatest difficulties in understanding humour – it does not travel well. Humour does not easily break down national, cultural and language barriers. It can be very specific. People laugh at different things and for different reasons. They also express their appreciation of humour in different ways. Even within one nation there can be differences within the subcultures of that nation. These subcultures are not just ethnically based but can be formed around age, gender and religious groupings, to name but a few. It is into this problem that every preacher who uses humour ventures. This is a point that needs to be remembered by the preacher in a multicultural setting. Where there is diversity within a congregation the shared understanding is no longer societal, but faith based. The humour that we experience will often emerge from the gap between worldviews.

There is a danger with the use of humour in preaching that it also can unintentionally make some feel excluded. The context of our use of humour is just as important as the content. As James and Kate Williams note: 'Feeling the fabric of humour ... is not quite enough, because it is a dynamic tool for eliciting laughter and creating/reinforcing groups. It necessitates a shared understanding of the world. By laughing you show that you belong. And by laughing you show that other people don't belong. So we, the readers and hearers of "humour", are most significantly implicated in its value or corruption as we *laugh* at it, thus potentially granting assent or approval.'¹⁰

It is within the context of the society that we are brought up to learn the difference between appropriate and inappropriate humour. We are a product of social conditioning because in every culture people who laugh at inappropriate things have been viewed at the best as simple at the worst as insane.

Influences on the effectiveness of humour

1. Attempting to explain something funny

In *Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious*, Freud attempts to explain humour by deconstructing jokes to analyse and demonstrate the way in which they work, but in doing so he destroys the elusive quality of humour that they possess. It is true that a joke explained is no joke at all. In fact, it is usually quite insulting. Humour works in the moment and often the retelling of a joke or story falls flat because the moment has passed.

2. Inappropriate humour

Humour can be inappropriate in the sense that it can be crass, insensitive and offensive to those listening because of the subject matter (e.g. ethnic, gender, religious, political). Political correctness may be derided by many today as having gone too far, but it is a

incongruity in life. It is not the big picture, but is part of the big picture. In a novel it would be like a chapter, in a play it would be like an act, and in a song it would be like a memorable line. It is a part of reality but not the whole.

Comedy is a genre that portrays reality as a whole; it represents the big picture, the whole novel, the play and the song.

Laughter is the result of understanding humour and the comic; the level of laughter depends on the depth of understanding of what is truly humorous or comedic.

It is within the shared understanding of the world that humour works. Henri Bergson comments upon this shared understanding when he writes: 'To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one ... Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have social significance.'⁸

For Freud, jokes are necessarily social. He argues that jokes must be told to someone else, they are not individualistic in the sense that we are able to enjoy them by ourselves. They have a shared aspect either in our reception of them or in our imparting them. Yet Freud argues that the comic is different in that it does not require sharing as we can find a situation or a person comic without the need to share.

Humour's shared understanding can become very divisive or subversive, as it can potentially be used to exclude as well as include. Shared laughter is something that draws people together and creates a bond. Where laughter is not inclusive it divides those listening into them and us; it creates unease and makes those who are being excluded very uncomfortable. Berger in speaking of this aspect, what he calls the 'socio-negative' element

Humour lives in the lives and hearts of every human being

Notes

1. R Darden, *Jesus Laughed: The Redemptive Power of Humour* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 2.
2. S Critchley, *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.
3. Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 3.
4. S Freud, *Jokes And Their Relation To the Unconscious* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 147.
5. Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 3.
6. A Smuts, 'Humor', *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu.
7. J and K Williams, 'Two guys go into the temple. One says to God ...' Humour, Scripture, and Christian Discourse', *Cambridge Papers* 14.4 (Dec 2005), p. 1; www.jubilee-centre.org. Reproduced in this issue of *The Bible*

good guide to the appropriateness of humour in both preaching and public speaking. It is useful to remember that good manners and common sense should dictate the content of any humour that we use in the pulpit. I think Paul is referring to this type of humour in Ephesians 5.4, when he speaks of humour that pollutes or trivialises what is being shared between Christians.

3. Past experiences

Another influence on humour's effectiveness is often the back story, which may be something that reflects a particular characteristic of a culture or a subculture, i.e. the cultural or racial stereotype. Within my own culture, that of the Western Highlands of Scotland, there is still the use of stereotypical humour (e.g. the meanness of the Scot and the backwardness and simplicity of the Highlander or Islander). As in most cultures, the stereotype is turned around so that there is a twist in the tail of the story as it is thrown back on those who would place us within that cultural stereotype.

4. Delivery

There can be few sights more humiliating than watching as a preacher tells a joke or a funny story, and seeing it die as it leaves their lips. The dramatic pause which should be filled with laughter is instead filled with silence and bewilderment as the congregation tries to figure out what is going on. There are people who are naturally funny, others who learn to be, and some who are not. As with most things in life it is best to work within our own levels of competency rather than to force ourselves to be what we are not. It is probably good practice to stay away from humour in the pulpit if you cannot tell a joke properly.

The only thing worse is when the joke being told is fluffed, because the preacher gets mixed-up or forgets the punch line. There is a cautionary tale told of a preacher who, whilst visiting another church, heard the minister tell a clever joke. The other minister had said, 'I have spent many happy years in the arms of another woman who is not my wife!' The congregation were startled by this revelation and wondered what was going to be said next. After a brief pause the minister continued, 'She was my mother!'

The preacher thought that the joke would be a good way to start his next Sunday service, and when the day came he stood and said that he wanted to make an announcement. 'I have spent many happy years in the arms of another woman who is not my wife!' The congregation looked shocked causing the preacher to panic and blurt out, 'But I can't remember her name!'

Added to this is the problem that often it is not what is said but the way in which it is said that elicits laughter. There are some people who by their facial expression or tone of voice can make what is ordinary appear funny.

Expressions of humour

The observation of people and society's idiosyncrasies, and the ridiculous nature of some aspects of life, is a common technique used by stand-up comedians, and has obvious implications for the preacher. In looking at the text it is possible to see and observe humour as we do our exegesis. An obvious example is the new names that Abram and Sarai receive in Genesis 17. What must those with him have thought when he changed his name to 'father of a nation' at his age!

Jesus used humorous observations about people's conduct not just in his parables but also in the way in which he described the religious leaders (Lk 18.9–14). We would do well to remember that we can often point out the incongruities of our own lives or society as a

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whole with the use of humour.

One element that is often present in a funny story or joke is that of surprise. This side of humour can be used to lower our listeners' defences or change their presupposition when we are sharing something that they already know. It allows us to look at the subject from a different angle.

There is often the fear that humour in general can trivialise the message, but if it is used carefully and with integrity it can be a way of opening up closed minds to a different way of looking at reality.

The prophets often touched on the dark side of humour in their messages to Israel, Judah and the nations (Jer 49). There are many other types of humour some of which are satire (Mt 23), irony (Amos 4.4–5), parody (Jonah) and sarcasm (Job 12.2).

Humour can bring about social change where the institutions and accepted norms of government and society are subverted by humour. Humour here points out that what has been accepted does not have to be; change is permissible. It is not surprising that humour is regulated and censored within totalitarian states.

It is not just social change that can be achieved through humour but the individual can also be changed: 'Jokes can be read as symptoms of societal repression and their study might be said to amount to a return of the repressed. In other words, humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would rather not be.'¹¹

If we are perceptive enough to recognise ourselves in the mirror of humour it can be a redeeming experience in proportion to our willingness to change.

in Transmission. See pp. 8–11.

8. H Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), p. 10.

9. PL Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin/New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), p. 57.

10. Williams, 'Two guys', p. 1.

11. Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 12.