

What is the True Place of Laughter

by Conrad Murrell

Several years ago I heard a hilarious recording of little ditties, parodies of Baptist church life set to popular tunes. The composer-guitarist-singer was a former music and educational director in Southern Baptist churches, and was well acquainted with all the embarrassing and sometimes painful absurdities that go along with a regular Baptist church "program." Delighted at the opportunity to poke fun at what I had long held in contempt, I rushed right out and bought one of the records for myself. Any time we had a visitor thereafter I could hardly wait to play "Tiptoeing Through The Tithers," relishing the appreciative guffaws that always followed. But that wore thin quickly. To my dismay and grief I found that after we had all had our big laugh there was a niggling sorrow in me, a sort of shame I tried to suppress. It was utterly impossible to talk seriously about spiritual things after that. If we spoke of anything in relation to Christianity it was in a railing, ridiculing spirit. I took the record out and smashed it.

Another Baptist minister, this one an ex-preacher of sorts who called himself the "Prime Minister of Humor" had found it easier and more profitable to make people laugh at religion than bring them to mourn over their sins. The seminary from which he graduated has started a fund to memorialize this star of the bawdy T.V. show "Hee-Haw" who was recently killed in a plane crash. Far be it from me to bring judgment on that poor soul. If God has justified him, all our accusations cannot touch him. And if not, what contempt we might heap on him now are nothing to the miseries in which he finds himself. There is no laughter in hell. But I am thinking of the title on one of his albums, "Let us Bray." If it is not sacreligious to poke fun at prayer, the highest and most holy exercise of redeemed men, what is? It seems to me that an institution dedicated to the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ could do better than memorialize a man who made his living ridiculing it.

It would be difficult to think of something more distasteful and unpopular than what I am about to write. Being the worst offender I know of, I have put it off as long as I dare. I have tried to rationalize, minimize, excuse, explain away the plain scriptures on this matter all my life. But it is no avail. If you have difficulty receiving it, I can well sympathize with you. One might as well attack apple pie or motherhood as question the goodness of humor and laughter. But our difficulties are entirely subjective. They lie within ourselves. The Bible is absolutely clear on the matter. And since we do not wish to be in the same category as wicked king Jehoikim who cut out all he did not like of the word of God we had better be prepared to bow to the truth.

A simple concordance search through the Bible of the words "laugh" or "laughter" turn up some shaking facts. Of the 33 times they occur in the Old Testament they are used in the good and positive sense only four times; and in those instances the word could be as well or better translated joy or rejoicing. The other 29 times usually speak of scorn, derision in unbelief. They are *never used* in respect to anything funny.

In the New Testament we find these words only five times, only one of which is in a positive sense (Luke 6:2). Three of these times the laughter is in scorning Christ.

Equally significant are some words not found in the Bible: Joke, fun, funny, humor, amuse. Their nearest equivalents in the Scriptures are, foolish talking, jesting, fool, foolishness, merry, merriment. Only the last two of these are ever used in any good and positive sense, and that is in reference to joy and rejoicing in the blessings of the Lord.

We have heard many a person assert his belief that Jesus laughed a lot, but not a shred of Scriptural evidence to support it. On the contrary He is said to be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Such passages as Psalm 2:4 are often cited as proof that God has a "sense of humor," but this is a poor place to prove such a point. In this passage God is not portrayed as being tickled about something. His humor is not on display but His wrath and His sore displeasure. His laughter is in scorn and derision at the potsherd of the earth striving against their Maker. This is cause to make men mourn rather than smile.

A look at the etymology of "humor" is also revealing. We have come to think of it only as that which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous, but that is something that has evolved. It comes from Latin meaning moisture, fluid (humidity comes from the same word). It came to mean a changing and uncertain state of mind, a caprice, whim or fancy. When used as a verb it means to change, comply with, to indulge or accommodate. Does that sound like something worthy of attributing to God? Or even something that should recommend Christian character?

As for amuse, the implication is more obvious. The prefix "a" means "non" or "no," and the word "muse" means to meditate or to think. To be amused is to stop thinking, to deliver ourselves from serious meditation.

So ingrained in our thinking that laughter is healthy, good, beneficial and wholesome, I was shocked when beginning in demonic deliverance ministry, great numbers of demons who called themselves "Laughter" manifested themselves. They are some of the most common of demonic obsessions, their principle purpose being to ridicule and laugh away the law of God and redemptive truth, to keep their victims from thinking seriously about the only things in this life that have eternal consequences. Think about it a moment. How many people do you know that laugh all the time? That must laugh every time they say something whether it is funny or not? That carry a perpetually smile or smirk? Add that to the clowns and jokesters that never take anything serious, and you will begin to have a dawning idea of what is going on.

But let us look at what the Bible does say about laughter and foolishness. "I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?" (Ecclesiastes 2:1-2). "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool" (Ecclesiastes 7:2-6). "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh ...

Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:21, 25).

It must be pointed out that these passages from Luke must not be interpreted in a letter sense. They reflect a general tenor of the philosophy of life of the wicked contrasted with that of the righteous. We do not gain eternal bliss by hungering, weeping and mourning. Nor do full stomachs and laughter condemn us to eternal punishment. The wicked, however, are intent upon filling their stomachs, getting all they can and having a good time. The righteous, recognizing that the whole world lies in wickedness under the wrath and imminent judgment of God, give themselves to earnestly seeking the redemption of ruined men. Their personal welfare and temporal happiness are of secondary concern.

But Ephesians 5:1-5 is not so oblique or indirect. It meets us head on with an injunction as dear children of God to walk in love as Christ loved us, "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints: Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks." For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Likewise, James 4:8-10 is a clear duty to those who profess faith in God: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands ye sinners: and purify your hearts ye double minded. Be afflicted and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."

AMUSEMENT

Two questions we ought to consider: The first is, Why do people want to be amused? The ostensible excuse is boredom, a means of passing (killing) time. Sometimes just something to lift heavy spirits. (No amount of amusement will lift the spirits of a person whose heart is heavy over a deeply serious matter; it will only grieve him.) Sometimes we say we want to be amused because it is "fun." Here are the real reasons:

1. We want to avoid thinking. We would have our thoughts diverted from reality. In this, amusement is a form of intoxication, drunkenness. Why do we wish to avoid thought? We hate the truth, have an aversion to the facts and had rather not face them. We wish to escape the responsibility imposed upon us by them. We are too lazy to respond to the normal demands of life, to shoulder the load that is only morally right for us to carry. We are cowards who are afraid to meet the challenges that God, men and our adversaries set before us. Rather than make sensible rational use of our minds we choose to be fools. We will not put away childish things and act like adults.

2. Unbelief. We think we can laugh the truth out of the court. If we can make a derision of it then it can be eliminated. Anything that can be laughed at need not be taken seriously; so we laugh at what we do not wish to believe. We think to dull the sharp edge of the word of God by kidding about it.

3. Hatred of God. The venom of the serpent lies inherent in the bloodstream of Adam's descendants. Their hatred of God extends to hatred of His moral law. By mocking it into absurdity they hope to dismiss it from their minds and relieve themselves of guilt for their constant violation.

The second question that we should consider is, Why do people amuse? Entertainers, jesters, jokers and kidders are aplenty. Why do people so desire to make funny?

1. Pride. We want attention, visibility. We want to be seen and heard. We want to gain an audience, to be looked at, to be the center of attention. Have you ever noticed at a joke telling session how each speaker can hardly listen to the other he is so impatient to have the floor with his funny story? How they butt in and interrupt each other with witty remarks? But it is not attention alone that we wish. A person who has just spilled his soup in his lap by a clumsy move has plenty of attention he does not want. He feels like a fool. That is not the purpose of getting attention by foolish jesting. We want to be thought clever, witty, admired and we are positive that we are giving that impression when we are entertaining.

2. Power. We want to influence and control people. If we are to do that, then we must have their minds to do with them as we please. That is why so many advocates of communicative arts insist on the importance of injecting amusement and humor into the speech immediately. Their minds must be turned from reality, from serious, sane thinking. If we are going to impose our minds upon theirs, then we must first rob them of their reason. One of the basic necessities of pressured sales is to refuse to allow your victims to think. Bury the truth with a laugh and then you can feed him a lie. This is the way men, with humor, use and exploit men, gain from them and manipulate them for their selfish ends. The entertainer gets the money, the power, the prestige and the entertained get nothing but a belly laugh that lasts no longer than dry thorns in a fire.

WHY WE LAUGH

The Creator did indeed endow us with the faculty of laughter, and it has a good and positive use which we will discuss later. But that faculty, like all others, has been perverted, corrupted and turned to evil use. These are the usual, most common provocations of laughter.

1. Scorn. Much of what we laugh about is absurdities. We laugh at the homely person who imagines herself attractive, the dull one who thinks himself bright, the inept who brags about what he can do, the impotent who has ambitions to do great things. Some of our scornful laughter is an attempt to convince ourselves of untruth. A person or event poses more of a threat than we want to admit so we bolster our unbelief by derision.

2. Gloating. We exult ourselves by poking fun at others calamities, poor appearances, peculiarities and inferiorities (real or imagined). What is more funny than a dignified person subjected to the humiliation of an ungainly sprawl from a slip of the foot or being splashed in the face with mud? One preacher-clown carries a picture of an unbelievably ugly woman in his billfold and tells everyone it is his wife. He likes to bring it out just before a prayer meeting and ask prayer for her. This is the category of laughs we get out of "nigger jokes," "Pollock jokes," "Jew jokes," "Aggie jokes," "Scotsman jokes" and all other forms of ethnic slurs. We thus puff ourselves up with pride because we are superior, more intelligent, more "normal."

3. Foolish amusement. We have already spoken at length on this matter of wasting time. What is more insane than throwing away your precious allotted minutes and hours of life with emptiness. Foolishness is emptiness; and nothing is so empty as empty laughter. It is choosing an illusion, nothingness rather than life in all its glorious reality.

4. Ridicule. Depraved humor reaches its peak in ribaldry. Comedians push to permissible limits usage of illicit sex, profanity, indecent references to the anatomy and private biological functions. Their audiences howl with delight, and the highest ratings go to the dirtiest jokesters. It is significant that the prohibition of foolish talking and jesting in Ephesians 5:4 falls between two verses that deal with fornication, uncleanness, covetousness, whoremongering and idolatry. Why is this? And why does jesting always gravitate to filthy jesting? The reason is subtle but clear. Again, our hatred of God's moral code surfaces. We laugh about the breaking of taboos, the flaunting of that which the Bible calls shameful, the violation of what God forbids more than anything else. With fiendish delight men hear stories of people doing what they wish to do, hear words spoken they dare not speak themselves. Like swine after swill they drink up iniquity like water. In so doing they put to ridicule the law of God, and for a few mad moments relieve themselves of the condemnation of God's holy law.

WHY WE MUST NOT JEST

Reflecting defensively upon these scriptures many times in the past, I have said to myself, "I must cut down on this foolishness. A Christian must not do much of this." But that will not do. The Scriptures say "not once named among you as becometh saints." Squirm and cavil as we may, yet we cannot escape the plain injunction, "not once." Another scripture that stuck in my mind which the Holy Spirit often uses to prick my conscience is Ecclesiastes 10:1: "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour."

Foolishness belongs to fools, to the world. Fun, funny, joking is big business in this world, especially so it seems as the world conditions become worse and worse, and mankind's condition looks more and more hopeless. Turn on a television set at any prime time hour and the chances are about even that if you do not hit a commercial, the first sounds you will hear is laughter, usually canned. Rather than face the inescapable consequences of their foolishness men prefer more darkness of the mind by empty-headed laughter.

We as Christians, on the other hand, are to be light, truth, wisdom, sobriety. Our life must be consistent with our professed faith. We may not engage in foolhardy nonsense in one minute, then sober up the next to "do our Christian duty."

I can never forget the disgusting sneer, "And you are supposed to be a Christian" I got from a co-worker in a shop a short time after my conversion. I had been trying to witness to him and thought I could better endear myself to him by telling him a joke. It was a tragic mistake.

We cannot pray in this spirit. Prayer is an exercise in dead earnestness. Its effectiveness is proportional to its burden. There is no such thing as light hearted prayer. It is all heavy. We pray with full knowledge and awareness of a wicked world. Evil is upon us. We are under sentence of death. Our children are being lost to drugs, immorality, drunkenness, despair, lawlessness and suicide. Our parents grow older and are slipping into hell. Our brothers and sisters carelessly let their lives slip by oblivious to their eternal destruction. Churches decay. False prophets deceive the people. Lies prevail. Truth is trodden under foot. The saints cry for bread. Add to this all the physical suffering, torment, starvation,

political and social oppression in this world. What is funny? Where is the humor in all this *reality*? Is there anything any more incongruous than dying humanity hee-hawing itself to hell? How much laughter do you hear in a funeral parlor where a child lies after being run down by a drunk driver? How many comedians perform on death row in a prison house? If the world may laugh while it goes to hell, certainly Christians may not. They may be blind, but we are not. Distress may drive a fool to jesting, but it drives a Christian to his knees.

We cannot preach, teach, witness in a light, humorous spirit. I well know this statement is constantly denied. The opposite is practiced. One of the curses upon preaching today is the light, witty, cute way in which it is presented. It delights its audiences but produces no serious results. No matter how severe the truth you present, if you say it in a light and funny manner no one will take you seriously. This tone also insinuates itself into modern books which take up the most sacred and portentous of spiritual truths and handle them in such a frivolous, slap-happy manner that robs them of any meaning.

When a person, sinner or saint, wants to get down to business with God, when his soul becomes disturbed and shaken to its foundations, he will not seek out a "Christian clown" to counsel. You may have gained his friendship as a jolly Joe, but you will not be the one he calls on in that hour. He will seek out a holy man whose life testifies that his heart and mind are informed and sensitive to sober issues of life, death and eternity.

We cannot grow spiritually in this spirit. All spiritual progress done in the heart is in dead earnestness, sober consideration, mournful repentance. It is cries of pain and anguish, not giggles of delight, that you hear in childbirth. We develop and grow in the deserts of trials and affliction, not in the jester's court. "Laughter, the best medicine" in a *Reader's Digest* quotation. The Bible says, "by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."

THE TRUE PLACE OF LAUGHTER

When, then, is laughter good and wholesome, to be recommended and encouraged? What is the good purpose for which God endowed us with this faculty? "Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient, but rather giving of thanks." Our hearts are to be cheered by gratitude, thankfulness, adoration to our good and gracious God. His mercy and kindness to us provide the only sound occasion of merriment. Thankfulness and joy in the Holy Spirit are the provocations of holy laughter.

Isaac, whose name means laughter, was well named. The announcement of his conception was greeted by Abraham with a hearty guffaw. Sarah, likewise, snickered in the tent as she heard the promise of God. These were both laughs of unbelief, typical of people who have not yet learned to experience the goodness and faithfulness of God. It is the only laugh of which they are capable. But there came another day when Sarah learned that God had indeed done as he promised and gave to her the deepest longing of heart. Holy laughter then found its fulfillment in her: "And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

There is indeed a time for us to laugh: "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them. The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad" (Psalm 126:1-3).

We who mourn, groan and weep now over the deplorable state of the professing church, the dishonor given to the name of God, the grievous perversion of the gospel of God's sovereign grace, the mad rush to hell of humanity all about us, we who sorrow now would like to put off our sackcloth and be clothed with gladness. To this end we cry to our able and merciful God to revive His people in the midst of the years, that we might see true spiritual awakening in our time. Then shall our mouths also be filled with true holy laughter. We will laugh with Sarah when our "Isaac" arrives.

*Originally titled "Dying Humanity Hee-Hawing Itself to Hell"