HUMOR AND TRUTH:

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

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Master of Theology

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by

David Nathanael Theobald

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LAUGHTER AND TRUTH:

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN TEE-HEE-OLOGY

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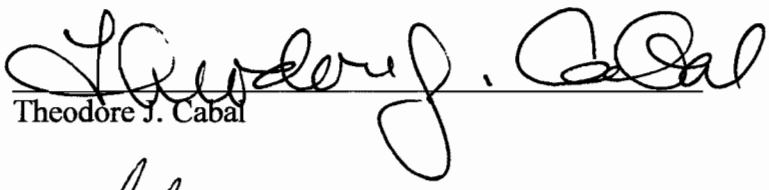

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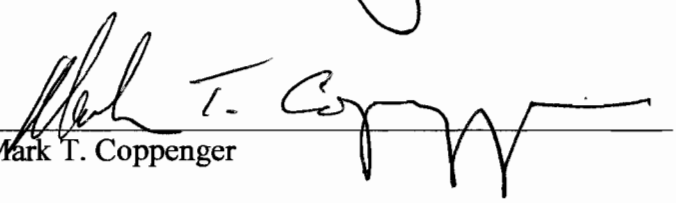

Mark T. Coppenger

Date Nov. 28, 2007

To Donald Theobald:

Father, pastor, mentor, theologian, friend,

and, yes, I will finally admit, his jokes are kind of funny too

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PREFACE

This project was conceived during an episode of *Seinfeld.* I had just laughed out loud at one of Newman's diatribes, when I had a philosophical experience. For the first time that I can remember, I attempted to discern what exactly had prompted my laughter. I laughed because watching a short fat man foaming at the mouth as he inveighed against his arch rival was funny. But why was it funny? I quickly realized that my chances of resolving this mystery were slim. For millennia (I came to find out), the nature of the comic has challenged the most brilliant minds. So, in the words of contemporary comedian Brian Regan, "Me on a couch with a bag of potato chips ain't got a chance." Investigating laughter would require a serious examination.

I am thankful to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for providing me with the opportunity and climate in which to write such a thesis. The faculty here is unrivaled, and Southern's professors are the primary defenders of orthodoxy in such recent debates as Open Theism, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Emergent Church. With the primary battles being fought by these capable men, I was free to research and write on a matter of secondary importance.

Specifically, I am indebted to President R. Albert Mohler, Jr., and Dr. Gregg Allison, my supervisor, who have taught and demonstrated an "all of life" theology. The topic of this project testifies to the fact that their vision is as contagious as Dr. Allison's laugh. I am also grateful for Dr. Ted Cabal, who showed unmerited confidence in me and allowed me to serve as his Garrett Fellow for a number of years. Alongside Drs.

Cabal and Allison, Dr. Mark Coppenger graciously agreed to serve on my thesis committee and I am thankful for his insight and interest in the study of humor and laughter. I deeply value the leadership, scholarship, and friendship of these men.

Rev. J. Ryan Fullerton and the saints at Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, have been extremely supportive of me as I studied this topic. A dear brother, Mike Withers, read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions. In addition, the financial and prayer support provided by my church in-law, the First Baptist Church of Stockbridge, Georgia, has proven to be invaluable. The cost of tuition during my last semester was underwritten by the Zoeller Pump Company of Louisville, Kentucky. I am extremely thankful for the support of this wonderful employer and am indebted to Dr. Matt Byers and Darren and Valerie Meyers. Comments from these friends and coworkers greatly improved the manuscript. In addition, the superior editorial skills of Professor Marsha Omanson made this paper presentable.

This thesis would not exist if it were not for the support, encouragement, and sacrifice of my incredible wife, Jamie. Since we have been married, she has endured an apartment full of books, a preoccupied husband, and a lot of bad jokes. She is a model wife and mother, and I love her deeply.

Above all, I praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ "who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:3). Soli Deo Gloria.

David N. Theobald

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2007

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Laughter is one of the most unique, universal, multifaceted, and misunderstood of all human behaviors. The experience is exclusively enjoyed by humankind. Man is the *animal ridens*: the "animal who laughs," being the only creature capable of reflection. Philosopher of religion Jackson Lee Ice once wrote, "Man is the only animal that weeps and laughs and knows that he weeps and laughs, and wonders why . . . He is the most humor-seeking, humor-making, and humor-giving species that has walked the earth, ever ready to provoke or be provoked with laughter."[1] In short, man "is the jester in courts of creation."[2]

Not only is laughter experienced exclusively by humans, but people living in all different times, cultures, lands, and sociopolitical climates have indulged in this ubiquitous behavior. Laughter is equally enjoyed by the tall and pale Brits who watch *Monty Python* as it is by African pygmies who are known to roll around on the ground in unrestrained fits.

A corollary of this universality is the fact that laughter is multifaceted. People can laugh for any number of reasons, they can employ it to accomplish a host of different

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[1]Jackson Lee Ice, "Notes Towards a Theology of Humor," *Religion in Life* 42 (1973): 392.

[2]Ibid.

ends, and they can laugh in a variety of "spirits." As contemporary Catholic theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel explains, "There is a joyful, comfortable, playful and contented laughter and there is mocking, malicious, desperate or cynical laughter. There is laughter for sheer pleasure in life and laughter from sheer bitterness at disappointments."[3] It is likely that laughter's complexity is the primary reason why we remain largely ignorant about its nature. This lack of knowledge is in spite of the valiant efforts of superior intellects, who for millennia have sought to capture the elusive essence of the comic.

Historically, examinations of humor and laughter have been sparse, owing in large measure to the common opinion that such studies are frivolous. Concerning this perception, neuroscientist Robert Provine writes: "In the world of serious science, laughter is seen as a lightweight topic – an area lacking in clout and prestige."[4] Whether that perception has been overcome or ignored, the last century has seen a proliferation of treatises on laughter, many of them published in the last two decades. Among these are a considerable number that treat humor's relationship to religion, theology, and the Bible. A brief overview of this material will be helpful to understand the occasion for the present study.

Background

Like most other disciplines, Christian treatments of humor and laughter range from the popular to the erudite. Books at the popular end of the spectrum, such as Marilyn Meberg's *Choosing the Amusing* and Charles Swindoll's *Laugh Again,* tend to

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[3]Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994), xvi.

[4]Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Approach* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 3.

be highly anecdotal and pop-psychological.[5] For example, Meberg's aim is to have her readers "see the emotional, physical, and spiritual value of laughter – to recognize its medicinal importance to our daily living."[6] Meberg and many other popular authors like her betray an interest in the function rather than the nature of laughter. Since most of these books fail to discuss the essence of laughter, the authors end up equating laughter with joy. They fail to see that laughter's function is inseparably linked with its nature. The present study attempts to maintain this relationship.

At the other end of the spectrum we find theses that are scholarly and academically engaging. However, since many are written by those with liberal or Roman Catholic presuppositions, they ultimately will not satisfy an evangelical readership. For example, conservative Christians will likely take issue with Ice's starting point. He believes that humor is ontologically grounded in human experience and "embodies an original formative power."[7] Only from this anthropological grounding can we derive the epiphenomenal laughter of God. Ice is working from the presupposition that

> general statements about the basic features of man and the world are also about God, and that God-talk is a special way of speaking about man. Theology is philosophical anthropology with a prayer shawl. If I hold – as I do – that humor is a unique and authentic aspect of human nature, and that it possesses an ontological character, then I am assuming that it can reveal something about, or has something to do with, what theologians call God. [8]

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[5]See Marilyn Meberg, *Choosing the Amusing: Finding Humor and Joy Beneath the Rubble of Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999) and Charles R. Swindoll, *Laugh Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

[6]Meberg, *Choosing the Amusing*, xiv.

[7]Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Humor," 394.

[8]Ibid, 392. To be fair, Ice allows the possibility that his assumption "may be the biggest joke of all."

The work of the postmodern liberation theologian, Kathleen M. Sands is equally unsatisfying. She begins her theological reflection on laughter with these words:

> Rather than simply liberating the nature beneath sociality, the sex beneath gender, or the body beneath the clothes, theology now faces the rather more complex task of criticizing and constructing values in the absence of such ontic absolutes. At this juncture, a look at humor might advance theology's liberative dimensions in ways that can ride the stormy seas of postmodern relativism.[9]

Since they affirm the existence of "ontic absolutes," most evangelicals will have little interest in the values that Sands constructs. Ironically, conservatives armed with a thoroughgoing theology of humor will undoubtedly share Sands' interest in "exposing norms that dominate and oppress" and will agree that "the critique of these norms can only be strengthened with the sweet persuasion of humor,"[10] but will be able to account for such a concern.

Roman Catholic theologians, who are often the first ones to examine obscure yet important topics, are at the frontlines of a theology of humor and laughter. Karl-Josef Kuschel's *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* is among the most penetrating works on the subject to date. In the final analysis, however, Kuschel demonstrates a weak view of Scripture. Referring to the Psalmist and those who would sing his hymns, Kuschel writes, "The God of these psalm singers is the guarantor of good against evil, of the holy against the unholy. His laughter is the divisive laughter of a partisan God whom the

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[9]Kathleen M. Sands, "Ifs, Ands, and Butts: Theological Reflections on Humor," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 500. Later in her treatise Sands writes, "'God' as hegemonic power, is [humor's] most secret, most perfect butt. For there is no better solvent for truth than laughter, and nothing is more laughable than a truth that claims to be absolute. In searching for God, then, theology will do well to listen for the muted laughter that rings round the absolute." Ibid., 507.

[10]Ibid., 518.

pious would like best to see denying free grace to all the impious."[11] He continues, "There is no longer anything liberating about the laughter of God which the singers of certain psalms conjure up. Rather, it has become coupled with mockery, which can extend as far as the frontier with sarcasm."[12] According to Kuschel, David falsely attributes mocking laughter to God, in an effort to oppose the scorn of his enemies. The result is that "the devil is . . . driven out with Beelzebub."[13] Failing to see the Divine author behind the Psalmist, Kuschel dispenses with the only foundation on which a theology of laughter may solidly be constructed.

Richard Cote's *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* is another interesting examination of the subject. However, non-Catholics will be either unable or unwilling to track with Cote's reliance upon experience, mysticism, natural theology, and tradition. For example, Cote writes, "Our laughter is but a quiver, a childlike reverberation of God's own laughter. Ultimately, we laugh because God laughs. Laughter is a divine attribute and finds only a faint echo in our hearts and on our lips."[14] How does Cote know that God laughs? In short, the answer is given by the *sensus fidelium*. According to Cote, the belief that God has a sense of humor is credible because "it is so spontaneously and so widely held in the absence of any authoritative or official Church

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[11]Kuschel, *Laughter,* 59.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., 57.

[14]Richard G. Cote, *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (Whitinsville, MA: Affirmation House, 1986), 20.

teaching."[15] Cote finds an analogy in Mariology, "where the consensus of the faithful compensated for whatever deficiency there was in scriptural evidence or patristic testimony. The same would apply to the commonly held belief that God has a sense of humor."[16]

Even after a brief glance at the literature, it is evident that we need a theology of laughter that, far from being embarrassed of the biblical material, actually relies on it. My own study is an attempt to move towards such a theology.

Methodology

Though many of the specific methodological movements made in this manuscript are outlined in the next chapter, it will be helpful to make some general comments about the overall approach. In contrast to many of the methodologies outlined above, the present study operates on the presupposition that Scripture has "God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy."[17] Furthermore, it is "the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried."[18] Thus, I rely on biblical revelation, and the theological truths that may be legitimately derived therefrom, to understand humor and laughter from a Christian perspective. Given these presuppositions, I am not compelled to apologize for what the biblical data reveal,

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[15]Ibid. 48.

[16]Ibid.

[17]*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, article I.

[18]Ibid.

however unpopular those truths may be.

As we have seen, brilliant thinkers have examined the profound phenomenon of laughter for millennia. Thus, it would be unwise, and likely impossible, to construct a theology of humor from scratch. For this reason, I adopt a modified model of the Superiority Theory and subject it to Scriptural scrutiny to see if it continues to have explanatory value. I do not intend to set up Superiority as a comprehensive comic theory. Rather, I make the more modest claim that Superiority seems to account for much of the humor in Scripture, as well as for a great deal of our own laughter.

One will search this paper in vain for precise definitions of "laughter," "humor," "irony," "satire," and the like. This is partly due to the difficulty inherent in defining concepts about which there is no common understanding. When philosophers fail, lexicographers have a laborious task. For our purposes, we may define laughter simply as the pleasant physiological response to humorous stimuli. This will eliminate non-humorous laughter from the discussion, such as the objectless laughter that issues from joy, the laughter of the infant, and the witless laughter that we intersperse throughout much of our conversation.[19] Humor is notoriously difficult to define, since it depends on one's understanding of the nature of comic stimulus. In some sense, then, this whole study is an attempt at a partial definition of humor. At times, the reader is likely to find the terms "laughter" and "humor" used interchangeably to denote anything in the category of "the funny." This will be evidence of the fact that the author is

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[19]Provine has shown that most of the laughter which erupts in human conversation is humorless. In fact, 80-90 percent of pre-laugh comments were not the least bit funny. For example, people commonly laugh after the statement "I'll see you guys later." See Provine, *Laughter*, 40.

concerned more about stylistic variation and confident that the reader's experience will compensate for the imprecision.

Thesis

This study is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of humor and laughter by bringing biblical and theological issues to bear on the topic. The central thesis of the paper is that much of our laughter is the ridiculing of a butt. Laughter performs a didactic function when it enforces a moral perspective by mocking deviant persons or ideologies. Furthermore, the moral standpoint from which we laugh is relativistic, with competing worldviews deriding each other. Most laughter issues out of superiority, though that superiority can be either real or imagined. Good humor is used by the wise to promote truth by exposing folly. Conversely, fools employ sinful humor to suppress the truth by ridiculing God, His Son, His people, and His truth.

Since the church's attitude towards laughter is commonly perceived to be negative, it will be necessary to first make an apology for a theology of humor. Thus, chapter 2 begins with an historical discussion of the Christian view of laughter and outlines the signal contributions that theology makes to the study of laughter. Along the way, important methodological issues are addressed.

Chapter 3 traces the development of the Superiority Theory of humor and laughter and establishes it as a working model. In recent years, Superiority has been replaced as the leading explanation of the comic in favor of more congenial theories. The chapter concludes by addressing possible objections to Christians adopting such a view.

The thesis advances on the presupposition that Scripture and good theology provide us with unmatched insight into human experience, including the phenomenon of

laughter. Thus, the heart of the study is chapter 4 which combs the Scriptures in order to confirm the working Superiority theory.

Chapter 5 observes that because of competing perspectives, laughter must have an eschatological dimension. Both historical and biblical arguments are employed to explore the possibility that Heaven will ring with the laughter of joy and triumph, defeat and derision.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses the implications that Superior laughter carries for a postmodern context and makes application by affirming the role of humor in preaching.

The overarching purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the relationship between laughter and Truth. It has been said that there is a kernel of truth behind every joke. Furthermore, it has been my observation that sometimes people in the throes of hearty laughter have great subconscious insight. Recently, at a stand-up comedy performance, I sat in front of a man who made editorial comments between his cachinnations. Gasping for breath as the comedian exposed another absurdity to which we had grown accustomed, this man would exclaim, "That is so true!" It is my view that the laughter of God, of His Christ, and of His people promotes a truth that subverts folly and lasts into the eschaton.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

Historically, the majority of treatises on laughter and humor have been philosophical in nature. Presently, however, we are enjoying a multidisciplinary approach to the subject. In addition to the philosophical, humor studies now are available from psychological, physiological, evolutionary biological, literary, historical, sociological, and many other perspectives. Given this present state, it is entirely appropriate for laughter and humor to be investigated from a Christian worldview. Moreover, those who concur with the medieval classification of theology as "Queen of the Sciences" should prioritize biblical and theological insights over the contributions of other disciplines. In other words, a theology of humor and laughter should be leading the charge in this multidisciplinary coalition.

To say that biblical theologians ought to be on the front lines of humor studies will be at once obvious and radical. On the one hand, it is clearly the privilege and responsibility of those who have been given divine revelation about God, humanity, sin, salvation, as well as all aspects of life in general, to share these truths with others. If it is not apparent that the Bible has much to say about the phenomenon of laughter, it will become so in subsequent pages.

On the other hand, it is radical to suppose that Christians, who have historically been suspicious of and opposed to laughter, would regard the pursuit of understanding the phenomenon as a worthy undertaking. A brief historical excursus on traditional Christian

attitudes towards laughter will enable us to appreciate more fully the radicalism that would seek to construct a theology of humor.

Laughter and Church History

The Church's antipathy towards laughter is represented well by Umberto Eco's character, Jorge de Burgos, in *The Name of the Rose.*[1] Through the mouth of this morose monk, Eco, a semiotician, replays the classic Christian arguments against laughter, not the least of which is the observation that Christ never laughed. Along the way, Jorge is able to quote Paulinus of Nola, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom in support of his negative view of laughter.[2] A similar catalogue is provided by E. R. Curtius in an excursus on the Church and laughter in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages.*[3] Curtius shows that Christian monasticism adopted the "antique ideal of dignity" which tended to exclude laughter out of principal. He accomplishes this in part by referencing eulogies of noteworthy saints. For example, Sulpicius Severus could say of St. Martin, "Nemo ridentem" and Athanasius testified that Anthony did not have to struggle against laughter.[4] In addition, the monastic ideal is codified in St. Benedict's *Rule*. Articles 54 and 55 of the fourth chapter demand "Verba vana aut risu apta non loqui; risum multum aut excussum non amare."[5] According to Curtius, "Benedict's

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[1]Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

[2]Ibid., 95-96, 131.

[3]Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), 420-22.

[4]Ibid., 420.

[5]"Not to speak useless words or those which provoke laughter. Not to love much or boisterous laughter."

precepts remained the authoritative norm."[6]

Most recent commentators uncritically accept the conclusion that the historic Christian view of laughter is negative and many are concerned with demonstrating the reasons for the hostility. These explanations range from the predictable to the obscure. For example, Ingvild Gilhus argues the Christian negativity towards laughter is due to its employment of, and association with, the lustful body. According to Gilhus, laughter stood opposed to the Christian ideals of revealed text and an idealized body. She writes, "In Christianity God is modeled on language, not on forces of nature. When religious symbolism centres around literal texts and on an ideal human body, marked by chastity and a continent life, laughter is bound to become a stranger."[7] Barry Sanders offers the bizarre suggestion that laughter died because of the desire of the church in the Middle Ages to control air flow. Not content to manage their souls, the medieval church sought to control the physiology of the faithful. Sanders argues that the sixteenth century church attempted "to regulate the respiratory system of its congregants. Naturally, air always constitutes the crucial ingredient for maintaining life: To own the air is to hold the key to life—both physical and spiritual."[8] The end of this medieval aspiration was the deflation of laughter.

In his evenhanded analysis, Curtius was able to find enough sources who allowed a "modesta hilaritas" to lead him to conclude, "What position did the church take

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[6]Curtius, *European Literature*, 421.

[7]Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 58.

[8]Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 193.

regarding laughter and humor? The answer is not simple. The testimony accessible to me exhibits a diversity of views which afford fascinating pictures of cultural history."[9] While Curtius' inconclusiveness is both justified and intellectually honest, it is ultimately inconsequential. Regardless of whether it is founded, the belief that Christianity has traditionally been opposed to laughter persists. In Eco's novel, while William of Baskerville and Jorge can debate the historical precedents, the latter remains the villainous embodiment of the Church's perceived position. Despite facts to the contrary, the caricature persists.[10] Given this context, it is radical to say that theologians ought to be at the forefront of humor studies.

However obvious or radical, it is necessary to examine the parameter-setting contributions that theology makes to the study of humor and laughter. It will readily become apparent that all of the major areas of theology bear upon the topic.

Laughter and Anthropology

In a movement towards a theology of humor and laughter, it is appropriate to begin with the observation that laughter is a *human* phenomenon. Aristotle was one of the earliest thinkers to formulate this as he investigated the nature of the comic. His philosophical reflections on comedy comprised the second part of his *Poetics*, but this work is not extant.[11] Fortunately, some of Aristotle's views of laughter are recorded

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[9]Curtius, *European Literature*, 420.

[10]Consider another example: The Christian view of sex has historically been negative. While we may contest the actual truth of this statement by referencing those throughout church history who have viewed sex in its proper context as a fundamentally good thing, the characterization continues.

[11]In *The Name of the Rose*, this is the volume that Jorge hides in order to protect patrons of the monastery's library from the corruption of laughter.

elsewhere. One of his most important contributions to the subject is contained in *On the Parts of Animals*, where he writes, "No animal laughs, save man."[12] We are *homo ridens,* the animal that laughs. In this reduction, laughter stands as *the* characteristic that separates us from the beasts. This Aristotelian distinction has been echoed by many others for millennia.[13] Writing in the ninth century, Yssac Arabus called laughter the "property of Man," a formula that has been used ever since. According to Renaissance scholar M. A. Screech, "Laughter, for Ysaac, is firmly confined to the human species. A human being either does laugh, or can laugh. No other creature has that property. The ability to laugh in fact defines mankind."[14]

Human existence is characterized by the intricate and indivisible interplay between body and soul. Laughter's humanness can be demonstrated by its employment of both constituents. Physician J. Van Hooff expresses well the psychosomatic nature of this event. He explains that laughter is characterized by "reflexoid stereotype and automation on the one hand, and the subtle spirituality of the stimuli that can release it on

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[12]Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, 10.29. Some disagree with Aristotle's reduction. For example, primatologists such as Jane Goodall and Roger Fouts have observed chimp "laughter," often occurring in the midst of rough and tumble play. The best interaction with this simian research is found in chapter 5 of Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Approach* (New York: Penguin, 2000). Concerning the evidence that would defeat Aristotle's analysis, Provine writes, "[It] is found in scattered, anecdotal reports by researchers and caregivers based on homocentric estimates of whether a given primate act meets the human criterion for 'humor'" (Provine, *Laughter*, 94).

[13]In his *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (New York: Penguin, 1997), Renaissance scholar M. A. Screech cites Galen, Porphyry, Sebizius, Mancinius, and Ferrara, and could have cited many others as following Aristotle. Generally speaking, contemporary theologians have not recognized this aspect of anthropology. A refreshing exception is Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 148-52.

[14]Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, 2.

the other."[15]

Terry Lindvall has also keenly observed the dualism involved in laughter. He writes, "At its core laughter is a physiological response, the body's muscular response to certain bodily stimuli. At its heart, however, laughter is the mind's recognition of a comic situation."[16] Kathleen M. Sands believes that this dualism grants laughter a special status. In an article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Sands proposes that humor "is an insight ratified not by analysis but by the instant, undeniable, and orgasmic reflex of laughter. This blend of cognition and automatism distinguishes humor from other pleasures and other insights, and establishes its special relationship with ritual, religion, and social practice in general."[17] In an effort to establish the fact that laughter is an essential part of human nature, we will do well to reflect on laughter's relationship to both the human soul and the human body.

The most significant reason why laughter is unique to man is because the soul is exclusively man's possession. Among other things, this gift provides humans with the ability to reflect on themselves and their surroundings. Anthropological philosopher Helmuth Plessner explains that while the other animals live and experience (*lebt und erlebt*), humankind has been given the unique ability to experience those experiences

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[15]Quoted in Donald W. Black, "Laughter," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 252 (1984): 2995.

[16]Terry Lindvall, *The Mother of All Laughter: Sarah and the Genesis of Comedy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 27.

[17]Kathleen M. Sands, "Ifs, Ands, and Butts: Theological Reflections on Humor," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 507.

(*erlebt sein erleben*).[18] Thus, humans are able to experience incongruity, superiority, relief, as well as any other potentially comic situation which is recognized at the level of soul or mind.

Laughter's corporeality also contributes significantly to its humanness. The act of laughing is a thoroughly physical one. It is an event with intense physiological manifestations. Anyone who has laughed heartily knows these effects experientially. The varying degrees of laughter range from a chuckle to a cachinnation, but any expression of mirth implicates the body. Even the simple act of smiling, the precursor to laughter, recruits twelve to fifteen facial muscles.[19] Laughter, which someone has defined as "a smile that bursts," employs the whole body for its explosion. From head to toe, a laugher's body undergoes significant physical changes. For example, when the smile bursts the laugher's mouth opens, revealing the teeth. In addition, his or her head slightly tilts back and, if laughter is sustained, the subject's face turns red, due to richly oxygenated blood that has flooded into dilated vessels in the face. Some persons are reticent to laugh, knowing that such will cause them to appear "blotchy." This phenomenon occurs when blood vessels dilate unevenly throughout a person's face. In concert with the muscles surrounding the mouth, a pair of muscles lining the eyes called the *Orbicularis oculi*, are also active. These muscles, which are responsible for the "crow's feet" that adorn the eyes of seasoned laughers, put slight pressure on the

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[18]For this distinction as it pertains to laughter, see Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

[19]This fact stands as the basis for the title of Arthur Koestler's brilliant thesis on humor, "A Contraction of Fifteen Facial Muscles," in *The Treasury of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Viking, 1992), 449-71.

lachrymal glands. When these tear ducts are squeezed, the eyes of the one who is laughing glisten and sparkle. During hearty laughter, so much pressure may be exerted on the ducts that a person might later report, "I laughed so hard, I cried!"

The throat is the site where laughter is vocalized. The vocalization of laughter is unarguably its most recognizable component. In fact, the verb "to laugh," is derived from *hleahhan,* an Old English word that is onomatopoeic. In essence, laughter is characterized by a voiced series of short syllables, such as "ho-ho," "hee-hee," or "ha-ha." These vocalizations result when the altered breathing pattern of the laugher crosses the larynx. Black describes the laugher's breathing pattern as "an abrupt, strong expiration at the beginning, followed by a series of expiration-inspiration microcycles with interval pauses."[20] In his thoroughly scientific study of laughter, Robert Provine analyzed genuine laugh tracks in a sound lab. Using sound spectrography, he discovered that laughter could be visualized as beads on a string, each bead representing a voiced syllable, such as "ha." He further discovered that the duration of each vocalized syllable was about 75 milliseconds. These syllables are spaced at intervals of 210 milliseconds, and the sequence may continue as long as stimuli and oxygen are present.[21] Laughter is vocalized upon expiration, and has been clocked exiting the lungs at speeds up to 70 mph.[22] For laughter to continue, it requires repeated inspiration of fresh oxygen. Oxygen is usually delivered through the mouth. However, some persons in the midst of hearty

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[20]Black, "Laughter," 2995.

[21]Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Approach* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 57.

[22]Annette Goodheart, *Laughter Therapy: How to Laugh about Everything in Your Life That Isn't Really Funny* (Santa Barbara, CA: Less Stress Press, 1994), 77.

laughter, attempt to inspire through their nostrils. A specialized breed of laughers, these persons are usually referred to as "snorters."

It is evident that the lungs are indispensable to the act of laughter. Lungs fill with oxygen and empty primarily through the convulsing action of the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a sheet of tissue, comprised partly of muscle and partly of tendon, which separates our thoracic cavity from our abdominal cavity. When we laugh, our diaphragm pulls convulsively on our side muscles. The involvement of these muscles explains why some humorous things are described as "side-splittingly funny." Persons who experience abdominal pain due to hearty laughter find some relief in the reflex of bending over.

Laughter is not content merely to affect the muscles of the face, throat, chest and abdomen. In fact, sustained mirthful laughter results in the loss of muscle control throughout the entire body. According to Sharon Begley, the reason is that "[laughter] blocks a neural reflex that regulates muscle tone."[23] This explains why successful comedians are able to have their audiences "rolling in the aisles." In the throes of hearty laughter, the only thing that may keep a Western laugher on his feet is an unspoken cultural prohibition against collapsing to the floor. On the other hand, African pygmies are much less inhibited. This group is reported to fall and roll on the ground in uncontrollable laughter.[24]

The phrase "I wet myself laughing" reflects the rather unfortunate reality that

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[23]Sharon Begley, "The Science of Laughs," *Newsweek*, 9 October 2000, 76.

[24]See, for example, Colin M. Turnbull's ethnography, *The Forest People* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 44. Turnbull observed, "When pygmies laugh it is hard not to be affected; they hold on to one another as if for support, slap their sides, snap their fingers and go through all manner of contortions. If something strikes them as particularly funny they will even roll on the ground."

urinary tract muscles are often implicated in the general loss of muscle control during laughter. One of the first physical reactions to mirthful laughter is the contraction of the anal sphincter. This involuntary response is designed to avert an even greater disaster.

Quite evidently, then, laughter is a thoroughly physical event. William Fry concludes that laughter is a physiologic activity "involving the muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and central nervous systems."[25] In other words, it involves all of the major systems of the body. That physiological phenomena comprise the content of many of the idioms we use to describe laughter is evidence that we know these bodily effects experientially. It is also clear that laughter, though manifested in the body, is initiated in the soul. Laughter is a fundamentally "human" experience because it employs the two constituents of humanity.

A word must be said about man's proper use of this essentially human characteristic.[26] That laughter is a property of man does not provide license for its indiscriminant use. Clement of Alexandria recognized the naturalness of human laughter but urged the regulation and limitation of it. He wrote, "Man is not to laugh on all occasions because he is a laughing animal, any more than the horse neighs on all occasions because he is a neighing animal. But as rational beings, we are to regulate ourselves suitably."[27] Aristotle had also urged laughter in moderation. He believed too

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[25]William F. Fry, Jr., "The Physiologic Effects of Humor, Mirth, and Laughter," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 267 (1992), 1857.

[26]The term "essential" should not be pressed to mean that a non-laugher, or one who lacks a sense of humor, does not qualify, in a technical sense, as "human." Rather, such a person is seen to have a flawed or deficient humanity.

[27]Clement of Alexandria *Instructor*, 2.5 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1979), 250.

much jesting results in buffoonery, and "those who would not say anything funny themselves, and who are annoyed at those who do, seem to be boorish and dour."[28] The anthropological conclusion is clear. Controlled laughter is a virtue,[29] and those who lack a sense of humor have a deficient humanity.[30]

It is only proper to begin with the human experience of laughter in our theological reflection, provided we move vertically from that point rather than horizontally. That laughter is a feature of humanity raises the questions "why?" and "whence?" For the answer to those questions, we must look up.

Laughter and the Doctrine of God

Can humor and laughter be properly attributed to God? Modern theorists attempt to answer this question through a variety of methods. These approaches may be classified as either inductive or deductive. Inductive methods attempt to show that humor and laughter are Divine attributes by appealing to tangential lines of argument that make the conclusion merely probable. The deductive approach relies on Scriptures that give explicit reference to the laughter of God. Most inductive arguments are unsatisfying at best and irresponsible at worst. A sampling will be illustrative.

Among liberal scholars, it is common to reason from the existence of laughing Ancient Near Eastern deities to the laughter of God. The ascription of laughter to deity

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[28]Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 4.8.

[29]Though not one of the classics, humor (ready wit, or *eutrapelia*) has often been regarded as a virtue. For a recent treatment, see chap. 17 in André Compte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

[30]F. H. Buckley, in his important work *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) discusses vanity, acedia, cynicism, and Puritanism as resistors of laughter. Persons who are characterized by these so as to be unable to laugh are susceptible to the charge of inhumanity.

enjoys a long history. In fact, the first references to laughter place it in the mouths of gods. Ancient myths are replete with gods mocking competing gods as well as humans. For example, the head of the Mesopotamian gods, Adaka, laughs at Anu when he is tricked by Ea. In her work on laughter in the history of religion, Gilhus puts it mildly when she writes, "The divine laughter was hardly a nice laughter."[31] The Akkadian word for 'laugh' (*sadu*) is used almost exclusively in connection with the misfortune of others. In other words, the type of laughter enjoyed by the mythological gods is often *Schadenfreude*. The laughter of the gods is an essential part of their struggle for power since laughter is often a signal of superiority. Gilhus writes, "The ancient peoples did not doubt their gods' power to laugh, it was an expression of their divine power. The gods had laughter in common with human beings, but divine laughter revealed the gods' superiority over humans."[32] After discussing the laughter of near Eastern deities, Gilhus moves seamlessly into a discussion of the laughter of Yahweh as if there was no distinction to be made. To be sure, Gilhus sees a distinction, but not an ontological one. She writes, "Laughter in the Old Testament stands out in comparison to laughter in other Ancient Near Eastern myths . . . because the divine laughter of the Old Testament is more derisive than that of any other god."[33] Her argument is that the Christian God laughs since all mythological deities laugh, though they do so not nearly as derisively.

Evangelicals are right to be disappointed in arguments like that of Gilhus.

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[31]Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins*, 16.

[32]Ibid., 21.

[33]Ibid., 22. Gilhus' phraseology is noteworthy when she compares the Old Testament to "*other* . . . myths," emphasis mine.

However, they typically pursue lines of inductive argumentation that are equally unhelpful. One example is found in Randy Alcorn's recent and delightful, if highly speculative, treatise on Heaven. Alcorn, a popular Christian author and theologian, begins a discussion of the possibility of eschatological laughter by putting humor in its proper theological context. According to Alcorn, good humor was created by God, and is to be enjoyed by His image-bearers. Laughter is an anthropological given grounded in the fact that God is the author of humor. To be sure, this is a good start. As we will see, the existence and nature of God's laughter not only provides the basis for our laughter but also determines the kind of laughter that will last into the eschaton. However, Alcorn fails to make a biblical case for God's laughter. Instead of turning to texts that provide explicit insight into the nature of divine laughter, Alcorn employs an inductive argument that relies on subjective interpretation. He reasons, "That [God] has a sense of humor is evident in his creation. Consider aardvarks and baboons. Take a good look at a giraffe. You have to smile, don't you?"[34] With this line of argumentation, Alcorn is out on a limb. If God was not making a joke by creating these animals then Alcorn is guilty of mocking the Creator. If God was joking in so doing, Alcorn ultimately has no way to be sure of it.

Another argument for the existence of Divine humor is equally erroneous. However, it is worth mentioning because it represents what is perhaps the most common

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[34]Alcorn, *Heaven*, 408. This line of argumentation is also pursued by Leslie Flynn. He writes, "A little meditation on the various kinds of creatures in God's animal world should teach us that God has a sense of humor. Not only has He created the category of the comical but He has stocked our surroundings with creatures to tickle our sense of humor." Leslie B. Flynn, *Serve Him with Mirth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 20. In the absence of special divine revelation on the matter, when theorists claim that God did something (create "strange looking" animals) for a specific purpose (to make humans laugh), they commit the intentional fallacy.

popular understanding of the humor of God. The unspoken premise behind the regularly-uttered conclusion "God must have a sense of humor" is the belief that God's meticulous providence is often ironic.[35] This common understanding provides the comic potential in the Scott Wesley Brown anti-missions anthem "Please Don't Send Me to Africa." The premise of the song is the unspoken expectation that unless Brown pleads, God will get His kicks out of sending the author to exactly the place to which he is loathe to go. Given the inscrutability of God and His providence, this implicit argument is inductively weak.

There are a number of additional inductive arguments that, while failing to establish the existence of Divine laughter, function as successful confirmations once the point has been established by other means. For example, in the literature, it is common to find one reasoning that given the essential humanness of laughter, and given the fact that mankind is made in the image of God (Gen 1:27), laughter may be considered as part of the *imago Dei*. Along these lines, Lee van Rensburg argues, "Simple syllogistic logic affirms that you cannot have in the conclusion that which is not in the premise."[36] While this statement has the appearance of being technical, van Rensburg is actually being metaphorical. His argument seems to be that if humans have a sense of humor (conclusion) then God has a sense of humor (premise). However, used inductively to establish the fact of God's humor, van Rensburg's argument is backwards. It is akin to

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[35]The ironic providence of God is responsible for the 'Situation Comedy' described in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), s.v. "Humor."

[36]Lee van Rensburg, *The Sense of Humor in Scripture, Theology, and Worship* (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1991), 34.

creating God in man's image. We will want to conclude that human laughter indeed is part of the *imago Dei*, but only after concluding independently that God has a sense of humor. To arrive at this conclusion, it is necessary to observe the explicit testimony of Scripture regarding Divine laughter. Thus, on the basis of passages such as Psalm 2:4, Psalm 37:13, Psalm 59:8, and Proverbs 1:26 we will conclude, in chapter 4, that humor and laughter are divine attributes. Insofar as human laughter resembles divine mirth, this deductive approach will provide a solid foundation for the derivation of human laughter. As Kuschel has written, "A theology of laughter deserves the name only if it can understand the reality of God himself in the light of the category of laughter and define the function of such talk of God for men and women and their existence in the world." [37]

Laughter and Christology

To wonder whether Christ laughed is to participate in a controversy that has raged presumably since the death of His last eyewitness. Furthermore, to question whether Jesus had a sense of humor, laughed, or caused others to laugh is to do far more than engage in a mere scholastic exercise. The answer to this Christological question has profound anthropological and soteriological implications. Since Jesus is a fully human person, a man *par excellence*, he properly stands as a model for us concerning what ought to characterize true humanity. Those who see Christ quintessentially as "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief," who neither laughed nor caused others to, will consequently live in solemnity and sobriety. On the other hand, if Christ exhibited a

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[37]Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994), xviii.

sense of humor, it would be appropriate for the rest of humanity to enjoy times of levity, leisure, and laughter. As we have seen, the longstanding debate in Christianity between "jest" and "earnest" demonstrates that these conclusions are not simply theoretical.

The corollary is also instructive since a thoroughgoing anthropology entails certain Christological conclusions. If humor and laughter can be determined to be anthropological givens, then Christ must have possessed them or else was less than fully human. Philosopher Simon Critchley sees the connection when he writes, "If laughter is essentially human, then the question of whether Jesus laughed assumes rather obvious theological pertinence to the doctrine of incarnation."[38] A mirthless messiah would not be able to redeem this essentially human quality since, as Gregory of Nazianzus argued, "What has not been assumed has not been healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved."[39] Because of these implications, it is important that we come to a conclusion about Christ's laughter.

Despite the importance of the topic, very few scholars have adequately treated it. Some of the more notable attempts include those of Trueblood (1964), Cormier (1977), Samra (1986), Phipps (1993), and Palmer (2000). These works differ in terms of what evidence from the life and ministry of Jesus is proffered to make the case that Christ was humorous. What they have in common, however, is an inductive approach that is inconclusive and subjective at best and intellectually dishonest at worst. For example, Catholic theologian Henri Cormier finds humor in Christ's words to the believing thief

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[38]Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2004), 25.

[39]Alistair McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 259.

on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Cormier believes this is hilarious because "here is a man who stole on earth and now has managed to steal heaven—with the connivance of Jesus himself!"[40] In addition, Elton Trueblood gets tickled reading Jesus' words to Peter: "Get thee behind me Satan" (Matt 16:23).[41] However, it is clear that in both of these instances Jesus could not have been more serious. Earl F. Palmer believes that the pericope of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) is funny. Specifically, he thinks that Jesus' response to the woman's accusers is humorous. The comic effect begins when Jesus "slows everything down by stooping over and by writing in the sandy soil. Every comedian knows that timing is an essential ingredient to all humor."[42] According to Palmer, when the tension had built and the moment was just right, Jesus delivered the punch line, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). The problem with Palmer's interpretation is not primarily that it appeals to a text whose authenticity is suspect, but that there are no clues in the text that Jesus was intending to be humorous or provoke laughter. That Christ demonstrated "timing" does not establish his comedic genius. Every comedian may know that timing is an essential ingredient for humor, but every undergraduate knows the

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[40]Henri Cormier, *The Humor of Jesus* (New York: Alba House, 1977), 5.

[41]Trueblood lists what he believes are thirty humorous passages in the Synoptic Gospels in the appendix to his *Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 127. Trueblood became interested in the topic after he was reading Matt 7 to his four year old and the boy burst out laughing at verse 34. For much of the book it is difficult to ascertain Trueblood's selection criterion. At times, Trueblood's hermeneutic does not appear to be any more advanced than finding out what would provoke the laughter of a toddler.

[42]Earl F. Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 57. Palmer appears to be arguing that all comedians have good timing, and since Jesus had good timing, he is a comedian. Or, in another form: All C's are T's. J is a T. Therefore, J is a C.

difference between necessary and sufficient conditions.

These three examples are indicative of the subjectivism to which many authors addressing the humor of Christ succumb. The unrestrained piling of text upon text to illustrate the humor of Christ is the method followed by most popular authors.[43] Though outlining and following a full-fledged inductive approach to the question of Christ's laughter exceeds the goal of the present study, we will briefly examine the relative fruitfulness of two inductive methods for further study.

The first approach seeks to substitute a joyful Christ for one who is merely a man of sorrows. This method seeks to establish that Christ was not primarily dour, solemn, sober, and sorrowful, but joyful. And joy is only one step removed from laughter. Representative of this method is Conrad Hyers, who argues that Christ's life was bounded by a "Comic Parenthesis." According to Hyers, Jesus' ministry begins with the wedding in Cana and ends with Easter and the post-Easter appearances. More broadly, "it begins with the joyful annunciation to Mary and the angelic allelulias heralding Jesus' birth, and it ends with the ascension and the birth of the church on Pentecost."[44] Hyers sees these events as an *inclusio* and concludes, "The overarching context remains one of celebration and joy, of life and love and laughter . . . the first and last words belong not to death but life, not to sorrow but joy, not to weeping but laughter."[45] Hyers is to be commended for drawing our attention to passages that portray

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[43]Ice has poignantly called these "laugh-along-with-Jesus books." See "Notes Towards a Theology of Humor," 390.

[44]Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 30.

[45]Ibid.

a joyful rather than sorrowful Christ (John 2; 10:10; Matt 9:15; 11:18-19). His approach ultimately fails, however, because it is reductionistic and equivocal. The overall tenor of Christ's life and ministry cannot be determined by the two events that form Hyers' parenthesis and he ends up equivocating on the terms "laughter" and "joy."

A more intellectually satisfying approach is that of the Icelandic scholar Jakob Jónsson.[46] Jónsson compares the words of Christ with rabbinic literature and concludes that Christ employed both ironic and non-ironic humor. Specifically, Jónsson draws parallels between the words of Christ in the Gospels and rabbinic teaching in Talmud and Midrash. Though the heart of Jónsson's approach is an analysis of the relevant texts of Scripture, he is working with a definite criterion (i.e., standard rabinnic teaching). Even from these two examples, it is clear that inductive approaches can have varying levels of success. In many ways, this is unavoidable. Induction, by its very nature can only result in probability, not certainty. The truth value of the humor of Christ should be arrived at through deduction with an inductive look at scriptural texts serving as confirmation and further illumination as to the nature and purpose of Christ's laughter.[47]

A valid deductive argument is one in which the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises. If the premises of such an argument are in fact true, its conclusion is sound. For our purposes, the simplest deductive argument would contain the premise: "Scripture states that Christ laughed." Evangelicals who uphold the authority of

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[46]See Jakob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985).

[47]I borrow the inductive/deductive distinction from Phipps, though his deduction treats only the humanity of Christ, while I include his divinity. See William E. Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 80ff.

Scripture as well as its inerrancy would supply the additional premise that anything stated in Scripture is true. The conclusion would be that Christ truly laughed. This could also be put in the form of a hypothetical syllogism:

P1: If Scripture states that Christ laughed, then Christ laughed.
P2: Scripture states that Christ laughed.
C1: Christ laughed.

Unfortunately, we cannot use this *modus ponens* since Scripture nowhere states that Christ laughed. The Bible does reveal that Jesus wept (John 11:35), slept (Mark 4:38), sighed (Mark 7:34) and was hungry (Matt 4:2), thirsty (John 19:28), angry (Mark 3:5), and sorrowful (Mark 14:34). However, it never states that he laughed. This fact need not be as devastating as some have made it. For example, in an effort to contrast Christ with the "assumed brightness and joviality which so many Christians seem to think is the right portrait of the Christian,"[48] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wanted us to observe that "we have no record anywhere that He ever laughed."[49] Preaching in the latter half of the twentieth century, Lloyd-Jones was repeating an argument that, as we have seen, had been advanced at least since the time of John Chrysostom. Concerning Scripture's lack of explicit reference to Christ's laughter, Richard G. Cote writes, "It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this omission in the eyes of first century Christians . . . this silence was a compelling reason why Christians should not laugh."[50] The form of this popular argument, however implicitly stated, is:

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[48]D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:57.

[49]Ibid., 56.

[50]Richard G. Cote, *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (Whitinsville, MA: Affirmation Books, 1986), 23.

P1: If Scripture states that Christ laughed, then Christ laughed.
P3: Scripture does not state that Christ laughed.
C2: Christ did not laugh.

It should be abundantly clear that, with the denial of the antecedent, this argument is invalid. While we cannot come to a conclusion, given P1, about the laughter and humor of Christ based on P2, those who attempt to conclude that Christ never laughed cannot do so on the basis of P3.

If the humor and laughter of Christ is to be deduced it will have to be done using a different set of premises. In addition, if the deduction is to be sound the premises will have to be true. The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), faithful as it is to Scripture, provides us with orthodox material concerning the person of Christ. Chalcedon confesses the "Lord Jesus Christ to be one and the same Son, perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human, consisting of a rational soul and a body, being of one substance with the Father in relation to his divinity, and being of one substance with us in relation to his humanity, and is like us in all things apart from sin."[51] This statement, pregnant with meaning, gives us concepts and language from which we may construct true premises for a deduction proving that Christ partook of humor and laughter. In fact, because of the nature of the hypostatic union, we may construct two deductive arguments. Consider:

P4: Laughter is a part of the nature of humanity.
P5: Christ is "perfect in humanity . . . truly human . . . and like us in all things apart from sin."
C3: Christ laughed.

And:

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[51]McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, 269-70.

P6: Laughter is part of the nature of Deity.
P7: Christ is "perfect in divinity . . . truly God."
C4: Christ laughed.

For the purpose at hand, we will assume the truth of the Chalcedonian statements P5 and P7 since for a millennium and a half Chalcedon has set the parameters for Christological orthodoxy. Given this, the soundness of these deductions are determined by the truth value of P4 and P6; namely, that the exercise of laughter is a feature of both the human and divine natures. In a theology of humor and laughter, the mirth of God Incarnate follows necessarily from the fact that laughter is a both a human and divine property. In chapter 4, with the confidence gained from this deduction, we will examine a few texts that demonstrate the humor of Christ.

Laughter and Hamartiology

Hamartiology, or the doctrine of sin, is indispensable to a theology of humor and laughter. In fact, it becomes necessary immediately after recognizing that laughter is a property of man. The presence of sin affects every property of humanity, including our humor. Sherlock writes, "As with all aspects of culture, humour discloses not only the joy and wonder of being human, but also the dire effects of sin, distorting relationships and perceptions."[52] This leads him to ask "Can humour exist apart from sin?"[53] Though Sherlock ultimately never answers his own question, he should be congratulated for introducing such a crucial element to the discussion. Moreover, he should not be overly criticized for failing to arrive at a conclusion, since the answer is not straightforward.

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[52]Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, 149.

[53]Ibid.

The solution to the sin problem is surely not as simple as *Credenda Agenda* editor Douglas Jones believes it to be. Jones supposes that we can identify a pure, Edenic, even Trinitarian humor, which exists apart from sin, by which we can judge human laughter. In criticizing the work of another comic theorist, Jones writes:

> One chilling consequence of [the] superiority view is that there could be no laughter before creation within the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They could not joke because there would be no genuine superiority within the Trinity. This is a serious check. But if play is the heart of laughter, then the Trinity can be the actual source of laughter.[54]

Apparently, Jones is presupposing a pristine, pre-Creation, inner-Trinitarian jocularity that serves as the source of human laughter. Since Scripture is silent on the matter, it is difficult to see how Jones accounts for this starting point. It is equally unclear how Jones is able to say that the derivative, human laughter, "is a taste of Eden."[55] In giving us unsubstantiated visions of inner-Trinitarian life and prelapsarian humanity, Jones is surely guilty of conjecture. Furthermore, Jones' tendency to festoon his argument with the adjective "Trinitarian" does not make the speculation any more orthodox.[56]

In our quest for a laughter untarnished by sin we must rely on the revelation given to us. Though we have not been given a glimpse into inner-Trinitarian life before the Creation, Scripture provides us with explicit references to the righteous laughter of

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[54]Douglas Jones, "Ironies of Laughter," *Credenda Agenda* 16 no. 1 (2004): 6. Jones' criticism of the Superiority Theory is surprising given his penchant for satire, which is essentially ridicule.

[55]Ibid., 4.

[56]The idiosyncratic adjective is overused in Jones, "Ironies of Laughter," 6. Jones' colleague Douglas Wilson is similarly liberal in his use of "Trinitarian." This is evident from the title and throughout his *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003).

God and contains examples of the mirth of the sinless Christ. Furthermore, given a firm belief in the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, it is reasonable to assume that any humor intended by the biblical authors is divinely sanctioned and, consequently, exists apart from sin.[57] Insofar as the prophets were the mouthpieces of God, any prophecies designed to produce laughter must be similarly pure.

Rather than see the laughter of God as essentially good, many modern theorists are critical of it. The most common approach is to regard the texts that attribute scornful laughter to God as human insertions. For example, Graham Neville recognizes that "a great deal of laughter is cruel, and this is borne out by its commonest meaning in the scriptures."[58] According to Neville, since scornful laughter is a common human behavior, it is not surprising "that the same attitude is attributed to God in the Old Testament."[59] In Neville's opinion, "It is an unattractive image of the supreme reality."[60] In other words, since cruel laughter is *prima facie* repellant, God must not engage in it. Therefore, the Old Testament references to the derisive laughter of God must be nothing more than human ascriptions. The present study rejects the weak view of Scripture that this kind of argumentation betrays. In contrast, it proceeds believing that "the Bible is the reservoir and conduit of divine truth, the authoritative written record and exposition

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[57]As Marcion Strange has said, "The Bible's sense of humor can be accepted as an echo of the divine laughter. See his "God and Laughter," *Worship* 45 (1971): 11.

[58]Graham Neville, *Free Time: Towards a Theology of Leisure* (Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham Press, 1994), 134.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid.

of God's nature and will."[61]

We may understand humor's relationship to sin by examining Scripture, both in its endorsements and prohibitions concerning laughter. From this investigation it will be possible to differentiate between "good" and "bad" laughter. The examination of relevant texts is reserved for chapter 4, which is structured along these same divisions. It will be demonstrated that the sin is not found in the nature of laughter; for in both cases the laughter issues out of a sense of superiority. Rather, sinful laughter is that which is either expressed in inappropriate contexts or has contraband content. The existence of the former is the occasion for Quoheleth's admonition: "For everything there is a season, and time for every matter under heaven . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh" (Eccl 3:1,4). The prevalence of the latter prompts Paul's prohibition: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place" (Eph 5:4). In due course we will see that the wrongheaded content in sinful laughter is, in the main, an imagined superiority that mocks God, His Truth, His Son, and His children.

Laughter and Eschatology

A discussion of the possibility of humor existing apart from sin leads inexorably to the issue of eschatological laughter. It is clear that sinful laughter will be silenced at the consummation of all things. What is not so apparent is whether, and in what sense, righteous laughter will persist into the eschaton. Few scholars have broached the subject of eschatological laughter and fewer still have adequately treated it. Most fail

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[61]This is Carl F. H. Henry's eleventh thesis in *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 4:7.

in their attempts because of over-speculation. The only difference between their error and that of Douglas Jones is that they are dealing with the other side of eternity. For example, Alcorn is surely inventing things when he writes, "Whose laughter will be the loudest and most contagious on the New Earth? Jesus Christ's."[62] That Alcorn's treatment of eschatological laughter is flanked with affirmations about playing in heaven's mud with toys, is hardly confidence-inspiring.[63]

Due to the paucity of satisfying treatments, it will be beneficial to devote the whole of chapter 5 to this important topic. While some degree of speculation is unavoidable, hypotheses about laughter in heaven must be formulated by the content of Scripture. Fortunately, the Bible is not silent on this matter. We will see that the biblical data reveal laughter largely as an eschatological reality. The character and promises of God lead us to expect that heaven will contain the sounds of joy and justice, defeat and derision, with the laughter of the wicked turned back on their own heads.

Laughter and Theology

Though brief, the discussions above have served to demonstrate the meaningful, even parameter-setting, contributions that theology makes to the study of humor and laughter. Of course, if they are not consistent with Scripture, the theological movements that we have been anticipating should be abandoned. For this reason, the heart of the present study lies in the fourth chapter, wherein we deal with the biblical

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[62]Alcorn, *Heaven*, 410.

[63]Alcorn surely cannot deliver what the inside front dust jacket promises: "We all have questions about what Heaven will be like, and after twenty-five years of extensive research, Dr. Randy Alcorn has the answers."

material. Before turning to that crucial component, it is necessary that we arrive at a working theory of humor and laughter with which to present Scripture for evaluation.

CHAPTER 3

LAUGHTER AS SUPERIORITY

Comic Theory: A Plea for Modesty

The task of unraveling the mystery of laughter is momentous. Concerning this undertaking, Quintilian (c. 35-95) wrote, "I do not think that anybody can give an adequate explanation, though many have attempted to do so, of the cause of laughter, which is excited not merely by words or deeds, but sometimes even by touch."[1] Neither was Goethe optimistic about the task:

> Who can make mathematics out of merriment? Who can postulate a pun? Who can square the circle of a joke? The calculus of cachinnation would be a pleasant kind of ciphering! One sometimes hears of the philosophy of humor. The phrase itself is most humorous. The philosophy of humor would truly be the humor of philosophy.[2]

To this day, a comprehensive understanding of humor and laughter eludes us, despite the valiant efforts of superior intellects. Given the elusive quality of the nature of laughter, it is befitting for theorists to exercise great humility. Max Eastman once noted, "There is no other subject, as we reflect upon it, besides God and laughter, toward which the scientific mind has ever advocated so explicit and particular a humility."[3] Some

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[1]Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Loeb Classical Library 125 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1985), 441.

[2]Goethe, *Dichtung und Warheit*, quoted in John Moore Bullard, "Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1962), 24.

[3]Max Eastman, *The Sense of Humor* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 134.

modern theorists are in desperate need of such modesty. For example, Charles R. Gruner's overconfidence is evident from cover to cover of his most recent work, *The Game of Humor: A* Comprehensive *Theory of Why We Laugh.*[4] Gruner's book is laden with examples of jokes that seek to illustrate his thesis that for every humorous exchange, there is a clear winner and a loser. According to Gruner, our joking is an artifact of evolutionary competition. Most off-putting about Gruner's book is not that it fails to be academically engaging, though it certainly does, but that he is overconfident in the comprehensiveness of his theory. He closes the book by challenging all his readers to present him "with a single example of humor that [he] could not render 'dehumorized' by removing its contest nature."[5] The inclusion of the word "towards" in the title of the present study is intended to demonstrate the modesty that is incumbent on anyone seeking to understand the mystery of the comic.

Though it would be arrogant to claim to have unearthed the mystery of laughter once and for all, it is necessary to adopt a working theory of humor in order to test its explanatory value. In addition, since Christian theology is late in arriving at the interdisciplinary table, it is more prudent to examine an existing theory than to construct a novel one. There are nearly as many comic theories as there are authors who undertake to explain the laughable. One author was able to list at least eighty-eight such theories.[6]

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[4]Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997), emphasis mine.

[5]Ibid., 176. Gruner brags that for years he has issued this same challenge to the International Society for Humor Studies and "so far these colleagues in humor research have been unsuccessful."

[6]J. Y. T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (New York: Cooper Square, 1923).

Traditionally, all theories fall under three large categories: Inconguity, Relief, and Superiority. After a brief outline of the first two theories, we will establish the third as a working explanation to be evaluated by the biblical text in the next chapter.

The Incongruity Theory is the view espoused by the majority of modern comic theorists. Representatives of this view are philosophers Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and more recently, John Morreall. Schopenhauer gives the classic explanation when he writes "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity."[7] Though each theorist has his or her own emphasis, the Incongruity Theory has a basic form. Morreall explains, "We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns."[8]

The classic example concerns an important and well-dressed business man who trips on a curb and falls to the ground. According to this theory, the comic potential is found in the incongruity between the man's perceived position (high) and his present position (low). Incongruity explains why we laugh when we see television advertisements featuring preschoolers who advise their parents concerning Roth IRA investments. Furthermore, the theory likely accounts for the humor in wordplay and punning. We expect a word to be used in a certain sense or in a certain context and laugh

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[7]Quoted in John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 17.

[8]Ibid., 16.

when another word is used instead. For example, have you heard the one about the dyslexic agnostic insomniac? He lay awake at night wondering if there really is a dog.

Relief theories of humor believe our laughter to be the explosive outlet for energy that is no longer needed for suppression. Popularized by Sigmund Freud, the Relief Theory believes joking to be a way of freely expressing forbidden feelings. Since we would ordinarily use psychic energy to suppress these feelings, in joking we are able to release the surplus energy in the form of laughter.[9] According to this view, energy takes on an almost fluid character. For this reason, relief theories are also appropriately known as "hydraulic" theories. Though some may take issue with Freud's psychoanalytical approach to the study of jokes, it is evident that the Relief Theory has significant explanatory value. In particular, the idea that our laughter represents a powerful force seeking an outlet comports well with the fact that laughter can at times be an almost violent physical reaction. In addition, since the intensely physical, and sometimes explosive, response relies on shock, the Relief Theory, perhaps better than any alternative view, accounts for humor's necessary condition of surprise.

Both theories contribute significantly to the study of humor and laughter. In addition, though it is not the goal of the present paper, it would be a fruitful study to examine both of these from a biblical and theological perspective. This thesis is devoted to the examination of a third understanding of laughter: the Superiority Theory. It is to that assessment that we now turn.

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[9]See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960).

Superiority: An Historical Theory

The Superiority Theory is undoubtedly the longest standing comic theory and there is nearly universal agreement that it accounts for at least some aspects of humor. Arguing for an incongruity-relief hybrid understanding of laughter, Arthur Koestler wrote that humor, "must contain a basic ingredient that is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension. It may appear in the guise of malice, contempt, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke."[10] In what follows, we will trace the development of the Superiority Theory, from Plato to the present.

Plato

The Superiority Theory was first anticipated by Plato (427-348 B.C.). This ancient philosopher was concerned with the negative consequences of laughter, especially its potential to disrupt the good and true city or state. In *Philebus,* Plato argued, through the mouth of Socrates, that a life of wisdom was to be preferred over a life of pleasure. Furthermore, he articulated his belief that laughter is malicious and usually employed in the derision of our inferiors. As Socrates explained to Protarchus, "The ridiculous is in its main aspect a kind of vice which gives its name to a condition."[11] Socrates further explained the condition as a failure to follow the Delphic inscription, "Know Thyself." Those who are ridiculous, and thus the objects of laughter, are those

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[10]Arthur Koestler, "A Contraction of Fifteen Facial Muscles," in *The Treasury of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Viking, 1992), 454.

[11]Plato *Philebus*, Loeb Classical Library 164 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1975), 333.

unaware of their true material, physical, and moral stature. In addition, Plato recognized that laughter is frequently used in a Republic to ridicule disruptive innovations. In entertaining the prospect of educating women alongside men, Plato anticipates that the sight of wrinkly naked women exercising in the palaestra with the young men will be the object of much ridicule. This inevitable laughter, however, will be ignorant. Therefore, "we must not fear the jests of the wits which will be directed against this sort of innovation."[12] Plato was confident that truth would prevail. Indeed it did,

> when experience showed that to let all things be uncovered was far better than to cover them up, and the ludicrous effect to the outward eye vanished before the better principle which reason asserted, then the man was perceived to be a fool who directs the shafts of his ridicule at any other sight but that of folly and vice, or seriously inclines to weigh the beautiful by any other standard but that of the good.[13]

In Plato's view, laughter is used to ridicule some defect, vice, or innovation. However, the assessment made by the laugher may be ignorant and, in the end, shown to be foolish.

Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) also held the concept of superiority as being crucial to our understanding of laughter and humor. This conclusion is based on numerous references in his *Rhetoric*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Poetics*. The latter is believed to have included a sustained treatment of comedy, but unfortunately it has been lost. In what remains, it is clear that Aristotle held inferiority to be a crucial element in comedy.

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[12]Plato, "Republic," *The Works of Plato* (New York: Modern Library, 1928), 401. In *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 90, Sanders misunderstands Plato as permitting "the jester to act as a kind of vigilante, a satiric, stand-up journalist." Further, Sanders believes that Plato does not fear ridicule because it "may be used effectively against wrongheaded or disruptive new ideas." While Plato certainly believed this, he was making a radically different point in the portion of the *Republic* that Sanders quotes.

[13]Ibid., 402.

According to Aristotle, comedy "is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster."[14] Aristotle was more amiable to laughter than his philosophical forebear, and held that since it was a property of man, it was to be enjoyed in moderation. It was his belief that too much jesting results in buffoonery and "those, on the other hand, who never by any chance say anything funny themselves and take offense at those who do, are considered boorish and morose."[15] For Aristotle, the moderation was necessary because of the nature of laughter. Since "raillery is a sort of vilification, and some forms of vilification are forbidden by law," a prudent man will limit his joking.[16]

Cicero

The Rhetoricians also saw the essence of the comic as lying in the derision of inferiors. For example, in a treatise on the art of oratory, Cicero (106-43 B.C.) says that the laughable "is restricted to that which may be described as unseemly or ugly; for the chief, if not the only, objects of laughter are those sayings which remark upon and point out something unseemly in no unseemly manner."[17] The ability to recognize such unseemliness in an opponent and to reveal it wittily to the court was indispensable. In

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[14]Aristotle *Poetics*, Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1985), 19.

[15]Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 8.3, Loeb Classical Library 73 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1982), 246-47.

[16]Ibid., 247.

[17]Cicero *De Oratore* 58.236, Loeb Classical Library 348 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1988), 373.

fact, the strategy was so effective that young lawyers would have the tendency to overdo it. Thus, Cicero described a good orator as one who adheres to the Aristotelian mean and uses ridicule sparingly, lest it result in buffoonery. In addition, the lawyer should not employ

> ridicule of a smutty nature, lest it be that of a low farce; nor pert, lest it be impudent; nor aimed at misfortune, lest it be brutal; nor at crime, lest laughter take the place of loathing; nor should the wit be inappropriate to his own character, to that of the jury, or to the occasion; for all these points come under the head of impropriety. He will also avoid far-fetched jests, and those not made up at the moment but brought from home; for these are generally frigid.[18]

It appears that Cicero had difficulty following his own good advice. Quintillian (c. A.D. 35-100), always generous in his analysis of his forebear, reported that many thought Cicero "used [jesting] without discrimination" and that Cicero "was regarded as being unduly addicted to jests, not merely outside the courts, but in his actual speeches as well."[19]

Quintillian

In his own work on oratory, Quintillian follows Cicero and states that "laughter is never far removed from derision."[20] In fact, the excitation of laughter at the expense of others begins Quintillian's taxonomony of humor. With laughter, Quintillian argues, "we either reprove or refute or make light of or retort or deride the arguments of others."[21]

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[18]Cicero *Orator*, Loeb Classical Library 342 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1971), 371.

[19]Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 439.

[20]Ibid., 443.

[21]Ibid., 449.

Like his predecessors, Quintillian urges adherence to the Aristotle's *via media.* In his classification, he describes wit as *salsus*, likening it to the effect of the seasoning on food. Wit, according to Quintillian, "just as salt, if sprinkled freely over food, gives a special relish of its own, so long as it is not used to excess."[22]

From antiquity, philosophers and rhetoricians saw humor and laughter as emanating primarily from the deficiencies, foibles, and vices of others. A good orator would raise laughs by drawing attention to the inferiority of his opponent; however, he would do so in moderation. This was the Superiority Theory in nascent form. Though the view persisted, it would take over a millennium and a half for it to be fully articulated.

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) provided the classical formulation of the Superiority Theory. This was a development in his understanding of the human struggle for power, as articulated in his *Leviathan.* According to Hobbes, laughter occurs when we believe ourselves to be winning the power struggle. Our laughter is both a statement of and advancement towards the attainment of a higher relative status. Laughter, in Hobbes' view, arises from a passion known as "sudden glory" which is caused in persons "either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud

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[22]Ibid., 447 (emphasis mine).

themselves."[23] Provine summarizes Hobbes as explaining "laughter as victorious crowing, the vocal equivalent of a triumphant flamenco dance stomped out on the chests of fallen adversaries."[24]

While most modern critics will accurately find Hobbes' account of pleasure and pain as motivators to be reductionistic, there are at least two things noteworthy about his analysis. The first is that he employs the traditional explanation for laughter. For Hobbes, that which excites our laughter is deformity or infirmity. Though most deficiencies are found in others, Hobbes allows that we may be driven to laughter upon remembering that at one time we possessed such a handicap. Thus, Hobbes follows in a long line of comic theorists who believe laughter to spring from a realization of the inferiority of others. To be sure, an excess of this kind of laughter is not to be encouraged. Too much laughter at the weaknesses of others is, for Hobbes, a sign of "pusillanimity," and great men should compare themselves with the strong instead of the weak.

Hobbes' analysis is noteworthy in the second place because he recognized that laughter depends on the "suddenness" of the glory. That is to say, the element of surprise is indispensable to our laughter.[25] As Hobbes puts it, "laughter and weeping are sudden motions; custom taking them both away. For no man laughs at old jests; or weeps for an

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[23]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38.

[24]Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 14.

[25]Incongruity, Relief, and Superiority theories disagree on many fronts, but all posit that our laughter relies on proper timing and surprise.

old calamity."[26] Our own experience testifies to this phenomenon. Invariably, hackneyed jokes and stale puns meet with groans rather than laughter. In the words of one observer, "Few things annoy more than the person who thinks himself amusing but who fails to surprise. We feel cheated, and our sense of the comic is blunted."[27] The physical reaction of laughter is itself explosive, and this testifies to the abruptness of whatever realization provoked the laughter.

Despite the fact that the Superiority Theory was coined in reference to Hobbes' analysis, few expositors have dealt adequately with his view of laughter.[28] Thus, Hobbes on humor is a necessary and promising area for further study.

Henri Bergson

The 1901 treatise, *Le Rire*, by French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) is undeniably one of the most popular and important works among modern humor studies. The fact that the work was initially published as three articles for the *Revue de Paris*, accounts for its simplicity and accessibility. The small volume offers profound insights into a topic that Bergson agreed had "a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again" and was "a pert challenge flung at philosophic

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[26]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 39.

[27]F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 21.

[28]Barry Sanders alludes to Hobbes in the title of his book, *Sudden Glory*, but surprisingly, does not treat Hobbes' view at all in his historical analysis. On the other hand, a rigorous investigation is furnished by R. E. Ewin in "Hobbes on Laughter," *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 29-40.

speculation."[29]

Bergson begins his treatise with three observations. First, following most theorists, he recognizes the "humanness" of laughter. He accepts the traditional designation of man as *homo ridens*; however, he adds a slight twist. According to Bergson, man could also have been defined as the "animal which is laughed at."[30] This modification is indicative of Bergson's emphasis on ridicule as the nature of laughter. Humans are those who laugh at an object, and that object is always human. An animal or inanimate object produces the comic effect insofar as it resembles the actions or characteristics of a human.[31]

Bergson's second observation is that to laugh at someone requires a temporary absence of feeling or pity towards the object. We are not able to laugh at a person if we are overcome with sympathetic emotion. As we will see, laughter is primarily a corrective and "being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."[32] The biblical mandate that parents have to implement the rod of correction is a helpful analogy. Many parents are unable to spank their children because of a superficial sentimentality. To discipline effectively, the conscientious corrector must take an

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[29]Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 1.

[30]Ibid., 2.

[31]For example, Gary Larson, creator of *The Far Side* ®, capitalized on this anthropomorphic effect in many of his brilliant and popular cartoons.

[32]Bergson, *Laughter*, 97.

objective, emotionally detached position. Similarly, the laughter of superiority requires a "momentary anesthesia of the heart."[33] When pity prevails, laughter is impossible and comedy is turned to tragedy.

The third, and most important of the observations, is that laughter is fundamentally a social phenomenon. In other words, "our laughter is always the laughter of a group…a kind of secret freemasonry."[34] For Bergson, any explanation worth its salt must show the social significance of laughter. Moreover, the mystery of laughter is elucidated when examined in its social setting. According to Bergson, "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one."[35]

Using functionalist language, Bergson opined that the primary role of laughter in society is disciplinary. That is, by our laughter, we ridicule our neighbor in order to correct his behavior. Writing in an increasingly industrialized context, Bergson believed that he had identified the fundamental defect that stood in need of laughter's correction. He maintained that "suppleness," or the ability of humans to adapt to changing situations, was an essential human quality. Thus, machine-like rigidity and quixotic absentmindedness are deformities that must be corrected. Put simply, "Rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective."[36] Laughter, then, is a "social gesture" and "by the

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[33]Ibid., 3.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., 4.

[36]Ibid., 10.

fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity…and softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical elasticity."[37]

Michael Billig keenly observes that Bergson's theory is in keeping with the latter's anti-materialist philosophy. In response to materialist philosophy that saw men as mere machines, "Bergson's theory of comedy rules out the possibility that humans can merely be physical automata. We cannot just be machines, for the more machine-like we appear, the more risible we become in the eyes of our fellow humans."[38] Interestingly, Bergson's polemic is still relevant a century later, as it articulates one of postmodernity's legitimate critiques of modernity. However, for our purposes, it is not necessary to locate the absurd in a fundamental category. Bergson undeniably furnishes some of the most astute observations regarding the nature and function of laughter, even if we quarrel with his understanding of its ultimate source.

F. H. Buckley

The Superiority Theory has its ablest modern proponent in a George Mason University law professor. F. H. Buckley's book *The Morality of Laughter* is, in the opinion of esteemed philosopher Roger Scruton, "surely the best to appear on this subject in recent years."[39] Buckley is one of the few modern analysts who understand superiority to be a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for laughter. Adopting a Bergsonian

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 129.

[39]Buckley, *Morality of Laughter*, dust jacket.

superiority theory, Buckley advances his argument on the shoulders of twin theses. The first of these, the "Positive Thesis," states that "laughter announces and enforces a code of behavior through the jester's signal of superiority over a butt. There is no laughter without a butt, and no butt without a message about risible inferiority."[40] The superiority experienced in laughter is, for Buckley, a moral superiority. Joking is a moral discourse between three parties: the jester, the butt, and the listener. The listener laughs at the butt if he agrees with the wit's message, and remains silent if he sides with the butt.

According to Buckley, behavior is risible and welcomes laughter if it falls to either extreme of an Aristotelian mean. For every virtue there are two extremes: one of deficit and one of excess. For example, if fortitude is a virtue, cowardice is an insufficiency and foolhardiness an overabundance.[41] Both extremes constitute what Buckley calls "comic vice." Comic vices must be corrected, and laughter is the rod of chastisement. Laughter serves as an effective deterrent since "[laughter] breaks through, even if we close our ears to it. We cannot will ourselves to be immune from its sting, however much we try. We can bear pain courageously and pressure gracefully, but we can never be indifferent to laughter."[42] Furthermore, "few emotions are stronger than the fear of being a butt."[43]

In the second part of his book, Buckley presents his "Normative Thesis." This

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[40]Ibid., xi.

[41]Ibid., 87.

[42]Ibid., 164.

[43]Ibid., xi.

is the ambitious claim that laughter indicates a *true* superiority and ridicules a *truly* inferior butt. Rather than develop the argument, Buckley begins by addressing the possible objections to his thesis. On the basis of this investigation, Buckley concludes that a hard-line version of his thesis is wrong "since decidedly inferior people laugh. Moreover, the fact that rival groups may trade off laughter against each other must lead us to reject the idea of a universal set of comic norms."[44] Consequently, Buckley is left with defending a soft version of his normative thesis, believing *most* laughter to issue from true superiority. He resorts to backing the banal belief that the message of superiority is "more often than not correct. In general, we should attend to laughter's message of the good life."[45]

To build his case, Buckley astoundingly appeals to the very set of universal comic norms whose existence he agreed we should reject. To demonstrate this, some definitions appear to be in order. According to Buckley, "comic norms" are virtues that constitute the *via media*.[46] As we have seen, "comic vices" are the defective traits laying at the extremes of the mean. The problem is that Buckley describes comic virtues as "intuitive"[47] and as having "intrinsic appeal."[48] He further characterizes vices as

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[44]Ibid., 60.

[45]Ibid., 191, emphasis mine.

[46]Buckley's persistent use of the adjective "comic" to modify "virtue" is confusing. While vices are comic (since they are consequently derided) it is hard to imagine how their complementary virtues can be called "comic." Buckley indicates a symmetry between these terms that is not at all evident.

[47]Buckley, *Morality of Laughter*, 86.

[48]Ibid., 87.

"*naturally* comic."[49] With this sort of language, one is led to suspect that Buckley is relying on a kind of natural law; in other words, a universal set of norms. Accordingly, though he argues convincingly for his Positive Thesis, Buckley fails to adequately support his Normative Thesis. This is surprising, since Buckley claims that his primary interest was the latter.[50] Despite this weakness, *The Morality of Laughter* is delightful, cleverly written, and contributes significantly to the present study.

Superiority: A Working Theory

In the movement towards a theology of humor and laughter, it has been necessary to examine a traditional explanation of the risible. Emerging out of centuries of thought, the Superiority Theory appears able to account for the surprise, scorn, and sociability that characterize the comic. Based on the merits and demerits of the contributions made by such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintillian, Hobbes, Bergson, and Buckley, we may tentatively accept a working Superiority Theory of humor and laughter. This theory recognizes that our laughter is often the ridiculing of a butt. Much of what we find funny can be reduced to the follies, foibles, and vices of another party, with our laughter serving the social function of correction. Thus, laughter promotes a way of life, or worldview, by deriding inferior ways of living. However, contra Buckley's Normative Thesis, I will argue that the perspective from which we laugh is wholly relativistic and subjective. Our own superiority, or the inferiority that is ridiculed, can either be real (as Buckley proposed) or imagined.

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[49]Ibid., emphasis mine.

[50]Ibid., 191.

Of course, conscientious Christians will not accept a theory simply because it is supported by insightful philosophers, but will want to know whether it can withstand the scrutiny of Scripture. Thus, the goal of the next chapter is to confirm this working theory using the Biblical data.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address some possible objections. Some persons may dismiss a working Superiority Theory out of hand because it is too reductionistic, too harsh, or too prideful. These legitimate concerns will be dealt with in turn.

The first objection quarrels with the idea that all laughter can be reduced to the ridiculing of a butt. Given the elusive nature of laughter, we should be suspicious when anyone claims to have discovered the universal explanation of the comic. Karl-Josef Kuschel correctly points out that people of different cultures, and at different times, laugh in different "spirits." He writes,

> There is a joyful, comfortable, playful and contented laughter and there is mocking, malicious, desperate or cynical laughter. There is laughter for sheer pleasure in life and laughter from sheer bitterness at disappointments. There is affirmative, enthusiastic laughter and there is laughing at, ridiculing, on the verge of arrogance and mockery.[51]

In the light of this, it would be highly reductionistic to claim that all laughter is a "laughing at."

However, this objection misses the mark if it is aimed at the present study. The goal of this paper is modest, in that it seeks only to establish the claim that laughter is *often* ridicule and that the recognition of superiority and/or inferiority accounts for *much*

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[51]Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994), xvi.

of our own humor, as well as *a significant portion* of biblical humor. Our working Superiority Theory will have explanatory value if it can be shown to account for a good deal of our laughter, and should not be rejected if counter-examples demonstrating non-superior humor can be proffered.

The second objection is much more formidable. Some are tempted to dismiss this working theory of laughter out of hand because it is malicious. In his book on humor, Eastman suggested that we "dismiss from the topic of laughter at the outset the topic of scorn."[52] Furthermore, Morreall believes that if laughter is reduced to the ridiculing of vice, comedy faces a significant moral criticism, since "cultivating a scornful attitude toward people is itself vicious."[53] Protesters such as Eastman and Morreall operate under the assumption that all ridicule is wrong because it is cruel. Thus, if our laughter signals ridicule, then our laughter is cruel and consequently wrong. This objection likely accounts for the fact that the Superiority Theory of humor is currently the least popular of the three views. Over the last century, Superiority has been replaced as the leading explanation of the comic by the much more genial Incongruity Theory. Most contemporary authors prefer to emphasize what they believe to be the positive side of laughter and treat derision, if only in passing, as laughter's ugly side. In humor studies, the Superiority Theory has become an embarrassing historical blemish.

The objection that our working theory of laughter is too harsh arises out of the sentimentalism that characterizes the early twenty-first century. It is Billig's keen

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[52]Eastman, *The Sense of Humor*, 7.

[53]John Morreall, "Comedy," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 402.

observation that the field of humor studies is currently infested with an "ideological positivism" which creates a "cultural climate that wants to believe in the positive powers of laughter."[54] In such a climate, books about the psychological and physiological benefits of laughter flourish, and comic theorists feel obliged to write with humor, in order to gain credibility.[55] Little wonder, then, that "theorists today often treat the Superiority Theory with suspicion because it suggests that laughter is less than wholesome."[56] In light of this cultural reality, there are at least two responses that must be made to the cruelty objection.

First, it is unwise to classify humor as "good" or "bad," or even "harsh" and "cruel" prior to investigating the relevant biblical and theological material. Ultimately, God is the judge of whether something is good or evil.[57] Moreover, if God partakes in

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[54]Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 21.

[55]At the fountainhead of the literature concerning the supposed health benefits of laughter stands Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (New York: Bantam, 1981). This is the account of his recovery from a debilitating spinal disease, for which he credits laughter. In 1964, doctors diagnosed Cousins with ankylosing spondylitis. He promptly checked himself out of the hospital and prescribed for himself a steady diet of Marx Brothers, Candid Camera reruns, and copious amounts of vitamin C. The last thirty years have witnessed the proliferation of studies touting the medicinal value of mirth. Though much of this work tends to be anecdotal and confused with uncontrolled correlates, it is exciting to speculate about the future findings of laughter research. Concerning that future, Provine prophesies that "research on medicinal laughter, like many other promising enterprises (e.g., genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, the Internet), will pay a price for the burst of early exuberance with a backlash of undue pessimism before rebounding to a more realistic level" (Provine, *Laughter*, 206). In the meantime, he wisely suggests that we take a truly scientific approach to the subject and assume "that laughter has no therapeutic value at all (the 'null hypothesis'), until we learn otherwise" (Ibid., 190).

[56]Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 39.

[57]The primary demonstration of this is at Creation, when God declares things "good" and "very good" (Gen 1). Part of Eve's downfall is her desire to be an autonomous arbiter of what is good. Thus, she declares the tree "good for food" and a "delight to the eyes" (Gen 3:6).

the laughter of Superiority (and it will be argued that He does), then the objector stands in moral judgment of God Himself. Therefore, as an *a priori* objection, the cruelty charge is premature.

Second, we must bear in mind that, according to our working theory, ridicule serves a disciplinary function. Thus, if laughter can be shown to correct vices and deter folly, then its implementation turns out to be more loving than cruel. This may be elucidated with an analogy. Many persons, operating from a misguided sentimentalism, object to the use of corporal punishment on children. One such objector, Dr. Benjamin Spock, has influenced generations of parents with these words: "If we are ever to turn toward a kindlier society and a safer world, a revulsion against the physical punishment of children would be a good place to start."[58] In other words, the physical punishment of children is to be rejected because it is fundamentally unkind. However, the Bible turns this worldly notion of kindness and love on its head. In fact, the one who "spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov 13:24). Believing themselves to be demonstrating love, contemporary parents actually hate their children when they withhold corporal correction. The loving thing to do is diligently discipline. In the same way, if our ridiculing laughter is intent on correcting vice, it is actually a way of "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

The third objection seeks to immediately dismiss our working theory because it makes our laughter arrogant. Indeed, even the term "Superiority Theory" sounds vain.

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[58]Benjamin Spock, *Dr. Spock on Parenting: Sensible Advice from America's Most Trusted Child-Care Expert* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 152.

Followers of Christ have learned to consider, in humility, others more important than themselves (Phil 2:3). In light of this, Christians are right to be suspicious of any action through which they wield their own superiority.

It is appropriate to agree with the heart of this criticism. Arrogance is certainly unbecoming of a Christian, and the Superiority Theory smacks of it. However, the concern is somewhat palliated with the observation that the Superiority Theory is something of a misnomer. With ridicule, what is in view is more the butt's inferiority than the jester's superiority. Furthermore, laughing at another's vice is not equivalent to praising one's own virtue. According to Roger Scruton, "Superiority" is mistaken in that it finds "the meaning of humour in what it does for the subject, rather than how it represents the object. Humour is not, normally, self-directed. Indeed one of its values lies in the fact that it directs our attention unceasingly outwards."[59] To call the theory "Superiority" is to emphasize the wrong half of an asymmetrical relationship. It would be better to call this the Inferiority Theory.

If Christians are to adopt this theory, however it is named, they will want to do so with a significant qualification. The superiority that is announced through Christian laughter is not personal superiority, but the supremacy of God and the Christian worldview. With these three major objections addressed, we turn to examine the biblical data to see whether it confirms our working Superiority Theory of laughter.

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[59]Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 192.

CHAPTER 4

SUPERIOR LAUGHTER IN SCRIPTURE

When we come to the biblical text to inform our theology of laughter, it is necessary to navigate between two errors. One is to see humor nowhere in Scripture. The other is to see it everywhere. Betraying his guilt of the former error, Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "The total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature."[1] Conrad Hyers commits the opposite error by seeing so much humor in Scripture that he can subtitle his book with the reduction: *The Bible as Divine Comedy*.[2] Traversing between these extremes is no easy task and few have successfully done so. For example, Joel Kaminsky begins an article on the relationship between humor and hope by observing, "There has been an unfortunate propensity to underemphasize or completely ignore humor in the Bible."[3] However, Kaminsky proceeds to read humor into the Genesis narratives. He argues that they humorously portray Isaac as "a bit of a bumbler and a dullard"; "intellectually challenged"; and "a bit

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[1]Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1953), quoted by Radday in his chapter, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990), 21. Later in the chapter, Radday rightly criticizes Whitehead's comment as ignorant and unsubstantiated (2n.31).

[2]See Conrad M. Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987).

[3]Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation* 54 (2000): 363.

of an incompetent."[4] Furthermore, the fact that Isaac took his new wife into his deceased mother's tent indicates to Kaminsky that "Isaac is a weak character who apparently never gets over his Oedipal connection to his mother."[5] It is difficult to decide whether the greater error is the one Kaminsky criticizes or the one he commits.

The proper approach is a *via media*, which recognizes that the human authors of the Biblical text sometimes employed humor in their craft. Discussing the use of wit as a weapon, Radday wrote:

> The foremost and perhaps the only aim of the Bible is the moral improvement of the world, essentially an educational undertaking . . . . To achieve success in this difficult experiment, all verbal weapons are permitted – indeed imperative – and neglect of even one such weapon would be tantamount to irresponsibility.[6]

In fact, the educational aim of Scripture has a natural affinity with the didactic character of the comic. One aspect of our working Superiority Theory is that laughter, like Scripture, is concerned with moral transformation. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that where laughter is sought or reported by the biblical authors, it is generally the laughter of superiority that ridicules butts. The wise wield the weapon of wit to correct folly, and their laughter issues out of true superiority. On the other hand, the laughter of fools is a demonstration of their imagined superiority. We will examine each of these in turn.

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[4]Ibid., 368. In n. 17, Kaminsky notes that "modern medical theory would also predict that Isaac, born to very aged parents and possibly was the product of an incestuous union, would have a diminished mental capacity."

[5]Ibid., 370. He continues, "But this also adds to the general humor of the narrative: Rebekah is talked into an arranged marriage with someone who is still too attached to his mother, even though she is dead."

[6]Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible," 32.

The Laughter of the Wise: Real Superiority

Scripture shows the wise following God's cue when they laugh at such persons as the deluded, the sluggard, the idol-smith, and the bogus religious leader.

The Laughter of God: Mocking Enemies

Though the Bible speaks of God laughing in only a few places, the material is quite instructive. In the second Psalm, we learn of the conspiracy of kings and rulers to stand against the Lord and His Anointed One. God, for His part, finds this to be quite comical: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision" (Ps 2:4).[7] The nature of the laughter is clear from the synonymous parallelism, where laughter (שחק) is equated with derision (לעג).[8] Since it is God's laughter, it reflects ultimate superiority which functions to put things in proper perspective. Kuschel writes,

> The most visible expression of [the] unassailable power of God is his laughter, a laughter of superiority and sovereignty, a knowing, mocking laughter from a God who sees through the situation on earth and can therefore only laugh mockingly at the vanity of human lust for domination.[9]

Though the didactic effect of ridicule is often implied in Scripture, it is here made explicit. In the face of God's laughter and impending wrath, the deluded kings are

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[7]Another instance of God's laughter, Ps 59:8, is structured almost identically to this one.

[8]For a brilliant study of humor-related Hebrew words and pairings, see Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," in *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 39-58. On p. 57, Brenner concludes, "Terms related to lighthearted facetious, innocent, pleasant laughter and fun exist only on the primary level and, even here, they are neutral rather than specific: they may signify fun, comedy and jokes as well as abuse, ridicule, and licentiousness. On the lower levels of the field's hierarchy, the extant data testify only to categories of 'heavy' laughter – that of satire, sarcasm, irony and the exposure of the contemptible, the absurd, and the grotesque."

[9]Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 55.

exhorted to "be wise" and to "be warned" and to "kiss the Son, lest he be angry" (Ps 2:10,12).

Another example of divine derision is found in Psalm 37:12-13. In the words of David, "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming." The word for "laughs" (שחק) is the same as in Psalm 2:4, except the meaning is supplied by the context instead of a parallel term. Spurgeon's commentary highlights the juxtapositions in the text. He writes, "Note how the gesture of the wicked in gnashing their teeth is returned to them in the Lord's scornful laughter at their devices. Their plotting, too, is countermined by that winding up of all plots, which the Lord knoweth, though they are willfully ignorant of it."[10]

Most commentators agree that God is the ultimate identity behind the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 1:20-33. After loud, repeated, and unheeded warnings to the foolish, Lady Wisdom promises, "I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you" (Prov 1:26). Though these words of wisdom have profound eschatological results, the present implications should not be overlooked. The warning of future mockery is offered as a deterrent to foolish living in the present. Bruce Waltke explains that the terms 'I will laugh' (שחק) and 'I will mock' (לעג)

> express the inward joy and disdain a mighty conqueror feels toward the defeat of his abject enemies (cf. Pss 2:4; 37:14; 59:8). The victory is so lopsided that there is a comic aspect to the reversal of fortunes, provoking mockery over the enemy. Truth has a harsh edge, and Wisdom does not dull it. Her shock tactics aim to persuade

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[10]C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, n.d.), 1:186.

the young to turn to her.[11]

Thus, the didactic effect of the laughter is in full force.

Even from these few examples, it is clear that the laughter of derision can be properly attributed to God. However, commenting on the LXX use of γέλως, Rengstorf writes, "It hardly need be said that the term cannot be brought into any essential connection with the biblical view of God. This would be true even if a certain odium did not attach to it in biblical usage. To be sure, it is said of God four times in the OT that He laughs. This does not imply, however, that laughter is a divine characteristic."[12] Since the conclusion he denies seems to be a clear derivation from the four texts, Rengstorf drastically underestimates what "need be said." In the same way, Morreall dismisses the textual evidence when he writes, "There are a few biblical references to God's laughter, but they are to the laughter of scorn, not to the laughter of amusement. If we understand the Bible as God's revelation about Himself, then we can say that God has no sense of humor."[13] Morreall's mistake is that he draws an unwarranted distinction between the laughter of scorn and the laughter of amusement. It is clear from the text that God is, in fact, amused when he sees puny princes plotting against the Potentate.[14] Moreover, the

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[11]Bruce K. Walke, *Proverbs 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 207.

[12]Karl Rengstorf, "laugh . . .," "γέλάω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 1:661.

[13]John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 78.

[14]In a *Focus on the Family* audio presentation (circa 1989) that I have been unable to relocate, Frank Peretti imagines the scene in Heaven when the New Ager Shirley MacLaine, in her TV special *Out on a Limb,* stands on the seashore and shouts in her loudest voice, "I am God . . . I am God." God is observing from Heaven, where the sound of her voice is barely audible, high pitched, and squeaky. Chuckling, God says "Hey Gabriel, Michael, come look at this!" I believe this is precisely the view of God that the Psalmist reveals.

absurdity deserves His derision. Thus, we are right to conclude that these texts reveal God's sense of humor. God's laughter signals His superiority over his enemies and functions to warn them to desist from their folly.

The Laughter of the Prophets: Mocking Idolatry

Insofar as the Hebrew prophets functioned as the mouthpieces of Yahweh, any humor or laughter they demonstrate is as sanctified as God's own. It is appropriate to ask, then, whether humor can be attributed to the prophets. R. P. Carroll's answer to this question is a function of his reader-response hermeneutic. Carroll believes that we ought to "recognize where we are located in our own world and allow those values to shape how we read texts."[15] Specifically, "To the reader with a real sense of humour the biblical prophets may well constitute a text of unending laughter and hilarity. To a different reader, perhaps one more given to serious theological or political reflection, the prophets may not be a laughing matter."[16] Though Carroll fails to define what constitutes humor, he is able to conclude, after trawling the Scriptures, that the prophets themselves were not humorous, but that they were presented as comic figures by their narrators.[17] This testifies to Carroll's weak view of Scripture as well as his poor hermeneutic. Given these presuppositions, Carroll ultimately has nothing objective to add to the discussion

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[15]R. P. Carroll, "Is Humour Also Among the Prophets?" " in *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 189.

[16]Ibid.

[17]On p. 188, Carroll leaves it to the reader to define "humor." He writes, "It is all a matter of definition and judgment, and each individual reader of the Bible will nuance their assessment of the matter in terms relative to their reading of the text in conjunction with their own convictions about what humour is." It is clear that the personalized definition that Carroll attaches to "humor" does not include "satire and irony, bawdy and ribaldry, taunt and mockery, burlesque and lampoon, parody and denigration" (167) with which he believes the prophetic literature is replete.

about the laughter of prophets.

Thomas Jemielity provides us with a much more interesting and valuable work. His thorough study uncovers the satiric elements in Hebrew prophecy, contesting the common conception that the Romans invented satire. Satire may be defined as "the exposure of human vice or folly through either rebuke or ridicule."[18] Classified this way, the genre (often a literary category) is continuous with our working Superiority Theory. In fact, it functions as a variation on the theme. Satire abounds in Scripture, where "deficient or immoral human behavior is the staple."[19] Since prophets were sent to warn people groups who demonstrate deficient and immoral behavior, it is not surprising to find humor and satire among the prophets. Jemielity writes, "The nature and characteristics common to both prophecy and satire explain their frequent intermingling and shared identity. The message of biblical prophecy is pervasively and predominantly criticism and criticism is always the content of satire."[20] Unlike Carroll and so many other modern theorists, Jemielity is not afraid to explore the so-called negative side of laughter. He writes,

> A study of satire in the Hebrew prophets cannot patronize or wish away the laughter of satire, imply its inferiority by describing the laughter it occasions as "negative," and, most important, I believe, must come to grips with the ambiguity and dark side of laughter. Satire is a great art and needs no apology.[21]

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[18]Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 408.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Thomas Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 85.

[21]Ibid., 14-15. Jemielity is also critical of Carroll's study. He writes concerning Carroll's essay: "It fails to recognize that not all laughter is genial, and however disturbing the laughter of superiority, of satisfaction at another's misfortunes, of grim, macabre 'gallows

Though the prophets had numerous satiric targets, the absurdity that most frequently invited their ridicule was idolatry and the worship of false gods. Isaiah's sustained treatment of the folly of idolatry (Isa 44:9-20) is a case in point. In this passage, idol makers are described as "nothing" (v. 9); ignorant, undiscerning, blind, hardhearted (v. 18); and "deluded" (v. 20). The craziness of the craftsman is described in detail in verses 14-17:

> He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

Jeremiah's indictment of idolaters is similar.[22] Describing them as "stupid" and "foolish" (Jer 10:8), the prophet ridicules their product. Craftsmen cut down a tree and "decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move" (Jer 10:4). According to Jeremiah, "Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk" (Jer 10:5). In contrast to the true and living God (v. 10) who instructs His people (v. 1), these idols cannot walk and cannot talk. By lampooning the folly that is idolatry, Isaiah and Jeremiah are seeking to deter Israel from following in the footsteps of the foreign nations. Behind the laughter of the prophets is the superiority of God over the idols.

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humour,' that laughter is laughter, and the prophetic texts, indeed a good deal of the Hebrew Bible, exhibit the laughter of attack, the laughing at that characterizes satire."

[22]Making fun of idolatry is not limited to prophets. The psalmist also engaged in it. See, for example, Pss 115:4-7 and 135:15-18.

No clearer example of the superiority of God over false deities demonstrated in laughter can be adduced than the showdown on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. The contest was designed to cure the Israelites of their waffling between allegiance to the Lord and to Baal. The humor in this passage occurs on two different levels. First, the narrator humorously portrays the scene on the mountain. It is comical to imagine four hundred and fifty men whooping and hollering, limping around and lacerating themselves as they appeal to a non-entity. Adding to absurdity is the juxtaposition between the relative volume of the call and response. We read, "And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention" (1 Kgs 18:29). The call was cacophonous, but the deity was dumb.

The humor exists also on another, much more explicit, level. This time, the laughter belongs to Elijah.[23] The prophet of God is so amused at the spectacle in front of him that he actually eggs it on. "It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked (התל) them and said, 'Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened'" (1 Kgs 18:27 NASB). Jemielity explains that the word for 'gone aside' or 'engaged' (סיג) likely speaks "euphemistically of Baal's attending to his own bodily needs and thus being unavailable for the needs of his priests. In other words, Baal may be in the bathroom."[24]

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[23]Cf. Carroll who believes that Elijah, "the severe moralist from Gilead who rants and raves his way through the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah hardly provides much evidence for humour among the prophets. On the contrary, his humourlessness is only equalled by that of his humourless companion Elisha." See Carroll, "Is Humour Also Among the Prophets?," 174.

[24]Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets*, 84. The idiom is translated "relieving himself" in the ESV.

Or, as Wilson paraphrases it, "Perhaps your god is off in the bathroom. His prophets are all gathered in the hallway with an anxious look on their faces. Bang on the door louder. He's been in there a long time."[25] In other words, Baal may have been "sitting on his throne."[26]

Like the other prophets, Elijah's laughter is not an end in itself but it is designed to shame the idolaters and deter those who are tempted to worship false deities. In a recent work, Richard Patterson highlights the lesson of the laughter at Mt. Carmel. He writes, "The satirical element validates the fact that only Yahweh is God before whom the pagan gods are powerless. The ethical implications follow: to oppose Yahweh is folly; to serve him is the *sine qua non* for experiencing God's sovereign intervention and is available only to those who put their trust in him."[27] Insofar as they represent God, the laughter of the prophets issues from true superiority and they implement it to ridicule the folly of idolatry in order to deter would-be wood worshipers.

The Laughter of Lady Wisdom:
Mocking the Sluggard

As in prophecy, comic defects are often singled out as objects of ridicule in the wisdom literature. And like the prophets, the wise employ humor as a pedagogical tool. The purpose of Proverbs is "to know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to

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[25]Douglas Wilson, *A Serrated Edge: A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire and Trinitarian Skylarking* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 53.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Richard D. Patterson, "Prophetic Satire as a Vehicle for Ethical Instruction," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 no. 1 (2007):55.

give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth" (Prov 1:2-4). One way to communicate insight to the youth is to get them to see foolish living for what it truly is – an absurdity that invites mocking laughter. For example, throughout the Proverbs, Solomon reveals laziness as ludicrous. Proverbs 26:13-16 contain a sustained caricature of the sluggard, at which Solomon undoubtedly intended us to laugh. First, we discover that the lazy man is diligent to come up with excuses for why he will not work: "There is a lion in the streets!"[28] To be sure, this is a far-fetched excuse and Solomon is no doubt embellishing. However, comedians and satirists must exaggerate the defect which they are ridiculing, or else their listeners may not recognize it as a blemish and may fail to join in the laughter. Like the bulbous nose in the political cartoon, the excuses of the sluggard are exaggerated so that we will be able to distinguish the defect.[29]

In verse 14, Solomon vividly describes the lazy man as he repeatedly hits the snooze button each morning. He observes, "As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed." Wilson gives this proverb a fresh coat of paint when he writes, "Just like the door to the kitchen in a busy restaurant turns, back and forth, back and forth, so the sluggard works industriously back and forth between the sheets."[30] Henri Bergson would certainly laugh at this picture since the sluggard is evidencing "something mechanical encrusted on the living."[31]

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[28]Cf. Prov 22:13.

[29]Perhaps this is what P. J. O'Rourke had in mind when he said "Humor is, by its nature, more truthful than factual." Quoted in "Quotations on Humor and Life," *Credenda Agenda* 9 no. 2 (1997): 17, no reference to the original given.

[30]Wilson, *A Serrated Edge*, 48.

[31]Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 18.

The third picture of the lazy man is equally laughable: "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth" (vs 15). In other words, he will only move if gravity will do the work for him. We are left with the image of a man who has likely nodded off though fist-deep in food. Perhaps it was a sluggard who invented the "alarm fork." US patent number 5,421,089 was designed to "sound an alarm to remind you to take another bite of food."[32]

Finally, in verse 16, we read that "the sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." Plato would laugh at this portrait of the sluggard, since the loafer fails to heed the inscription at Delphi, "Know Thyself."[33] The lazy man thinks himself wiser than he actually is, so he becomes the perfect butt.

This final verse in Solomon's excursus on the sluggard gives some commentators pause. Believing the sluggard of Proverbs to be "a figure of tragic-comedy,"[34] Kidner writes,

> Admiration for the wit of this portraiture has to be tempered with disquiet, on reflection that the sluggard will be the last to see his own features here, for he has no idea that he is lazy: he is not a shirker but a "realist"; not self-indulgent but "below his best in the morning"; his inertia is "an objection to being hustled"; his mental indolence a fine "sticking to his guns."[35]

Kidner's observation is not lost on conscientious exegetes. However, his concerns may be palliated to some degree with the realization that Solomon is not primarily concerned

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[32]See Johnny Acton, *The Ideas Companion: Clever Copyrights, Tremendous Trademarks, and Peerless Patents* (London: Think Publishing, 2005), 149.

[33]See Plato *Philebus*, *Loeb Classical Library* 164 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1975), 333.

[34]Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964), 42.

[35]Ibid., 163.

with the sluggard, but with those who may be tempted to emulate him. By making the lazy man a laughingstock, Solomon uses the butt as a deterrent.

The Laughter of Christ: Mocking Religious Leaders

The discussion on the relationship between humor and Christology, in chapter 2, has prepared us for an investigation of the laughter of Jesus. Based on the deduction that humor is both a divine and human characteristic combined with the affirmation that the incarnated Christ was fully divine and fully human, we should expect to see examples of his mirth in the New Testament. The best approach is a modest one, which is content with the discovery of just a few examples. These examples will demonstrate that Christ used humorous hyperbole to ridicule the Pharisees and Sadducees in order to instruct the crowds and disciples.[36]

Matthew 23:1-36 contains multiple instances of Jesus' humor. In this passage, Jesus is inveighing against arrogant and hypocritical religious leaders who fleece people. Trueblood notes,

> Vanity is a great weakness of mankind in general, but it seems especially ludicrous when it appears among the professionally religious. The contradiction between man's humility before God and his strutting before men is a perfect opening for ridicule, and Jesus employed it to perfection in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew's Gospel.[37]

Though he is addressing the Pharisees, Jesus' audience is comprised of the disciples and the crowds (vs 1). Therefore, his primary concern is not the reform of the Pharisees, but for the people they so easily lead astray. Christ is drawing the people's attention to the

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[36]The editors of the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* believe that "the most characteristic form of Jesus' humor was . . . preposterous exaggeration." See Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, "Humor," 410.

[37]Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 35-36.

comic vices of the Pharisees in order to provoke laughter. He has already drawn attention to their large phylacteries and lengthened tassels (Matt 23:5), and in verse 24 he invokes another absurd image: "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel." Strict adherence to the Law prohibited the consumption of a swarming band of insects (Lev 11:41) and the Pharisees that Jesus targets would be vigilant to adhere. However, Jesus humorously portrays them as allowing one of the largest animals that was commonly known at that time to pass through the cheesecloth and be eaten. As Phipps explains, the fastidious Pharisees "meticulously poured their wine through cloth to remove tiny bugs. But at the same time, the Pharisees outperformed a hinged-jaw python by consuming a camel. Without blinking, Jesus says they ingested an entire monstrous 'unclean' animal!"[38] This is humorous for another reason. It is a pun, or "paronomasia," that has been lost in translation. In Aramaic this would have sounded like straining out a *galma* and swallowing a *gamla*.[39]

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount also contains many humorous images, which more often than not present the Pharisees, Gentiles, and hypocrites in all their absurdity. Christ caricatures the religious leaders of his day and ironically uses them as examples of improper religious behavior. Specifically, he has his disciples laugh at the Pharisees who (1) give alms with much fanfare in order to be applauded (Matt 6:1-2); (2) stand in the

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[38]William E. Phipps, *The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 87-88. The cud-chewing camel qualifies as "unclean" according to Lev 11:4.

[39]Another example of Jesus' use of paronomasia is Matt 16:18: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The word play is not evident in an English translation, but is accessible in Greek (*Petros* for "Peter" and *Petra* for "rock") and in the original Aramaic (*kepha* for both "rock" and "Peter"). See Robert H. Stein, *The Methods and Message of Jesus' Teaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 14.

synagogues and on street corners to be heard praying (Matt 6:5); and (3) fast with disfigured faces to communicate their discipline (Matt 6:16).[40] In contrast to these comically defective ways of practicing religion, Christ teaches his disciples (1) to give to the poor in such a way that the left hand does not know that the right hand just reached for the wallet (Matt 6:3); (2) to pray with the shades drawn (Matt 6:6); and (3) to shower on fast days (Matt 6:17).

Like all the examples of laughter in Scripture, the humor of the Messiah is not an end in itself. It performs a didactic function when it ridicules inferiors. Christ's humor, as it is reported in the Bible, is always employed in the service of instructing or encouraging his disciples and the crowds. Jónsson writes, "Jesus's humour is educational and homiletic humour, like the humour of the rabbis – it serves the purpose of enlightenment, stimulation and joy, but, most of all, of illustrating religious truth."[41] Flynn's comments are also helpful. "Humor not only laughs at things misshapen or absurd but protects against them. Jesus threw into comic relief some of the moral inconsistencies of His day that they might be seen in their proper perspective, corrected, and avoided by others."[42] Thus, Jesus serves as an example of sanctified humor and

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[40]Earl F. Palmer is right to see the humor in these passages, but his exegesis is questionable. For example, he believes that Jesus' teaching on fasting has something specific to say to teenage girls. He writes, "Jesus moves beyond the humorous reflection upon those who 'make a bad face' when they fast as an act of piety, and he goes forward to make the point that those who fast should wash their faces and carry on the fast in a healthy way. Jesus, by means of humor, makes a teaching point in a very clear way that the non-healthy fasting of anorexia and bulimia in no way can become a part of God's plan for the life of a disciple." See Earl F. Palmer, *The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 96-97.

[41]Jacob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1985), 167.

[42]Leslie B. Flynn, *Serve Him with Mirth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 117.

laughter. In Christ, we have precedent for implementing humor in our preaching and teaching. In addition, it seems evident that there is a place for godly satire and ridicule of bogus religiosity.[43]

The Laughter of Fools: Imagined Superiority

If fools receive the ridicule of God, His Son, and His people, it is also true that they issue it. In fact, the Bible is full of examples of deluded folks, imagining their own superiority, who laugh at their godly rivals. A few examples will be illustrative.

The Laughter of Unbelief

The first sound of laughter encountered in Scripture is negative. Establishing His covenant with Abraham, God declares, "I will bless [Sarah], and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen 17:16). Upon hearing this promise, Abraham "fell on his face and laughed (צחק) and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" His wife's response is similar. When she eavesdrops and catches wind of the promise, she "laughed (צחק) to herself" (Gen 18:12).

These texts provide insight into the nature of laughter, since both Abraham and

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[43]Though space constraints forbid us from examining other sources of New Testament humor, it is clear that the apostles followed Jesus' lead in ridiculing religious leaders. For example, Paul gets so exasperated with the Judaizers insistence on circumcision that he wishes that their parents had not stopped at the foreskin. "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves" (Gal 5:12). Furthermore, in what is arguably one of the funniest passages in the NT, John lampoons the blindness of the religious leaders when they hauled the man born blind (now healed) into their kangaroo court. For an extended discussion of the humor in John 9, see Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox , 1985), 117-25.

Sarah give the reason for their response. The couple laughs because they believe God to be operating on the basis of misinformation. According to Abraham, God fails to realize that he is a centenarian. Furthermore, the future patriarch believes that God must have missed more than fifty of Sarah's birthdays (Gen 17:17). Sarah understands God to be unaware that she is menopausal and "worn out" (Gen 18:11-12). Their laughter, then, issues out of a sense of superiority over God. In a sense, they ridicule the promise because they have more knowledge about the situation than God. In short, they laugh because they believe this to be too hard for the Lord.[44] It is the laughter of unbelief, and it duly receives the Lord's rebuke (Gen 18:15).

Despite this clear interpretation of the text, a number of modern scholars, determined to prove the geniality of laughter, reinterpret this text as an example of positive laughter. Terry Lindvall's book-length treatment of Sarah's laughter is almost "without conscience" in its hermeneutics.[45] Lindvall writes,

> This daring and darling old woman, who had waited for almost a century to feel a kick in her womb, surrendered to the thought of this incredible and hilarious promise and did the only thing she could do – she laughed. She gave herself over to laughter as she had given herself over to love with wild abandon. And it felt good, real good.[46]

To this interpretation we might object that God was displeased with Sarah's

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[44]This is attested by the Lord's response to Sarah's laughter. He asks, "Why did Sarah laugh? . . . Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:13-14).

[45]I am borrowing this term from Albert Schweitzer's evaluation of Ernest Renan's 300-paged conjecture, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Modern Library, 1927).

[46]Terry Lindvall, *The Mother of All Laughter: Sarah and the Genesis of Comedy* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 15. Lindvall immediately segues into a predictable discussion of the health benefits of laughter. He concludes that excursus, on p. 17, by declaring that Sarah's laughter was "a fresh, healing tonic."

laughter. Lindvall responds, "Sarah was laughing *with* God."[47] Furthermore, "God even let himself get caught up in the joke. Rarely had he encountered such a cataclysm of comedy, an earthquake of mirth. He heard his own delight echoing back to him, and like hearing your own voice, it sounded funny."[48] Clearly, Lindvall's re-interpretation will not do. The laughter of Abraham and Sarah was negative because it ridiculed God and His promise, thus rightly deserving His rebuke. However, God's own sense of humor and superiority is given the last word. The Lord commands that the child be given the name Isaac, which translated means "He laughs."

The laughter of unbelief can also be heard in the New Testament. In Luke's Gospel we read that Jesus had been summoned to the house of Jairus, a ruler in the synagogue, so that his sickly daughter would be healed. By the time the entourage arrived at the house, it appeared to be too late. Walking into a wall of wailing, Jesus said, Do no weep, for she is not dead but sleeping" (Luke 8:52). Verse 53 records both the response ("and they laughed at him") and the reason for the response ("knowing that she was dead"). Their laughter (καταγελάω) is, according to Rengstorf, a "scornful laughter on the basis of supposedly better information and therefore of a superiority which is not slow to make itself felt."[49] The force of their laughter is shown to be even stronger when we consider that it advanced not from neutral position, but from a state of mourning (κλαίω, v. 52).

In both of these examples, the unbelieving laughter was ridicule, issuing from

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[47]Ibid., 35, emphasis mine.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Rengstorf, "γέλάω," 1:660.

an imagined superiority. However, the imagined superiority of these laughers was corrected. For example, it could be said, concerning Abraham's wife, "By faith Sarah received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised" (Heb 11:11). Similarly, Jairus and his wife were "amazed" at the work of Christ (Luke 8:56). Ultimately, in these cases, faith prevailed over the laughter of unbelief. In many other cases, however, the conclusion is not at all positive.

The Laughter of God's Enemies

Scripture gives abundant testimony to the fact that God's enemies ridicule His prophets, His kings, His Messiah, and His people. We will briefly examine an example of each.

Second Kings 2:23-24 recounts an incident in which the newly installed prophet Elisha is accosted by a number of young boys. These apparently followed him out of the city towards Bethel for the purpose of mocking him (קלס). They jeered at him, saying "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" Turning around, Elisha invoked the name of the Lord and "two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys." It is clear from the context, wherein Elisha is seen to be struggling for recognition as Elijah's God-appointed successor (2 Kgs 2:1-25), that the boys were not merely mocking Elisha because he was follicularly challenged. Instead, the boys were ridiculing the Lord whom Elisha represented. Thus, Carroll is wrong to think the reaction was due to the fact that the "less than hirsute" Elisha was "sensitive about his fine head of skin."[50] Mocking God's prophet is the same as mocking God, and so the boy's laughter was justly

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[50]Carroll, "Is Humour Also Among the Prophets," 176.

punished. M. A. Screech's perspective is refreshing: "So here is a grim warning: the mocking laughter even of children may merit punishment at its most extreme. That account of mauling to death is the word of God: nobody who venerates it as such can shrug off as innocent even the laughter of naughty boys."[51]

God's kings are frequently mocked and scoffed at. Though many examples could be proffered as evidence of this, the clearest is Psalm 22:7-8. In this psalm, David is appealing to the Lord for deliverance from his enemies. From the king's perspective, God has forsaken him (Ps 22:1) and left him exposed to the ridicule of mankind. The psalmist writes, "All who see me mock (לעג) me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; 'He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'" The sheer physicality of laughter is described here to show the intensity of the opposition behind the ridicule. From the perspective of the people, the king's trust in God is ludicrously misplaced. David, then, becomes a butt of their jokes.

The overtly messianic quality of this Psalm allows it to be used to illustrate the fact that God's enemies also laugh at His Messiah. On this hermeneutical point, Screech is helpful:

> The cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me," is a quotation by Jesus from the opening verse of the twenty-second psalm. That psalm, in all its detail, was seen as a shadow, providentially cast beforehand by the supreme reality which is the Crucifixion. As such, the psalm can gloss the texts of the Gospels; it can fill in gaps and supply details not given in the New Testament, details otherwise unknowable.[52]

Though the Gospel writers do not explicitly say that the soldiers at the foot of the cross

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[51]M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (New York: Penguin Press, 1997), 34.

[52]Ibid., 29.

laughed at Jesus, we can deduce it from this messianic Psalm. "That laughter, implicit in the New Testament, is explicit in its foreshadowing."[53]

Ridiculing laughter, issuing from the imagined superiority of Christ's enemies surrounds the whole Passion narrative. In his Gospel, Matthew describes the mocking of the passersby, the religious leaders, and even criminals. In Matthew 27:39-44 we read,

> And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let him deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

To be sure, this is a sobering passage. A theology of laughter must take into account the wicked laughter at the foot of the cross. As Screech notes,

> Even in translation the sneering laughter comes across like a slap on the face. Christ was memorably scoffed at as he hung in agony on the Cross. After Christians had meditated upon the Crucifixion, never again could laughter be thoughtlessly seen by them as a sign of simple joy and buoyant happiness.[54]

At the central event in redemptive history, Christ becomes the butt of his enemies' jokes. They considered his Christological claims to be patently absurd and deserving of ridicule. New Testament scholar Robert Stein notes the two main themes of their mockery: "One was the riddlelike claim that he would rebuild the temple in three days after it was destroyed. The other was the messianic claim that he was the Christ."[55]

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[53]Ibid.

[54]Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, 17.

[55]See Robert H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 248.

Concerning the former, it is interesting to note that their ridicule is based on their own misunderstanding, since "he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:22), not the Jerusalem temple. Even as they mocked him, the riddle was in the process of being fulfilled in their midst. Thus, the normative perspective from which they laughed was ill-informed. Theirs was the laughter of superiority, but it was wholly misguided.

According to Kuschel, "This laughed-at Jesus has become the archetype for laughed-at believers."[56] In other words, Christians should not expect to be treated differently than their Savior. He once declared, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:20). In fact, being mocked and ridiculed was the experience of the earliest Christians, so much so that they could be called "fools for Christ's sake" (1 Cor 4:10) because "the message of the cross is folly to those who are perishing"(1 Cor 1:18). Christians should expect that the claims of the gospel will be met with the laughter of the Gentiles. To the natural man, Christian truth claims are absolutely absurd and absurdities are corrected with the laughter of superiority. The superiority that would mock God, Christ, and Christians is illusory. It is based on an inability to understand, since spiritual things "are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

Conclusion

There are 10 kinds of people in this world: those who understand binary and those who do not! Similarly, the world can be divided along laugh lines. On the one hand, God, His prophets, His Son, and His people laugh at the foolish delusions of the ungodly. On the other, unbelievers laugh at Christian truth claims that they believe to be

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[56]Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection*, 80.

risible. The laughter of superiority properly characterizes both sides, since in every case the humor is found in perceived absurdities that are consequently ridiculed. However, our laughter is all a matter of perspective. In the words of the fictitious sage Lazarus Long, "One man's theology is another man's belly laugh."[57]

The biblical data clearly support Buckley's positive thesis: "that laughter signals the wit's sense of superiority to a butt."[58] At the same time, the data also soundly defeat even a soft version of his normative thesis: "that this [laughter] is a *true* superiority."[59] On the contrary, since competing perspectives trade jabs, the humor and laughter found in Scripture is wholly a matter of perspective. This is not to deny the existence of absolute truth. Indeed, Christian laughter, when it is truly godly, is grounded in what Francis Schaeffer called "true truth." However, it is important to recognize that people laugh from a myriad of perspectives. The superiority that gives way to laughter, and the inferiority that yields to it, can either be real or imagined. The fact that rival groups engage in mutual ridicule would lead us to expect an eschatological adjudication. Thus, the next chapter will investigate who "will get the last laugh," and whether it is true that "he who laughs last, laughs best."

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[57]Robert A. Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1988), 243.

[58]F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 49.

[59]Ibid., emphasis mine.

CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS AN ESCHATOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

Helmut Thielicke has written that if laughter is to be given a place in theology it would come under the heading of eschatology.[1] The evidence that Thielicke's taxonomy is widely rejected by theologians is found in the dearth of serious examinations of the eschatological dimensions of laughter. One recent attempt can be found in Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven*. According to Alcorn, "We need a biblical theology of humor that prepares us for an eternity of celebration and spontaneous laughter."[2] A biblical and eschatological theology of humor is indeed a necessity and Alcorn should be congratulated for dedicating a few pages to this end. Specifically, he deserves praise for highlighting the eschatological reality of laughter as a reward. In addition, though he tends to conflate the terms "joy" and "laughter," Alcorn is right to point out that heaven will be overwhelmingly joyful, and that our joy is often expressed in laughter.[3] However, as we have seen, Alcorn fails to provide a satisfying biblical theology of the topic because his discussion is methodologically weak.

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[1]Helmut Thielicke, *Das Lachen der Heiligen und Narren: Nachdenkl uber Witz und Humor*. (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), quoted in Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), 215.

[2]Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), 409.

[3]Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "To know oneself forgiven and released from sin, is the occasion for a new joy. This joy expresses itself in an exuberance of which laughter is not the only, but is certainly one, expression." Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 123.

One troubling aspect of Alcorn's discussion concerns what he confidently dismisses. He writes, "The only laughter that won't have a place in Heaven is the sort that late-night comedians often engage in – laughter that mocks troubled people, makes light of human suffering, or glorifies immorality." Furthermore,

> All those who have not surrendered their lives to God, who have exploited and ignored the needy, who laugh at and ridicule the unfortunate, and who flout God's standards of purity will have all eternity to mourn and weep. They will never laugh again.[4]

In this passage, Alcorn describes the laughter of the wicked that are destined for Hell. In effect, Alcorn is making the rather bland assertion that immoral mockers will not have a place in Heaven. One suspects that Alcorn believes all ridicule to be wicked and does not imagine the inhabitants of Heaven engaging in such laughter. This may be the case, but Alcorn would have to demonstrate it through a biblical theology of humor.

This chapter contends that when the nature of divine and human laughter is elucidated through a careful analysis of Scripture, it carries significant eschatological implications. In fact, the biblical data reveal laughter largely as an eschatological reality. Furthermore, the derisive and superior nature of God's laughter does not undergo a metamorphosis to a more genial type when it is applied to eschatological realities. Based on the character and promises of God, we may conclude that the new heavens and the new earth will echo with the laughter of joy and justice, defeat and derision. The consummation of all things will include a great comic reversal. Those who wept and were the objects of ridicule during this life will laugh, and those who spent their lives mocking God, His Messiah, and His people, will then be the objects of scorn.

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[4]Alcorn, *Heaven*, 409.

We will arrive at this conclusion primarily through an examination of key comic texts which are pregnant with eschatological inferences. Instead of isolated proof texts, these passages reveal a general tenor and impulse in Scripture that leads us to expect eschatological laughter. Eschatological realities have profound implications for life and relationships in the present. Thus, in order to guard against an over-realized eschatology of laughter, it will be necessary, towards the conclusion of the chapter, to draw out some of these implications. However, since the possibility that we will one day laugh at our enemies is so repugnant to our modern sensitivities, it will first be necessary to demonstrate that this view is not an innovation, but enjoys historical precedent.

Eschatological Laughter in History

The question of whether the saints will rejoice, even laugh, at the just punishment of the wicked has been answered in the affirmative by some of history's brightest theologians and biblical scholars. Tertullian (c. 155-230), for example, speaks to this issue in *De Spectaculis*, where he addresses the eternal fate of those whose lives consist of viewing spectacles and games, attending theatrical performances, and engaging in dance. He predicts his own future joy at the mourning that awaits the heathen.

> But what a spectacle is already at hand—the return of the Lord, now no object of doubt, now exalted, now triumphant! What exultation will that be of the angels, what glory that of the saints as they rise again! What the reign of the righteous thereafter! What a city, the New Jerusalem! Yes, and there are still to come other spectacles—that last, that eternal Day of Judgment, that Day which the Gentiles never believed would come, that Day they laughed at, when this old world and all its generations shall be consumed in one fire. How vast the spectacle that day, and how wide! What sight shall wake my wonder, what my laughter, my joy and exultation as I see all those kings, those great kings, welcomed (we were told) in heaven, along with Jove, along with those who told of their ascent, groaning in the depths of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus,

liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians![5]

In the same vein, Peter Lombard (c. 1110-1160), the master of the *Sentences*, believed that "the elect shall go forth . . . to see the torments of the impious, seeing which they will not be grieved, but will be satiated with joy at the sight of the unutterable calamity of the impious."[6] In addition, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) not only believed that the redeemed have a view of the suffering of the damned from heaven, but that the sight of such was an integral part of their eternal joy.[7]

This belief persisted until the time of Thomas Boston (1677-1732) and Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Watts, a popular hymn writer, is said to have penned this verse:

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls,
When they in glory dwell,
To see the sinner as he rolls,
In quenchless flames of hell.[8]

Likewise, Boston, a popular Scottish preacher, wrote concerning the wicked, "They will be unpitied. The damned shall have none to pity them. God will not pity them, but 'laugh at their calamity.' The blessed company in heaven shall rejoice in the execution of God's righteous judgment and sing while the smoke riseth up for ever."[9]

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[5]Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 30.

[6]Peter Lombard, *Sententiae,* 4.5.9.

[7]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3.94.1.

[8]This verse is attributed to Watts and widely distributed on the Internet, especially among atheistic websites. It can be found, for example, on "Quotes about Hell from Christian Leaders," [online]; accessed 7 March 2006; available from http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/hell-fire.htm; Internet. I have not been able to locate the primary source for this hymn.

[9]Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (Glasgow: J. and M. Robinson, 1788), 423.

With the support of such Christian luminaries, it is difficult to understand why the conviction concerning the righteous delight in the punishment of the wicked began to wane in the nineteenth century. In a series of lectures given in Westminster Abbey in 1877, Frederick W. Farrar dealt the death knell to the doctrine when he called it "the abominable fancy."[10] Farrar's censure was based on what he perceived to be the utter compatibility between delight in the eternal torment of the damned and the nature and character of both God and man. D. P. Walker is undoubtedly correct when he speculates, "The reason for [the doctrine's] obsolescence is, I think, a general change in the attitude to other people's suffering." Furthermore, "Closely connected with this is a change, also only incipient, in the conception of justice: a tendency to minimize, or even occasionally to reject, retributive or vindictive justice."[11] In light of these tendencies, it is imperative that our sensitivities and our conception of justice be formed by Scripture.

Eschatological Laughter in Scripture

When theologians anticipate having joy and even laughing at the just desserts of the wicked, they are doing so because they believe that such a conception is biblical. For example, in his discussion of the fourth state of human nature, Thomas Boston is not engaged in mere speculation, but is relying on the witness of Scripture. In fact, in the short quotation above, Boston alludes to two key texts: Proverbs 1:26 and Revelation

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[10]F. W. Farrar, *Eternal Hope* (New York: Dutton., 1878), 66. Farrar's further frustration is found in note 1 on the same page. He wonders, "Can any one with a heart, any man worthy of the name of Christian, any man worthy of the name of man, fully realize the meaning of such words with a soul unblended by prejudice and unsteeled by custom, without calling it inhuman language, and wondering that any could have uttered it who thought that they were preaching a gospel of infinite love?"

[11]D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 30.

19:3. In the first of these, Boston identifies "Wisdom" as the Almighty God who, after issuing repeated warnings to the foolish, will laugh at their calamity and mock them as they are stricken with terror.[12] In the second passage, the redeemed join in on the laughter and joy as they view the destruction of Babylon, a symbol of every ungodly thing and person. The repeated refrain will be "Hallelujah! Her smoke ascends forever and ever!" In this verse, the joy of the believer is intertwined with the destruction of the ungodly.

Tertullian alludes to the reversal referred to in Luke 6:21 when he writes, "It is a matter of turn and turn about. Now they are happy, and we are afflicted. Then let us mourn while the heathen rejoice, that when they have begun to mourn, we may rejoice."[13] On the basis of Jesus' words to his disciples in his sermon on the plain, Tertullian expects to enjoy derisive laughter at the future judgment of those who presently scoff. This interpretation of "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" is far from the objectless, joyous, and genial giggling that recent commentators expect based on Luke 6:21.[14] However, upon a closer examination of the context, Tertullian's interpretation appears to make much more sense of the promise.

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[12]Another instance of God's laughter, Ps 37:13 has profound eschatological implications. "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him." However, "The Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming." Here, God's laughter is fueled by his knowledge of the future—a future that God, with a great comic reversal, has schemed against the wicked. Ironically, this "day," will provide even more opportunities for God's enemies to gnash their teeth.

[13]Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 28.

[14]For example, right before he dismisses the idea of derisive laughter in heaven, Alcorn writes, "Only the followers of Christ can laugh in the face of persecution and death because they know that their present trouble isn't all there is. They know that someday all will be right and joyful." See *Heaven*, 408-09.

The eschatological language in this short beatitude is difficult to ignore. It is made evident by the strong contrast between the "now" (νυν) and the future (γελασετε). If one condition receives a blessing, the opposite state of affairs is subject to a curse. Therefore, Jesus continues, "Woe to you who are laughing now, because you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). This complimentary pair of statements sets up a parallelism from which we may determine the nature of our eschatological laughter. Jesus is condemning not just any laughter, but the foolish and unbelieving laughter of superiority in which enemies of the cross engage. This interpretation is supported by the earlier reference to these same foes. Here, Jesus describes these enemies to his disciples as those who "hate you . . . exclude you . . . insult you, and slander your name as evil, because of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22). Christians, who are mocked, insulted, ridiculed, and laughed at to the degree that their lives on this earth are characterized by mourning, stand to receive the blessing of laughter in the eschaton. Again, this great reversal features not just any laughter, but a laughter that parallels the kind in which the enemies used to engage. On the other hand, those who ridicule Christ's followers will have their derisive laughter turned into mourning at the consummation of all things.

Christ's words in this sermon are reminiscent of Psalm 126:1-2. This song of ascents declares, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter then, our tongues with shouts of joy." Though it sounds like a recounting of history, the later plea (v. 4) clarifies that this restoration of Zion is ultimately a future hope. When this hope is fully realized, the response of God's people will be laughter. Anticipating the words of Christ, the Psalmist explains the basis for this hope: "Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy" (v.

5). In reference to the nature of this laughter (v.2), Rengstorf writes, "From the context it is obvious that this laughter expresses superiority over previous opponents. In this case, there is here nothing ungodly, since God is gratefully praised for His liberating act."[15] The laughter with which God will fill the mouths of His people is a kind that issues out of superiority and triumph.

These passages are not just a couple of isolated verses but are in keeping with a host of others. Only a few more examples will be necessary to establish the point.

Psalm 52 is a *Maskil* that David composed, inspired by the arrogance of Doeg the Edomite. David proclaims that Doeg's haughtiness will provoke God's judgment. For our purposes, it is important to note the response of the righteous man to this judgment. The psalmist writes, "The righteous will look on with awe and will ridicule him: 'Here is the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in his abundance of his riches, taking refuge in his destructive behavior'" (Psalm 52:6-7). Commenting on the laughter in this Psalm, J. J. Stewart Perowne wrote,

> Such exultation, to our modern sensibilities, seems shocking, because we can hardly conceive of it, apart from the gratification of personal vindictiveness. But there is such a thing as a righteous hatred, as a righteous scorn. There is such a thing as a shout of righteous joy at the downfall of the tyrant and the oppressor, at the triumph of righteousness and truth over wrong and falsehood.[16]

Contrary to what our "enlightened" sensitivities dictate, ridicule is the right response of

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[15]Karl Rengstorf, "laugh . . .," "γέλάω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 1:661-62.

[16]Quoted in C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, n.d.), 1:430. Spurgeon's own commentary is also poignant: "'And shall laugh at him.' If not with righteous joy, yet with solemn contempt. Schemes so far-reaching all baffled, plans so deep, so politic, all thwarted. Mephistopheles outwitted, the old serpent taken in his own subtlety. This is a goodly theme for that deep-seated laughter which is more akin to solemnity than merriment" (ibid., 427).

the righteous to the downfall of the arrogant.

The English Old Testament closes with a vision of the future given for the comfort of God's people:

> For indeed, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them, not leaving them root or branches. But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall. You will trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing (Mal 4:1-4).

In this verse, the redeemed are said to trample the wicked underfoot in a spirit of "playfulness."[17] This play is far from the pity that contemporary Christians imagine they will have for the damned; rather, it is more akin to the laughter of superiority.

"Death" is another enemy at which Christians can and will laugh. Since death is an abstract entity and therefore does not have the power to evoke our weak sensitivities, it serves well as part of a starting point for an evangelical recovery of the belief that we will laugh at our enemies. After an extended discourse on the resurrection, designed for the encouragement of the Corinthian believers, Paul echoes Hosea when he ridicules death, "O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:55). Renowned English poet and satirist, John Milton (1608-1674), in *Paradise Lost*, provided insight into the eschatological laughter of God and His Son when he put these lines in the mouth of Christ:[18]

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[17]The theme of having one's enemies underfoot is one that runs through the entire storyline of Scripture. An interesting study would be to examine whether "the enemy as a footstool" motif is more than a statement of mere subduing. Perhaps the phrase carries connotations of mockery and ridicule.

[18]It should not be surprising that Christ also laughs at his enemies. Colossians 2:15 states that Christ, by his cross work, "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." Furthermore, a common interpretation of 1 Pet 3:19 ("He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison") has Christ triumphantly taunting his enemies in a spirit of mockery. See, for example,

Thou at the sight
Pleased, out of heaven shalt look down and smile,
While by thee raised I ruin all my foes,
Death last, and with his carcass glut the grave.[19]

A proper perspective on the superiority of God, demonstrated most significantly at the resurrection of Christ from the dead, enables the believer to laugh at death. Of course, the final defeat of death awaits the final resurrection, and at this point our laughter must have an already/not yet component.

It is one thing for Christians to laugh at the defeat of an abstract entity such as death, and even the destruction of wicked enemies like Satan and the Antichrist. It is an entirely different thing to consider laughing at and rejoicing in the eternal torment of their uncle, father, or son. One wonders what the proper response should be. In the new heavens and new earth, will redeemed family members pity their relatives? This is certainly unlikely. After all, God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). For those who refuse to believe that laughter and rejoicing will occur, the only option that remains is that we will be eternally neutral about the destruction of the ungodly. Besides being emotionally unsatisfying, this would result in a state of affairs that has our attitude towards the enemy out of accord with the attitude of God. The most satisfying and biblically faithful view recognizes that God has given derisive laughter to his people as a final reward.

Alan M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 142.

[19]Quoted in John N. King, *Milton and Religious Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109. King devotes the whole of chapter six to interacting with Milton's view of God concerning the derisive laughter that Milton believed is present in Heaven.

Eschatological Laughter in the Present

Since eschatological realities have profound implications for the life and relationships in the present, some cautionary remarks must be made. In his analysis of eschatology in American life, Paul Boyer gives many examples of the detrimental results of over-realized eschatology.[20] Imagine the deleterious effects that might come if Christians cannot wait until the eschaton to laugh at the impending destruction of unbelievers! In his discussion of the "last laugh," Graeme Garrett outlines the potential pitfall of what he calls "euphemy." He writes,

> There are dangers here, of course. The laughter *of* believers (rather than *at* believers) may try to claim the victory rather too easily. There is a "my-cup-is-full-and-running-over" brand of piety that manages to ignore the horrors of the world around and belie its own advertising with an empty head and timid heart. It smells of "cheap grace."[21]

It is important that our beliefs and behaviors are guided by the Bible. Scripture provides the balanced approach to this and every other subject. In fact, some of the same passages that lead us to believe that we will eventually laugh and rejoice in the face of our enemies provide balance and instruction as to how to relate to these same people in the present. As we have seen (Ps 2), it is true that God laughs at the wicked, and then speaks to them in His wrath. In the meantime, however, the scheming kings and rulers are urged to "be wise," and "receive instruction" (Ps 2:10). Furthermore, they are invited to "kiss the Son" before his wrath is kindled (v. 12). Similarly, Lady Wisdom will indeed laugh at and mock the fool, but only after calling out loudly in the streets with repeated

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[20]See his excellent book, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992).

[21]Graeme Garrett, *God Matters: Conversations in Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 34, emphasis his. Garrett is borrowing the term "cheap grace" from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

invitations to repent (Prov 1:20-23). If God's ultimate laughter is reserved for the eschaton, so should ours.

Our present attitude should be the same as that of God the Father. While scoffers mock His promises, God is patient, "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). However, this does not diminish the fact that "the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the Day of Judgment and destruction of" the ungodly scoffers (2 Pet 3:7).

In many ways, then, the uneasiness towards a doctrine of eschatological laughter felt by most contemporary Christians is appropriate. They are correct that in this life we are to be consumed with love for our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. They fail, however, to see that this state of affairs is only temporary. The confusion lies when present sympathies are misapplied to the eschaton. A balanced Christian approach carries out the Great Commission with undiminished zeal but looks forward to the consummation of all things, when God and His Christ will finally triumph over all enemies. At that time, the laughter that has been directed at God, His Messiah, and His people will be redirected to its proper objects. The mockers will be mocked, and those who ridiculed Christians will be laughed at by those whom they caused to mourn.

Conclusion

According to Bergson, one of the key ingredients of comedy is inversion. He explained, "Not infrequently comedy sets before us a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy,

or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays."[22] He adds, "The root idea involves an inversion of *rôles*, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author."[23] This appears to be the comic material that will provoke our eschatological laughter.

We have seen that where Scripture speaks of laughter, it often does so with eschatological overtones. Whether by the righteous or the wicked, laughter springs from a sense of superiority. Thus, the relativistic nature of earthly laughter demands a final adjudication. The wicked have an imagined superiority which causes them to mock God, His Messiah, and His people in this life. God's laughter, on the other hand, is truly superior and does and will mock the wicked for their rebellion and foolishness. The nature of heavenly laughter is not fundamentally different from the laughter we experience in this life.[24] It is, and will be, the laughter of superiority. The only significant changes will be that in the eschaton, laughter will represent True Superiority and, since the time for repentance will have passed, the laughter will have lost its didactic function. We have Scriptural warrant to believe that in a momentous eschatological and comical turning of the tables, the righteous will rejoice and laugh at the eternal destruction of the damned.

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[22]Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 46.

[23]Ibid., 47. Cf. "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling" (Prov 26:27).

[24]For example, Bob Parrott, who sees comedy in the incongruity between that which is and that which should be, consistently applies that notion to the eschaton and concludes "At that moment when man no longer is, neither will there be humor. All incongruities are in man. When man ceases to be, incongruities do too. In the end all the gaps close." Bob Parrott, *Ontology of Humor* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1981), 71.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Laughter in Postmodern Society

Despite the fact that the Superiority Theory of laughter is clearly affirmed by the biblical evidence, it has fallen out of favor over the last century. Billig traces its demise to the rise of "ideological positivism," a largely psychological movement that is consumed with demonstrating the good-natured and medicinally beneficial side of laughter. In the current climate, the laughter of ridicule is disparaged. Billig writes, "The idea of ridicule fulfilling a necessary function will find itself at odds with the prevailing assumptions and theories of ideological positivism. Far from viewing ridicule as a basic part of humour, ideological positivists see it as an unfortunate negative side effect."[1] Billig's response is a timely and devastating critique of such assumptions. However, there is another *Zeitgeist* of which we must be aware. Pluralism and postmodernism are positivism's twin cousins, and they pose an equal threat to the laughter of Superiority.

It is now no longer debatable that our culture has imbibed the spirit of pluralism. D. A. Carson defines philosophical pluralism as the stance that "any notion that a particular ideology or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is

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[1]Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 200.

necessarily wrong."[2] He continues, "The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior."[3] Since we have said that laughter makes evaluative judgments about beliefs and behaviors, the implications of pluralism for humor are staggering. Laughter, which effectively signals the inferiority of a butt, is imperiled in a society in which it is politically incorrect to say, think, or imply that anything is inferior.

This state of affairs has dire consequences for all aspects of human existence, not the least of which is academia. Buckley explains, "The loss of a sense of humor has impoverished academic discourse, where nonsensical theories that could not survive the test of ridicule are now taken seriously. Before adopting a fashionable idea, we ought first to enquire whether it twigs our sense of humor."[4] Without any natural predator, the cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) can hop into every corner of Australia. Similarly, in a society where the laughter of ridicule is taboo, the emperor can prance around naked. When laughter is not able to perform its function, young men swagger with the waist of their pants around their knees and models sashay down the runways of *haut couture* bedecked in feathers. With ridicule outlawed, "artists" get thousands of dollars for vomiting into a fan aimed at a canvass.

Ironically, the pluralism that would silence laughter is what philosophers call

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[2]D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 19, emphasis his.

[3]Ibid.

[4]F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3.

"self-referentially absurd."[5] The absurdity is uncovered when we realize that the claim "There is no such thing as an absolute truth" is itself an absolute truth claim. Thus, the most basic tenet of pluralism and postmodernism can be dismissed with a laugh. Laughter has the uncanny ability to nip the ludicrous in the bud. Moreover, it can do so swiftly and effectively. American humorist H. L. Mencken made a living with the realization that "One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms."[6] Thus we would do well to recover the disciplinary function of laughter for the service of truth. One vehicle for such a recovery is the pulpit.

Laughter from the Pulpit

Insofar as our humor often performs a didactic function, it has natural affinities with the pedagogical disciplines. Since laughter promotes truth by exposing vice and folly, laughter is an indispensable tool in the hands of those given the responsibility of instructing others. R. L. Dabney once observed that the sense of the ludicrous "assists the attention, lightens the labors of abstraction, and makes truth vivid and pleasing. Thus it very seriously assists us in the acquisition and memory of truth; for what is so easily and pleasantly learned is never forgotten."[7] Because of this, Christian preachers would do well to employ humor in their craft. Esteemed homiletician John Stott writes,

> Humour should definitely not be prohibited in the pulpit. On the contrary, provided that we are laughing at the human condition, and therefore at ourselves, humour helps us to see things in proportion. It is often through laughter that we

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[5]See, for example, Ronald Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 201-05.

[6]H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 17.

[7]Reprinted as R. L. Dabney, "Humor and Wit," *Credenda Agenda* 9, no. 2 (1997): 17. The editors do not give a reference to the primary source.

> gain clear glimpses both of the heights from which we have fallen and of the depths to which we have sunk, leading to a wistful desire to be "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven." Thus, humour can be a genuine preparation for the gospel. Since it can contribute to the awakening within human hearts of shame over what we are and longing for what we could be, we should press it gladly into service in the cause of the gospel.[8]

Baptists at the end of the nineteenth century clearly understood the place of humor in the pulpit. For example, the students at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary published a number of articles on the subject in their *Seminary Magazine*. In one of these articles, J. S. Kirtley, of St. Louis, Missouri, articulated the belief that a good sense of humor was a prerequisite to the pastorate. He wrote, "A preacher can not live without a sense of humor, and I would suggest that a candidate for ordination be subjected to a rigid examination on that point."[9] Concerning the use of humor in the pulpit, Kirtley wrote, "We may so use it as to give power and attractiveness to truth, freshness to our social contact and brightness to sad hearts."[10] Another student, Edward B. Pollard, agreed that the sense of humor "is most helpful, if not altogether indispensable" for the preacher. He continued,

> The preacher should have the ability to detect the shallow, artificial, the unreal in conduct, and to let men see how the sins and follies of much of the life about them is not only vile, but also highly absurd and ridiculous.[11]

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[8]John R. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 291-92.

[9]J. S. Kirtley, "Humor in the Ministry," *The Seminary Magazine,* March 1896, 326. Kirtley further suggests that the candidate be required "to read Josh 9:3-23; 2 Chron 13:21 (in the old version); 2 Chron 16:12,13; 2 Kings 1:1:12 [*sic*]; 1 Kings 18:27." Kirtley also cites a conversation that he had with Dr. George W. Riggan, concerning a very bright and promising young man. Riggan commented, "He lacks just one thing of being a great man; he has no humor" (327).

[10]Ibid., 329.

[11]Edward B. Pollard, "The Preacher's Need of Humor," *The Seminary Magazine,* November 1901, 1.

At the turn of the century, ministerial mirth had no less of an advocate than the prince of preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Lecturing on the use of anecdotes and illustrations in preaching, Spurgeon affirmed the role of laughter:

> I would rather get the truth to them through the medium of ridicule than I would have the truth neglected, or leave the people to perish through lack of reception of the truth. I do believe in my heart that there may be as much holiness in a laugh as in a cry; and that, sometimes, to laugh is the better thing of the two, for I may weep, and be murmuring, and repining, and thinking all sorts of bitter thoughts against God; while at another time, I may laugh the laugh of sarcasm against sin, and so evince a holy earnestness in the defence of truth. I do not know why ridicule is to be given up to Satan as a weapon to be used against us, and not to be employed by us as a weapon against him.[12]

Spurgeon not only recognizes that laughter is fundamentally aggressive, but he actually advocates employing that aggression in the service of Christian truth-telling.

A century later, Baptists are just as favorable towards humor in the pulpit. However, many view aggression as laughter's ugly side and ridicule as having no place in the sermon. In his dissertation devoted to the topic, James Barnette is enthusiastic about good-natured humor in homiletics but strongly disapproves of the laughter of Superiority. He writes,

> The ethics of aggressive pulpit humor also points to the rejection of its use as well. People like humor more when it is directed outward, ridiculing perceived stereotypes and shortcomings of other groups. Christians, however, are to exercise love for all people, including those of different races, religions, and social levels. Christian preaching is to focus on what binds us together, not what separates us. Christians must love even their enemies. There is no place for pulpit humor to provide the release of hostility towards a person or group. Furthermore, aggressive pulpit humor betrays an unbiblical way of dealing with anger.[13]

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[12]C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 3:43-44.

[13]James Randolph Barnette, "Humor in Preaching: The Contributions of Psychological and Sociological Research" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 100. By "aggressive," Barnette means humor that "is aimed at a person or group and is disparaging in nature" (99).

Barnette's presuppositions are evident from this passage. First, he assumes that aggressive humor is incompatible with love. He dismisses out of hand the possibility that pointing out the "shortcomings of other groups" is actually the loving thing to do. Furthermore, in order to pit laughter against love, Barnette classifies aggressive humor as "anger." As we have seen, however, Scripture affirms the use of ridicule to correct folly. Laughter functions as a loving rebuke, which when heeded, protects people against having to face God's ultimate anger. For example, it is written that "God laughs" (Ps 2:4) so that kings may "kiss the Son, lest he be angry" (Ps 2:12). Second, Barnette apparently believes that preaching is to be exclusively positive ("is to focus on what binds us together") and never critical ("not what separates us"). However, Paul's instruction counters Barnette's. The apostle wrote, "Preach the Word . . . reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). Laughter which issues from the Superiority of God and His truth is one effective way to admonish.

Spurgeon himself found it necessary to address objections to his use of laughter from the pulpit. Answering those who said that ridicule "is a dangerous weapon" and "many men will cut their fingers with it," Spurgeon said, "Well, that is their own look-out [*sic*]; but I do not know why we should be so particular about their cutting their fingers if they can, at the same time, cut the throat of sin, and do serious damage to the great adversaries of souls."[14] Apparently, Spurgeon believed that the objection cuts both ways. If it will be granted that laughter is dangerous for the subject, then it must

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[14]Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 3:44. Writing at the same time, Kirtley had to address a similar objection: "But are there not dangers in its use?" He responded, "To be sure; and so there are, in too much water, food, work, and too many friends. There are dangers in living, but you would not seriously advise a father to put his boy out of danger by killing him, would you?" See Kirtley, "Humor in the Ministry," 328.

also be admitted that it can do damage to the object. The latter result is desirable, especially if the target is Satan.[15] Though Spurgeon's retort is decisive, the concern raised by the objectors is a valid one. Therefore, it is necessary that we briefly outline some parameters for the safe use of ridicule from the pulpit. Specifically, the preacher's practice of authenticity and moderation will serve as a protective handle on the blade of ridicule.

First, the preacher ought to be authentic in his use of humor. That is to say, his jests should neither be canned nor have the appearance of having been downloaded off the Internet the night before. This advice is reminiscent of Cicero's admonition that a good orator will "avoid far-fetched jests, and those not made up at the moment but brought from home; for these are generally frigid."[16] In addition, a preacher should not go out of his way, diverting the whole flow of his sermon to incorporate a joke. Humor, in the words of Kirtley, "should never be lugged in."[17] Spurgeon stands as an excellent model in this respect. It was his own testimony that "he never went out of his way to make a joke – or to avoid one."[18]

Second, the preacher should incorporate humor in his sermons moderately. Laughter is not appropriate for every occasion (Eccl 3:4) and the proper approach should

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[15]Scoffing is also Luther's strategy in his battle with Satan, though he sometimes resorted to more direct attacks. For example, Luther is quoted as saying, "I resist the devil, and often it is with a fart that I chase him away." Quoted in Eric W. Gritsch, *The Wit of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 200 6), 7.

[16]Cicero *Orator*, *Loeb Classical Library* 342 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1971), 371.

[17]Kirtley, "Humor in the Ministry," 328.

[18]C. H. Spurgeon, *The Full Harvest*, vol. 2 of *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 440.

be determined by the context. For example, in some cases you should not "answer a fool according to his folly, lest you become like him yourself" (Prov 26:4). In other cases, you had better "answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Prov 26:5). Jude's admonition is analogous: "Have mercy on those who doubt, save others by snatching them out of the fire" (Jude 24). Ridicule works nicely as a fire snatcher, but doubters tend to find it unmerciful. If a preacher engages in moderate mockery of vice and folly only when the context calls for it, he will set an example to his flock, and protect them from the tendency towards cynicism and hyper-criticalism.[19]

Moderation also protects the preacher from being pigeonholed. Kirtley is helpful on this point as well. "If you, as a 'funny preacher,' have narrowed the sphere in which you are to work, your audiences will demand fun, and will feel cheated of the rights, unless you give it – and constantly."[20] The danger of being so classified is real. Kirtley concludes, "Once get the reputation of being a funny preacher, you better walk out of the pulpit and on to the lecture platform or the auctioneer's block."[21] The preacher that exercises moderation and authenticity will not be in danger of this reputation, as he will make effective and safe use of ridicule's blade.

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[19]A good test of the quality of the preacher's example was recently proposed by Douglas Wilson. He writes, "A godly satirist should look carefully (and regularly) at the effect he is having on younger Christians who know him and desire to imitate him (2 Cor. 11:1). Does their imitation of him lead regularly to relational disasters in their lives? Does their imitation cause one firestorm after another in the church? Or do they, using wisdom, imitate more than just the *fact* that their mentor occasionally uses satire, and go on to make appropriate distinctions having to do with objects, levels, occasions, warrant, and so on?" See Douglas Wilson, "And Wilson, Almost Suitably Abashed, Responds" [on-line]; accessed 23 September 2007; available from http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=4262; Internet.

[20]Kirtley, "Humor in the Ministry," 328.

[21]Ibid.

Preachers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stand as excellent examples of those who made effective use of humor in the pulpit. Douglas Adams (1945-2007), the late professor of Christianity and the Arts at the Pacific School of Religion, devoted his doctoral dissertation to cataloguing the homiletical humor from these centuries. Adams discovered that the pulpit humor was essentially ridicule, "directed by the minister against those ideas or persons whom he believed threatened the very souls of his congregation and the soul of the nation by attracting people's attention to them and away from God and his service."[22] In other words, these preachers implemented the laughter of Superiority to combat prevailing winds of error. A few examples will be illustrative.

Preaching during the years of heightened debates over slavery, Baptist revivalist Jabez Swan (1822-1884) was outspoken in his criticism of slave owners who could find biblical warrant for their sin. Addressing those who supported the extension of slavery because they believed it to be a "divine institution," Swan used a humorous retort. He preached, "You pretend to think that slavery is right. You contend that it is a divine institution. Very well; for the sake of argument, we grant it. So is hell a divine institution, as only too many will find out; but we don't propose the extension of either."[23]

Another Baptist, Jacob Knapp (1822-1874), used the following anecdote to ridicule the folly of speaking flippantly about hell:

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[22]Doug Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit from George Whitefield through Henry Ward Beecher* (Austin, TX: The Sharing Company, 1975), 7.

[23]Jabez Swan, *The Evangelist: or, Life and Labors of Rev. Jabez S. Swan*, ed. F. Denison (Waterford, CT: W. L. Peckham, 1873), 436-37. Quoted in Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit*, 140.

> As a vessel was about to sail from this port, the officers made a farewell supper. As the canvas was being spread to the breeze, the captain arose, and passing the brandy around the board, called on the company to drink to the following utterance: "Now, boys, in twenty days, Liverpool or hell." They sailed on over the Atlantic for nineteen days. On the twentieth day they struck a rock and the vessel filled, and on that twentieth day they were . . . not in Liverpool![24]

In the eighteenth century it was as fashionable as it is today to interpret the biblical language about hell as entirely metaphorical. George Whitefield (1714-1770) implemented humor to expose this hermeneutical hogwash to his hearers. He preached:

> Do you think these and such like forms of speaking are mere metaphors, words of a bare kind, without any real solid signification? Indeed, it is to be feared, some men would have them interpreted so; but alas! Unhappy men! They are not to be envied in their metaphorical interpretation; it will be well, if they do not interpret themselves out of their salvation.[25]

Another object of ministerial mirth was atheism. The atheist is a perennial butt since, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1). A young Congregationalist pastor named Jonathan Mayhew (1747-1766) used pulpit humor to attack "pyrrhonism," an extreme brand of atheism that denied the existence of absolute truth. He preached, "If there is no such thing as truth, why will they please themselves for their sagacity in making this discovery? . . . Why will they attempt to investigate truth? Or why will they plume themselves upon their supposed discovery of this notable truth, that men are unable to discover truth?"[26]

Mayhew's comical critique is strikingly applicable to the present challenge of

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[24]Jacob Knapp, *Autobiography of Elder Jacob Knapp* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1868), 295. Quoted in Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit*, 151.

[25] George Whitefield, "On Regeneration," *The Works of the Rev. George Whitefield* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772), 10,25. Quoted in Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit*, 150.

[26] Jonathan Mayhew, *Sermons: Seven Sermons* (New York: Arno, 1969), 10,25. Quoted in Adams, *Humor in the American Pulpit*, 171.

philosophical pluralism. In addition, the responses from Knapp and Whitefield to the downplaying and denial of hell are hardly outdated. Inasmuch as the present errors represent nothing new under the sun, contemporary preachers ought to employ the time-tested technique of ridiculing folly through the laughter of Superiority.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that a biblical theology has much to contribute to the study of humor and laughter. In fact, every major area of theology carries implications for our mirth. In a movement towards a theology of humor and laughter, the present study has employed Scripture to affirm the Superiority Theory. The biblical data demonstrate that much laughter is, by nature, ridicule. Properly, it is a disciplinary tool designed to correct comic vices and absurdities, and, as such, is a servant of truth. However, since competing worldviews trade jests, the truth that is promoted in laughter is relativistic. This is not to say that truth, in the ultimate analysis, is relative. Rather, the claim is simply that human laughter can issue from an imagined superiority just as easily as it can from a real superiority. Because of the relativistic nature of our laughter, we await the eschaton. At that time, human laughter will be judged and those who mocked God, His Son, and His people will then be the objects of righteous ridicule. In the meantime, we ought to laugh at manifest absurdities so that simpletons and saints alike will be deterred from foolish living. Only in this way does our humor reflect the One who sits in the heavens and laughs.

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ABSTRACT

HUMOR AND TRUTH:
TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

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This thesis explores the relationship between theology and laughter. It adopts the Superiority theory, confirmed through biblical and theological analyses. Chapter 1 discusses recent theologies of humor and outlines the occasion for the present one.

Chapter 2 begins with an historical review of the church's attitude towards laughter and discusses humor's relationship to major areas of theology.

Chapter 3 traces the development of the Superiority Theory and contends that much of our laughter is the ridiculing of a butt. Laughter performs a didactic function when it enforces a moral perspective by mocking deviants. Chapter 4 combs Scripture to confirm the theory.

Chapter 5 observes that because of competing perspectives, laughter must have an eschatological dimension. It concludes that Heaven will contain the sounds of joy and triumph, defeat and derision.

Chapter 6 discusses the implications for a postmodern context and makes application by affirming the role of humor in preaching.

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