

Preaching Ethics: Is Pulpit Humor Ever Appropriate?

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Is pulpit humor ever appropriate? Our church's head elder recently posed the following question for consideration by the Board of Elders: "How much humor—if any—during the worship service is acceptable? In my mind, I am torn between reverence to God (no humor) and the use of humor to make a spiritual point." What follows is my studied response, incorporating material from the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.

For the sake of argument, it may be safely assumed that some Christians feel strongly that there is no place whatsoever for anything like humor in the pulpit. They think that the sacred desk is to be reserved exclusively for purely solemn discourses. They might consult the apostle Peter, who wrote, "The end of all things is at hand: Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer" (1 Peter 4:7).¹

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that those occupying the pulpit should give the impression that the Christian life must be totally cheerless. The life of Christ provides helpful insights.

Did Jesus Smile or Laugh?

For an answer to this question, let's look at the following inspired quotations:

"It has been said that Jesus never smiled. This is not correct. A child in its innocence and purity called forth from His lips a joyous song."²

"There are many who have an erroneous idea of the life and character of Christ. They think that He was devoid of warmth and sunniness, that He was stern, severe, and joyless. In many cases the whole religious experience is colored by these gloomy views."³

"It is often said that Jesus wept, but that He was never known to smile. Our Saviour was indeed a Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief, for He opened His heart to all the woes of men. But though His life was self-denying and shadowed with pain and care, His spirit was not crushed. His countenance did not wear an expression of grief and repining, but ever one of peaceful serenity. His heart was a wellspring of life, and wherever He went He carried rest and peace, joy and gladness."⁴

Unless I am utterly mistaken, Jesus sometimes incorporated humor in His teaching. Speaking to the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, He once pronounced a woe upon them, saying, "Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel." Or how about comparing them to "whitewashed tombs . . . full of dead men's bones" (Matt. 23:24, 27)? Another example: "How canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Luke 6:42). And this: "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?" (Luke 11:11, 12). If taken literally, how preposterous such scenarios appear! I'm sure the targets of the Master Teacher's spiritual irony often frowned or grimaced, while others within earshot might have been given plenty to think about, and maybe even been constrained to laugh out loud.

The Solemn Side of Jesus' Teaching

We hasten to say that it would be a grave mistake not to mention what should be obvious: Though Jesus' teaching sometimes contained elements of humor, it was, for the most part, solemn and full of pith and marrow. Let's review a few illustrations that demonstrate His teaching method:

"Jesus was the greatest teacher the world ever knew. He presented truth in clear, forcible statements, and the illustrations He used were of the purest and highest order. He never mingled cheap symbols and figures with His divine instruction, or sought to pander to curiosity or to gratify the class that will listen simply to be amused. He did not bring sacred truth down to the level of the common, and the comical illustrations that some ministers of the Gospel use were never uttered by His divine lips. Christ did not employ illustrations that would create amusement and excite laughter. . . . He never stooped to utter that which was comical, in order that He might attract an audience."⁵

Ministers Who Misuse Humor

The case of Moses Hull provides a striking illustration of what happens when ministers fail to balance the sacred with the common. Ellen G. White had occasion to reprimand this pastor in the following words:

"You stand in the desk and handle the most holy, sacred, elevating truths in an able manner; but when treating upon the most solemn subjects, you often bring in something comical to create a smile, and this frequently destroys the force of your whole discourse. You handle solemn truths with ease, but do not live them, and that is the reason why the heavenly endorsement is lacking. Many whose ears you have pleased will talk of the smart discourse, the able preacher, but are no more impressed with the necessity of obeying the truth than before they listened to it."⁶

Let's also consider the following inspired quotations:

"What can the minister do without Jesus? Verily, nothing. Then if he is a frivolous, joking man, he is not prepared to perform the duty laid upon him by the Lord. 'Without Me,' says Christ, 'ye can do nothing.' The flippant words that fall from his lips, the trifling anecdotes, the words spoken to create a laugh, are all condemned by the Word of God and are entirely out of place in the sacred desk."⁷

"Ministers are not to preach men's opinions, not to relate anecdotes, get up theatrical performances, not to exhibit self; but as though they were in the presence of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, they are to preach the Word. Let them not bring levity into the work of the ministry, but let them preach the Word in a manner that will leave a most solemn impression upon those who hear."⁸

Personal Conclusions

What are we to make of all this? To me, the whole matter depends on the speaker's motivation while occupying the pulpit. If the purpose of an anecdote is merely to elicit a good laugh, that is wrong. On the other hand, certain illustrations (like the one in which our head elder once related the case of a physician who had to eat crow after mistakenly pronouncing a woman dead and then passing off his terrible goof a few hours later by saying to the woman's husband, "There has been a slight improvement in her condition") cannot help but produce a smile or an outright laugh.

The wise man once wrote, “A merry [rejoicing] heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken” (Prov. 15:13) and “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones” (17:22). I see no reason why those who minister in the pulpit shouldn’t feel comfortable incorporating appropriate illustrations that make a spiritual point while being careful to refrain from undue emphasis on humor for humor’s sake. Such an approach strikes a healthy balance between Solomon’s encouragement to cheerfulness and Peter’s call for solemnity.

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¹ All Bible references are from the King James Version.

² Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, 57.

³ White, *Steps to Christ*, 120.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ White, *Review and Herald*, August 6, 1895.

⁶ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:435. Incidentally, Hull eventually became a spiritualist.

⁷ White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 142, 143.

⁸ White, *Evangelism*, 207.