

PROCLAIMING THE MESSIAH'S MIRTH:  
A RHETORICO-CONTEXTUAL MODEL FOR THE  
INTERPRETATION AND PROCLAMATION OF HUMOUR  
IN SELECTED GOSPEL SAYINGS

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of Theology, Acadia Divinity College,  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Ministry

Acadia Divinity College  
Acadia University  
Spring Convocation 1998



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0-612-27576-0

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project is an attempt to facilitate a greater appreciation of the humorous perspective as it relates to the Christian faith in general and biblical interpretation in particular and to supply a specific methodology whereby particular manifestations of humour found in selected gospel sayings might be understood and communicated to a contemporary audience.

The theoretical portions of the study develop a theological rationale for the place of the humorous perspective in the Christian faith as well as an appropriate methodology for interpreting the humour in selected gospel sayings. The latter is an adapted version of George Kennedy's rhetorical critical model.

The target audience for the study was composed of practising ministers among the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in Prince Edward Island, Canada. The purposes of the thesis-project were adapted into a workshop format and evaluated.

In terms of conclusions, the thesis-project was deemed to be successful in that it was able to contribute to an enhanced understanding of humour in the Christian faith and supply an effective methodology to incorporate this understanding into the tasks of biblical interpretation and preaching.

## DEDICATION

This thesis-project is affectionately dedicated to my wife Peggy, who more than anyone knows the limits of my own humour and of my need to learn, in this regard and in many others, from the Messiah.

## APPROVAL TO REPRODUCE COPYRIGHT MATERIAL

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## INTRODUCTION

Defining and analyzing humour is a pastime of humorless people.

Robert Benchley

### **Purpose of the Study**

While admitting to little experience in the art of matchmaking, it is the intention of the author to wed a threefold personal interest with perceived deficiencies among some in conservative Christian circles in hopes of facilitating a happy union. The three interests are, in stereotypical alliterative form: hermeneutics, homiletics and humour. The intended spouses of the above triad are preachers in conservative churches who desire and need to develop a biblical and effective understanding of humour in their ministries in general and in their preaching in particular. This proposed 'ceremony' will be performed in a workshop format with the author as 'officiant' along with the normal hopes for a growing and lasting relationship.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a perceived need for many preachers serving conservative churches to increase their understanding of humour in its relation to the Christian faith. A greater appreciation of the theological underpinnings of humour may free the preacher to recognize

humorous elements and devices in the process of biblical interpretation which will in turn impact the preaching of those texts.

Therefore this thesis-project is an attempt to facilitate a greater appreciation of the humorous perspective as it relates to the Christian faith in general and biblical interpretation in particular and to supply a specific methodology whereby particular manifestations of humour found in selected gospel sayings might be understood and communicated to a contemporary audience.

Just as wisdom dictates that an intended marriage requires the betrothed to seek some guidance as to what to expect from their union, a few comments on the context and direction of this study will help to set the parameters for what lies ahead.

### **Issues Related to the Subject Matter**

Many preachers are caught in a double bind. They speak to a church divided on the subject of humour. Some church members view humour with guarded appreciation; others with suspicion and even antipathy. The other half of the bind is the world in which preachers speak. Humour is everywhere—in the media, advertising and normal conversation. Humour is highly prized. Odd is the contemporary person who does not want to be perceived as having a good sense of humour. Where is the preacher to stand?

Responses may come in two extremes. One is to join voices with the centuries that proclaim that the faith is serious business not funny business. Here laughter leads to doubt and any notion of a jocular Jesus is heresy. This is the pious austerity demonstrated by the venerable Jorge in Umberto Eco's novel The Name of the Rose when he said, "The spirit is

serene only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in good achieved, and truth and good are not to be laughed at. Laughter foments doubt.”<sup>1</sup>

The other extreme is to embrace the spirit of the age and compete with the multitude of comedians on their own terms. Here the preacher turns from being court herald to court jester. While the immediate entertainment value of such a ploy will be tempting, the long term results are disappointing. If the congregation wants to listen to a comedian, they can find far better ones on television the night before the worship service. Nevertheless some go to great lengths to mimic what works in contemporary culture. A case in point is the program in a Doylestown, Ohio church called “Saturday Night Alive.” The evening includes comic monologues, skits and Top Ten Lists like those on “Late Night with David Letterman.”<sup>2</sup> However, complete cultural accommodation on one hand and a ‘pious’ obscurantism on the other are not the only options. Many find some middle ground. The question of the stability of this middle ground is still an issue. One can arrive at a position by default simply by rejecting the other options.

An answer to this dilemma could come in the form of a theology of humour. Such an understanding might be the mortar needed to change these sifting sands into a concrete place to stand. Therefore part of the task of this study will be to set out the theological foundations of humour.

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<sup>1</sup>Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose, trans. William Weaver (New York: Warner Books, 1980), 151.

<sup>2</sup>David Briggs, “Christians are Urged to Take Up the Joy of Laughter,” The Moncton Times-Transcript (9 April 1994), 9.

Once these underpinnings are secured, along with a basic understanding of the nature of humour, the participants in the proposed workshop will be given the basis for a freedom to incorporate the humorous perspective in their biblical interpretation. In turn this perspective will lead to an enhanced ability to recognize and understand humorous devices within Scripture generally and more specifically in selected sayings of Jesus. These instances of 'divine comedy,' in turn, may be incorporated into their sermons. This thesis-project, then, will focus upon the interpretation and proclamation of humour as it is found with selected sayings of Jesus and is not a study of the uses and abuses of humour per se in the practice of preaching.<sup>3</sup>

### **Issues Related to the Methodology**

Once a firm footing has been established for the understanding of the place of humour in both the Christian faith and in biblical interpretation, an appropriate methodology is needed to reap the exegetical benefits. The methodology chosen for this thesis-project is that of

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<sup>3</sup>For guidance in the use of humour in preaching, cf. John W. Drakeford, Humor in Preaching (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); David Buttrick, Homiletic Moves and Structures (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 95,96,146,147; Calvin Miller, Marketplace Preaching (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 105-106; Warren W. Wiersbe, Preaching and Teaching with Imagination (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), 273-76; William H. Willimon, "Humor", in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching, William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995); Grant Lovejoy, "Pulpit Humor," in Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Jim Berkley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 110, 111; James R. Barnette, "A Time to Laugh: Principles of Good Pulpit Humor," Preaching 11.5 (March/April 1996): 5-11; John Vandorsdall, "Humor as Content and Devise in Preaching," Dialog 22 (Summer 1983):187-90; James R. Barnette, "Using Humor in Preaching: An Interview with Bob Russell,"(March/April 1995): 5-10; A.W. Tozer, "The Use and Abuse of Humor," in The Best of A.W. Tozer, Warren Wiersbe, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 146-48. For a historical study of humour in the American pulpit, cf. Doug Adams, Humor in the American Pulpit: From George Whitefield through Henry Ward Beecher (Austin: The Sharing Company, 1975).

rhetorical criticism. Reasons for this choice are twofold. The suitable methodology must be able to do both hermeneutical and homiletical justice to the text(s) and also must be acceptable to those who will be participating in the study. The former is the subject at hand and the latter will be addressed below in issues relating to the participants.

The contemporary field of biblical hermeneutics offers a cornucopia of competing and/or complementary exegetical methods. Each has its contribution to make to what is generally referred to as the historico-grammatical method. While movement in the field is tending toward theories highlighting the role of the reader in front of the text, other methods give more weight to matters behind the text and/or in the text itself. These emphases exist simultaneously, each with their own dedicated disciples among biblical scholars. For purposes of this study a credible methodology must be found which will be attuned to the humorous perspective and able to bear exegetical results.

Literary approaches in general and rhetorical criticism in particular seem to hold the most promise for purposes of this thesis-project. A brief history of rhetoric and the development of rhetorical criticism will follow in Chapter 3 of this study. It will lead to a discussion of the chosen methodology which is an adaptation of George Kennedy's method of rhetorical criticism--that which this study dubs the rhetorico-contextual method.

The chosen methodology also must dovetail with the homiletical purposes of this research. A current concern in homiletical circles is that the sermon should do justice to the form and function of the biblical text. Fred Craddock states,

Sometimes the shape of the text will carry over into the sermon quite well...However, more important is attending to the form of the text to discern what it achieves--praise, correction, judgment, encouragement, defense,

reconciliation, instruction—and then asking if the sermon is designed with that in mind.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Long echoes this concern when he writes, “The preacher should bring to the sermon both what the text says and what the text does; or, to put it another way, what the text does by its saying.”<sup>5</sup> Since rhetoric in general and rhetorical criticism in particular are aware that things are said and written for a purpose, the rhetorico-contextual method should be sufficient for the purposes of this thesis-project. Therefore if indeed rhetorico-contextual criticism can be shown to have a sensitivity to humorous devices in biblical literature, can produce credible exegetical results and can accommodate the homiletical concerns for the ‘finished product’ of the process, it should stand as the method of choice.

### **Issues Related to the Participants.**

This study has a general perception of the audience it wishes to address. Many of its particulars will be motivated, shaped and limited by this target group. The author’s understanding of the issues relating to these participants has been formed over many years of close association and service in this ethos. Beyond the ground belief that these servants have a basic desire to be more effective preachers, several factors form parameters for this thesis-project.

The main target audience is practicing preachers among conservative churches. Often

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<sup>4</sup>Fred B. Craddock, Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 178; cf. also Thomas G. Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 50-52, 61-65; and David Buttrick, Homiletic Moves and Structures (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 333-445.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas G. Long, The Witness of Preaching (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 84,85.

with several sermons to prepare in a given week, they struggle to be fresh, creative and faithful in their preaching. The term 'conservative' is used intentionally rather than 'fundamentalist' or 'evangelical'. The former is discounted due to its pejorative connotations. The term 'evangelical' is not used because some among the potential participants would object to that as a self-designation even though generally they would be seen from the outside to belong to this general classification. 'Conservative' would be more apropos since it is more than a designation of theological stance. It also speaks of the kind of caution regarding the 'new,' 'different,' or 'out-of-the-ordinary.' The possibility exists that those of considerably more 'progressive' theology might share this same cultural conservatism and also benefit from this thesis-project. Their participation, however, would remain ancillary to the main thrust of the study. Even though the basic purpose of this thesis-project is remedial, it also may serve as preventive medicine for those still in training for ministry. Again, even though this group potentially may be larger than the former, this research still will be formulated to meet the needs of the primary target group.

Those targeted for this study often possess a native suspicion or antipathy toward methods of critical Bible study. Some time will be spent attempting to allay those fears. The definition of the type of rhetorical criticism employed will set it apart from the many differing approaches among rhetorical critics. The perspective given on the history and operation of the discipline as well as an outlining of the particular approach adopted in this study will help to focus attention on the benefits of this kind of Bible study and deal with possible prejudices that all critical methods undercut the authority of Scripture. The discussions of Chapter 3 are especially aimed to deal with these issues.

Practical limitations in the lives of the target group will also give shape to this study. Many who currently occupy pulpits have little or no command of the original biblical languages. Biblical Greek and Hebrew, if understood at all, often are distant, not-so-pleasant memories from days in college. Most would not have the benefit of seminary education. Therefore the methodological component of the thesis-project must be based upon the English text of the Bible. The language parameters will delimit the breadth of humorous devices studied. For example, since puns and examples of double entendre require sophisticated understanding of the nuances of the language studied, they will be omitted from the forms of humour under observation.<sup>6</sup>

A final parameter is time. Many in Christian ministry already have over-crowded calendars. Time off to take a full semester course would not be possible for most. Lack of finances would also come into play at this point. The option of a workshop format would enable the basics of the thesis-project to be taught while giving participants motivation and freedom for subsequent experimentation with their new understandings within their preaching ministries. Many preachers already are familiar with the workshop format as this is a common form of continuing education in ministry.

The workshop format also might be amenable to the future development of the kind of approach advocated in this thesis-project. This material might serve as a module in a

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<sup>6</sup>For extended treatments of puns in biblical literature, cf. John Moore Bullard, "Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function" (Ph.D. diss. Yale University, 1962), 74-91; I.M. Casanowicz, "Paronomasia in the Old Testament" (Ph.D. diss. Johns Hopkins University, 1894); and E. Russell, "Paronomasia and Kindred Phenomena in the New Testament" (Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago, 1920). For a brief treatment of double entendre in Luke-Acts, cf. Frank Connolly-Weinert, "Double-Talk and Double Entendre in the Lukan Writings," (Boston: A.A.R./S.B.L. Triregional Meeting, 1995), photocopied.



longer course of study if the application of the rhetorico-contextual method is applied to humour in other genres of biblical literature (eg. parables, proverbial sayings, prophetic literature and epistolary literature). While this possibility lies beyond the purview of this study, it yet may bear fruit. This workshop module also might be inserted in a longer course examining current issues in preaching. The material on humour in this study also might be separated from the rest and presented with benefit to a broader audience.

## CHAPTER 1

### HUMOUR IN PROSPECT: FOUNDATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS



Analyzing humor

Gary Larson

What is the relationship between humour and holiness? Can faith and funniness coexist? An affirmative response to these questions assumes a basic understanding both of the Christian faith and the nature of humour. While it may be safe to assume some rudimentary knowledge of both subjects, they both have aspects that surpass rational penetration. On investigation of these matters several surprises may unsettle well-worn but

untested assumptions. Therefore with a source of expectation and honest humility, the relationship between these domains will be explored. Since "...a God defined is no God at all,"<sup>1</sup> one's unflagging trust in God is best expressed in an attitude that recognizes his declaration "for as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). In the same spirit, the aphorism of E.B. White is well heeded: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind".<sup>2</sup> A backward glance to the cartoon epigraph should keep one from making too many dogmatic assertions about the nature of something as complex as humour.

### **A Working Definition of "Humour"**

Regardless of the inherent limitations of the process, a working definition of "humour" must be presented to give focus and direction to the study. Shades of meaning abound, but an appeal to the Oxford English Dictionary will supply the foundational definition for this study. Humour, then is "that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun."<sup>3</sup> Likewise one's sense of humour is "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing or

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<sup>1</sup>Krister Stendahl, "The Walter Pope Binns Lecture Series," (Liberty: William Jewell College, 1987), 3.

<sup>2</sup> E.B. White, A Subtreasury of American Humor (New York: Howard McCann, 1941), XVII; quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, Preaching and Teaching with Imagination (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), 274.

<sup>3</sup>Oxford English Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., S.v. "Humour".

other composition; jocose, imagination or treatment of a subject.<sup>4</sup>

### Cognate Terms

While a basic definition gives initial focus to the study greater clarity can be given to the subject by comparing and contrasting “humour” with its cognate terms.

### Wit

The understanding of wit has evolved from denoting intellectual agility to what literary critic M. H. Abrams terms as

a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise. The surprise is usually the result of an unforeseen connection or distinction between words or concepts, which frustrates the listener’s expectation only to satisfy it in a different way.<sup>5</sup>

Wit and humour are closely related and to differentiate between the two is notoriously difficult. If any line could be drawn between them it would be that

...wit is primarily intellectual, the perception of similarities in seemingly dissimilar things—the “swift play and flash of mind”—and is expressed in skillful phraseology, play on words, surprising contrasts, paradoxes, epigrams, and so forth, whereas humor implies a sympathetic recognition of human values and deals with the foibles and incongruities of human nature, good-naturedly exhibited.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 179.

<sup>6</sup>C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, A Handbook to Literature 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1991), 502.

This distinction is difficult to maintain in practice and examples of Jesus' humour will be found in both the above categories. The wisest option for purposes of this study and in concert with literary convention is to consider the terms to be synonymous. In sum, the person who attempts to distinguish between the two demonstrates "the possession of neither wit (in the sense of superior mental powers) nor humor (which implies a sense of proportion and self-evaluation that would show one the difficulty of attempting a cold analysis of so fugitive a thing as humor)."<sup>7</sup> Another flashback to the cartoon epigram may help to maintain an appropriate attitude in this regard.

### **Laughter**

Humour and laughter appear prima facie to be twins. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear they are not Siamese twins or even identical twins for that matter. Nonetheless their close relationship cannot be denied. As a matter of fact, as will be seen below, humour theorists often couch their theories given the assumption that laughter and humour are almost undistinguishable.

At least two distinctions need to be made before the relationship of the two is understood. First is that they differ basically as to nature, similar to stimulus and response. Laughter is the physiological response to certain stimuli. Humour is one of these stimuli but not the only one. The phenomenon of inappropriate laughter would caution against a simplistic causal relationship and opens the study of laughter to the approaches of physiology,

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 501.

psychology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics.<sup>8</sup>

Second, there are different kinds of laughter ranging from the rather innocent laughter of child's play to laughter that is meant to injure and demean. Some forms of laughter can be wholesome, cathartic and illuminating therefore should be encouraged. Other kinds are to be condemned and discouraged. It is a mistake to lump all laughter together--some understanding of its variegated nature is needed.

This understanding is especially important in understanding the relationship between laughter and the Christian faith. Laughter can run the gamut from the recent phenomenon of

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<sup>8</sup>The area of humour studies is a rapidly expanding field of study. Significant recent works include: Mahadev L. Apte, Humor and Laughter. An Anthropological Approach (Ithaca: Cornell University, Press, 1989); Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee, eds. The Psychology of Humor (New York: Academic Press, 1972); Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee, eds. Handbook of Humor Research, 2 vols. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983); Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot, eds. Humor and Laughter. Theory, Research and Applications (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1976); Antony Chapman and Hugh Foote, eds. Its a Funny Thing. Humour (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977); Michael Mulkay, On Humour. Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988); Victor Raskin, Semantic Mechanisms of Humor (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); Norman Cousins, The Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979); and Don L. F. Nilson, Humor Scholarship. A Research Bibliography (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993). An international and interdisciplinary society known as the International Society for Humor Studies has been established which holds annual conferences and publishes the research journal Humor to promote research in the field of humour studies.

holy laughter found in some charismatic churches,<sup>9</sup> to a laugh of scorn,<sup>10</sup> to laughter normally more appropriate to believers in Christian community.<sup>11</sup> The latter two types of laughter will be those which affect this study.

## **Play**

A spirit of playfulness seems akin to a sense of humour. Indeed there is some relation between the terms and the theological importance of play as it relates to the foundations of

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<sup>9</sup>Recent studies of this phenomenon in the broader context of "The Toronto Blessing" include: Guy Chevreau, Catch the Fire The Toronto Blessing (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995); Patrick Dixon, Sings of Revival (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1994); David Roberts, The Toronto Blessing (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1994); Robert R. Kuglin, The Toronto Blessing. What Would the Holy Spirit Say? (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>A study of the biblical data relating to terms for laughter demonstrates that the vast majority of cases of both divine and humour laughter express scorn. Cf. E.M. Embry, "Laugh," in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology; K. H. Rengstorff, "gelao," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; Gary Webster, Laughter in the Bible (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960), 35-82 *et passim* and A. Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter, and the Comic in the Old Testament" in On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible, eds. Yehuda T. Radday and A. Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 39-58.

<sup>11</sup>Reference to the laughter of Abraham (Gen 17:17) and Sarah (Gen 18:12) as it related to the promise of Isaac's birth demonstrates how the laughter of incredulity, which includes an element of scorn, can be transformed into the laughter of thanksgiving (Gen 21:6). Walter Brueggemann, taking his clue from the flow of the narrative here, interprets the initial laughter of Abraham (Gen 17:17) and Sarah (Gen 18:12) as evidence of their initial resistance and mockery of the inscrutable promise of a son to be born in their old age (Genesis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, (1982), 158). Karl Barth, from a more 'theological' perspective, considers their initial laughter as aimed toward themselves. "Is not the contrast between man himself and the honor done him by God really too great for man to take himself ceremoniously, and not to laugh at himself, in his quality as its bearer and possessor? Is not the proof of the genuineness of his thankfulness and humility the fact that his own inadequacy, the distance between the Giver and His gift on the one hand and himself as the one to who it is given on the other, must always be clear to him (Church Dogmatics 3.4 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1961), 665)?"

a biblical understanding of humour will be developed below. In the simplest terms, play is seen as joyous, spontaneous and completely free activity. The term, however, bears a great deal of metaphysical freight, being an indispensable grid for human activity.

Play is often defined by listing its attributes. Donald Handleman gives a representative list:

A first attribute of play is that its assumptions are preeminently conditional, for play is a medium through which the make-believe is brought into being and acquires the status of reality....A second attribute of play is the necessity of a form of reference that can be altered in systematic ways....A third attribute of play is that any phenomenal form can be transformed through a sense of imagination that itself remains constrained to a degree by the composition of the "original" form....A fourth attribute of play is that it brings into being something that had not existed before by changing the shape and positioning of boundaries that categorize phenomena and so altering their meaning.... A fifth attribute is that it is an amoral medium, one that is marked by plasticity, by lability, and by flexibility in ideation—qualities closely related to those of imagination and creativity....A sixth attribute of play is a penchant for questioning the phenomenal stability of any form that purports to exist as a valid proposition and as a representation of "truth".<sup>12</sup>

From this description it can be seen that recognition and appreciation of humour could be heightened by a spirit of playfulness.

### **Joy**

Often joy and its expression (i.e. enjoyment and/or joyfulness) are linked with humour. From a theological perspective, it might seem that joy is both a source of humour and one of its results. A simple definition of joy might be the believer's response to God's love, grace and peace that is demonstrated in an attitude of thankful gladness even in the midst of the

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<sup>12</sup>Don Handleman, "Play" in The Encyclopedia of Religion, Cf. also Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture (London: Temple Smith, 1949), 32.



most trying circumstances (e.g. James 1:2,3; Heb 12:2).<sup>13</sup> Given this definition, the joyful believer may well be in a state of mind conducive to the humorous perspective. Both joy and humour are able to maintain perspective in spite of (and sometimes “because of”) the incongruities of human existence. So long as room is left to understand the complexities of both terms,<sup>14</sup> no strict causal relationship is asserted from joy to humour or vice versa, and various modes of expression are deemed appropriate to both, the nexus between joy and humour is a helpful one to recognize.

### **Comedy**

Comedy mocks easy description. At its root, comedy is a dramatic genre, composed of several sub-genres (e.g. romantic comedy, high comedy, low comedy, comedy of manners, and comedy of morals), designed primarily for purposes of amusement. Many, however, consider any work which deals with the limitations, foibles, failures and incongruities of the human state and comes to a happy ending to be a comedy.<sup>15</sup> The surprising reversal of fortunes involved in the restoration of the comic hero prompts some to use comedy as an interpretive grid for the biblical story. Northrop Frye, for instance, states that “the entire Bible, viewed as a “divine comedy”, is contained within a U-shaped story of this sort, one in

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. R. Alan Culpepper, “Joy,” in Handbook of Themes for Preaching, ed. James W. Cox (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 148; Mark Lee, Humor is No Laughing Matter (Beaverlodge: Horizon House, 1981), 68; and Hans Conzelmann, “chara”, in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. William G. Morrise, Joy in the New Testament (Greenwood: Attic Press, 1984), 17-82 for a study of the New Testament terms within the semantic domain of “joy”. A popular treatment of joy in relation to Jesus can be found in Sherwood E. Wirt, Jesus: Man of Joy (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991).

<sup>15</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 95; cf. Abrams, Glossary, 25.

which man loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation.”<sup>16</sup>

Caution should be exercised, however, in employing the comic genre too liberally in relation to the lives of biblical heroes and individual books of the Bible. Some hero cycles (e.g. Samson) and books (e.g. Jonah and Job) are more conducive to this kind of analysis than others.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the wisest course is to agree with Frye and view the over-arching movement of the biblical narrative as comedy. This allows room for the rich diversity of literary phenomena in Scripture and thwarts any attempts toward simplistic reductionism. Such an understanding helps to supply the background hues on the canvas against which the particular colours of the picture are viewed. It supplies a macro perspective from which the micro (i.e. individual instances of humorous or comical perspective such as those to be studied in this thesis-project) can be interpreted. The validity of this approach will await further validation below when a theology of humour will be discussed.

An adequate understanding of humour, then, begins with a basic definition but must

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<sup>16</sup>Northrop Frye, The Great Code, The Bible and Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1982), 167; cf. Frederick Buechner, Telling the Truth. The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 49-72. Michael Edwards contends that the biblical narrative more closely resembles a check mark than a “U” because the end of the story is seen as higher than the beginning (i.e. heaven above Eden). Cf. Michael Edwards, “The World Could Not Contain the Books,” in The Bible as Rhetoric, ed. Martin Warner (London: Routledge, 1990), 181.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Cheryl J. Exum, ed. “Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible” Semeia 32 (1985): 5-96, Note also the insightful responses by David Robertson, Yair Zakovitch, David Gunn and Francis Landy in Semeia 32 (1985): 99-148.

interact with the cognate terms<sup>18</sup> each of which adds a nuance to the complex nature of this subject. While humour is not to be equated with any of its cognates, it shares a deep kinship with them all. In some way, each cognate enriches one's overall understanding of humour.

### **Theories of Humour**

The difficulty of defining humour is surpassed when attempts are made to analyze it. Again, it is wise to be mindful of the cartoon at the beginning of this chapter lest this attempt to explain humour ends in a similar fashion. C.G. Prado explains that "the propensity toward amusement regarding analysts and analysis of humor signals a deep understanding that humor defies the sort of circumscription or delineation necessary for comprehensive analysis."<sup>19</sup> Guided by this warning and somewhat daunted by the fact that experts estimate the current number of humour theories to be over one hundred,<sup>20</sup> the major theories of humour will be presented.

### **Classical Theories of Humour**

Any treatment of humour must go back at least as far as ancient Greece. Since the theory of humour had only random formulation during the period of the pre-Socratic

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. John Moore Bullard, "Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1962), 230-39 for a treatment of the cognate terms for "humour" in the Bible.

<sup>19</sup>C.G. Prado, "Why Analysis of Humor Seems Funny," Humor. International Journal of Humor Research (8.2) (1995): 156.

<sup>20</sup> Don L. F. Nilsen, Humor Scholarship (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 304.

philosophers,<sup>21</sup> this study will begin with Plato.

### **Plato (c.428-347 B.C.E.)**

References in Plato to humour and laughter are few, scattered and incidental to his major arguments. While discussing the nature of mixed pleasures (those which contain an element of pain) in Philebus, he considers laughter to be a response to weakness and self-ignorance,

Those of them who combine their delusion [to be someone they are not] with weakness and incapacity to be revenged on a scoffer you may truly call comic figures.... Thus the conclusion is that when we smile at a friend's absurdities, once more we are blending pleasure with malice, or in other words, with pain.<sup>22</sup>

Other incidental references, including a prohibition against guardians of the republic indulging in laughter,<sup>23</sup> have caused Mary Grant to summarize Plato's contribution to humour theory as presenting several ideas, namely:

...the kinship of the ridiculous with what is morally or physically faulty; the justification of laughter as a means of understanding serious things; and the beginning of the conception of the spoudaiogeloion [earnest laughter]; the need of restraint in laughter in everyday conduct; the distinction between good-natured and ill-natured jests; and finally the moral justification of the use of laughter against vice and folly.<sup>24</sup>

In sum Plato gave a cautious, almost grudging approbation of humour and laughter

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Mary A. Grant, The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1924), 13-17 for treatment of this era.

<sup>22</sup>Plato Philebus 49B, 50A.

<sup>23</sup>Plato Republic 2.388E.

<sup>24</sup>Grant, Theories of the Laughable, 22.

along with prescribed manners for its use, but at the same time set the stage for subsequent, more systematic treatments of the subject.

### **Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)**

Humour theory becomes a bit more systematic in Aristotle but the major obstacle to understanding his treatment is the loss of the second book of Poetics.<sup>25</sup> What remains are scattered references to the subject in his Rhetoric and Nicomachean Ethics. His definition of the humorous is similar to that of Plato:

As for Comedy, it is...an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any or every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle's reasons for humour or delight, however, are more intellectual and aesthetic than Plato's.

Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation...The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>His passing comment, "reserving hexameter poetry and Comedy for consideration hereafter....(Poetics 1449 b 20) left everyone in anticipation of a fuller treatment of comedy which is not extant. Umberto Eco's novel The Name of the Rose is an excellent fictional treatment of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of Aristotle's second book of Poetics. This novel is very insightful as to the relationship of humour and the Christian faith.

<sup>26</sup>Aristotle Poetics 1449 a 30.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 1448 b 5.

A good portion of Aristotle's attention is paid to the propriety of humour or wit. In his typical fashion, he decides that true wittiness is the mean between two extremes.

Those these who go to excess in ridicule are thought to be buffoons and vulgar fellows, who itch to have their joke at all costs, and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum and avoid giving pain to the object of their raillery. 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. Those who jest with good taste are called witty or versatile--that is to say, full of good turns; for such sallies seem to spring from the character, and we judge men's characters, like their bodies, by their movements.<sup>28</sup>

In total, Aristotle treated the origins of humour and its relation to greater ends in life, gave directions on differentiating proper and improper jesting and paved the way for others to develop the relationship between humour and rhetoric.<sup>29</sup> From Aristotle the torch is passed to the ancient Latin rhetoricians who built upon his foundation.

### **Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.)**

Other Latin notables discussed humour,<sup>30</sup> but in the works of Cicero it receives the most systematic treatment. He agrees with his predecessors as to the origins of the laughable, stating, "...the seat and as it were province of what is laughed at...lies in a certain

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<sup>28</sup>Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV 8.3

<sup>29</sup>Grant, Theories of the Laughable, 30-32.

<sup>30</sup>A summary treatment of the contribution of Plutarch, who seems heavily dependent upon Theophrastus and therefore in turn to Aristotle, is given by Mary Grant, Theories of the Laughable, 35-37. Cf. also Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria VI 3.

offensiveness and deformity, for those sayings are laughed at solely or chiefly which point out and designate something offensive in an unoffensive manner.<sup>31</sup>

What might be detected among earlier humour theorists becomes obvious in Cicero. Humour therefore originated as an ancillary discipline, serving other ends than its own. The nature of humour was valuable because it aided one's effectiveness in the context of rhetorical exchange. Whether the context was informal, such as banquets and other social events, or more formal, such as in the courts, academies or legislative chambers, humour was used as a device against and among fellow communicators. Since humour served such practical purposes in rhetoric, more emphasis was placed upon its contribution to the speaker's credibility and the emotional response to the speech than to its innate structures and purposes.<sup>32</sup> Most ancient treatments of humour, consequently, read more like rules of etiquette or propriety in the use of humour or ridicule. Cicero's are no exception.<sup>33</sup>

The ethics of humour, at least in theory, is determined by what Cicero thought to be proper. The guidelines include: proper and improper subjects of ridicule; appropriate

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<sup>31</sup>Cicero, De Oratore, II 58.

<sup>32</sup>Grant, Theories of the Laughable, 138, 39. In ancient rhetoric the three modes of persuasion included *ethos* (the credibility of the speaker), *pathos* (the emotional component of the speech and its reception) and *logos* (the component of the speech itself). These terms will be put into their proper context below in the discussions on ancient rhetoric in Chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup>Grant, Theories of the Laughable, 76.

language for humour, appropriate timing; the appropriate place and the suitability of the jest to the jester.<sup>34</sup> In short,

The liberal jest then, is one that conforms to these different proprieties. It is worthy of a gentleman in all respects, for although by its very nature it must ridicule faults and follies, it ridicules only minor ones, and is not directed at friends, the unfortunate, or those in high positions; it is expressed in refined language; it is not abusive in spirit except when there is a worthy purpose to serve; it observe the proper time and place. Above all, it reflects the kindness, dignity and refinement of the speaker.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the oratorical context given to humour, Cicero makes at least two incidental comments that could be considered embryonic advances in humour theory. The first is his recognition of the distinction between the humorous nature of the particular subject addressed and the use of humorous language for effect.

There are two sorts of jokes, one of which is excited by things, the other by words....[W]hatever is expressed wittily, consists sometimes in the mere language but...men are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by thought and the language in conjunction.<sup>36</sup>

The other comment suggests Cicero's understanding of humour went beyond its utility in oratorical settings to a basic perception of the nature of humour itself. He notes that.

...you are aware that that is the most common kind of joke, when we expect one thing and another is said, in which case our own disappointed expectation

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<sup>34</sup>At the beginning of his discussion of humour, Cicero introduces his own order of treatment, "Concerning laughter, there are five things which are subjects of consideration: one, 'What it is,' another, 'Whence it originates;,' a third, 'Whether it becomes the orator to wish to excite laughter;,' a fourth, 'To what degree;,' a fifth, 'What are the several kinds of ridiculous' (*De Oratore* II 58) ? For purposes of this study the preferred approach is taken from Mary Grant's monograph *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable*, 78-89.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 87.

<sup>36</sup>Cicero, *De Oratore* II 59, 61.



makes us laugh. But if something of the ambiguous is thrown in with it, the wit is heightened.<sup>37</sup>

In summary, the classical theorists propounded an understanding of humour which gave it penultimate significance. Humour was the handmaiden of rhetoric. As such humour served the purposes of speech in order to make it more palatable. Little developed in regard to the nature of humour itself because all the theorists, even with the two isolated statements from Cicero noted above, were bound to a theory of humour that related it to ridicule.<sup>38</sup> Therefore their chief preoccupation was to supply the boundaries within which this ridicule could be employed with dignity and propriety.

#### Modern Theories of Humour

Despite the contemporary proliferation of humour theories, most of them can be explained as personal variations of one of three major theories: superiority theories, release and relief theories and incongruity theories.<sup>39</sup> Each of these three will be explained fully in turn.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., II 63; cf. also John Morreall, ed. The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 17,18.

<sup>38</sup>Due to the incidental status given to humour especially in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, it would be stretching the point beyond credible limits to credit Plato as being the wellspring of "dark" comedy and Aristotle of "light" comedy, contra George Aichele, Jr. Theology as Comedy. Critical and Theoretical Implications (Washington: University Press of America, 1980),80.

<sup>39</sup>For a slightly expanded treatment of these and other theories, cf. Patricia Keith-Speigel, "Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues," in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, eds. The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 5-13.

## **Superiority Theories**

This school of thought, which is rooted in the classical period, recognizes humour as a form of ridicule or mockery at the expense of other persons or circumstances. One's self-estimation is raised at others' expense. One proponent of this theory was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679 C.E.) He states

Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused 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 themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.<sup>40</sup>

While this grouping of theories predominated for two millennia, it has fallen out of favor due to its reductionistic connection between scorn and humour.<sup>41</sup> D.H. Monro attempts to redeem the superiority perspective by broadening its focus and stating, "...that in humor at its best we are conscious of surveying the whole humor scene from some godlike level at which all men and women look pretty much alike: all weak, all lovable, all transparently obvious in their petty pretenses."<sup>42</sup> This approach is valid in as far as it goes but requires the aid of incongruity theory, which is discussed below, in order to complement its deficiencies. The humour from this 'exalted' position may not come as much through the comparison of human foibles with onself as through the innate incongruities evident between reality and

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<sup>40</sup>Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan I 6:52.

<sup>41</sup>John Morreall, Philosophy of Laughter, 3,4.

<sup>42</sup>D.H. Monro, "Humor", in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

human pretension, not the least of which would be illustrated by the unmerited vaulting of oneself to the level of an objective observer removed from these ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.’

### **Release and Relief Theories**

According to this family of theories, humour results from a release of nervous energy whenever one is liberated from some tension or social constraint. While nineteenth century scientific thought guided Herbert Spencer (1820-1903 C.E.) to suggest that built up nervous energy needed to be released through muscular movement,<sup>43</sup> modern release theories have most of their influence in the field of psychology. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939 C.E.) put his own twist to Spencer’s theory by recasting it in terms of the intrapsychic conflict between the id, ego and super ego. Humour was a means whereby one’s sexual and aggressive impulses could outwit the censor (the super ego) and gain expression in some veiled form. Freud realized, however, the difference between this form of humour, which he called “tendency wit” and the innocent pleasure of playing with words and ideas, which he termed, “harmless wit.”<sup>44</sup> Release theories of humour are the least germane to this study in that they best explain the physiological and psychological benefits for the one amused without adequately explaining

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<sup>43</sup>Cf. Morreall, Philosophy of Laughter, 99-110 for the text of Spencer’s “The Physiology of Laughter” from his Essays on Education, etc. (London: Dent, 1911).

<sup>44</sup>D.H. Monro, “Humor,” 92, 93; also Sigmund Freud, Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1976). A more accessible edition of Freud’s volume can be found in The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, trans. by A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938).

the nature of that which has caused the amusement.<sup>45</sup>

### **Incongruity Theories**

The essence of humour, according to the incongruity theories, is the conceptual jolt one receives by encountering ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations that deviate from what is expected or customary. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements is then what one perceives to be humorous. The amount of incongruity evident may vary and contribute toward the broad range of responses to any given incongruity--from anger, to confusion, to laughter.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 C.E.) suggested a rather physiological explanation of humour along the lines of incongruity.

Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very likely enjoyment for a moment. Its cause must consequently be in the influence of the representation upon its body, and the reciprocal effect of this upon the mind. This, moreover, cannot depend upon the representation being objectively an object of gratification, (for how can we derive gratification from a disappointment?) but must rest solely upon the fact that the reduction is a mere play of representations, and as such produces an equilibrium of the vital forces of the body.<sup>46</sup>

A weakness of this presentation of incongruity theory and others like it,<sup>47</sup> is that it confuses laughter and humour. Incongruity does not fully explain laughter but, in the position

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<sup>45</sup>Morreall, Philosophy of Laughter, 6.

<sup>46</sup>Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment I 2.54.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Morreall, Philosophy of Laughter, 45-186 for treatment of other theorists who hold to incongruity theories of humour.

taken in this thesis-project, best explains the nature of humour. Incongruity is to be seen in a broad sense with a large number of possible oppositions such as: the ideal versus the real, the spiritual versus the material or mechanical, propriety versus vulgarity, expectation versus surprises, balance versus exaggeration and superiority versus inferiority.

The obvious criticism of this theory is related to its broadness. Incongruity may become so wide a term that it loses any significance. Given certain conditions, almost anything may be considered incongruous. For instance a single piece of white paper placed by itself on a large library study table may strike someone as incongruous, yet few may appreciate it as such. Also a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, which causes great damage and loss of life may indeed be seen as incongruous, but is humour the most appropriate response in this case? Added to the discussion are the many cultural variables involved in the process. What might be termed humorous in one cultural context might be understood as tragic or even vulgar in another. Therefore while incongruity may provide the key to understand the nature of humour, some further focus is needed to make the theory usable. At this point, then, it would be wise to agree with the basic assertion of John Allen Paulos: "Together then, two ingredients--a perceived incongruity with a point and an appropriate emotional climate--seem to be both necessary and sufficient for humor."<sup>48</sup> The Christian preacher, therefore, needs a theological framework from which humour (in its relation to incongruity) might be recognized and appreciated (which includes the ability to discern between helpful and harmful kinds of humour). It is necessary at this point, then to

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<sup>48</sup>John Allen Paulos, Mathematics and Humor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 10.

formulate a basic theology of humour.

### A Theology of Humour

Any attempt at a theology of humor must combat the general impression that there is little room for the humorous in a faith system as serious as Christianity. Zen philosopher D.T. Suzuki facetiously summed up Christianity by saying, "God against man. Man against God. Man against nature. Nature against man. Nature against God. God against nature--very funny religion."<sup>49</sup> Christianity is seen to be cloaked in seriousness. This attempt at a theology of humour is not to deny this seriousness but to gain a different appreciation of it from the perspective that if one takes God seriously, everything else should be taken less seriously.<sup>50</sup> The somber robes of Christianity predominate due in part to the predilection to view everything, including God, in light of the seriousness of the human condition. This may

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<sup>49</sup>Don L. F. Nilsen, Humor Scholarship (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 233.

<sup>50</sup>Peter L. Berger, "Christian Faith and the Social Comedy," in Holy Laughter, ed. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 129. Theologian Thomas Oden labels this approach "theo-comic perception." He writes, "One who leaves no room for the utter unseriousness of theology will not be taken seriously in speaking of God.... The healthier the study of God, the more candid it remains about its own finitude, the stubborn limits of its own knowing, its own charades, Band-Aids, closets, masks and broken windows. That is why the study of God is best understood from within a caring community that laughs a little at its own sombre efforts. Those whose faith offers corrective love empathetically to others give a great gift. The gift is best wrapped in the brightly colored tissue of hope, in an atmosphere where theo-comic lightness about the pretended gravity of our words abounds." The Living God (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 406. This attitude differs from the postmodern conception of comedy where *nothing* is taken seriously. Cf. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 53. Conrad Hyers writes, "Comedy presupposes some frame of reference, some article of faith, some vision of hope, some sense of mystery that has not been reduced to an absurdist credo." The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 167.

amount to self-worship and self-preoccupation dressed in pious clothing. Self-preoccupation is idolatry. Therefore, to some extent a theology of humour must be iconoclastic.<sup>51</sup>

The growing interest in humour among biblical scholars is not a sufficient basis upon which to build a theology of humour. Exegetical treatments of humorous devices in various biblical texts may simply be explained as isolated examples of linguistic cleverness or occasional 'exceptions to the rule' if they are not connected to a larger theological perspective. In the words of philosopher, John Morreall, "humor requires more than cleverness; it requires a playful attitude toward what one is joking about."<sup>52</sup> Therefore the challenge facing a theology of humour is to elucidate the connection between the humorous perspective (or comic vision) and traditional Christianity.<sup>53</sup> This comic vision is described by Conrad Hyers:

...[It] is not intended to suggest that all manifestations of the comic spirit are hilariously funny, or necessarily provoke laughter. Laughter is not always a reliable signature of the comic spirit; nor does the comic spirit always reveal itself in laughter. The comic spirit is fundamentally a certain attitude toward and perspective upon life. The essential element in relation to the sacred is the periodic suspension of seriousness and sacrality (the comic spirit) and the realization of the playful, gamelike quality inherent in all human enterprises, however holy (the comic perspective). The spirit of comedy is kindled by that same spirit of play that lies within the very nature of things themselves, from atoms to "little creeping things" to whirling galaxies to homo sapiens, who nervously tries to comprehend the whole in neat little packages of rationality, order, and meaning—the element of indeterminacy and randomness, of vitality and spontaneity, yes, of purposeless being and becoming for the sake

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. Richard G. Cote, Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter (Stoughton: Alpine Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>52</sup> John Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 136.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

of being and becoming.<sup>54</sup>

No attempt will be made to be either exhaustive or original in this brief outline of theology.<sup>55</sup> All that is necessary for purposes of this thesis-project is to supply a theological outline which is deemed sufficient to debunk the jaundiced perspective that faith is a wholly serious thing. This is not to deny that faith should be addressed seriously--it is the imbalance of the treatment which will be countered. Hyers indicates the imbalance exhibited by past generations of theologians by stating that "even granting both the ontological and psychological priority of the sacred and the serious, to have presented only one term of what is clearly a polarity is to have been unfaithful to the professed object of inquiry: man and his response to the sacred."<sup>56</sup> After examining a few recent precursors to a theology of humour, a brief treatment of theology proper and some issues related to biblical anthropology and soteriology will follow. The treatment of Christology will be reserved for Chapter 2.

#### Theological Precursors to a Theology of Humour

A somber tone has ruled Christian theology throughout most of its existence. Assuming Jesus' use of humour in his preaching and teaching, which is the burden of subsequent chapters of this thesis-project, it is difficult to see this same blending of the serious and the humorous among his theologians. Instead of sharing the lively, dialogical and

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<sup>54</sup>Conrad Hyers, "Introduction," in Holy Laughter (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 7.

<sup>55</sup>For use within the workshop component of this thesis-project only, the newly-phrased colloquial term "mirthology" will be used to designate this attempt at a theology of humour.

<sup>56</sup>Hyers, *Ibid.*, 4.



personal style of the Master, Christian theology has suffered from a ‘hardening of the articles’ and has taken theology from the streets to the ivory tower. Christian pedagogy has replaced rapport with reports and application with abstraction and in the process lost its sense of humour in its imbalanced quest of serious study.<sup>57</sup> Harvey Cox feels that Protestantism should shoulder a large part of the blame for this emphasis in the past five centuries.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of who or what is to blame, the imbalance in Christian theology is obvious, and to paraphrase Marx, the important thing is not to understand the situation but to change it.

A few recent theological currents have stirred up the waters in the sense that they challenge the prevailing Zeitgeist of seriousness and chide Christendom to examine her cherished theological and methodological assumptions. Some of these movements might rightly be termed fads but some cannot. In a sense they may have paved the way for a theology of humour at this time, when it would not have been possible just a few decades earlier. These would include: the Death of God theology,<sup>59</sup> Christian aesthetic theory,<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Any full-scale attempt to trace this development and the possible reasons for it would be a task for historical theologians. It is beyond the parameters of this thesis-project.

<sup>58</sup>Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 15,70; cf. also Yehudah T. Radday. “On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction” in On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible, ed. Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990) 35; and Joseph W. Bastian “Humor and Satire,” in The Encyclopedia of Religion.

<sup>59</sup>This movement was confined to the 1960’s although its intellectual roots went back at least as far as Friedrich Nietzsche. It was a radical and iconoclastic ideology that advocated the death of God as he had been understood traditionally and the crowning of secular man as king. Hardly a positive influence, it did draw attention to some of the deficiencies of classical liberalism, neo-orthodoxy and the hyper-rationalism of Christian orthodoxy. Cf. J.M. Frame, “Death of God Theology,” in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology and S.N. Gundry, “Death of God Theology,” in Evangelical Dictionary of

process theology,<sup>61</sup> the theology of play,<sup>62</sup> and narrative theology.<sup>63</sup> All of these, with the

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Theology for brief treatments of this movement. The radical iconoclasm of this movement has affinities with similar impulses in darker forms of comedy and play. Cf. George Aichele, Theology as Comedy (Washington: University Press of America, 1980), 59-79 and David Miller, Gods and Games (New York Harper and Row, 1973), xix-xxv.

<sup>60</sup>Although there is no univocal voice for Christian aesthetic theory, in general thrust it attempts to appreciate God's beauty especially as it is evident in Creation and to respond to that beauty by in turn creating things of beauty to God's glory. Brief treatments of the subject may be found in: C. G. Seerveld, "Christian View of Aesthetics," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology and L. P. Zuidervaart, "Aesthetics," in New Dictionary of Theology. The revolutionary aspects of aesthetics, which properly is a branch of philosophy, are the ways and means in which God's beauty is comprehended and expressed. Artistic modes of expression may become pointedly and sometimes obviously iconoclastic as evidenced in some forms of modern art. For a helpful introduction to the arts from an evangelical perspective, cf. Leland Ryken, The Liberated Imagination (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1989).

<sup>61</sup>Process theology is built upon the ontological theory of A.N. Whitehead wherein the essence of being is "becoming". In sum, Whitehead has revived the ancient Heraclitan concept of flux over the Parmedeian view of static reality to the point where even God is 'becoming'. This movement began in academic circles but is finding popular proponents in more recent times. Cf. John Cobb Jr. and D. Griffin, Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976). For a conservative evaluation, cf. Ronald H. Nash, Process Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); D. W. Diehl, "Process Theology," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, and W. D. Beck, "Process Theology," in New Dictionary of Theology.

<sup>62</sup>Various theologies of play appeared in the late 1960's and early 1970's as an attempt to understand God and reality using the categories of play and games. Some of these include: Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), David Miller, Gods and Games (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Hugo Rahner, Man at Play, tr. by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), Robert Neale, In Praise of Play (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), and Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Play, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). For Hans Georg Gadamer's view of play, cf. Truth and Method, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 91-99. For a theology of play from an evangelical perspective, cf. Robert K. Johnston, The Christian at Play (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). David Miller makes the significant point that if play is the lens through which reality is understood, then theologies of play should adopt a more playful language, method and structure than other theologies. For his proposal, cf. Gods and Games (New

partial exception of the last, have been vigorously opposed by the segment of Protestantism targetted for this thesis-project. The issue, however, is not to fear guilt-by-association but to illustrate the need to recapture the playful part of orthodox Christian thought by rediscovering a few emphases over-shadowed by many centuries of rationalistic scholasticism and pietistic asceticism.

One observation is worthy of note at this point. For reasons of consistency if nothing else, the language and structure of a theology of humour must coincide with its perspective. Therefore, it would be inconsistent to expect a 'serious' theology of humour (assuming 'serious' scholarship means the normal language, structures and methods approved by the academy). When one is attuned to the humorous perspective, tasks are colored by different hues than before. Suddenly the prosaic plains of Kansas are no longer ultimately satisfying until they are juxtaposed to a land where paradox, incongruity, mystery and word play line the golden streets (i.e. streets of yellow bricks not gold; this is humour, not heaven!). A more complete theology of humour, therefore would be drastically different from other theologies

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York: Harper and Row, 1973), 137-56. He states, "It is therefore not enough for a *theologia ludens* to be a theology about play, interpreting traditional doctrines of the faith *sub specie ludi*...something more is needed. It must not only be about play; it must also be in theology of play, by play, and for play. It must wittingly incarnate its content" (p. 259). Cf. also George Aichele, Theology as Comedy, 99-107.

<sup>63</sup>Narrative theology uses the category of 'story' to explain reality. It is more than a form of literacy criticism, although related to it, in that it insists that reality has a narrative cast to it. It becomes a new way to understand and respond to truth not completely dependent upon cognition but also upon an appeal to the imagination. For an example of Christian narrative theology cf. Gabriel Fackre, The Christian Story, vols. 1-2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978-87). For a collection of essays exploring the named for narrative, cf. Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones, eds. Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

in terms of language, method and structure.<sup>64</sup> However, for purposes of this study, a very elementary approach is called for. This theology will merely ride alongside existing traditional theologies and contribute interpretations to supplement them as the need arises.

## God The Father

### Divine Character

The limitations of human language are most evident in attempts to understand God. Many nouns and adjectives are used to describe his character as can be evidenced by glancing through the index or table of contents in any systematic theology. However, one underused adjective is “beautiful”. What does it mean to say that God is beautiful? Can God be love, holy, majestic and beautiful at the same time?

Karl Barth discusses God’s beauty as an aspect of his glory.

It is to say that God has this superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers, on the fact that he is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautifully in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful. He does not have it, therefore, merely as a fact or a power. Or rather, He has it as a fact and a power in such a way that He acts as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does it because He is pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment, because first and last He alone is that which is pleasant, desirable and full of enjoyment. God loves us as the One who is worthy of love as God. This is what we mean when we say that God is beautiful.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Some attempts at a theology of humour have been made. The best of these is Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987). An attempt to deal with humour from a Tillichian perspective can be found in Bob Parrott, The Ontology of Humor (New York: Philosophical Library, 1982).

<sup>65</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 2.1, The Doctrine of God, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrence, eds. (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1957), 650,651. He gives three illustrations of this beauty: God’s unity, trinity and the incarnation, pp.657-66.

The response of humanity to the divine attributes may come from these attributes as well as bear witness to them. For example, the majesty of God leads to wonder and worship, and the love of God leads to a response of love (1 John 4:19). To what response does God's beauty lead? Barth answers with, "Joy".

Joy in and before God--in its particular nature, distinct from what we mean by awe, gratitude and the rest--has an objective basis. It is something in God, the God of all perfections, which justifies us in having joy, desire and pleasure towards Him, which indeed obliges, summons and attracts us to do this.<sup>66</sup>

In the presence of a beautiful God one is compelled to worship joyfully. Our purpose may be so defined in the famous words from the Westminster Shorter Catechism that our chief end is to worship God and enjoy him forever. Although underscoring God's beauty and the response of joy does not establish an irrefutable argument for a theology of humour, it reminds the believer of the basic truths which serve to support it. A theology of humour gains a founding from such truths and others like it.<sup>67</sup>

### **Divine Actions**

The divine activity in creation may be seen as another area giving support for the humorous perspective. Theologians normally speak of creation as "free". What this means is "God is fully himself within the divine Trinity apart from the world in that God is love within himself as the Triune One. Consequently, the existence of the universe comes about

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 655.

<sup>67</sup>Other attributes of God which would warrant more detailed study in this regard, but which also receive more treatment by systematic theologians, are: love, mercy, grace and goodness.

through a free act, and not by necessity.”<sup>68</sup> This free and gracious act is most often interpreted as an expression of God’s sovereignty, that he created notwithstanding any internal or external necessities. While that is true, many have missed the connection between freedom and playfulness. In fact, freedom is the essence of playfulness. Free creation may indeed exhibit a sovereign God but also a playful one, one who created the world “for no apparent reason.”<sup>69</sup>

The playfulness of God in creation receives direct support from a speech made by Wisdom which is sometimes interpreted as relating to Christ’s role in creation,<sup>70</sup> “I was at his side, a master-workman, my delight increasing with each day, as I made play before him all the while; made play in this world of dust, with the sons of Adam for my playfellows” (Prov. 8:30,31 Knox translation). While this passage does not relate directly to God the Father, only massive amounts of humourless rationalizing could refuse to see the sense of play evident in this description of creation. In fact, one way to describe creation, since the worlds were spoken into existence (Gen. 1:3,6,9,14,15,20,24; Heb. 11:3), is as primordial word play. As a matter of act, the crowning glory of creation, humanity, evidences examples of word play in both the name of the man (Gen. 2:7) and the woman (Gen. 3:20) and in the relationship between the genders (Gen. 2:23).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 130.

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Play, 16,17.

<sup>70</sup>Grenz, Theology, 135.

<sup>71</sup>John Moore Bullard, “Biblical Humor: Its Nature and Function” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1962), 83.

To understand the playfulness within creation is not to deny the serious side of the issue or to assert that God acted irrationally or irresponsibly in creation. It is a basic attempt to understand reality. Creation gives answers to foundational questions of identity and purpose and to misinterpret creation is to misinterpret life. So if the playful side of creation is recognized, especially the playful aspect of the Creator himself, a more balanced view of life under this Creator can be realized. It is simply asking questions of creation:

Is there no joy and delight in creating, no sense of creating for the sake of creating? Is this creative labor not also a marvelous form of play, a prodigious frolicking of whirling galaxies and whirling atoms and whirling whirligigs? Are the gyrations of the planets, or the ponderous steps of the elephants, or the darting of little fishes actually to be construed as gravely serious motions?...Is this drama not also something of a great comedy, so that to fail to see it in both modes is to miss something of special significance and lose an important dimension of life?<sup>72</sup>

If such an appropriate sense of the Creator and his creation can be gained then created beings, in turn, come closer to what should be expected of them.

## Christian Anthropology

### The Image of God

Humanity is the apex of creation, the crowning achievement of God's creative work.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that

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<sup>72</sup>Conrad Hyers, The Meaning of Creation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 191. One might sense a playful spirit in Psalm 104:24-26 "O LORD, how many are Thy works! In wisdom Thou hast made them all; The earth is full of Thy possessions. There is the sea, great and broad, In which are swarms without number, Animals both small and great. There the ships move along, and Leviathan, which Thou has formed to sport with it."

creeps on the earth.” “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1:26,27).

While views of this image vary greatly among theologies,<sup>73</sup> there is an agreement that it forms the qualitative difference between humanity and the rest of creation. As a result of this special gift, humanity is singled out for special honour. Barth described this honour as “...the significance, the worth, the distinction, which he [humanity] now has in the eyes of God; the value, which is now ascribed to him by the mouth and in the word of God; the adornment, vesture and crown with which he is now clothed by God.”<sup>74</sup>

This bestowed honour is manifest in a number of ways. One way in which humanity reflects the divine imprimatur, according to sociologist Peter Berger, is by signals of transcendence. Human tendencies such as: order, play, hope and damnation, along with humour, give unique witness to the existence of God.<sup>75</sup> The ability for self-transcendence places humanity above the rest of creation and an ability to view reality from a humorous perspective is an essential part of this divine gift.

Humour is not only seen as an expression of the divine image but also as an appropriate human response to it. Barth outlines that pure thankfulness, deepest humility and free humour are the necessary human postures in relation to the honour bestowed by God. In relation to the last, he remarks, “humour is the opposite of all self-admiration and praise.

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<sup>73</sup>For a summary of this issue, cf. Grenz, Theology, 218-33.

<sup>74</sup>Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 3.4, The Doctrine of Creation, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrence, eds. (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1961), 663.

<sup>75</sup>Peter Berger, A Rumor of Angels (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1969), 86-90. Cf. also Bob Parrott, Ontology of Humor, 64,65 and Harry Blamires, The Christian Mind (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1963), 98-100.



The honour of man comes from the God who is alone to be admired and praised. How can it be recognized, affirmed, and seized except in the free humour which takes and keeps its distance?"<sup>76</sup> Barth himself is a good example of this sane self-estimation in the light of God's endowments. In light-hearted fashion he remarks about his theological efforts:

The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh, they say to one another, "Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics!"<sup>77</sup>

From this brief discussion, humour appears not to be a frivolous option for those so included, but an integral part of being human and a necessary part of responding to the human condition.

### **Human Sinfulness**

To charge that the humorous perspective does not take sin seriously is to misunderstand the situation. If humour is that quality which highlights the distinction between the infinite and the finite, it not only takes sin seriously but can interpret sin as seriousness--the idolatrous self-preoccupation of humans who take themselves too seriously. Such a realization gives a new perspective on the fall of humanity and human sinfulness.

The fall is, if anything, the loss of laughter, not the loss of seriousness. Adam and Eve fell when they began to take themselves, their "deprivations," and their ambitions too seriously. And we have taken ourselves, our opinions and beliefs, our status and

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<sup>76</sup>Barth, Church Dogmatics, 3.4 The Doctrine of Creation, 665.

<sup>77</sup>Karl Barth, Portrait of Karl Barth, trans. Robert McAfee Brown and George Casalis (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 3.

achievements, and our designs on the universe too seriously ever since.<sup>78</sup>

The humorous perspective engages sin and evil seriously in that it refuses to accept them as the final word in a world created by a holy and redeeming God. In other words, sin is taken seriously by not taking it too seriously. Sin and evil are viewed with realistic fear and suspicion and are exposed and opposed by a sense of prophetic humour among other responses.

This is not to say, of course, that laughter or humour themselves may not be affected by human sinfulness. Conrad Hyers has suggested at least three levels of humour. The first is the laughter of “paradise.” This form of humour is innocent and childlike where one indulges in a harmless bit of silliness or absurdity. Elephant jokes belong to this category of pure playfulness. The laughter of “paradise lost” is where innocence is lost, and one must live with the tensions inherent within reality. This kind of humour may express itself in lower forms of base humour where it serves to be a vicious weapon. It may also be seen in higher forms as prophetic humour which aims to pop the bubble of human pretension and aids in catharsis. The final level is the laughter of “paradise regained.” It is the most mature in that our freedom to laugh passes over judgment and arrives at mercy. It is the humour among close friends based upon grace, caring and trust. It is laughter “with” rather than laughter “at”.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Hyers, God Created Laughter, 14.

<sup>79</sup>Conrad Hyers, The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 32-39.

## The Christian Life

### **Faith**

Reinhold Niebuhr investigated the relationship between humour and faith and found them to have a great affinity. He writes, “the intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal with the incongruities of our existence. Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones.”<sup>80</sup> Niebuhr’s remarks are insightful especially in light of the postwar context in which they were written. However, he may have underestimated the degree of interpenetration between these two concepts. When one addresses a matter of ultimate incongruity, can it truly be said that the necessary faith lacks any sense of the humorous? Does faith debar any recognition of the tenuousness of the human condition in the course of addressing even the most threatening issues? Niebuhr’s fear is that employing humour by itself to deal with ultimate issues will lead to meaninglessness and to that extent he is correct, with numerous examples of humour gone awry to prove his point. Where he is mistaken is in missing the closeness of the relationship between humour and faith. Their symbiotic relationship is better understood by agreeing with Hyers, “The relationship between faith and humor is an intimate one. On the one side is the peril of idolatry and pride. On the other side is the peril of unbelief and despair. Faith without humor becomes fanaticism; humor without faith becomes cynicism.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in Holy Laughter, ed. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 135.

<sup>81</sup>Hyers, God Created Laughter, 27. He has stated this same principle elsewhere, “Without faith, humor becomes superficial, empty, and helpless. Laughter turns into mockery, banter into blasphemy, comedy into tragedy. Humor passes over into despair if it has no groundedness in the sacred, if it is not essentially and inwardly related to holy

## **Hope**

Humour recognizes the eschatological tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet.' The present time, between the inauguration and consummation of the age to come, is full of all the incongruities one might expect for believers whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20) while they continue to live as inhabitants of the earth. Humour helps believers to cope with the many difficult situations of life by daring to believe in hope--in something more than the present evidence of hopelessness. By responding to the incongruities of present existence in good humour believers display Christian hope. In the words of Harvey Cox, "Only by assuming a playful attitude toward our religious tradition can we possibly make any sense of it. Only by learning to laugh at the hopelessness around us can we touch the hem of hope."<sup>82</sup>

The ability to face life's incongruities is not a baseless hope or a hope against hope. True hope is based on a commitment to the plans and purposes of God to bring about his will in human history. Hope and humour recognize the present in light of the future and so their response to the present and their faith in the future honor the God who will bring his purposes to pass. Hope and humour become part of the interim ethic to guide believers until the eschaton. Frederick Buechner sums up this basic trust in God's purposes by saying, "Where there is humor, there is hope; where there is hope, there is humor. The tragic is the inevitable;

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things, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred" in Holy Laughter, ed. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 27. George Aichele suggests that Christians may live out the faith by interpreting their lives in light of the irony of ancient Greek comedies, Theology as Comedy, 123-28. For Hyer's critique of Niebuhr's position, cf. God Created Laughter, 14.

<sup>82</sup>Cox, Feast of Fools, 156, 157. For a brief discussion of the eschatological caste of humour, cf. Gary Webster, Laughter, 16, 17 and Helmut Thielicke, Das Lachen der Heiligen und Narren (Stuttgart: Quell, 1989).

the comic is the unforeseeable.”<sup>83</sup> Humour can be seen as an existential appropriation of the eschatological promise of Jesus’ blessing, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:21b).

### **Gratitude**

Gratitude is an appropriate response to the gift of salvation. In the words of Karl Barth, “...gratitude means specifically that I am gladly, i.e. voluntarily and cheerfully, ready for what God wills of me in acknowledgment of what is given to me by God and as my necessary response to God’s gift.”<sup>84</sup> Barth’s argument is complex, determining gratitude to be an eschatological and free response, but it is his understanding of the expression of gratitude that is of interest here. Gratitude is to be expressed in play:

At this point, where we understand the required character of our action to be gratitude, it is in place to consider the bold thesis that our conduct bears the mark of good, of what is pleasing to God, when it is not done in earnest but in play....Having said this, we should not fail to say that as God’s children we are in fact released from the seriousness of life and can and should simply play before God.<sup>85</sup>

Playful gratitude, according to Barth, is expressed in art and humour, and his view of humour is hardly cavalier but rather rooted in the eschaton.

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<sup>83</sup>Buechner, Telling the Truth, 57.

<sup>84</sup>Karl Barth, Ethics, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 499,500.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 503,504. Barth gives three reasons for the legitimacy of the use of ‘play’: 1) Believers are called God’s little children and all that such a term suggests; 2) eschatological tension prohibits final seriousness to what is done in the present; and 3) play confronts the self-conscious impulse of many to assert their ‘earnest obedience’ as grounds for acceptance in God’s sight. Ibid., 504–506.

...humour undoubtedly means that we do not take the present with ultimate seriousness, not because it is not serious enough in itself, but because God's future, which breaks into the present, is more serious. Humour means the placing of a big bracket around the seriousness of the present. In no way does it mean--and those who think it does do not know what real humour is--that this seriousness is set aside or dismissed. Humour arises, and can arise only, when we wrestle with this seriousness of the present. But above and in this wrestling, we cannot be totally serious as the children of God.<sup>86</sup>

### Conclusion

In summary, the tasks of this chapter have been to attempt a definition of humour, to outline the various theories of humour, both classical and modern, and to uncover a rudimentary theology of humour which will serve to supplement the interpreter's (or preacher's) approach to the Scriptures. Some of the complexities involved in defining "humour" have been highlighted as has the long history of humour theory. The brief theology of humour has suggested an overbalance on the side of seriousness may have prejudiced the common understanding and approach to the traditional Christian faith. A more balanced approach to the faith would free the interpreter to a greater appreciation of the wealth of humour found in the Bible.

Upon completion of these foundational tasks, the thesis-project may begin to narrow its focus to see how one might identify and understand the humour found in the sayings of Jesus. The following chapter will apply these general insights to aid in understanding the role of humour in the ministry of Jesus.

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 511.

## CHAPTER 2

### MIRTH AND THE MESSIAH: UNDERSTANDING HUMOUR AND THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when he walked upon the earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth.

G. K. Chesterton

Having given some theoretical bases for the role of humour in the faith, practical matters of how such information is to be assimilated need to be addressed. If indeed it is concluded that the failure to appreciate humour has negatively affected our understanding of Scripture in general and Jesus' sayings in particular, then this situation invites investigation. John Bullard's conclusion that "A loss of sense of humor in studying the Bible has blinded exegetes to the profound subtleties of biblical authors rendering it more difficult, at times, to discuss their real purposes"<sup>1</sup> demands a response.

A person's ability to see humour in the Bible will be conditioned by a number of factors. Jakob Jonsson suggests three, "...the state of mind of the person, the attitude towards the object [in this case the existence of humorous devices in Scripture], and thirdly the philosophy of life."<sup>2</sup> It would seem, then, in matters regarding understanding humour in

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<sup>1</sup>John Bullard, "Biblical Humor", 200.

<sup>2</sup>Jakob Jonsson, Humour and Irony in the New Testament Illustrated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 23. This view would coincide with the emphasis of Canadian humorist, Stephen Leacock who downplayed humour as a literary

Scripture, the issues relating to one's attitude toward humour would be the first to be addressed.

### **Barriers to the Appreciation of Humour in Scripture**

Despite the arguments of the previous chapter, there are many Christians who would agree with Jorge in Eco's The Name of the Rose when he said "That laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinners that we are....Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villein from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God."<sup>3</sup> Barriers to the appreciation of humour can be divided into four main categories: intellectual, theological, ethical and hermeneutical.

#### **Intellectual Barriers**

The intellectual reasons for suspecting humour are not exclusively Christian but are widespread among those who place great value upon reason and rationality. Many of the intellectual barriers to humour appreciation can be traced back to superiority theories of humour and therefore lose some of their power when the inferiority of superiority as humour theory is demonstrated.

However, it could be argued that since humour deals with human shortcomings, those things that are ugly, base and 'laughable' in human nature, it may have a gradual negative effect on the character of those who enjoy it. Also, there is the belief that humour and

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genre(s) and emphasized the more subjective aspects of humour as an essentially undefinable perspective on the world that was capable of viewing things humorously. Cf. his Humor: Its Theory and Techniques, with Examples and Samples (London: John Laine, 1935).

<sup>3</sup>Eco, The Name of the Rose, 577, 578.



laughter are enemies of reason and beauty and by engaging in them persons lose control of their rational facilities and distort what is beautiful even to the point of having their facial features altered. De Lamennais states that, "Laughter never gives to the face an expression of sympathy or good will. On the contrary, it distorts the most harmonious features into a grimace, it effaces beauty, it is one of the images of evil."<sup>4</sup> Following this same train of thought, it could be argued from the superiority theories that all humour and laughter is scornful therefore antisocial and uncharitable.<sup>5</sup> Again, these objections to humour rise and fall with the fortunes of the superiority theories.

### Theological Barriers

Theological misgivings about humour run deeper in the church than the intellectual ones. Is humour indeed a proper response to the majesty, righteousness and holiness of God? Cannot humour be used to trivialize its object, even God himself? Does not the Bible condemn laughter and frivolity?<sup>6</sup> Is humour a legitimate expression of piety?

The church's response to these questions has sided against humour's validity. Ample

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<sup>4</sup>Long-Chen-pa, The Natural Freedom of the Mind, trans. by Herbert Guenther in Crystal Mirror (Berkeley: Dharma, 1975), 4:124-25 quoted in John Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 87.

<sup>5</sup>Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously, 85. Morreall goes into more detail on the humanistic critique of humour in his essay, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," Philosophy East and West 39.3 (July, 1989), 243-57.

<sup>6</sup>Possible arguments for this position might include: the repeated censure of the "fool" in wisdom literature, admonitions for sober mindedness and prohibitions of frivolity (e.g. Luke 6:25; Eph 4:29;5:4; Col 3:8; 1 Thess 5:6-8; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 2:16; Titus 2:7,8, Jas 4:9). Space prohibits lengthy exegetical treatment of these texts. Suffice it to say that they are not aimed at the humorous perspective advocated in this thesis-project.

ammunition can be found among the Church Fathers for this position. Jerome (c.347-419/20 C.E.) wrote, "As long as we are in the vale of tears we may not laugh, but must weep. So the Lord also says, "Blessed are those who weep, for they shall laugh." We are in the vale of tears and this age is one of tears, not of joy."<sup>7</sup> Augustine agreed when he said, "Humans laugh and weep, and it is a matter for weeping that they laugh!"<sup>8</sup> John Chrysostom (444/45-507 C.E) joined the chorus in one of his homilies:

If you also weep such tears, you have become a follower of your Lord. For he too wept, both over Lazarus and over the city, and he was deeply moved over the fate of Judas. And this indeed one may often see him do, but nowhere laugh or smile even a little; no one at least of the evangelists mentions this... That is why Christ says so much to us about mourning, and blesses those who mourn, and calls those who laugh wretched. For this is not the theatre for laughter, neither did we come together for this intent, that we may give way to immoderate mirth, but that we may groan, and by this groaning inherit a kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

Similar quotations could be stockpiled from every era in church history,<sup>10</sup> but the point already has been brought to light. Many of these objections to humour were anticipated in the treatment of the subject in the previous chapter. To respond to these legitimate concerns, attention must be drawn to the fact that humour is not being presented as the only appropriate Christian response to faith and life but as a legitimate and important one. The humorous perspective based on a theology of humour does not advocate irresponsible

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<sup>7</sup>Jerome, Tractatus in Psalmos LXXXIII, CCL 78, 99 quoted in Karl-Josef Küschel, Laughter. A Theological Reflection (New York Continuum, 1994), 45.

<sup>8</sup>Aurelius Augustine, Sermo 31, Migne PL, quoted in Rüschel, Laughter, 45.

<sup>9</sup>John Chrysostom, St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, Post Nicene Christian Library, Homily VI.6 quoted in Kuschel, Laughter, 46,47.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Morreall, Taking Laughter Seriously, 86-88.

frivolity in relation to God or to fellow humans. On the contrary, it supports a sane if playful estimation of all things in contrast to the only One whose knowledge transcends the incongruities of human experience. The many biblical fulminations against the 'fool' are not targeted at such a mindset!<sup>11</sup> The many prohibitions of laughter heard within the walls of the church do not necessarily come from God himself but from those who claim to speak for God and not to God. These authorities have announced with confidence the mind of God as it relates to any subject under the sun and in the process often debar the childlike wonder that glimpses of the biblical God should engender. In the words of Doris Donnelly, "Speaking *to* and not *for* God is a helpful warm-up exercise which enables the acquisition of a sense of humour (*italics hers*)."<sup>12</sup>

#### Ethical Barriers

Ethical objections flow from the theological ones and concern themselves with appropriate attitudes and actions toward the seriousness of moral choices and the state of the world's problems. Is laughter not irresponsible in light of all the oppression, violence, hunger, racism and threat of nuclear holocaust? Is humour merely escapism?

Response to these criticisms would mirror that of the theological objections. Yes, humour can be irresponsible and frivolous escapism, but that is not the kind advocated in this study. A properly rooted humorous perspective is courageous, hopeful and active in its response to serious ethical dilemmas. Indeed it has been demonstrated that ruthless dictators

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. G. Bertram, *moros* in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.

<sup>12</sup>Doris Donnelly, "Divine Folly: Being Religious and the Exercise of Humour," Theology Today 48 (Jan 1992): 388.

feared the power of humorists and satirists as much as any armed insurrection.<sup>13</sup> In a real sense, humour is a way of putting all things flawed and contingent in the perspective of the Ultimate.

### Hermeneutical Barriers

Interpreters with little or no sense of humour often find it difficult to sense the humour in Scripture.<sup>14</sup> In turn the lack of exegetical results reinforces the conviction of the ‘seriousness’ of Scripture until this ongoing cycle might be termed as a ‘hermeneutical vicious circle’. On the other hand, those who might be ‘hypersensitive’ to the humorous perspective may laugh at that which was not intended to be funny. John Drakeford relates an anecdote of a woman who was an admirer of Stephen Leacock’s humorous works. She laughed all the way through his Elements of Political Economy (Leacock had a Ph.D in economics) before she realized it was a textbook in economics.<sup>15</sup> The issue needs to be addressed. Yehuda Radday formulates the question using the terminology of literacy criticism, “How can one maintain that a given reader’s response is contrary to the writer’s intent when interrogating the latter is not feasible?” and then outlines three possible criteria:

(a) the degree to which the reader has thorough command of the writer’s language in reading, writing and speaking; (b) the immediate and, later, wider context of the passage in question; (c) the overall tenor and purpose of the entire book interpreted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Conrad Hyers, The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith, 24.

<sup>14</sup>Y. Radday, “On Missing the Humour,” 33.

<sup>15</sup>John W. Drakeford, Humor in Preaching (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 27.

<sup>16</sup>Radday, “On Missing the Humor,” 27.

Radday's solution is hardly revolutionary until he twins this concern for the writer's intention for the text with the need of biblical scholars to develop their sense of humour.<sup>17</sup>

Although the above objections have answers, they successfully raise the issue of limitations in regard to the humorous perspective. There is legitimate concern about humour running amok. How far is too far in relation to humour? Examples of unreined humour abound in contemporary conversations and media. It was in addressing the issue of limits for humour that Niebuhr insisted that humour remain in the church vestibule and not in the Holy of Holies.<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Moltmann also may be interpreted in this way when he insists that there was no play involved in the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Bob Parrott contends that one cannot laugh at Truth-itself.<sup>20</sup> Indeed there are ways in which humour may be used that are simply not appropriate for anyone, let alone the Christian.<sup>21</sup> It is wise when in the process of showing the legitimacy of humour to ponder its illegitimate manifestations. The approach to humour advocated in this thesis-project is rooted in an orthodox theological perspective. It makes no claims to supremacy but merely functions as a remedial supplement to both traditional theological understanding and the historico-grammatical method of interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>18</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 131.

<sup>19</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Play (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 32.

<sup>20</sup>Bob W. Parrott; The Ontology of Humor (New York: Philosophical Library, 1982), 16,17.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Webster, Laughter in the Bible, 58-73.

<sup>22</sup>George Aichele draws six lessons that theology can learn from comedy: 1) the inadequacy of the partial, biased and narrow in contrast to the wholeness and completeness

## **Personal Development of Humour Appreciation**

With the need for the development of humour appreciation established, the treatment of the subject will include the entering attitudes and principles for humour appreciation and the personal benefits of humour.

### **Entering Attitudes for Humour Appreciation**

From the discussion of the theology of humour from the previous chapter, there are a few basic attitudes which may facilitate the process of humour appreciation in the context of Christian faith. The first of these is a sense of devoted detachment. In essence it is a response to the words of Jesus. "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple"(Luke 14:26). Believers cannot be free to follow Jesus or see the humorous incongruities of this world if they are too entangled in the net of narcissistic and narrow personal worlds. Discipleship and humour both demand a larger perspective than the normal human propensity to see all of life filtered through the lens of self interest. By looking to the larger picture, motivated by the hope that comes from following the Lord of the universe, believers can walk with Jesus and see humour in the pitiful legalism of religious leaders and the mindless superstition of the curious but noncommittal. The paradox is that in being detached from this world, true freedom is given to value life in this world.

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of life; 2) the importance of the buffoon (*eirōn*) as a hermeneutical tool; 3) the comical message of endurance despite and because of all the difficulty that life may entail; 4) comedy's exaltation of the primitive and ordinary in contrast to the elitism evidenced in some theology, 5) the relationship in comedy between ethics and aesthetics; and 6) the challenge to develop new forms which are more in tune with content, intent and purpose, Theology as Comedy, 133-41.

The second attitude, then, is a reverence for life. The Christian's laughter is based on the conviction that the God of the Bible lives, has given life, loves life, has and is working to grant life eternal. Here is where a Christian understanding of humour demonstrates the fixed gulf between itself and its darker forms. Much of contemporary humour seems to be born out of despair and nihilism. Nothing could be further from the ground of 'holy' humour—it is a basic affirmation of life and a cooperation in God's purpose for that life.

A third attitude is a familiarity with God. Richard Cote sums up this entire discussion by stating, "If Christian laughter originates in the paradox of detachment, and thrives on a deep reverence for life, it is ultimately provoked by a tongue-in-cheek familiarity with God best expressed in Jesus' words: "I have called you friends" (John 15:15)."<sup>23</sup> This is not presumption or blasphemy but the acceptance of the divine invitation to enjoy the privileges of salvation (Heb 10:19-25). The claiming of the benefits of being children of God does not downplay the need to recognize the transcendent majesty and holiness of God but is part of that recognition. Drawing from the work of Rudolph Otto, Conrad Hyers states, "Just as the more serious reaction to the sacred is one of both shrinking back and drawing close, like the movement of the moth around the flame, so the comic response to the sacred is both withdrawing and aggressive."<sup>24</sup>

### Principles for Humour Appreciation

While there is no instant way to enhance personal skills in humour appreciation, a few

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<sup>23</sup>Richard Cote, Holy Mirth, 73.

<sup>24</sup>Conrad Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," in Holy Laughter, ed. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 218.

principles to aid in the process may be of help. Books and programs on developing one's sense of humour are plentiful enough,<sup>25</sup> here space dictates that only a few principles be given.

### **Determine One's Humour Profile**

This is the place to start. One helpful exercise is to surround oneself with the kinds of humour deemed most enjoyable and then draw some conclusions as to the nature of one's sense of humour. One might also ask some trusted friends to give their opinions of one's sense of humour. There are several self-tests and other assessment instruments<sup>26</sup> which might help one understand one's sense of humour—its strengths and weaknesses.

### **Adopt a Playful Attitude**

As has already been suggested, there is a strong relationship between playfulness and humour. One's playfulness might be rediscovered by observing and participating in child's play. The innocence and freedom of children can put a person back in touch with the ability to gain simple pleasures by playing, entertaining thoughts unfettered by the years of personal and societal strictures and expectations.<sup>27</sup> Play and laughter can be very meaningful

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<sup>25</sup>Some of the available resources include: Laurence J. Peter and Bill Dana, The Laughter Prescription (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); Harvey Mindess, Laughter and Liberation: Developing Your Sense of Humor (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971); Paul E. McGhee, Health, Healing and the Amuse System. Humor as Survival Training 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1996), For a listing of 106 humour scholars who have courses or programs in humour studies, cf. Don L.F. Nilsen Humor Scholarship (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 327-31.

<sup>26</sup>Paul McGhee offers a "Humor Pre-test" and "Humor Post-Test" in his Amuse System, 61-81.

<sup>27</sup>Laurence Peters and Bill Dana, The Laughter Prescription, 193; McGhee, Amuse System, 237-44.



communication with God. It might be helpful to recall the simplicity and trust of a child's prayers.

### **Dignify Everyday Life By Sensing Its Humour**

The humorous happens all the time. It only remains to sense and enjoy it. A person can develop this perspective by asking questions about almost any experience (e.g. "Is there anything in this experience that reveals incongruity?—my own or others' pretensions or idiosyncrasies?").

### **Spend Time with Humorous People**

Like so many other things, humour is contagious. One can learn a great deal from truly humorous people. However, some caution needs to be shown here. It is not wise to spend a lot of time around those prone to sarcasm and darker forms of humour. Exposure to scatological, indecent, nihilistic or oppressive humour can be very detrimental to a wholesome sense of humor and can destroy Christian community rather than enhance it. One is also best advised to stay away from the one 'addicted' to humour—the one who feels compelled to make everything into a joke. Aristotle's estimation of the compulsive comic was not very positive.

### **Do Humour Appreciation Exercises**

As one attempts to enhance one's humour appreciation, regular discipline by performing humour enhancing exercises may be of help. These may be as simple as reading good humorous literature for five or ten minutes daily. Resources abound here and there are

many humorous works produced from a Christian perspective.<sup>28</sup> If one listens to comedy, it is better to listen to talented story tellers like Bill Cosby or Garrison Keillor rather than many of the contemporary stand-up comedians. Another exercise would be to play with language. Language is the medium of most humour and so one's humour will be enhanced by developing linguistic playfulness. One should notice the language play in normal conversation, media advertizing and on commercial signs.<sup>29</sup> Something else that might be of help is actually to practice laughing on a regular basis. While this will feel strange and awkward especially at first but can be cathartic once one's inhibitions have been bettered.

### **Learn to Take Oneself Lightly**

Laughing at oneself can be very therapeutic. Healthy forms of self-depreciating humour may actually enhance a person's self-concept by acknowledging one's common humanity. In this way, laughing at oneself does not isolate one from others but rather builds community through identification. On occasion a person's ego may make him unnecessarily defensive about an area of his life.<sup>30</sup> Humour may not always be the best way to deal with this

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<sup>28</sup>A few examples would be Cal Samra and Rose Samra, Holy Humor (New York: Master Media, 1996); William H. Willimon, The Laugh Shall Be First (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986); Phil Calloway, The Total Christian Guy (Eugene: Harvest House, 1996); Calvin Miller, The Philippian Fragment (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), Tom Raabe, The Ultimate Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), Edmund P. Clowney, ed. Eutychus (and his Pin) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); The Fellowship of Merry Christians is an ecumenical organization promoting humour. They have a catalogue of humour resources and publish a bi-monthly paper entitled The Joyful Noise Letter. Their address is: P.O. Box 895, Portage, MI, 49081-0895.

<sup>29</sup>McGhee, Amuse System, 113-18.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 163-66.

situation, but it can serve as a diagnostic tool. Whenever one is offended by humour that ‘hits too close to home’, it is helpful to probe this reaction. A person can learn from both the things he laughs at and at the things he does not.

### **Use Humour to Deal with Stress**

Most people have the capacity to find humour in a situation in retrospect. However, humour can be helpful when it speaks to the immediate situation—in the midst of a stressful situation. One needs to be able to ask, “Is there something about this difficult situation that is incongruous or humorous?” The realization of some humorous element in an otherwise trying circumstance can help one cope. For example, the ability to answer an antagonist with discerning humour might bring relief to oneself and possibly even to the antagonist. Doris Donnelly recounts an occasion when humorist Robert Benchley came out of a restaurant and asked a man in uniform standing there to hail a cab for him. The man’s indignant reply was, “Do you realize you are speaking to a rear admiral in the United States Navy?” Benchley retorted, “O.K., then, get me a battleship!”<sup>31</sup>

### **Help Others Laugh**

Humour enjoyed is humour shared. There is something mutually satisfying to both parties when they share humour together. Part of the process of growing in appreciation of humour is offering the results of one’s insights. Again some restraint is necessary lest in enthusiasm one becomes the kind of person most ordinarily would avoid.

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. Doris Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” 397; for a humour development program designed for stress management, cf. McGhee, Amuse System, 45-236.

## **Look for Humour When You Read**

In relation to this thesis-project, one needs to start reading the Bible with a more sensitive eye to the instances when humorous devices are used. This principle holds true for other readings as well. Often good novels have instances of ‘comic relief’ woven into the plot. A developed sense of humour is sensitive to these moments and, therefore forms a closer bond to the author and his intentions.

### **Personal Benefits of Humour**

The results of a good sense of humour can be wide-ranging. Only a few will be highlighted here. The first would be an over-all sense of wellness. The psychological and physiological benefits of a good sense of humour are well documented.<sup>32</sup> Humour can relieve tension and stress, aid relaxation, aid the cardio-vascular system and contribute to the will to live. Indeed as stated in the book of Proverbs, “a joyful heart is good medicine” (17:22a).

Another benefit is balanced perspective. If life is viewed in overly-tragic terms or weighted too heavily toward the sad and miserable aspects of life it will be hard to maintain a healthy and hopeful Christian life. Humour helps to restore balance to this perspective so that this life is seen both as a vale of tears and laughter. Stanley Handleman writes, “Seriousness implies gravity. Gravity is the force that pulls all things to the center. It is what keeps us from flying. It is the opposite of levity, which is the force that raises things and

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. Norman Cousins, Anatomy of an Illness as perceived by a Patient (New York: Bantam Books, 1979); Raymond A. Moody, Jr., Laugh After Laugh: The Healing Power of Humor (Jacksonville: Headwaters Press, 1987); Laurence J. Peter and Bill Dana, The Laughter Prescription (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); Mary Roach, “Can You Laugh Your Stress Away?” Health (Sept 1996):93-96.

makes them light. Religion is supposed to free the spirit from gravity, raise it, lighten our loads, and enlighten our minds.”<sup>33</sup>

A final benefit would be the increased opportunities for creativity. If humour views reality in unconventional ways the possibilities for imaginative and creative communication abound.<sup>34</sup> Sensing connections in the juxtaposition of opposites can lead to a free, helpful and at times prophetic perspective that is a valuable asset to any believer but especially one who is given the responsibility to share the mind of God with the people of God.

### **Humour in the Ministry of Jesus**

On the basis of the preceding discussion, it is now possible to address the role of humour in Jesus’ ministry. With the words of John Chrysostom’s assertion that Jesus never laughed still ringing in the ears of many,<sup>35</sup> the insights of humour beg to be applied to his mission and message. The issue is not so much whether or not Jesus laughed—an argument from silence from either side—but whether or not he had a sense of humour.<sup>36</sup> This study will attempt to demonstrate the affirmative.

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<sup>33</sup>Stanley M. Handleman, “From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: the Religion of Humor,” in Handbook of Humour Research, eds. Paul McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), 27.

<sup>34</sup>Doris Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” 396; also Morreall, “Rejection of Humor”, 257-63.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Cote states that reasons for refraining from attributing laughter to Jesus were the low esteem with which laughter was viewed by many throughout history, the association of laughter with the Devil and a certain conception of Jesus’ knowledge which exalts his divinity at the expense of his humanity. Holy Mirth, 24-26.

<sup>36</sup>Doris Donnelly, “Divine Folly,” 389, Cf. also Karl-Josef Kuschel, Laughter. A Theological Reflection (New York: Continuum, 1994), 69.

## The Jewish Tradition of Humour

To understand the role of humour in the ministry of Jesus, it is of vital importance that the Jewish context of that ministry be explored. Jesus was not raised in a cultural vacuum nor were those to whom he preached. Therefore a broad understanding of humour from the Jewish perspective is a prerequisite for this study. The Jewish hegemony in contemporary North American humour is widely recognized and most explanations of the Jewish conception of humour focus primarily on the last two centuries.<sup>37</sup> The picture of contemporary Jewish humour as bitter complaint, wry and self depreciating<sup>38</sup> is a common perception. To judge Jesus by present standards would be anachronistic, although they are not completely irrelevant because those of Jewish descent are ones of tradition and "...Jewish humor did not advance in a straight line from primitive to modern times, but rather developed in concentric circles, sometimes expanding, at others contracting which illuminated the mores of the day."<sup>39</sup>

The biblical and rabbinical eras of Jewish history are more apropos in the determination of Jesus' context. Both backgrounds, however, have historical ambiguities. It would be futile to insist that the Palestinian context of Jesus's time was equally affected by

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<sup>37</sup>Henry D. Spalding, Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor, (New York: Jonathan David, 1969), xv; Chaim Bermant, What's the Joke? A Study of Jewish Humour through the Ages (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986), 244; and Israel Knox, "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor," in Holy Laughter, ed. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 150.

<sup>38</sup>Spalding, Encyclopedia, xv-xviii; Bermant, What's the Joke?, 237-43.

<sup>39</sup>Spalding, Encyclopedia, xiv. Israel Knox comments, "Jewish humor is not merely a reaction or response to circumstances and environment but a product of Jewish experience, and is almost as old as the Jewish people itself." "Traditional Roots," 151.

all eras of Jewish biblical history.<sup>40</sup> Likewise the sources of the rabbinical tradition are removed from Jesus' time by several centuries, but do reflect some of the same perspectives.<sup>41</sup> Nor would it be wise to "homogenize" completely the humour of biblical and rabbinical times since the approach to humour in the latter is judged to be more subtle than that of the former.<sup>42</sup> A nuanced composite perspective of Jewish humour will be presented here as an appropriate context for looking at Jesus' humour without doing great disservice to the particularities of either era.

At its root, Jewish humour has stemmed from their understanding of the covenant. Along with the reverence shown to Yahweh, there was a sense of familiarity that came from being the people of the covenant. This fear of the covenant God and respect for the covenant law was often accompanied by an aggression that was nourished by the relationship established by that same covenant. This familiarity led Jews to realize that although Yahweh was deity, his actions had certain human ways about them. And even though the covenant law as revered as the word of God, their daily experience of and their familiarity with it often

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<sup>40</sup>Examples of scholarly treatments of humour in the Hebrew Bible include: Edwin M. Good, Irony in the Old Testament (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), Yehuda Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds. On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), Conrad Hyers, And God Created Laughter (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), Dale R. Davis, "Comic Literature - Tragic Theology: A Study of Judges 17-18," Westminster Theological Journal 46 (Spring 1984):156-63, Cheryl Exum, ed. "Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible," Semeia 32 (1985): 5-148, Judson Mather, "The Comic Art of the Book of Jonah," Soundings 65 (Fall 1982): 280-91, and Yehuda Radday, "Sex and Women in Biblical Narrative Humor." Humor 8.4 (1995): 363-84.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Jakob J. Jonsson, Humor and Irony in the New Testament Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 51; Bruce D. Chilton, A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984),32-34.

<sup>42</sup>Spalding, Encyclopedia, xv.

made it appear as though it was part of their ordinary human existence.<sup>43</sup> Indeed when they were not praising Yahweh for his gracious provision in the covenant they seemed to be complaining about why he would allow his covenant people to be in such dire straits. There seems to be an uneasy ambivalence in Judaism that vacillates between great pride in being the chosen nation and a squirming under the demands and consequences of the covenant. Doris Donnelly contrasts this approach to that found in much of Christendom:

A familiarity with God uncommon in mainline Christian circles is widely apparent in Judaism, along with the acceptance of human emotions before Deity. Jews have a long history of weeping, moaning and raging, as well as rejoicing before Yahweh, while the liturgical behavior of Christians seems, by comparison, to be considerably more polite and restrained. The conversation of the Jew with God was precisely that: a conversation, with a give-and-take rarely found, if entirely unheard of, in the Christian way of relating to the Creator.<sup>44</sup>

Such was the level of familiarity with God, that narratives of human boldness before him are common in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Abraham (Gen. 18:16-33), Moses (Ex. 3:1-4:17) and Job (Job 31:1-40) as well as in rabbinical literature.<sup>45</sup> The fact that God was experienced in the realm of ordinary life undoubtedly helped to develop the recognition of incongruity and paradox in the Jewish consciousness which in turn led to their use of humour

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<sup>43</sup>Bermant, What's The Joke?, 5.

<sup>44</sup>Donnelly, "Divine Folly," 387.

<sup>45</sup>Elie Wiesel records the defiant words of Rebbe Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev, "If you prefer the enemy who suffers less than we do, then let the enemy praise your glory!" and his reminder to God "that he too had to ask forgiveness for the hardships he inflicted on his people. Thence the plural of Yom Kippurim: the request for pardon is reciprocal," Souls on Fire, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York: London House, 1972), 107. Wiesel, the consummate storyteller, has written stories about biblical characters in Messengers of God, trans. By Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1976). Cf. also Jonsson, Humor and Irony, 51-89.



and story.<sup>46</sup> Both of these are seen in the ministry of Jesus.

From the covenantal context of Jewish humour, several corollaries emerge which have given shape to its various expressions. Given the covenant relationship, the standard for righteousness was established and deviance from that standard not only provided the basis for judgment but for humour as well.<sup>47</sup> False righteousness, unrighteousness and self-righteousness were targets for all kinds of humourous gibes. When the standard was broken, there was a desire to see the situation remedied and humour was one way of addressing the issue. Humour was one way of expressing their devotion to Yahweh and his covenant.

Another meaningful motif in Jewish humour is hope. The present was often painful in Jewish experience but it was endured with a sense of "tragic optimism" because it was never seen as ultimate. Israel Knox states, "Judaism has never accepted the proposition that this [present] disparity is final; it has never yielded to the enticement of cutting off the ideal from the actual, the spiritual from the natural, of elevating the religious above--and, in effect,

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<sup>46</sup>Beldon C. Lane contends that the major motifs in Jewish theology are evident in six major paradoxes as to how truth is perceived: 1) relating to the doctrine of creation: "spirituality is rooted in earthiness;" 2) relating to the doctrine of God: "the absolute is known in the personal;" 3) relating to the doctrine of man: "freedom is discovered in obedience;" 4) relating to the doctrine of salvation: "triumph grows out of suffering;" 5) relating to the doctrine of the future (Eschatology): "security is found uncertainty;" and 6) relating to the doctrine of sanctification: "prayer is offered through study," Storytelling: The Enchantment of Theology. (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1981), cassette, cf. also Krister Stendahl, "The Jewish Humor of Jesus," in "The Walter Pope Binns Lecture Series," (Liberty: William Jewell College, 1987), 3-7; and especially Jonsson, Humour, 51-89 for an extended treatment of rabbinical humour.

<sup>47</sup>Israel Knox, "Traditional Roots," 153; William E. Phipps, The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 96.

separating it from—the ethical.”<sup>48</sup> The messianic hope which embodied hope for the Jew kept them hoping and smiling even through very trying circumstances.

While it would be an overstatement to suggest that Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ era were given over to the comic element in reality, it may safely be assumed that they understood and employed it as a natural part of an existence hallowed by the purposes of God and stipulated in his covenant with them. The impression of the humorlessness and self-righteousness of Jewish leaders given by the evangelists needs to be interpreted in light of the latter’s polemic purposes. Judging all Jewish leaders by those directly confronted by Jesus might lead to a jaundiced perspective. It makes more sense historically to view Jesus’ ministry, with his use of humorous devices, in light of both his continuity and discontinuity with his cultural context rather solely in light of the latter. The sensible conclusion would be that Jesus reflected some of the common mores of his day including a rather Jewish comic sense exhibited more often in wry, subtle ways than in uproarious ones.

### Jesus and Humour

Given his cultural milieu, Jesus was aware of the power of humour, yet the particulars of this awareness must be explored. Two approaches will be examined. The first is to interpret the ministry of Jesus by using models attuned to the humorous perspective and the second is to examine his teachings for evidences of humorous devices.

### **Humorous Models of the Messiah**

Some are tempted to interpret Jesus through lenses that emphasize the humorous

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 157.

aspect of his mission and message. This approach is used by many who study the historical Jesus. Many differing models of Jesus have been posited as hermeneutical constructs for interpreting his ministry.<sup>49</sup> The more humour-oriented of these models tend to emphasize the comical aspect of Christ. Some would assert broadly that Jesus' ministry was exercised between the comic parentheses of the twin incongruities of the incarnation and the resurrection.<sup>50</sup> Others put a more particular identity to this model.

### Jesus as Harlequin

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox raised a few eyebrows almost three decades ago when he suggested that Jesus be viewed as a harlequin. In his words,

...even in the biblical portrait of Christ there are elements that can easily suggest clown symbols. Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel he frequents dinners and parties. At the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst sniggers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim.<sup>51</sup>

### Jesus as Trickster

Another suggestion is to view Jesus from the perspective of the trickster, the wiley

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<sup>49</sup>For a brief discussion of Jesus research, cf. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), s.v. "Quest of the Historical Jesus," by Colin Brown.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Cote, Holy Mirth, 52,53; Donnelly, "Divine Folly," 391-92; Hyers, God Created Laughter, 28-31.

<sup>51</sup>Cox, Feast of Fools, 140,141. For a view of Jesus as clown, cf. Welton Gaddy, God's Clowns (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 17-27.

unscrupulous preternatural practical joker found in many religious mythologies including classical religions and North American native traditions.<sup>52</sup> Donald Blais demonstrates how many of Jesus' actions and words could be related to the basic characteristics of the trickster—his sharing of human and divine dimensions, his flouting of contemporary mores, his mastery over demons, his ability to change his form, his ability to evade capture and his love of playful interchange.<sup>53</sup>

### Gnostic Views of Jesus

There is a passage in The Coptic Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter where Peter inquires of the risen Jesus regarding a vision he had seen of the crucifixion:

“What is this I see, O Lord? Is it you alone they take, and do you lay hold of me? Or who is this who is glad beside you and laughs? And another they strike upon his feet and on his feet and on his hands?”

The Saviour said to me: “He whom you see beside the tree glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly [likeness], the “ransom”, which [alone] they [are able to] put to shame. That came into being after likeness. But look on him and on me!”

But when I had looked, I said: “Lord, no one sees you, let us flee from here!”

But he said to me: “I have told you that they [are] blind. But you, see

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<sup>52</sup>Cf. Paul Radin, ed. The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (New York: Schocken Books [1956] 1972), Susan Niditch, Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), and J. Cheryl Exum and Johanna B.H. Bos, eds. “Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power” Semeia 42 (188):1-155.

<sup>53</sup>Donald Blais, “Wisdom as Trickster: Jesus the Christ and Mary, Queen of Heaven as Trickster Archetypes” (Boston: Tri-Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, 1995, Photocopied), 5-8. Cf. also his “Eutrapelia: The Dynamics of Divine and Human Playfulness,” (M.A. thesis, University of St. Michael’s College, 1993).

how little they know what they say.<sup>54</sup>

The Gnostic conception of a laughing Jesus while the Romans unknowingly crucify a substitute is further explained by Irenaeus of Lyons as involving a morphic metathesis with Simon of Cyrene.<sup>55</sup>

Passages in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas relate incidents from the childhood of a rather cavalier Jesus who created twelve birds out of clay and played with them on the Sabbath,<sup>56</sup> pronounced a fatal curse on a child who knocked against his shoulder,<sup>57</sup> and laughed in derision at the teacher assigned to him in order that he be taught the law and not to curse.<sup>58</sup> In the Sophia of Jesus Christ the resurrected Jesus shares laughter with his disciples who are perplexed at seeing him alive.<sup>59</sup>

These gnostic pictures of Jesus deny his humanity and make his laughter one of divine scorn and therefore are rightly to be deemed heretical.<sup>60</sup> As for viewing Jesus as harlequin or trickster, although they are interesting and instructive to a point, both of them suffer from the obvious reductionism that disqualifies them as balanced views of Jesus.

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<sup>54</sup>W. Schmeemelcher, ed. New Testament Apocrypha, rev. ed., vol.2 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 709.

<sup>55</sup>Irenaeus, Against the Heresies I.24.4.

<sup>56</sup> J.K. Elliot, ed. The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Greek A Text, 75,76.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., Greek B. Text, 81.

<sup>59</sup>James M. Robinson, ed. The Nag Hammadi Library in English (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 222-26.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Küschel, Laughter, 68.

## **Humour in the Ministry of Jesus**

Many of the books dealing with humour in the ministry of Jesus are popular treatments rather than scholarly ones and, therefore, are not given much credibility in the academy.<sup>61</sup> However, this thesis-project will take a somewhat different approach. Rather than attempt to document a humour Christology (i.e. a Christology 'from above'), which ordinarily would have been included as part of the theological discussion of the last chapter, preference will be given to a Christology 'from below'. The nature and purpose of Jesus' sense of humour will be established by examining some of the sayings of Jesus recorded in the gospel accounts. While such an approach may be susceptible to the same weakness of subjectivity criticized in the popular works mentioned above, two procedural safeguards have been posited to regulate this possibility. First, Jesus' ministry will be seen both in continuity and discontinuity with its cultural context. If Jewish teachers of Jesus' time can be seen as having and using a sense of humour (which is what is assumed by the brief discussion above of the Jewish tradition of humour), then it is a historical probability that Jesus did as well--with allowance given for him to give it his characteristically personalized twist. The second safeguard is the assumption that the content and purpose of Jesus' humour would be in concert with the major theme of his preaching and teaching--the kingdom of God.<sup>62</sup> To view

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<sup>61</sup>For example: Cal Samara, The Joyful Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), Sherwood Eliot Wirt, Jesus, Man of Joy (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), Henri Cormier, The Humor of Jesus (New York: Alba House, 1977), and Elton Trueblood, The Humor of Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). Küschel also displays contempt for a couple of German works: O. Betz, Der Humor and die Frohlichkeit der Christen (1982) and W. Thiede, Das verheussen Lachen. Humor in theologischer Perspective (1986) in Laughter, 140.

<sup>62</sup>For an understanding of the kingdom theme in the ministry of Jesus, cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, Jesus and the Kingdom of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), George E.

the kingdom as a giant joke would be blasphemous but the emphasis upon reversal (a form of incongruity) as a major theme in the theology of the kingdom does allow for the distinct possibility of humour. Kingdom values and ethics seem odd indeed to the average human observer. Jesus came preaching a realm of reversal where: "...the last shall be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16); "...everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11); "he who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My [Jesus'] sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:39); and "...whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all" (Mark 10:44).<sup>63</sup>

When the evidence is seen, it will be very difficult to agree with the assertion of Jorge from Eco's The Name of the Rose, "Our Lord Jesus never told comedies or fables, but only clear parables which allegorically instruct us on how to win paradise, and so be it."<sup>64</sup> The existence of humour in Jesus' ministry can hardly be doubted, the extent of it, however, may be an ongoing issue.

The matter of a taxonomy of humour for the sayings of Jesus is complicated by at least three ambiguities. One is the breadth of the term parabolos which often encompasses

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Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), *idem*. A Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), Bruce Chilton and J.I.H. McDonald, Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), Bruce Chilton ed., The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus: Issues in Religion and Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), Norman Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation, New Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1976).

<sup>63</sup>For the reversal theme in the Kingdom of God, cf. James M Dawsey, The Lukan Voice (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 145, 46; Hyers, Laughter, 47-52; Cote, Holy Mirth, 61-64; Hyers, Comic Vision, 138, 139, 150-53.

<sup>64</sup>Eco, Rose, 149.

some material more appropriately termed as 'sayings.'<sup>65</sup> More difficult is the notorious ambiguity and overlap among humorous terms. There is no general agreement on a taxonomy of humour.<sup>66</sup> Only a rudimentary classification of humour will be attempted here. The task is lessened by the fact that not all forms of humour normally listed in a taxonomy are employed by Jesus in the gospel sayings.

Probably the most problematic matter is the chasm created by recording verbal humour in a literary medium. This reacquaints the reader with the issue of subjectivity and predisposition in the interpretation of humour. Modern humour theorists demonstrate that certain commonalities must exist in any humorous act in order for it to be 'funny'. Sharing understandings in language, life experience, cultural mores and worldview may trigger a humorous response given a certain context and stimulus.<sup>67</sup> While this might erect enough

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<sup>65</sup>This is seen in D.W. Sandifer, "The Humor of the Absurd in the Parables of Jesus," in *SBL Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 287-97. Cf. Gerhard Fredrich, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), s.v. *parabole* by F. Hauck and John Dominic Crossan, *Sayings Parallels. A Workbook for the Jesus Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), xiv-xvi.

<sup>66</sup>For examples of humour taxonomies, cf. Debra Long and Arthur Graesser, "Wit and Humour in Discourse Processing," *Discourse Processes* II (1988):38-44; Bob W. Parrott, *Ontology of Humor* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1982),25-36; John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983),60-84; Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 24-30; John Ellington, "Wit and Humor in Bible Translation," *The Bible Translator* 42(1991):305, and Bullard, "Biblical Humor," 26-29. For the purposes of this thesis-project, an adoption of Bullard's taxonomy will be used. He divided humour into two classes: Class A which is purely conceptual humour and includes: wordplay, meiosis, litotes, hyperbole, euphemism, conundrum, taunt, proverb and parable; Class B humour is partly conceptual and partly perceptual and includes: irony, invective, caricature, ridicule, sarcasm, burlesque and parody.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985),3-19; and Walter Nash, *The Language of Humour* (London:



barriers to understanding humour in a time and place as remote as first century Palestine, there is more. Oral (or verbal) and textual humour have different dynamics of communication. While oral humour has non-verbal clues (or ‘triggers’) such as facial expression, tone of voice and other interpersonal dynamics,<sup>68</sup> textual humour must rely upon textual triggers which may be more subtle and may be missed easily by those not trained or predisposed to look for them.<sup>69</sup> The biblical interpreter must then follow whatever textual clues are present in the context to determine whether or not a certain saying of Jesus had humorous intent without being privy to the original dynamics, his tone of voice or facial expressions. With these necessary caveats, a rudimentary taxonomy of humorous devices excluding paronomasia and its kindred phenomena may be presented with a major distinction drawn between those devices which are inherently humorous and those which employ broader literary devices for humorous purposes.

#### Humorous devices

Satire. It is common to view satire as the umbrella term under which all the other inherently humorous devices are grouped.<sup>70</sup> While satire has a narrow definition in reference

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Longman, 1985), 2-10.

<sup>68</sup>Michael Mulkay, On Humour (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 48-52.

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Nash, Language, 20-22.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Bullard, Humor, 29; C. Corydon Randall, “Satire in the Bible” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College, 1969), 27-53; Northrop Frye, “The Nature of Satire”, in Satire: Theory and Practice, eds. Charles A. Allen and George D. Stephens (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1962), 15-30. For a view that sees “irony” as the umbrella term, cf. Edward Greenstein and R. Alan Culpepper, “Humor and Wit,” in Anchor Bible Dictionary.

to specific literary forms made famous in the ancient world, it also may be used in a more general sense to refer to the satiric “tone or quality of art which we may find in any form.”<sup>71</sup> A general definition of satire, then, which outlines both its nature and purpose would be “a work or manner that blends a censorious attitude with humor and wit for improving human institutions or humanity. Satirists attempt through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling.”<sup>72</sup>

Frye defines the boundaries of satire: “As a tone or attitude...two things are essential to satire. One is wit and humour, the other an object of attack. Attack without humour or pure denunciation thus forms one of the boundaries of satire; humour without attack, the humour of pure gaiety or exuberance, is the other.”<sup>73</sup> Randall outlines the characteristics of satire as, that which “...attacks with a serious purpose and its objects are of importance; that it always has a high aim that extends beyond mere exposure; that, it has a basis in a real life situation; that it involves an element of wit or deflection which appeals to the imagination, and it is always of a critical nature.”<sup>74</sup> Two corollaries of these traits need to be mentioned. One, the satirist’s critique comes not from a sense of detached cynicism but a personal involvement with the objects of criticism in a sense of loving the sinner and hating the sin. The sting of satire is more akin to the logic of reductio ad absurdum than to the pointed nature of ad

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<sup>71</sup>Frye, “Satire,” 15.

<sup>72</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 423, cf. Abrams, Glossary, 153-56.

<sup>73</sup>Frye, “Satire,” 16.

<sup>74</sup>Randall, “Satire,” 13.

hominem attacks, although the latter may be present as well.<sup>75</sup> And two, there is a tacit agreement between satirist and the audience as to the propriety of the subject matter addressed and the force of the satirical attack.<sup>76</sup> In other words, there are certain conventions regulating satire which safeguard the barb of the attack without having the audience turn on the satirist in disgust. No matter how clever, the remedy cannot be seen as more repulsive than the disease. One example of satire from the sayings of Jesus would be Luke 7:24-28 where Jesus satirizes the pampered 'dandies' of the royal court in contrast to the integrity and self-sacrifice of John the Baptist.<sup>77</sup>

Irony. Of all the humorous or satirical devices found in Scripture, irony has attracted the most scholarly attention. Simply defined, irony "...is a double-leveled literary phenomenon in which two tiers of meaning stand in some opposition to each other and in which some degree of unawareness is expressed or implied."<sup>78</sup> The matter of 'unawareness' in the definition refers to the fact that "...the "punch" of irony depends in part upon some failing to

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.; Frye, "Satire," 30.

<sup>76</sup>Frye, "Satire," 18.

<sup>77</sup>Phipps, Wisdom, 63. Another example of satirical juxtaposition is found in Matthew 15:1-6, "The Pharisees interrogated Jesus about his disciples' neglect to wash their hands in accordance with tradition. Jesus responded with "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (vs.3) and then exposed their casuistry in not honoring father and mother. Jesus' direct criticism here is heightened by the juxtaposition of handwashing and honoring father and mother: the incongruity of external ritualism being elevated over the profound demand of honouring priests is evident in the juxtaposition of the two concerns" (cf. also Matt. 23:23). Henry Boonstra, "Satire in Matthew", Christianity and Literature 29 (Summer 1980):39.

<sup>78</sup>Paul D. Duke, Irony in the Fourth Gospel (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 17.

see it.<sup>79</sup>

The target of this study is what Wayne Booth calls “stable irony”. By this he means the ironic communication was intended by the author (not just perceived in the mind of the reader), unannounced as being ironic, fixed on the newer lever of meaning (i.e. intending for the sender and perceiver of the irony to share the common ground of this higher level of understanding) and finite in that it is aimed at a specific target rather than everything in general.<sup>80</sup>

An understanding of the different types of irony will aid in giving further refinement to the kind to be studied in this thesis-project. Verbal irony “is a statement in which the implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from what he ostensibly asserts.”<sup>81</sup> Dramatic irony “involves a situation...in which the audience shares with the author knowledge of which a character is ignorant....”<sup>82</sup> Paul Duke makes the helpful distinction between local and extended irony:

Local irony occurs at a given point in the text though its punch may depend upon knowledge gained by the reader elsewhere, either in the text or outside it, this kind of irony does its work quickly and its parameters can be drawn rather narrowly. Extended irony demands more development and employs scattered hints and devices throughout an episode or an entire work. It is often more subtle than local irony, though its effect in the end is frequently

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>80</sup>Wayne Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 5-6.

<sup>81</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 80.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 82.

just as sharp and may be considerably more forceful.<sup>83</sup>

Local irony will be the focus of this research although the majority of scholarly effort explores more extended forms.<sup>84</sup> The reasons for narrowing the field of study this way is that stable, local forms of irony are the more important in understanding the sayings of Jesus. Even with this clarification, dealing with examples of irony will be difficult to interpret due to the overlap between humorous devices. There is an ironic aspect to other devices such as: hyperbole, meiosis, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, parody and euphemism. Therefore, it will be difficult to be too emphatic regarding the exact relationship among them.

Possible examples of irony include Jesus' statements, "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9) and "... "But now, let him who has a purse, take it along, likewise also a bag, and let him who has no sword sell his robe and buy

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<sup>83</sup>Duke, *Irony*, 43.

<sup>84</sup>Cf. Duke, *Irony*, 117-137; Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981); Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel: Text and Subtext* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); James Dawsey, *The Lukan Voice: Confusion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986); R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 165-180; Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). For a critique of Dawsey's view of irony in Luke, cf. William Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 135-55. For comment on the work of Duke, Culpepper and O'Day from the perspective of speech-act theory, cf. J.E. Botha, "The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened I: The Problematic Current Situation," *Neotestamentica* 25 (1991): 209-20 and idem, "The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened II: Suggestions, Alternate Approaches," *Neotestamentica* 25 (1991): 221-31. For a deconstructionist perspective, cf. Stephen D. Moore, *Literacy Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 159-70.

one” (Luke 22:36).<sup>85</sup> A case could be made for the ironic interpretation of Luke 8:10. “...To you it is granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables; in order that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.”<sup>86</sup> as well as the Markan parallel in 4:10-12.<sup>87</sup> Other passages to have been given ironic interpretations include: Luke 5:32,<sup>88</sup> Luke 13:33<sup>89</sup>, Mark 7:9,<sup>90</sup> as well a number of texts in the gospel of John.<sup>91</sup> These few examples are enough to give a representative sampling of irony evident in the sayings of Jesus.

Invective/Ridicule/Denunciation.      Invective (and associated terms) is defined as “direct [in contrast to the indirection of irony] denunciation by the use of derogatory

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<sup>85</sup>Trueblood, Humor, 102,93; Dawsey, Lukan Voice, 153.

<sup>86</sup>Trueblood, Humor, 91, Dawsey, Lukan Voice, 153.

<sup>87</sup>Camery-Hoggatt, Irony, 181.

<sup>88</sup>William Phipps, The Wisdom and Wit of Rabbi Jesus (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 96.

<sup>89</sup>E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (Grand Rapids Baker, [1848]), 811.

<sup>90</sup>Robert Stein, The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1978), 23.

<sup>91</sup>A composite list of Johannine passages given ironic interpretations is supplied by J.E. Botha: John 1:10,11,45,46; 2:9-11,18-20; 3:1,2,10; 4: 10-12,29-38; 5:7,18,39,40,45-47; 6:30,31,42,51,52,66-68; 7:3,4,15,19,20, 23,26,27,28,29,35,36,41,45,46,47,48,50,51,52; 8:19,22,41,47,48,52,53,57; 9:16,24,27,28,29,40,41; 10:32,33, 11:16,47,48,49,50; 12:4-6,19,25,42; 13:29,36-38; 16:16,29,30-32; 18:1-8,17-19,29,30,33,34,38,39; 19:3,5,7,12, 14,15,19-22,28,29,38-42; 20:14-15. “Johannine Irony”, 2:214.

epithets....”<sup>92</sup> Such denunciation, however, is not simply malevolent abuse. As Frye explains, “Now invective is never the expression of merely personal hatred, whatever the motivation for it may be....For effective attack we must reach some kind of impersonal level, and that commits the attacker... to a moral standard.”<sup>93</sup> This kind of ridicule serves the higher purposes of satire in general but may run the risk of “crossing the line” into mean-spirited personal attack and alienating the audience in the process. Possible examples of invective in the sayings of Jesus would be the “woe” sayings of Matthew 23:13-32 and Luke 11:42-52.<sup>94</sup>

Sarcasm (literally “flesh-tearing”), in its relation to satire, seeks to resolve an incongruity for a higher purpose. It may be defined as “... the blatant use of apparent praise for dispraise.”<sup>95</sup> Sarcasm is less abusive than invective in that it employs inversion as a means of deflection so that its sting is a little more indirect.<sup>96</sup> An example from the words of Jesus would include his retort to the Pharisees, “...It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are ill. But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Matt. 9:12,13).

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<sup>92</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 82. Randall identifies the two main elements of invective as the degree of directness of statement and the harshness of the message “Satire,” 27.

<sup>93</sup>Frye, “Satire,” 18,19.

<sup>94</sup>Harry Boonstra, “Satire,” 40. It is difficult to find any written treatment that connects the “woe” oracle with invective although they serve the same purpose--that of denunciation.

<sup>95</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 82.

<sup>96</sup>Randall, “Satire,” 29.

Burlesque. Rather than the common understanding of burlesque as a bawdy variety show including slapstick and striptease,<sup>97</sup> in literary circles it refers to a satirical form. “The essential quality that makes for burlesque is the discrepancy between subject matter and style. That is, a style ordinarily dignified may be used for [a] nonsensical matter, or a style very nonsensical may be used to ridicule a weighty subject.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore it is possible to view burlesque in terms of high burlesque or parody where the weighty style is used in relation to more inconsequential subject matter and low burlesque or travesty where a weighty subject is addressed in a lesser style.<sup>99</sup> Caricature is another form of this exaggerated imitation in that it targets the qualities of a person to produce a ridiculous effect.<sup>100</sup> Matthew 16:2-4 would be an example of parody. Jesus mimics the meteorological competence of the Pharisees and Sadducees only to show their incompetence in interpreting the signs of the times. In the words of D. A. Carson, “the proof that they cannot discern the “signs” is that they ask for a sign (v.1)”<sup>101</sup> Travesty might be seen in Jesus’ use of a children’s ditty to indict those who refused to accept either John the Baptist or himself (Matt 11:16:19; Luke 7:31-34). Jesus uses caricature in highlighting the hypocrisy of the religious establishment; for example, “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matt. 23:24) and the excesses of those

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<sup>97</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 19.

<sup>98</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 65.

<sup>99</sup>Cf. Abrams, Glossary, 17-19; Holman and Harman, Handbook, 65,344.

<sup>100</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 71.

<sup>101</sup>D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 361.



who make performances of their piety (Matt. 6:2,5,16).<sup>102</sup>

### Humorous use of literary devices

**Hyperbole.** This figure of speech which is Greek for “overshooting” is defined as “bold overstatement, or extravagant exaggeration of fact, either for serious or comic effect”<sup>103</sup>

Examples of humorous hyperbole abound in the sayings of Jesus: “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3);<sup>104</sup> “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25); and, speaking of camels, “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (Matt. 23:24)!”<sup>105</sup>

**Meiosis.** Contrary to hyperbole, meiosis, from the Greek meaning “lessening,” “deliberately represents something as much less in magnitude or importance that it really is.”<sup>106</sup> Instances of meiosis would include: “He [the master] does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he” (Luke 17:9)?; and “...It is not good to

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<sup>102</sup>Phipps Wisdom, 93; Robert Tannehill, The Sword of His Mouth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 52.

<sup>103</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 75.

<sup>104</sup>Bullard, “Biblical Humor,” 99.

<sup>105</sup>Robert H. Stein, The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 11,12; also Phipps, Wisdom, 89.

<sup>106</sup>Abrams, Glossary, 75.

take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26).<sup>107</sup>

Riddle. Riddles are questions which not only display the verbal and intellectual ingenuity and playfulness of the one who poses them but also requires the same of those who would be able to answer them. Jesus' statement in John 2:19, "...Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" is in the form of a riddle.<sup>108</sup>

Paradox. Defined as "a statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd may actually be well founded or true,"<sup>109</sup> a paradox is a well suited vehicle for expressing arresting truths. Jesus' statement, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead...."(Luke 9:60a) could be termed paradoxical.<sup>110</sup> Other paradoxes would include: Mark 4:22,25; 6:4;8:35;9:35;10:43-45;12:41-44; Matthew 5:5;6:17;7:15; 18:3,4;21:31; 23:11,24,27,28; Luke 4:23;12:3; 14:11,24; 18:14.<sup>111</sup>

Proverb. "A saying that briefly and memorably expresses some recognized truth about life; originally preserved by oral tradition, though it may be transmitted in written literature

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<sup>107</sup>E.W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1898]), 156,157.

<sup>108</sup>George R. Beasley-Murray, John Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 40,41; also Stein who lists: Matt. 10:34; 11:11,12; 13:52; 19:12; Mk. 2:19; 9:12,13; 14:48; Lk. 13:32,33; 22:36 as other riddles in the gospels. Method, 18,19.

<sup>109</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 342; cf. Abrams, Glossary, 119.

<sup>110</sup>Küschel, Laughter, 77.

<sup>111</sup>Stein, Method, 19,20.

as well.”<sup>112</sup> Jesus’ statements, “...A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:14b) and “... follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19) can be understood as humorous proverbs.<sup>113</sup>

**Metaphor.** Although metaphor functions in much broader terms than solely humorous ones, it can be employed for humorous ends. Metaphor is defined as “an analogy identifying one object with an other and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.”<sup>114</sup> Jesus’ reference to Herod as “that fox” (Luke 13:32) would be an example of metaphorical humour,<sup>115</sup> as would his epithets, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14a) and “You serpents, you brood of vipers...” (Matt. 23:33).<sup>116</sup>

**Simile.** Another device with a breadth of function, a simile is “a figure in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed...”<sup>117</sup> Humorous similes in the sayings of Jesus would include: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16) and “Woe to you, scribes and

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<sup>112</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 381.

<sup>113</sup>Bullard, “Biblical Humor,” 97. Stein lists: Matt. 6:21,22,23,24,27,34; 7:12,17,18; 8:22; 10:16,24,26,27; 11:19; 12:30,34,35; 15:14; 24:28; 25:29; 26:52; Mk. 2:17,21,22,27; 3:24,27; 4:21,22,25; 7:15; 8:35,36,37; 9:40,50; 10:25,27,31,43,44; Lk. 4:23; 5:39; 9:62; 11:47; 12:15,48; 14:11; 16:10; 20:18; Jn. 3:3,12,20; 4:23; 12:25,36; 15:14 as proverbs. Not all are necessarily humorous. Method, 19,18.

<sup>114</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 287.

<sup>115</sup>Bullard, “Biblical Humor,” 97.

<sup>116</sup>Stein, Method, 16.

<sup>117</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 445.

Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27).<sup>118</sup>

A Fortiori. From the Latin, a fortiori refers to the kind of argument that moves from the lesser to the greater. Granting a certain fact, it becomes even more compelling on the larger scale.<sup>119</sup> Examples include: "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:9:11) and, "It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!" (Matt. 10:25).<sup>120</sup>

Rhetorical Question. In asking a question for which there is a rather obvious answer, the speaker is more interested in increasing the rhetorical impact of his point rather than to induce the obligatory response.<sup>121</sup> Examples of Jesus' employment of this technique would

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<sup>118</sup>Stein lists: Matt. 6:29; 12:40; 13:40,43; 24:27; 25:32,33; Mk. 10:15; 14:48; Lk. 10:18; 11:36; 13:34; 21:34,35; 22:31; Jn. 15:6 as examples of similies in the gospels. Method, 15.

<sup>119</sup>Harry Shaw, Dictionary of Literacy Terms York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), n.p.

<sup>120</sup>Stein lists: Matt. 6:23,26,28-30; 10:28,29-31; 12:11,12; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 13:15,16; 14:1-6; 18:1-8; Jn. 13:14 as examples of a fortiori. Method, 20,21.

<sup>121</sup>Holman and Harmon, Handbook, 407.

include Matthew 7:9-11,<sup>122</sup> and “...What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothes?...” (Matt. 11: 7b,8a).<sup>123</sup>

Counter Question. Another use of the question, but with a contrasting rhetorical effect is the counter question, designed as a polemical device to silence one’s opponents.<sup>124</sup> Jesus is shown using this approach in Matthew 21:24,25 and 22:18,19.

### **Purposes of Humour in the Ministry of Jesus**

Evidences of humour abound in the ministry of Jesus. Close inspection of the gospels would support the perspective of this study, that Jesus often used humorous devices in his preaching and teaching. Far from being a radical or revisionist perspective on Jesus, it is an attempt to view his ministry in relation to his own cultural context. Jesus’ use of humour is not without precedent and in one sense places him in continuity with others chosen to speak the message of God. What remains to be explored are the purposes Jesus had in mind when he employed humorous devices.

The exact rhetorical strategies for each instance when Jesus used humour must be

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<sup>122</sup>Stein, Method, 25. Stein also lists: Matt. 5:46,47; 6:25-30; 7:3,4; 10:29; 11:23; 12:34; 14:31; 18:12; 23:17-19,33; 24:45; 26:53,54; Mk. 4:13,30,40; 7:18,19; 8:12,17,18,21; 9:50; 11:17; 12:9,24-26; 13:2; 14:6,37,41,48; Lk. 2:49; 6:34,39,46; 11:5-7,40; 12:51,56; 13:2-4,20; 14:28,31; 16:11,12; 17:7-9,17,18; 18:7,8; 22:27. Ibid.

<sup>123</sup>Raymond Bailey, Jesus the Preacher (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 58; and Bullard, “Biblical Humor,” 103.

<sup>124</sup>Boonstra, “Satire,” 40; Stein’s list includes: Matt. 12:11,12,27-29; Mk. 2:6-9,19,25,26; 3:1-4,23,24; 10:3; 11:27-33; 12:14-16; Lk. 7:39-42; 10:26; 13:15,16; 14:1-5. Method, 24.

determined on the basis of exegetical work on each passage. A broad statement can be made, however, as to the general intent for his use of humour.<sup>125</sup> The general consensus is that biblical humour in general and Jesus' humour in particular is not an end in itself but serves the higher purposes of truth.<sup>126</sup> To conclude with Bullard:

Where humor is observed in the sayings of Jesus..., it is always used to heighten or call attention to a sober and often lofty insight.... The ability to perceive the ludicrous was a property of biblical writers and characters, and their use of humor, however grim, was to indicate the incongruities between the actual and the ideal...a stimulus to the knowing smile—never the raucous laugh.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>There are modern attempts to devise personal strategies for the use of humour. Cf. Frank J. MacHovec, Humor. Theory, History, Applications (Springfield: C.C. Thomas, 1988), 20-23; David Kaufer, "Irony and Rhetorical Strategy," Philosophy and Rhetoric 10 (Spring 1977):100-105; and Debra Long and Arthur Graesser, "Wit and Humor in Discourse Processing," Discourse Processes 11 (1988):52-57. While helpful in assuring contemporary uses of humour, they are of limited use in relation to the biblical texts.

<sup>126</sup>Cf. Elton Trueblood, The Humor of Christ (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1964), 51; Gary Webster, Laughter in the Bible (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960), 105-16; James Dawsey, The Lukan Voice (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 153-55; Boonstra, "Satire," 42-44; Radday "Missing the Humour" 32; D.W. Sandifer, "The Humor of the Absurd in the Parables of Jesus," in SBL Seminar Papers, ed. K. H. Richards (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 287; and G. Welton Gaddy, God's Clowns (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 19.

<sup>127</sup>Bullard, "Biblical Humor," 206-11.

## CHAPTER 3

### RHETORIC AS METHODOLOGY: THE RHETORICO-CONTEXTUAL METHOD

While the faculty of eloquence, which is of great value in urging either evil or justice, is in itself indifferent, why should it not be obtained for the uses of the good in the service of the truth if the evil usurp it for the winning of perverse and vain causes in defense of iniquity and error?

St. Augustine

#### Introduction

Passing from foundational and theoretical matters toward more practical ones, an exegetical methodology with the ability to bear the weight of this study's assertions is needed. Several issues are at stake in this shift from "how come?" to "how to." One such issue has to do with critical methodologies as a whole. If there is a general distrust of these methodologies, how is one to be sure that the choice of any one of them might not prejudice the study or sway the results in favor of a theological perspective deemed unacceptable by those participating in the workshop? It will be beyond the parameters of this study and its workshop to deal with general questions regarding the use of critical methodologies. Therefore, any such discussions must transpire outside the present focus but may be guided by at least a representative sampling of conservative works evaluating the respective critical

methods.<sup>1</sup>

A second issue is more germane in that it deals with the choice of methodologies—that of rhetorical criticism. What is it that qualifies rhetorical criticism as the method of choice for this thesis-project? What qualifies a largely Greco-Roman method as an appropriate means by which to understand Holy Scripture? When Tertullian framed his famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”, he voiced this perpetual query for all believers who ponder the relationship between the Christian faith and secular methodology. While eschewing the impact of Greek philosophy upon Christian faith, he was inadvertently undercutting his own statement, in that he made it in the form of a rhetorical question, a part of the Greek rhetorical tradition. The above epigraph illustrates the necessity for the Christian believer to understand the relationship between sacred Scripture and secular methodology. Not every believer appears as enlightened as Augustine, who was both a teacher of rhetoric and a homiletician in his lifetime, when he wrote what is quoted as the epigram above.

The employment of rhetorical criticism as the preferred exegetical methodology will be supported by two lines of argument. The first is historical in nature and will trace the development of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism in relation to the hermeneutical and homiletical ministries of the church. The second approach will be more conceptual and will

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<sup>1</sup>A partial listing of these works would include: G. E. Ladd, The New Testament and Criticism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds. Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); David A. Black and David S. Dockery, eds. New Testament Criticism and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds. Scripture and Truth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds. Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); and I. Howard Marshall, ed. New Testament Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).



demonstrate the exegetical sufficiency of rhetorical criticism. A basic understanding of the canons of rhetoric is necessary as is comprehending the adaptation of George E. Kennedy's five stage model of rhetorical criticism proposed in this study. Since the final concern of this thesis-project is homiletical, the description of 'rhetorico-contextual' will be defended as an appropriate description of the entire hermeneutical and homiletical process. A few summary remarks will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology.

### **The Historical Interaction Between Rhetoric and Homiletics**

#### **The Development of Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism**

Rhetoric as a discipline predates the Christian Church by several centuries. It therefore forms part of the background to the milieu in which the first Christian preachers proclaimed the gospel. Classical rhetoric has Homeric precursors as well a multitude of other national or regional approaches such as those noted in Old Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> Many locate its genesis in fifth century B.C.E. Sicily where it developed as a way in which Sicilian citizens might defend themselves successfully in court. Among those first to develop the discipline were the Sophists. Their skepticism regarding philosophical absolutes led them to concentrate upon human opinion and how it might be influenced. The rather negative appraisal given to the Sophists and the coining of the pejorative phrase 'mere sophistry' came about not due necessarily to their vanity and/or frivolity but their failure to combine skill in the verbal arts with a concern for the truth of the speech or the character of the speaker.

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. George Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Traditions from Ancient Times to Modern Times (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 120-25.

Isocrates (436-338 B.C.E.), Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) and Plato (428-348 B.C.E.) were critical of the Sophists' emphases and contributed greatly to history's negative appraisal of sophistry.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning rhetors had to contend with the impression, whether rightly or wrongly given, that they were concerned with mere matters of style or verbal ornamentation. The Stoic Epictetus writes, "But this faculty of speaking and of ornamenting words, if there is any such peculiar facility, what else does it do, when there happens to be discourse about a thing, than to ornament the words and arrange them as hairdressers do the hair?"<sup>4</sup>

Plato was ill-disposed toward the discipline because of his preference for the 'heavenly perfections' (or the sureties brought through the facility of philosophical reflection) over the mundane and fleeting matters of human opinion. He placed the 'knack' of persuasive speech over against the analytical processes of philosophy. Aristotle, however understood them to have a complementary role. Considering rhetoric to be the counterpart of philosophy, he argued that rhetoric was a legitimate way in which to approach practical matters such as ethics, politics and poetics whereas the more theoretical areas of physics, metaphysics and logic were better understood through analytical means. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) then gave rhetoric its first systematic treatment. Much of what is now considered the basic categories of classical rhetoric were coined and explained by Aristotle.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Phyllis Trible, Rhetorical Criticism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Chaim Perelman, "The New Rhetoric," in Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. Lloyd F. Britzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 115.

<sup>5</sup>David S. Cunningham, Faithful Persuasion. In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 15-18.

Rhetoric passed from the Greeks to the Romans. Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) built on the foundation laid by Aristotle and himself wrote at least seven works on rhetoric. By his time the five basic principles or canons of rhetoric were well known: invention (*inventio*), structure or arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*pronunciatio/actio*).<sup>6</sup> Quintilian (40–95 C.E.) systematized rhetoric into a form of pedagogy and wrote rhetorical manuals which served as classics for centuries. The Roman ideal of the rhetor was a “good person speaking well.”<sup>7</sup>

The rhetorical tradition had significant impact upon the Christian Church in that the hellenization of the Mediterranean World included training in rhetoric. Palestine was not exempt from the training for citizenship in the Hellenistic ephebate which included lessons in rhetoric. Added to that were the many private Roman rhetorical schools found throughout the Empire, including Palestine, where youths could receive an extensive education in rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it is hardly surprising that Tertullian (c. 160–220 C.E.) (Despite his faux pas mentioned above), John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 C.E.) and Augustine (354–430 C.E.) among other early leaders had substantial backgrounds in rhetoric and brought their talents to bear in the proclamation of the gospel. Augustine set the standard for Christian preachers by showing the worth of speaking well in service of the gospel in Book IV of On Christian

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<sup>6</sup>Craig A. Loscalzo, “Rhetoric,” in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>George Kennedy, review of Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith: An Inquiry, by James L. Kinneavy, Philosophy and Rhetoric 22 (1990): 77. Cf. also George Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric, 130. For examples of rhetorical argumentation in rabbinical writings, cf. Alan J. Avery-Peck, “Rhetorical Argumentation in Early Rabbinical Pronouncement Stories,” Semeia 64 (1994):49–72.

Doctrine, the first homiletics 'textbook'. He advocated rhetoric in the service of persuading believers toward living a holy and righteous life imbuing Cicero's threefold aim of the rhetor "to teach, to delight, and to persuade" with Christian meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Rhetoric suffered a rather serious period of decline for a number of centuries. The time after the great Latin rhetors saw little progress but only minor adjustments to their established systems. Despite a brief revival in the Renaissance, rhetoric was static and survived only as a servant to pedagogy.<sup>10</sup>

Three key developments had long standing consequences for rhetorical studies. One was the proliferation of 'new rhetorics' in the common vernacular replacing the hegemony of the classical Latin rhetorical handbooks. Another was the invention of moveable print and the third was the Ramist reform of the liberal arts curriculum. Peter Ramus (1515-72 C.E.) separated grammar and rhetoric as the cosmetic arts from 'True Reason'.<sup>11</sup> The spirit of modern rationalism had a devastating effect upon rhetoric and substantiated the common opinion that it dealt only with matters of ornamentation rather than significant content. This paved the way for rationalists like Rene Descartes (1596-1650 C.E.) who eschewed rhetoric in his desire for mathematical certainty. The rhetoricians of this modern era began to reflect this Zeitgeist and the sermons of this era followed suit. They tended to be literary

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<sup>9</sup>Augustine On Christian Doctrine VI. 17; cf. Loscalzo, "Rhetoric."

<sup>10</sup>Cunningham, Persuasion, 19.

<sup>11</sup>Wilhelm Wuellner, "Biblical Exegesis in the Light of the History and Historicity of Rhetoric and the Nature of the Rhetoric of Religion," in Rhetoric and the New Testament, eds. Stanley Porter and Thomas Olbricht (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 496,497; cf. also Cunningham, Persuasion, 21.

masterpieces fashioned for the mind's eye and devoid of much pathos. With elaborate structures only discernable to the literary eye, these sermons championed the modern spirit in service of the gospel. Influential rhetoricians of the period tended to be clerics as well. These included George Campbell (1709-96 C.E.), Hugh Blair (1718-1800 C.E.) and Richard Whatley (1787-1863 C.E.) in Britain and John Broadus (1827-95 C.E.) in the United States. For the most part, homiletics was the handmaid of rhetoric during this period and only with the establishment of the Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1871 did homiletics start to develop its own North American voice.<sup>12</sup>

The revival of classical rhetoric's emphasis upon persuasion only began in the present century. The move from recognizing rhetoric as ornamentation to that of persuasion and argumentation was a gradual one but succeeded in re-establishment of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism (which is defined as "the study of man's past attempts to change the behavior of fellow man primarily through verbal symbols")<sup>13</sup> as legitimate disciplines. The work of rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897-1993 C.E.) and the publication of The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in 1969 as well as The Uses of Argument by S. E. Toulmin in 1958 helped to broaden and deepen the influence of rhetoric in more recent times. As the modern spirit of optimism began to be replaced by postmodern relativism, rhetoric was seen increasingly to deal with matters more

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<sup>12</sup>Don M. Wardlaw, "Homiletics and Preaching in North America," in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching.

<sup>13</sup>Charles J. Stewart, "Historical Survey: Rhetorical Criticism in Twentieth Century America," in Explorations in Rhetorical Criticism, eds. G. P. Mohrmann, Charles J. Stewart and Donovan J. Ochs (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 1.

substantial than mere style. With language seen at least as a reflection of reality to some and as a source of reality to others, rhetoric took on more significance. It began to deal with metaphysical, political and social issues and therefore could be ignored no longer. The option of dealing with texts in isolation from their situational contexts and their purposes of persuasion vanished.<sup>14</sup>

During the present century, homiletics began to pull away from rhetoric to establish its own identity and after having done so, has begun to move back towards it in a number of ways. Rhetorical considerations are important for homileticians in regard to determining the thought processes and consciousness of the congregation; recognizing and understanding the 'flow' and meaning of Scripture; and deciding upon matters of sermon form and ways in which the sermon may be communicated in effective ways and means.<sup>15</sup> One point of intersection between contemporary rhetoric and homiletics is that of biblical rhetorical criticism, to which we now turn.

### The Development of Biblical Rhetorical Criticism

It is somewhat pre-emptory to sketch the history of a discipline still in its infancy. Indeed it is the relative novelty of this approach that has both attracted those who saw its potential and bewildered those who saw some of the confusion and lack of unanimity among

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Ibid, 10-25 and James L. Kinneavy, "Contemporary Rhetoric," in The Present State of Scholarship in Historical and Contemporary Rhetoric, ed. Winifred B. Horner (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 174-84.

<sup>15</sup>Don M. Wardlaw, "Homiletics and Preaching re North America," in Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching and Loscalzo, "Rhetoric." Cf. Fred B. Craddock, "Is There Still Room for Rhetoric?" in Preaching on the Brink, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66-74 for a contemporary call to use the tools of rhetoric in homiletics.

its current practitioners. Despite its nascence, it is not without precursors. Augustine published works applying rhetorical methodology to Scripture as did the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735 C.E.). The Protestant Reformers focused on the rhetoric of Paul. Notable among the contributors are Martin Luther (1483-1546 C.E.), Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1469-1536 C.E.), Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560 C.E.) and John Calvin (1509-64 C.E.). Little significant work was done until Germany became the center of rhetorical analysis of the New Testament from the late eighteenth century through until early in the present century.<sup>16</sup> It is a matter of agreement among most that the current practice of biblical rhetorical criticism can be traced to James Muilenburg's Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968. The address entitled "Form Criticism and Beyond" was a call to go past the atomizing tendencies of form criticism which was preoccupied with individual pericopes and to view texts more holistically and aesthetically. Muilenburg and his students were among the first to apply this new supplementary approach to the Old Testament writings and Amos Wilder pioneered the effort in relation to the New Testament with the publishing of his Early Christian Rhetoric (1964 and 1971). It was Muilenburg who coined the term 'rhetorical criticism' and, as with all pioneers, reactions are mixed as to his success. He was criticized by some as being preoccupied with the stylistic aspects of Scripture to the neglect of its social and political implications<sup>17</sup> which is somewhat unfair in that his primary role in the development of

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<sup>16</sup>Duane F. Watson and Alan J. Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 101-105.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 11-13; Burton Mack, Rhetoric and the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 13; and C. Clifton Black, "Keeping Up with Recent studies. XVI:

rhetorical criticism was to give preliminary direction to an infant discipline.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually different scholars took this trail blazing work and went in differing directions with it. Along with Muilenburg's call, they were heeding the work of contemporary rhetoricians like Wayne Booth, Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman who were advocating a recognition of all discourse as being persuasive in some way and recommended an increased rhetorical concern for the social implications of a discourse. In relation to rhetorical study of the New Testament in particular, since the Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks had a greater impact upon its literary milieu, the scholars have been giving increased attention to this field leading to their first international conference held in Heidelberg in 1992.<sup>19</sup>

In an insightful history of the development of rhetorical criticism to date, Phyllis Trible notes it has developed and continues to do so in concert with developments in classical rhetoric (i.e. the 'New Rhetoric'), literary critical theory, literary study of the Bible and form criticism.<sup>20</sup>

This has allowed some to take the rhetorical criticism of the Bible in the direction of a repristination of the classical emphasis upon persuasion (e.g. George Kennedy), others more toward reader-response theory (eg. Dale Patrick, Allen Schult and Jerry Camery-Hoggatt)

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Rhetorical Criticism and Biblical Interpretation," Expository Times 100 (April 1989): 254.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 48-52.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, eds. Rhetoric and the New Testament. Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>Rhetorical Criticism, 25-87. Cf. also D.F Watson, "Rhetorical Criticism," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.



and others to move more toward practical and social criticism (eg. Burton Mack).<sup>21</sup> Vernon Robbins has developed a rather eclectic approach which he terms socio-rhetorical interpretation. He has applied the approach to the Gospel of Mark<sup>22</sup> and has published study guides for the gospels<sup>23</sup> and epistles.<sup>24</sup> With the numbers of divergent approaches to this fledgling discipline, it seems obvious that biblical rhetorical criticism displays the same profusion of alternatives as its secular counterpart with no clear leader declared.

In sum, the result to date has been a wide diversity of approaches to rhetorical criticism of the Bible, each showing a debt to Muilenburg's ground-breaking work and each building on the centuries-long relationship between the study of rhetoric and the Christian disciplines of preaching and teaching.

### **The Rhetorico-Contextual Method**

#### Rhetorico-Contextual Criticism in Relation to Other Methods

Once insight into the historical pedigree of rhetorical criticism has been gained, it remains to examine its conceptual framework. Part of this understanding comes from placing it within the field of other methodologies. McKnight and Malbon warn:

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<sup>21</sup>Black, "Rhetorical Criticism," 255,56; Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 49 (July 1987): 453.

<sup>22</sup>Vernon K. Robbins, Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress/Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup>Vernon K. Robbins, Exploring the Texture of Texts. A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Intl, 1996).

<sup>24</sup>Vernon K. Robbins, The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology (London: Routledge, 1996).

Even when we concentrate upon one critical methodology, we are aware of the interpenetration of methodologies, the interpenetration of world views supporting those methodologies, and the socio-political contexts influencing those world views. We are also aware of the local, ad hoc and provisional nature of our own contributions.<sup>25</sup>

Especially since no one has promoted rhetorical criticism to the necessary exclusion of other methods, its relation to them is important to understand.

Form criticism has affinities to rhetorical criticism in that it is concerned with the complementarity of form and content and in determining meaningful units in the text (pericopae) as well as their Sitz im Leben. The difference comes in the fact that form criticism tends to have an atomizing effect upon a text in that it tends to spend more time dealing with the background, settings and forms of each unit. It cannot see the forest for the trees (which, in essence, was Muilenburg's criticism in his programmatic presidential address).<sup>26</sup> While contemporary developments in form criticism have addressed this weakness to some extent,<sup>27</sup> it still holds true that rhetorical criticism has a greater appreciation for the entire extant text.<sup>28</sup>

Redaction criticism shares a concern with rhetorical criticism for the extant text as a

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<sup>25</sup>Edgar McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Introduction", in The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament, eds. E. McKnight and E. Malbon (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Intl, 1984), 25.

<sup>26</sup>George Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>27</sup>Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 81-84.

<sup>28</sup>For an evangelical evaluation of form criticism, cf. D. L. Bock, "Form Criticism," in New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 175-96.

whole but is more interested in those parts of the text where the influence of the redactor is more obvious. The major concern of redaction criticism is theological and tends to deal with content over form whereas rhetorical criticism attempts to keep them in balance.<sup>29</sup> Canonical criticism also looks to the extant form of the text but, at least in the way used by James A. Sanders, is more interested in how ancient traditions are adapted for use within their new contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Literary criticism shares the concern of rhetorical criticism for the extant text but deals with the text as a literary product. Rhetorical criticism is primarily concerned with speech acts. To study past speech acts does make one dependent upon written texts but the primary difference is to view these texts as they were meant to be heard (i.e. their oral/aural qualities).<sup>31</sup> While there are some who do not distinguish between literary and rhetorical criticism, they ignore, purposefully or otherwise, the peculiar developments in rhetorical criticism or make reference to the discipline in its early years as practiced by Muilenburg and his followers. Followers of the 'New Literary Criticism' differ from rhetorical critics because of the former's insistence upon interpreting the text itself to the exclusion of the other

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<sup>29</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 4. Cf also Martin Warner, "The Fourth Gospel's Art of Persuasion," in The Bible as Rhetoric, ed. Martin Warner (London: Routledge, 1990), 155-57.

<sup>30</sup>James A. Sanders, Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 37; cf. also M. C. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism", in New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, eds. D.A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1991), 255-94.

<sup>31</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 5. Cf. also A.B. Spencer, "Literary Criticism," in New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, eds. D.A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 227-54.

'worlds' affecting the text.

Proponents of narrative criticism, which can be grouped under the larger umbrella of literary criticism, have commonalities with rhetorical critics. The canonical shape of the text is taken seriously and narrative techniques are used to understand the movement and meaning of the text. However narrative critics often stop at an aesthetic appreciation of the text rather than an understanding of its persuasive intent. What is more is that narrative techniques do not seem as suited to as many literary genre as rhetorical techniques.<sup>32</sup>

Structuralism's emphasis upon the 'deep' structures of the text to the exclusion of its historical context and authorial intention ignores the diachronic aspects of interpretation. For this reason, rhetorical critics may find structuralism wanting since rhetorical criticism can be viewed as a juncture of diachronic and synchronic methods.<sup>33</sup>

Poststructural approaches to interpretation move beyond the literary approaches to posit the meaning of a text in the understanding of each individual reader. Reader-response theory focuses upon the response of the 'first-time' reader of a text where each one would be called upon to fill in the gaps in any text with his/her own preunderstanding. While such an approach does justice to what is known about the original communication of these texts--read aloud to a gathered group--its emphasis upon the reader to the neglect of what is

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<sup>32</sup>William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (Waco: Word Books, 1993), 432, 433.

<sup>33</sup>Martin Kessler, "A Methodological Setting for Rhetorical Criticism," in Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature, eds. D.J. A. Clines, D.M. Gunn, and A. J. Hauser (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 7-II. For evangelical appraisals of structuralism cf. Klien, Blomberg and Hubbard, Biblical Interpretation, 428-32 and B. Stancil, "Structuralism," in New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, eds. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 319-44.

'behind' and 'in' the text allows it to flounder in a sea of relativity.<sup>34</sup> The reader's role in interpretation is not to be neglected,<sup>35</sup> but it requires the diachronic aspect in order to escape complete subjectivity.

Deconstruction seems to be the contemporary reincarnation of Nietzschean nihilism which attempts to play different parts of a text against each other in order to undermine any fixed meaning in it. This anarchistic and relativistic approach despairs of any meaning in the universe and therefore approaches every text with the assumption that it undermines or deconstructs itself.<sup>36</sup> Rhetorical criticism, which endeavors to understand attempts at persuasion, has little in common with this approach, and what is more, a full scale adoption of deconstruction would mean the end of rhetorical criticism and of humour, for that matter (when despair rules, all that is left of humour is cruel mockery).

What seems evident from this cursory overview is that rhetorical criticism is capable of cooperating with as many other critical methodologies as the interpreter deems necessary or valid. This flexible nature allows rhetorical criticism to be used by interpreters from a

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<sup>34</sup>Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Biblical Interpretation, 438-40.

<sup>35</sup>As a matter of fact, some have developed rhetorical criticism in the direction of reader-response theory to the point where they are viewed as synonymous (eg. Jerry Camery—Hoggatt, Speaking of God (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995); Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990); and E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press Intl, 1989), 240-51). For a positive treatment of the role of the reader in biblical interpretation from an evangelical perspective, cf. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Biblical Interpretation, 138-45; and W. Randolph Tate, Biblical Interpretation 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997).

<sup>36</sup>Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Biblical Interpretation, 440-43. For an introduction to poststructural critical studies in the gospels, cf. Stephen D. Moore, Literary Criticism and the Gospels (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

broad spectrum of critical persuasions including the target group for this thesis-project.

### The Terminology of Classical Rhetoric

To grasp the rhetorico-contextual model proposed for this study, an elementary understanding of rhetorical nomenclature is necessary.<sup>37</sup> There are three basic species of rhetoric which are interdependent and interpenetrate each other. Judicial or forensic rhetoric is concerned with persuading an audience, particularly in a legal setting, regarding a matter of truth or justice. Its time orientation is past since it deals with the evidence being presented in order to bring about the desired verdict. The positive form of this rhetoric would be defense (apologia) and the negative would be prosecution or accusation.<sup>38</sup> Deliberative or hortatory rhetoric seeks to persuade the audience or give advice. It deals more with the future because the advice is normally aimed at informing future thought and action, although some emphasis upon the present time is appropriate as well. Positively, it is viewed as persuasion, negatively as dissuasion and its end is the expedient or inexpedient, possible or impossible, necessary or unnecessary, advantageous or harmful.<sup>39</sup> Epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric is ceremonial in nature and is designed either to praise or blame something or someone to the end of its affirmation or rejection. The general time frame is the present since the person or object is being evaluated by what is presently taking place. In its positive

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<sup>37</sup>For the sake of those participating in the proposed workshop, the majority of the following material can be found in chart form in Appendix A.

<sup>38</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 19,20; Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 9; Duane F. Watson, Invention, Arrangement and Style: Rhetorical Criticism of Jude and 2 Peter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>39</sup>Watson, Invention, 10.

expression it is encomium and in the negative it is invective.<sup>40</sup>

The five canons of classical rhetoric were mentioned above in the treatment of the historical development of rhetoric. Only the first three of the five (i.e. invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*) and style (*elocutio*)) relate to the four factors that comprise the rhetorical situation of any *written* text: a speaker or writer, an audience, a discourse, and the occasion or context of the discourse.<sup>41</sup>

Invention (*inventio*) deals with the planning of the content and the arguments to be used in the discourse. The desired end of the discourse would be related to the three modes of artistic proof (*ethos* or the speaker's character, (which was considered to be the most persuasive), *pathos* or feelings and *logos* or message) in that it would either desire to inform, please or move the audience to action.<sup>42</sup>

Two modes of reasoning spring out of *logos*: example (or inductive reasoning) and argument (deductive reasoning). Examples could be drawn from history, fables, comparisons, poetry and court records. The point comes from using comparative, contrasting and *a fortiori* arguments. Arguments were made by making deductions from accepted axioms.<sup>43</sup>

There are three types of argument, the syllogism, the epicheireme, and the enthymeme. The rarest is the syllogism which is composed of a major premise which gives the underlying principle of the syllogism, the minor premise which supports the point of the major premise,

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.; Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 9.

<sup>41</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 15.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup>Watson, Invention, 16,17.

and the conclusion. More common is the epicheireme which also consists of three parts; the major premise, the minor premise as proof of the major premise and the conclusion. What differentiates the epicheireme from the syllogism is the former may be built upon statements that are not necessarily deemed axiomatic. An enthymeme could be termed as an incomplete syllogism since it is composed by a proposition and supporting reason. The enthymeme allows the point to be made indirectly, and similar to the epicheireme, deals with matters which are not always axiomatic. Deliberative rhetoric tends to depend upon *ethos* and the use of examples whereas judicial rhetoric often uses the enthymeme.<sup>44</sup>

In either inductive or deductive argumentation, the speaker would use topics (*topoi*) or 'places' where he could get his material. These *topoi* were divided into two kinds (common and specific). Common topics applied to all three species of rhetoric and all classes of things and included: the possible-impossible, past fact, future facts, more-less, and greater-lesser. Specific topics were more particular in that they related to certain classes of things and were directly suited to the species of rhetoric. Judicial categories of specific topics included: the just-unjust, and equity-inequity. For deliberative rhetoric they were: happiness-unhappiness, expediency-harm, honor-dishonor, necessary-unnecessary, the good and degrees thereof. Epideictic topics included the noble-disgraceful and virtue-vice.<sup>45</sup>

A good portion of the strategy of rhetorical discourse could be summed up as the way in which the speaker's thesis was amplified by the use of his various 'topics.'

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 18,19.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 19,20. For a more detailed description of the various ways to construct rhetorical arguments, cf. Watson, Invention, 14-20.



Arrangement or structure (*dispositio*) deals with matters of organization and structure so that the discourse as a whole might be persuasive. Each form of rhetoric has its own internal logic and structure. The pattern found in many judicial discourses is sixfold (or possibly fourfold — a discussion going back to the time of Quintilian)<sup>46</sup>: *proem* or *exordium*, an introduction that seeks to gain the goodwill or sympathy of the audience; *narratio*, the background information is given and the thesis to be defended is stated; *partitio*, where the various aspects of the thesis to be proven are listed, sometimes in the form of the speaker's own arguments and often in the form of his opponent's; *probatio* or *confirmatio*, the presentation of the proofs for the case argued by the speaker; *refutatio*, a refutation of opposing views to the one defended by the speaker, often with digressions that are designed to strengthen the case; and *peroratio* or *conclusio*, a summary and conclusion with an appeal to mind, emotion and will.<sup>47</sup>

A common form of deliberative discourse is a simplified version of the judicial: *proem*, *narratio* (the proposition), *confirmatio* and *peroratio*.<sup>48</sup> Epideictic discourse, which takes many forms, often begins with a *proem*, followed by a sequence of amplified topics regarding the subject at hand, often using *ecphrasis* (vivid description) and *synkrisis* (comparison), and concluding with a *peroratio* or epilogue.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 23,24; Burton L. Mack, Rhetoric and the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 42, 43.

<sup>48</sup>Kennedy, Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.; Mack Rhetoric, 47,48.

The canon of style (*elocutio*) may be defined as “the fitting of the proper language to the invented matter,”<sup>50</sup> and is divided into two major parts: *lexis* or diction (the choice of words) and *synthesis* (the way words are put together in phrases, clauses and sentences). The area of diction deals with tropes (eg. metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole) while *synthesis* is concerned with the matter of figures (eg. anaphora, apostrophe, chiasmus).<sup>51</sup> Style is not merely a matter of ornamentation. It is purposive in that it aids in the overall persuasive intent of the discourse. There were three basic styles in ancient rhetoric: the Grand Style which used all the rhetorical means available in order to communicate in an ornamental and forceful way; the Middle Style which employed a level of speech below the Grand but above the colloquial, relying heavily upon the use of metaphor, and the Plain Style which was restrained, colloquial and unequivocal with a heavy reliance upon the use of maxims.<sup>52</sup>

### The Stages of the Rhetorico-Contextual Model

The proposed model is a minor variation of the one presented by George Kennedy, the stages of which he perceives as working together in a circular process.<sup>53</sup>

#### **1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit**

The rhetorical unit is somewhat similar to the pericope in form criticism. What defines its limits, however, is that it comprises “an argumentative unit affecting the reader’s reasoning

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<sup>50</sup>Watson, *Invention*, 22.

<sup>51</sup>Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 26-28.

<sup>52</sup>Watson *Invention*, 24,25.

<sup>53</sup>Kennedy, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 33.

or the reader's imagination."<sup>54</sup> This unit of persuasion is comprised of a beginning, a middle and a conclusion and may be seen in the macro sense of a large unit (eg. Matthew 5-7; Romans 9-11) or the micro sense of smaller units (eg. Matthew 6:1-18; Romans 9:6-18).<sup>55</sup> Whatever the size of the rhetorical unit identified, it must be done in light of a general appreciation of the rhetorical structure of the entire document. Here is where attention should be give to rhetorical devices of opening and closure such as *proem*, *conclusio*, *chiasm*, and *inclusio* rather than relying upon the chapter, verse and paragraph divisions in the modern English translations of the Bible.<sup>56</sup> To gain this appreciation of the text, it is helpful to read it over several times from different translations if possible. A facility in the original languages is helpful in noting some rhetorical devices not immediately evident in the English translations. Such information, however, can be found in commentaries attuned to the literary and rhetorical aspects of the text. Since this thesis-project is directed toward those who do not have ability in the original languages, it is recommended that, although other versions may be read and referred to in the course of study, the interpreter use a literal translation like the New American Standard Bible as the basic working text. The woodenness of this translation, which can cause some barriers in comprehension at times, often serves to display some of the rhetorical features of text lost by the emphasis upon the contemporary audience in more idiomatic translations.

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<sup>54</sup>Wuellner, "Rhetorical Criticism," 455.

<sup>55</sup>Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 125.

<sup>56</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 34.

## **2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit**

This aspect of the method is similar to understanding the Sitz im Leben of form criticism. In the mind of the rhetorical critic any given text originates from a certain situation or problem to which the text or discourse is considered to be the answer or solution to the problem.<sup>57</sup> The idea of a rhetorical situation is borrowed from rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer who defines it as “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence [i.e. “an imperfection marked by urgency, it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be (in other words, a problem requiring a response)] which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.”<sup>58</sup> The interpreter should pay special attention to the components of this complex (eg. persons, events, objects, time, place and relations) in order to understand the rhetorical situation.

This is a crucial part of the method in that it recognizes the fact that all discourse is purposive and so it seeks to grasp the basic intent of the unit by understanding why it came about. Especially important are the issues of the obstacle or problem that is being faced, the composition of the audience of the discourse and the ways and means in which the speaker attempts to constrain the audience.<sup>59</sup> Again, referring to the commentaries on occasion can

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<sup>57</sup>Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy and Rhetoric, Supp. Vol. (1992): 5,6.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>59</sup>Obsborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 125.

be helpful in obtaining some of the needed information.

### **3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit**

Along the way, the rhetorical unit needs to be studied to determine its nature and purpose. Three determinations need to be made during this stage of the process. The interpreter is to determine the species of rhetoric, the question and the stasis of the unit. The three species of rhetoric (judicial, deliberative and epideictic) were defined above, but the matters of the question and stasis require explanation.

Questions are those issues for which two or more answers or opinions are possible. Any given text will contain at least one of these questions and the more of them it contains, the more complex the text. Questions may be of two types: definite and special or indefinite and general. Definite questions relate to and involve things like persons, facts and times (i.e. 'definite' things). Indefinite questions involve matters of knowledge and action. Knowledge is concerned with whether a thing exists, what it is and the quality of its nature. Action deals with how to obtain or avoid something and how to use something.<sup>60</sup> These indefinite questions are somewhat broader and logically prior to definite questions and function in a similar fashion as do universals to particulars. Most often definite questions are found in judicial and epideictic rhetoric and indefinite ones in deliberative rhetoric.<sup>61</sup>

Stasis theory aids in determining the basic question of a text around which the whole text turns and toward which the audience gives attention. If a text contains several questions

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<sup>60</sup>Watson, Invention, 11.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

it is very important to be able to determine the most important of these. Stasis theory divides questions into matters of fact or conjecture (dealing with whether a thing is), definition (dealing with what it is) and quality (determining what kind it is). To apply these stases to the argumentation involved in defending an accused:

With the stasis of fact, the question is whether something was ever done or was done by the person accused. The stasis of definition involves admitting the facts while denying they are to be defined as they have been. With the stasis of quality, the act is admitted, but that any wrong was committed is denied, a claim is made that it is the best course of action to take under the circumstances, or there is inquiry into the nature of a thing.<sup>62</sup>

Judicial rhetoric is able to use all three basic stases effectively while epideictic and deliberative rhetoric depend most heavily upon the stasis of quality.<sup>63</sup>

In the sense that the second stage of the model deals with matters of background which leads to understanding the situation out of which the text is derived, this third stage analyzes the basic question framed within the text and around which it revolves.

#### **4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit**

Once issues relating to the unit's background and aim are answered, the interpretive process needs to be honed further by an analysis of the rhetorical techniques and devices used by the speaker (writer). This analysis relates to the first three rhetorical canons which relate to written documents: invention, arrangement, and style. Pertinent questions to ask at this time include: Who or what are the main characters, issues and objects in the text?; What kind of proofs does the speaker use (inartificial forms of documentation or artificial proofs using

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 12,13.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 13.

*ethos, pathos and/or logos*); Which means of proof (i.e. *ethos, pathos* or *logos*) is most predominant?; Does the speaker argue inductively or deductively?; Does the speaker use syllogism, epicheireme or enthymeme?; What kind(s) of topics are used?; What rhetorical structures or arrangements are evident?; What rhetorical devices are used (eg. chiasm, repetition, inclusio)?; and What figures of speech and tropes are used in the text?

These questions need to be supplemented by ones that investigate the function and purpose of the rhetorical techniques and devices. Ones like: What kind of effect would this have on the audience?; Why would the speaker choose to say this in this way at this time? are helpful to ask all through the process as is the evaluative question at the end: What is the combined effect of the various techniques and devices in this text?<sup>64</sup> This in turn leads to the final stage in the process.

A warning here regarding atomization and over-analysis. With such an impressive arsenal of rhetorical weapons at one's disposal, an interpreter may begin to see motives that wouldn't have been present in the original discourse. It is here that it is necessary to remind all who use rhetorical criticism that this discipline analyzes texts as oral/aural discourses and not necessarily as literary ones. There may be times when the oral tradition behind the text and the literary forms of communicating the text may be in tension. These respective forms and logics must be appreciated. Here is where prudence is required. In genres of biblical literature that were originally intended to be read rather than spoken (i.e. apocalyptic and more speculative forms of wisdom literature), rhetorical criticism may not provide as helpful results in interpretation.

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<sup>64</sup>Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 126.

## **5. Evaluate and Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit**

This part of the process is not designed to evaluate whether a certain biblical writer uses good rhetorical technique. It is, rather, a looking back over the entire process to see the overall purpose and movement of the discourse. The interpreter observes the ways and means of persuasion in the unit and evaluates how it fits into the larger framework of the entire discourse. Here is where questions about the implications of the unit for both speaker and audience are asked. What impact was this unit designed to have on the ancient audience?; and to what extent was it successful in accomplishing the desired effect?<sup>65</sup>

## **6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit**

A final state of the process is necessary in order to take the intended impact of the message upon the ancient audience and contextualize it for a contemporary grouping of believers gathered in a specific place at a specific time. In this way contemporary believers may connect with the intent of that same ancient message and respond accordingly. Without this final state of the process, rhetorical criticism is merely an academic exercise reserved only for the ivory tower. While the contextualization and communication of this state is not emphasized by Kennedy, it is what grounds the entire process. The purpose of classical rhetoric was to engender effectiveness in concrete situations. It is this concern for the specific and concrete that is completed in the appropriate contextualization of the original intent of the discourse into a concrete contemporary situation.

Contextualization is a term borrowed from missiology and is capable of a broad

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<sup>65</sup>Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 38; cf. also Watson, Invention, 28.



spectrum of definitions. For purposes of this study a rather conservative definition will be adopted: "Contextualization is a dynamic process of the church's reflection, in obedience to Christ and his mission in the world, on the interaction of the text as the word of God and the context of a specific human situation."<sup>66</sup> The importance of this process of 'translating text into context' for the rhetorico—contextual model is obvious. It seeks to understand both the message and impact of the message in the ancient culture so that both of them might be brought to bear in parallel contemporary situations. In light of the importance of this stage in the interpretive process, it was decided to underscore this aspect by terming the proposed model as rhetorico—contextual criticism.

Building upon the results of the previous five states in the model, the interpreter takes the message and intended impact of the ancient text and seeks for a way to communicate them in a parallel situation in the contemporary context. The specificity of the contextualization depends upon the degree of similarity between the ancient and contemporary contexts.<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup>Bruce J. Nicholls, "Contextualization," in New Dictionary of Theology. For treatments of contextualization from an evangelical perspective, cf. Bruce Nicholls, Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979); Bruce Fleming, Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1980); David Heresgrave and Edward Rommen, Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); and John R. W. Stott and Robert Coaste, eds. Down to Earth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>67</sup>The process of contextualization assumes that biblical texts are most often specific examples of theological truths contextualized for the original audience. Therefore contextualization involves uncovering the basic message of the original situation so that a modern parallel might be found and "re-contextualized" accordingly. Osborne suggests a six-stage process for contextualizing biblical texts into the contemporary context: 1) determine the surface meaning of the text (exegesis); 2) determine the deep structure principle behind the message; 3) note the original situation; 4) discover the parallel situation in the modern context; 5) contextualize the message generally to the modern context; and 6) make a specific contextualization, if needed, to a specific modern context (Hermeneutical Spiral, 336-38).

value of the rhetorical analysis of the text is that it is now possible for the interpreter not only to have an understanding of the basic message of the text and its intended impact but also an insight as to how the text was structured to get this message across.<sup>68</sup> In service to the proper contextualizing of the text's message and impact, the preacher is free to choose whether the rhetorical strategy used in the text would be the best choice in the contemporary context. That may very well be the case, but on occasion some of the rhetorical strategies of modern rhetoricians may be employed to ensure a proper hearing of the text in the present day.<sup>69</sup>

### An Evaluation of Rhetorical-Contextual Method

#### **Strengths of the Method**

Rhetorico-contextual criticism holds great promise as a method of interpretation especially in light of homiletical concerns. To begin, it concentrates upon an analysis of the extant text. While it does not ignore diachronic analysis, it attempts not to get bogged down

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<sup>68</sup>Cf. Robert Tannehill's remarks: "The text itself wishes to preach, to call forth faith and obedience. We will miss the significance of the text's forceful and imaginative language if we do not recognize this. If we do not begin to "feel the bite" of the text we cannot really appreciate why the text is shaped as it is." (The Sword of His Mouth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 30.

<sup>69</sup>Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching." Bibliotheca Sacra 48 (Oct-Dec 1991):481. Eg. Craig Loscalzo has adopted Kenneth Burke's rhetoric of identification for homiletical purposes. Cf. his Preaching Sermons that Connect (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) and Evangelistic Preaching that Connects (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995). This may indeed be a valid rhetorical strategy for some texts given the current societal prejudice against authoritative proclamation. It is the contention of many that the predominate form of rhetoric in the Bible is authoritative proclamation rather than rational persuasion. Cf. Kennedy, Rhetorical Criticism, 6, 104-107; and David Jasper, "In the Sermon which I have just completed, wherever I said Aristotle, I meant St. Paul", in The Bible as Rhetoric, ed. Martin Warner (London: Routledge, 1990), 136.

in what can become a time consuming and overly cerebral exercise. This concern with the extant text helps it to maintain some perspective on the atomizing tendencies of the purely diachronic methods so that an interpreter may gain a sense of the flow of a text both in its immediate and larger contexts. This attribute also makes it more acceptable as an appropriate critical methodology among those who are somewhat suspicious of any or all of these disciplines.

Another valuable quality of rhetorico-contextual criticism is its concreteness. Since ancient times, rhetoric has been interested in the particularities of real situations—real people dealing with real situations. This part of the process which takes special note of the social context of speaker, audience and discourse is specially apropos to the concerns of the preacher. A sense of groundedness, practicality and incarnation will keep the preacher true to the good news of God-with-us when he speaks to the needs of concrete people facing concrete obstacles (not all of which are in the church parking lot!). There is a sense in which that which is most personal and concrete can also be the most applicable to others who face similar situations. Rhetorical analysis can be of real service in this regard in that it never lets the interpreter forget that these discourses were addressed to specific rhetorical situations.

Of benefit as well is the rhetorico-contextual emphasis upon the purposiveness of all discourse. There is intent behind all discourse. The speaker desires some end and uses differing devices to persuade his audience toward it. Language does more than inform, it persuades, teases into action, pleases, challenges, inspires and condemns. It is not only informs, it functions. This emphasis upon persuasion is a profitable corrective to our intellectualizing tendencies that have been so strong in the past both societally and

homiletically. To be in line with this understanding of language is mandatory for the contemporary preacher. If the original biblical text had a particular aim should not the preacher's sermon on that text reflect that same purpose? The preacher who jumps on a text and 'rides off madly in all directions' has failed to see the divine intent for the opportunity given to administer the Word of God. As the preacher ascertains the intention of the biblical text, a window into the mind and will of God is gained and the proclamation of that message with power and conviction is made possible. All effective preaching is purposive as is intimated in a long-standing definition of the sermon: "The sermon is an oral address, to the popular mind, upon religious truth, as contained in the Scriptures, elaborately treated, with a view to persuasion."<sup>70</sup>

In order to understand the nature of the persuasive arguments in the text, it would stand to reason that this form of analysis has not abandoned the conception of authorial intention. As a matter of fact Kennedy states,

Rhetorical criticism takes the text as we have it, whether the work of a single author or the product of editing, and looks at it from the point of view of the author's or editor's intent, the unified results, and how it would be perceived by an audience of near contemporaries.<sup>71</sup>

The fact that authorial intention is upheld by Kennedy (as it was by Muilenburg), has provoked some criticism from within the New Critical and Poststructuralist camps.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Austin Phelps, The Theory of Preaching (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 21, quoted in Harold Knott, How to Prepare a Sermon (Cincinnati: Christian Restoration Association, 1977), 15,16.

<sup>71</sup>Rhetorical Criticism, 4.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. Mack, Rhetoric, 23; Trible, Rhetorical Criticism, 95,96.

However, notwithstanding the considerable influence of the so-called “intentional fallacy”,<sup>73</sup> thoughtful contemporary critics who have not totally capitulated to the relativism of the radical critics or political advocacy groups still hold a place for authorial intention in the interpretive process.<sup>74</sup>

Rhetorico-contextual criticism refuses to bifurcate form and content in a discourse. Although it is not the only methodology that does so, rhetorico-contextual analysis maintains that the medium and the message are intimately related (not identical as in the mistaken emphasis of Marshall MacLuhan). The upshot of this emphasis is that form and style are important, both in the interpreting of the discourse and in the proclamation of the sermon based upon that discourse. They become part of what the discourse is saying and meaning. The preacher, then, must become a student of ancient forms and methods of argumentation

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<sup>73</sup>The classical statement of the ‘intentional fallacy’ was made by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley: “[T]he design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (“The Intentional Fallacy,” in The Verbal Icon (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3). The modern critics took this as a hermeneutical axiom without bothering to note what the original authors meant by the statement (a delicious example of irony, to be sure). Wimsatt later remarked, “What we meant in 1945, and what in effect I think we managed to say, was that the closest one could ever get to the artist’s intending or meaning mind, outside his work, would still be short of his effective intention or operative mind as it appears in the work itself and can be read from the work” (Genesis: An Argument Resumed” Day of the Leopards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 36; quoted in Wendell Harris, “Intention”, in Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 164.). This understanding of the ‘intentional fallacy’ is not nearly as damaging to modern evangelical hermeneutics, which does give voice to the aspects in and in front of the text, than it is to the methods of the pioneers of modern hermeneutics like Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834 C.E.).

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Black, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 256. Trible’s comments are representative of this mindset, “Texts do reveal authors: their resources, knowledge, issues, perspectives, and skills, yet authorial intention constitutes a part, not the whole, of meaning” (Rhetorical Criticism, 96, 97).

as well as contemporary ones if the message is to be contextualized faithfully.

Finally, rhetorico-contextual criticism has promise as a hermeneutical methodology for the very reason that it is not a method, technically speaking, as much as an art. There are technical parts of the methodology as there are in any art, but the process calls for more than rote application of certain principles. One's aesthetic and intuitive appreciation for the discourse are large factors in becoming proficient in rhetorico-contextual analysis. These are also faculties encouraged in modern homiletic theory in relation to the construction of sermons.<sup>75</sup> In the words of Phyllis Trible, "Experiment; play with the text; be graceful in articulation.... Work and play, struggle and serendipity, yield the rhetorical fruit."<sup>76</sup>

### **Weaknesses of the Method**

It might be easy to overlook some of the difficulties inherent within this method since it has such potential. However, like in all other instances, there are matters that might temper its usefulness and call for careful examination. The first of these is the flip side of the last advantage listed above. The very fact that rhetorical criticism is an art allows a great deal of room for subjectivity. This may explain the fact that no two rhetorical-contextual critics seem to agree on the results of their interpretations. Each interpretation may be as unique as the

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<sup>75</sup>Eg. Elizabeth Achtemeier, Creative Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980); idem, Preaching as Theology and Art (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); Thomas Troeger, Imagining a Sermon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990); Warren W. Wiersbe, Preaching and Teaching with Imagination (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994); and Paul Wilson, Imagination of the Heart (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

<sup>76</sup>Rhetorical Criticism, 106.

individual interpreter.<sup>77</sup> This may be partly due to the fact that this discipline is still developing, but nevertheless such vast disagreement among the scholars may not bode well for the perceived stability of the method. It is obviously impossible to expect complete agreement, but the margin of disagreement might be lessened somewhat by maintaining a balance between the synchronic and diachronic aspects of interpretation and by resisting the temptation to over-analyze the text beyond any reasonable expectations for the original audience's possible understanding of it.

Another issue relates to the degree of applicability classical rhetorical categories have on the study of the Christian Scriptures. Do rhetorical standards composed in ancient Greece apply 'across the board' to discourses written by authors with no or little training in this tradition? Do all or any Scripture passages fit neatly into these preconceived structures? Are rhetorical categories by themselves sufficient to interpret every text? Put another way, "The adequacy of strictly rhetorical canons for interpreting all texts of all genres with persuasive intent is a debatable premise, which rhetorical critics need to think through."<sup>78</sup> It is clear that one can take this method too far and force it upon Scripture just to satisfy ancient Greek rhetors. While this method is valuable, the interpreter does well to respect the creativity of the biblical writers and not to err by falling prey to reductionism.<sup>79</sup>

This potential pitfall might challenge the propriety of using a Greco-Roman method on the Christian gospels; echoes of Tertullian's query recorded above. The challenge may

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<sup>77</sup>Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 124.

<sup>78</sup>Black, "Rhetorical Criticism," 257.

<sup>79</sup>Osborne, Hermeneutical Spiral, 124; Watson and Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism, 111.

come at two levels: first, the theoretical one of the suitability of a Hellenistic discipline with a Hebraic document; and second, the practical matter of nomenclature (will the labeling of the parts of a Hebraic document with Greek terms not lead to an artificial grid being foisted upon the text and jaundice its interpretation?).

The theoretical issue stems from the perception common in theological circles that Hebrew thought and Greek thought are very distinct; the former emphasizing active forms and the latter, static. James Barr warned against such a strict dichotomy<sup>80</sup> and it is best not to repeat the error.

Even if the argument is based more on the applicability of Greek rhetorical forms for Hebraic literature, it is best not to press the point, given the high degree of Hellenization evident in first century C.E. Palestine as well as the rest of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>81</sup>

The question of nomenclature is one to be settled inductively rather than a priori. Documentation of rabbinical pronouncement stories<sup>82</sup> suggests the suitability of using at least rudimentary rhetorical terminology to interpret gospel pronouncement stories (i.e. chreiai). Moreover, this thesis-project will not demand the use of precise rhetorical terminology but rather will promote the ability to recognize and analyze the basic structure of the rhetorical arguments in the gospel sayings.

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<sup>80</sup>James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: SCM Press, 1961), 8-20; D.A. Carson, Exegetical Fallacies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 44,45.

<sup>81</sup>N.T. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 152-66; Shaye J.D. Cohen, From the Maccabees to the Mishnah (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 34-45.

<sup>82</sup>Alan J. Avery-Peck, "Rhetorical Argumentation in Early Rabbinical Pronouncement Stories." Semeia 64 (1994):49-72.



While the concreteness of the rhetorico-contextual approach is listed as an asset, there is a possible danger involved in it as well. This is obviously a matter of personal opinion, but often the social aspect of the rhetorical situation of the original and contemporary context can be emphasized to the point that it overshadows the message of discourse. The emphasis then is upon the “dynamics of personal and social identification and transformation”<sup>83</sup> which can relativize the entire process and undercut authorial intention. The concreteness and the social aspects of determining the rhetorical situation are an attractive part of the method, and do open the doors for us to hear other voices from differing theological and socio-economic groups. The problem may come when this one part of the method is allowed to over-ride the rest.<sup>84</sup> In that case there would be nothing to tune the growing chorus and so symphony becomes cacophony.

If, however, the warnings of these potential weaknesses are heeded and the necessary adjustments are made, the rhetorico-contextual model would appear to be an appropriate methodology, given the conservative theological orientation of both the author and the participants in the workshop.

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<sup>83</sup>Wuellner, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 461.

<sup>84</sup>An example of this in action is found in the work of Burton Mack who does an admirable job of analyzing the rhetoric of the New Testament only to dismiss it as an unsuitable paradigm for today’s world (*Rhetoric*, 93-102). The normativeness of Scripture is at the whim of social ideology.

## CHAPTER 4

### RHETORIC AS METHODOLOGY IN THE GOSPELS: THE GOSPEL SAYINGS

The appearance in our time of Christ the harlequin and the Lord of the Dance should provide a double cause for rejoicing. Not only does he draw us into the dance of life, he also restores an essential aspect of our faith that in the awful seriousness of our age we had nearly forgotten.

Harvey Cox

As the focus of this study narrows from the more general to the specific, attention is directed toward the gospels and how the proposed methodology is to be applied to the humour in the gospel sayings. A few background matters regarding the gospels are necessary, however, before a concrete example of this process can be given. Some of those in the group targeted for the workshop portion of the study may have (and in some cases, do have) a rather out-dated and untenable understanding of the nature and composition of the gospels. Therefore any fruitful study must begin by updating their knowledge of what the gospels are and are not, and how they were (are) composed and arranged.

#### **The Christian Gospels**

The Christian gospels as a genre are unique documents. Each of them includes teachings of Christ imbedded within narrative accounts of his deeds, both miraculous and more mundane. While each gospel focuses upon Christ, they are not written by him, but by

others who followed him and who were motivated and guided by the Holy Spirit to tell his story. Each had their own reasons for doing so and an original target audience in mind throughout the process. The result is four canonical stories of Jesus the Christ which convey both a startling unity of perspective in some ways and a rich (and to some, perplexing) diversity in detail.

Study of the gospels up until the eighteenth century was largely a matter of harmonizing the accounts of each of the gospel writers into one smooth and coherent narrative. Certain doubts about this approach to the gospels coincided with increased suspicion of the authoritative nature of the Bible as a whole. To this day, in some circles, those who criticize the harmonization of the gospels are suspected as having a low view of biblical inspiration. This, of course, is not necessarily the case. Doubting the value of harmonization does not necessarily mean that one does not suppose there is one grand historical narrative of the life and teachings of Christ of which each gospel is a particular witness. What is doubted, however, is that this one grand narrative can be constructed mechanistically by a harmonization of the component parts.<sup>1</sup> This is not doubted on theological grounds but practical ones. Different communities need to hear the story of Jesus and each of these communities is unique. Therefore when a story is told to a particular group, certain aspects may be emphasized in a different fashion than if the same story was told to another group. To patch these stories together in a 'Bible-in-a-blender' approach does not do justice to the integrity of each story as an inspired account of the incarnate Christ. It is

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<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 52,53.

therefore part of the genius of the gospels that there are four accounts which, despite basic agreement, differ in context, chronology, emphasis and exact wording.<sup>2</sup>

### A Genre for the Gospels

Part of recognizing the integrity of each gospel is the discussion of an appropriate genre for the gospels. Justin, in the middle of the second century, was the first to refer to canonical accounts of Jesus' ministry as "gospels," thus giving them a unique designation.<sup>3</sup> The heart of the subsequent debate has been over the degree of uniqueness attributed to the gospels as a distinct genre. Are they *sui generis* or do they bear enough resemblance to existing genre in the ancient world to be included in an existing category? While many contemporary scholars prefer the former, several suggestions have been proposed in regard to the latter, the most popular one being that of the Greco-Roman biography.<sup>4</sup> Although the classification of a genre for the gospels is somewhat unsure, what is obvious is that there is nothing inherent within them which demands or even welcomes excessive harmonization.

There are some characteristics which typify these memoirs of the Messiah.<sup>5</sup> One

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<sup>2</sup>Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 105.

<sup>3</sup>Carson, Moo, and Morris, Introduction, 46.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. David E. Aune, The New Testament in Its Literary Environment (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 17-76; Richard A. Burridge, What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Philip L. Shuler, A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Sidney Greidanus, The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 266-68.

would be their emphasis upon proclamation. Mark begins his account of the ministry of Jesus by saying, "...Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God" (1:14b). The gospels are accounts of the ministry of Jesus designed not a much to inform as to call to repentance and faith. In the words of John, "these [signs] have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:31).

The content of this preaching is found in Jesus himself and the theme of his preaching. This gospel or "good news" is focused on the person of Jesus of Nazareth--he *is* the good news. In his own preaching, the major theme is categorized as "the gospel" (Mk 1:14; Lk 20:1), the "Kingdom of God" (Matt: 4:17; Lk 4:43; 8:1; 16:16) or "the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23). The good news of the kingdom is embodied in the king himself.

### The Composition of the Gospels

Part of the task of interpreting the gospels is to understand the basic nature of their composition. The best in conservative scholarship holds that each gospel writer is telling this story of Jesus from a certain perspective and for a certain purpose. Each gospel writer is both historian and theologian and therefore each written gospel will display these two concerns: one for the horizon of the ministry of Jesus and the other for the horizon of their audience. The selection of content, arrangement and modification of that content is guided by these foci. In the words of Fee and Stuart, "...the nature of the Gospels is a given; they are two-level documents whether we like it or not."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Read the Bible, 106.

The opening words of Luke's gospel may provide a model for this process:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught (1:1-4).

This text suggests three stages involved in the writing of the gospel: the level of the "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" who handed down the details of the ministry of Jesus; others who already had "undertaken to compile an account" of the ministry of Jesus; and the gospel writer himself who sat down to relay his own 'orderly'<sup>7</sup> account of this same life to his audience.<sup>8</sup> Both oral and written sources, then, were available to the gospel writers.

How one might view this process then, is that with a large number of oral and written sources available, each gospel writer, guided by the Holy Spirit, selected and adapted these sources into an account of the ministry of Jesus which reflected his own post-resurrection understanding of the events and the needs of his particular audience.<sup>9</sup> There is no room here

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<sup>7</sup>For an explanation of how *kathexes*, "in consecutive order" (1:3 NASB) does not mean complete chronological exactitude, cf. I. Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 43.

<sup>8</sup>For an expanded treatment of this process of composition, cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris, Introduction, 20-45.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Fee and Stuart, Read The Bible, 107-109; 114-16. For conservative treatments of the particular emphases of each gospel writer, cf. Richard A. Burridge, Four Gospels: One Jesus? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); R. T. France, Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); Ralph Martin, Mark: Evangelist and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); I. Howard Marshall, Luke: Historian and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Stephen Smalley, John: Evangelist and Interpreter (London: Paternoster Press, 1978).

to assume the evangelists were irresponsible or dishonest with these sources. Each, however, would take these sources, some imbedding the teachings of Jesus in their original contexts and some not, and arrange them into a faithful and purposeful account of the ministry of Jesus.

### Interpretation of the Gospels

The gospels themselves give us a model for interpretation. In the way that each gospel writer took the stories of the ministry of Jesus and composed his story of Jesus for his audience, the contemporary preacher may follow by performing the same service for an audience in the present. The task of interpreting the gospels in the present is more complex, however, since attention must be given to both the horizon of the original context and that of the canonical context before contextualization for the contemporary audience is possible.

To begin, each pericope needs to be examined in light of its parallels in other gospels. The purpose of this is not necessarily to harmonize them but to gain an appreciation of both the distinctiveness of each gospel and the variety of contexts in which the same material is found.<sup>10</sup> The use of a synopsis of gospel texts, rather than a harmony of the gospels would be helpful in this process.<sup>11</sup> A greater understanding of the original context of the pericope should result through this exercise.

Even though the original and canonical contexts are complementary, the latter must take precedence for the preacher so that the canonical use of the source may be determined

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<sup>10</sup>Fee and Stuart, Read the Bible, 110.

<sup>11</sup>The best of these in Greek and English is K. Aland, ed, Synopsis of the Four Gospels (New York: United Bible Societies, 1970). For a detailed method of how to use a synopsis, cf. Gordon D. Fee, New Testament Exegesis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 101-09.

in order to guide the contemporary task of contextualizing the message. In the words of Greidanus,

In approaching the text, then, the life-setting of the Gospel writer is primary, but it, in turn, leads the preacher to the life-setting of Jesus. Consequently, in preaching one need not choose one life-setting over another but must do justice to both as they come to expression in a particular Gospel. This procedure will frequently be quite natural since the purpose of the Gospel writer is usually an extension of the purpose of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Once a broad appreciation is gained of the hermeneutical and homiletical tasks involved in the gospels, more specific developments in the rhetorical criticism of the gospel sayings may be outlined.

### The Rhetorico-Contextual Criticism of Gospel Sayings

Recently some of the findings of biblical scholars have shed new light on how the gospel sayings may be viewed. Up until the mid 1980's, gospel sayings were analyzed more for a historical understanding of their sources than for the rhetorical impact of their canonical form. Early form critics, while composing taxonomies of the different forms of gospel material,<sup>13</sup> were still preoccupied with how these forms related to source-critical issues.

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<sup>12</sup>Modern Preacher, 301.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. the following chart of taxonomies, reproduced from Carson, Moo, and Morris, Introduction, 22:

Form	Terminology of Form Criticism		
	Dibelius	Bultmann	Taylor
Brief sayings of Jesus set in a context (e.g., Mark 12:13-17, which climaxes in Jesus' saying "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's")	Paradigms	Apophthegms	Pronouncement Stories
Stories about Jesus' miraculous deeds (e.g., the feeding of the 5000)	Tales	Miracle Stories	Miracle Stories
Stories that magnify Jesus as a "hero" (e.g., Luke's story about Jesus in the temple at twelve years of age [2:41-52])	Legends	Historical Stories & Legends	Stories about Jesus
Teaching of Jesus which does not climax in a single saying (e.g., the Lord's Prayer)	Paranesis	Dominical Sayings	Sayings and Parables



Whatever scholars like Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius uncovered relating to the rhetoric of the gospel remained sublimated to their other pursuits.<sup>14</sup> Study of gospel sayings was guided by the form critical term “pronouncement story” coined by Vincent Taylor until the literary critical term “aphorism” gained prominence among scholars.<sup>15</sup> Change came in North America largely through the translation of preliminary exercises (known as progymnasmata) found in rhetorical handbooks from Greco-Roman antiquity. Preliminary work has been spearheaded by the Chreia Project at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity of Claremont Graduate School and leading scholars in this new field normally have had some contact with this group.<sup>16</sup>

### The Chreia

The application of the rhetorical method pioneered by Kennedy to the gospels has not been successful when scholars have approached an entire gospel as a rhetorical unit. This is largely due to the fact that ancient rhetoric is incapable of analyzing narrative categories of

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<sup>14</sup>For a history of the development of rhetorical criticism in the gospels, cf. Burton Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1989), 1-29.

<sup>15</sup>Among others, John Dominic Crossan has given considerable attention to the study of aphorisms in the gospels. Cf. In Fragments, The Aphorisms of Jesus (New York: Harper and Row, 1983); and Sayings Parallels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup>Mack and Robbins, Patterns, 27-29.

plot development.<sup>17</sup> Positive results from rhetorical analysis would come as the focus narrowed to the patterns of argumentation in smaller units. It is at this point that the study of the ancient chreiai has contributed a great deal to the rhetorical analysis of the gospels.

A chreia, (pronounced 'cray-a') to quote rhetorician Aelius Theon (ca. 50-100 C.E.), is "a concise statement of action attributed with aptness to some specified character or to something analogous to a character."<sup>18</sup> A modern working definition is "a saying or act that is well-aimed or apt, expressed concisely, attributed to a person, and regarded as useful for living."<sup>19</sup> The primary source of the chreiai ('cray-eye') are the progymnasmata (preliminary exercises) of the ancient rhetorical handbooks. The progymnasmata began to appear in the first century B.C.E. although Theon's is the earliest extant text. These preliminary exercises served as a transition from the basic literary studies to the rhetorical curriculum of secondary

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<sup>17</sup>Duane Watson and Alan Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 116.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in James Butts, "The Chreia in the Synoptic Gospels," Biblical Theology Bulletin 16 (1986): 132.

<sup>19</sup>Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds. The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric, Vol I: The Progymnasmata. Texts and Translations (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 26; quoted in Vernon Robbins, "The Chreia," in Greco-Roman Literature and The New Testament, ed. David E. Aune (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 2. A revised definition of the pronouncement story, affected by the discovery of the chreiai is: "...a brief narrative in which the climatic (and often final) element is a pronouncement either in speech or action or a combination of speech and action. There are two main parts of a pronouncement story: the pronouncement and its setting, i.e., the response and the situation provoking the response. The pronouncement is closely associated with the main character who is the author or recipient of the speech or action. Both the setting and the pronouncement contribute to the rhetorical goal of the story," Vernon Robbins, ed. Ancient Quotes and Anecdotes (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1989), xi. Cf. Robbins, "A Rhetorical Typology For Classifying and Analyzing Pronouncement Stories," 1984 SBL Seminar Papers, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 94.

education in the Greco-Roman world. This ‘rhetoric for beginners’ program allowed students to develop rhetorical skills on the basis of well-known literary material.<sup>20</sup> These chreiai normally consisted of the words and deeds of notables such as kings, philosophers and military leaders as well as ordinary citizens. An essential feature of the chreiai, then, was that they were central to both oral and written argumentation which forged a link between oral forms of rhetorical speech on one hand and literary forms of narrative or discursive literature on the other.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the import of the chreiai for the interpretation of the gospel sayings becomes evident immediately.

### **Types of Chreiai**

In the classification of the more than one thousand extant chreiai, three main types emerge: sayings chreiai, action chreiai, and mixed chreiai.

#### **Sayings Chreiai**

According to Theon, sayings chreiai are “those which make their point by means of words without an action,”<sup>22</sup> Under the rubric of sayings chreiai, there is a further classification into statement, response, and double chreiai.

The statement chreia might be prompted by a specific situation as in Mark 1:16,17, “And as He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother

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<sup>20</sup>Burton Mack, “Elaboration of the Chreia in the Hellenistic School,” in Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels, eds. Burton Mack and Vernon Robbins (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>21</sup>Watson and Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism, 117, Mack, “Elaboration”, 32.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Butts, “Chreia,” 132.

of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men"; or by no particular circumstance as in Mark 1:14,15, "And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."<sup>23</sup>

A response chreia is where the saying responds to a previous statement or speech and can take the form of a simple "yes" or "no" answer to a question as in Mark 15:2, "And Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And answering He said to him, "It is as you say;" or with more information as evidenced in John the Baptist's answers to the questions of the repentant in Luke 3:10-14; or with a word of explanation or advice like in Luke 13:22-24, "And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem. And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able;" or simply a response to a remark rather than a question as in Matthew 8:18-20, "Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side. And a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."<sup>24</sup>

A double chreia contains two sayings, one which normally rebuts the other as in Matthew 3:13-15a, "Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be

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<sup>23</sup>Robbins, "Chreia," 5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 5-7.

baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."<sup>25</sup>

### Action Chreiai

In Theon's words, action chreiai are "those which reveal some thought without speech."<sup>26</sup> These are very rare in that most actions are coupled with words. Action chreiai may have either active or passive action in "either the situation prompting the action or the response to the situation."<sup>27</sup> Both active and passive elements are seen in Mark 14:51, 52. "And a certain young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. But he left the linen sheet behind and escaped naked." A passive action chreia in regard to Jesus is seen in Mark 1:12,13, "And immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him."<sup>28</sup>

### Mixed Chreiai

These are "those which share characteristics of both the sayings-type and the action-

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Butts, "Chreia," 132.

<sup>27</sup>Duane Watson, "Chreia/Aphorism," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.

<sup>28</sup>Robbins, "Chreia," 8,9.

type, but make their point with the action.”<sup>29</sup> Sometimes mixed chreiai can contain the action and saying in the precipitating situation or in the resulting response or in both. Examples include: Luke 19:45,46, “And He entered the temple and began to cast out those who were selling, saying to them, “It is written, ‘AND MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER,’ but you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN””; and Matthew 12:46-50:

While He was speaking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. And someone said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.” But He answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Manners of Presentation of the Chreiai**

As well as classifying the chreiai, Theon had a rhetorical concern regarding the various ways they might be presented in an argument or a narrative. He presented twelve manners whereby chreiai might be presented.

In the manner of a maxim, the chreia might include a bit of gnomic wisdom as in John 4: 43, 44, “And after the two days He went forth from there [i.e. Samaria] into Galilee. For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country.”<sup>31</sup>

Presented in the manner of an explanation a chreia may give support to a statement like in Luke 9:49,50, “And John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to hinder him because he does not follow along with us.”

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∴Quoted in Butts, “Chreia,” 132.

∴Robbins, “Chreia,” 9.

∴Ibid., 13.

But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."<sup>32</sup>

An example of a chreia presented with wit might be Matthew 8:21, 22: "And another of the disciples said to Him, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father. "But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead." <sup>33</sup>

Some chreiai may be presented in the form of a syllogism as in Matthew 12: 22-28,

Then there was brought to Him a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw. And all the multitude were amazed, and began to say, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons." And knowing their thoughts He said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself cannot stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently, they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."<sup>34</sup>

Others may be formulated as enthymemes requiring the reader to make a deduction about something only implied. An example might be Luke 19:8-10:

And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost".<sup>35</sup>

A chreia may be presented with an example as in Luke 6:1-5:

Now it came about that on a certain Sabbath He was passing through some

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 14,15.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

grainfields; and His disciples were picking and eating the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?" And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."<sup>36</sup>

Some chreiai are presented in the manner of a wish such as in Matthew

23:37-39:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"<sup>37</sup>

It is also possible for a chreia to be presented in a symbolic manner like Jesus'

remarks in Luke 8:19-21:

And his mother and brothers came to Him, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. And it was reported to Him, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."<sup>38</sup>

Chreiai may occur in a figurative manner as in John 15:1-3:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 14,15.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.



word which I have spoken to you.”<sup>39</sup>

Some may be found using double entendre as in the famous dialogue

between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1-3:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to him by night, and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”<sup>40</sup>

On occasion a chreia may be presented with a change of subject as in Jesus’ enigmatic response in John 12:20-26:

Now there were certain Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; and therefore came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came, and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.”<sup>41</sup>

And finally, a chreia may contain a combination of these manners of presentation. An example which combines an enthymeme with wit might be Matthew 7:9-11:

“Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, will he give him a snake, or a scorpion? If you then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

who ask Him!”<sup>42</sup>

### **Elaboration of the Chreiai**

Along with the classification of chreiai and their manners of presentation, the ancient rhetoricians supply another helpful insight. Most rhetorical handbooks include exercises for elaborating chreiai in several ways. These elaboration exercises were designed to develop the rhetorical skills of the students by taking the basic rhetorical form, the chreia, and developing it in various ways for different purposes or occasions. Theon includes eight such topics for the elaboration of the chreiai: 1) recitation (where the chreia is given in the same or similar words); 2) inflection (displaying the chreia with variety in number and in the various cases of the language); 3) commentary (including a comment in favor of the chreia); 4) critique (including a statement antithetical to the assertion of the chreia); 5) expansion (reciting the chreia at greater length); 6) abbreviation (putting the chreia in more concise form); 7) refutation (arguing for the impossibility, falsity or implausibility of the chreia's assertion); and 8) confirmation (writing a short essay in favor of the chreia's assertion and the *ethos* of its source if need be).<sup>43</sup> These topics seem to fall naturally into couplets with recitation/inflection and expansion/ abbreviation designed to help the student with rhetorical style and delivery and commentary/critique and refutation/confirmation to aid in analysis and argumentation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>43</sup>Mack, “Elaboration,” 36. Cf. also Watson, “Chreia/Aphorism” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels; and Robbins, “Chreia”, 17.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. For a detailed account on how these exercises were employed in the ancient rhetorical schools, cf. pp.37-41. A more nuanced treatment of chreia recitation, abbreviation, expansion and elaboration may be found in Vernon K. Robbins, “Introduction: Using

Several ancient rhetoricians had their own versions of these topics and methods of argumentation with the increased emphasis being directed away from the variety of topics to ways in which these topics might become complementary aspects of a ‘complete argument’ (See Table I).

Table I<sup>45</sup>

1 The Standard Speech Form	2 Anaximenes' Supporting Arguments ( <i>Rhet. ad Alex.</i> )	3 Hermogenes' Supporting Arguments	4 The Complete Argument ( <i>Rhet. ad Her.</i> )	5 The Amplifi- cation of a Theme ( <i>Rhet. ad Her.</i> )	6 Hermogenes' Elaboration
1. <i>Proimion/Exordium</i>					1. Encomium/Praise
2. <i>Diegesis/Narratio</i>		<i>Propositio</i>		<i>Res</i>	2. Paraphrase/Chreia
			<i>Ratio</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	3. Rationale
3. <i>Pistis/Argumentatio</i>		<i>Confirmatio</i>		<i>Pronuntio</i>	
		<i>Exornatio</i>			
	Contrary	Same/Contrary		<i>Contrario</i>	4. Contrary
	Similar	Analogy	<i>Simile</i>	<i>Simile</i>	5. Analogy
		Example	<i>Exemplum</i>	<i>Exemplum</i>	6. Example
		Lesser/Greater	<i>Amplificatio</i>		
	Judgments		<i>Iudicatio</i>		7. Judgment
4. <i>Epilogos/Conclusio</i>			<i>Complexio</i>	<i>Conclusio</i>	8. Exhortation

Hermogenes of Tarsus, a second century C.E. rhetorician presented an elaboration exercise consisting of eight topics which support the basic chreia as a thesis (cf. Column #6 in Table I above).<sup>46</sup> Some of these topics may be observed in the following examples of what appear to be elaborated chreiai in the gospels:

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Rhetorical Discussions of the Chreia to Interpret Pronouncement Stories.” Semeia 64 (1994):ix-xvi and Miriam Dean-Otting and Vernon K. Robbins, “Biblical Sources for Pronouncement Stories in the Gospels.” Semeia 64 (1994):95-115.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 52.

I. Mark 9: 38-41

A. Description of the situation

John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us."

B. Exhortation

But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him..."

C. Rationale

"...for there is no one who shall perform a miracle in my name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."

D. Statement from the contrary.

"For he who is not against us is for us."

E. Authoritative conclusion with an example.

"For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall lose his reward."<sup>47</sup>

II. Matthew 12:1-8

A. Description of the situation

"At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful on the Sabbath."

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<sup>47</sup>Robbins, "Chreia," 20,21.

B. Argument from example.

But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?”

C. Argument from analogy

“Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?”

D. Argument from comparison

“But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here.”

E. Argument from the contrary based on citation of authority, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.”

F. Rationale

“For the son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”<sup>48</sup>

This understanding of the composition of the gospels suggests that those texts labeled as pronouncement stories are in many cases elaborated *chreiai*,<sup>49</sup> and the gospels themselves, at their root, are rhetorical documents with argumentation designed to persuade.<sup>50</sup> While this

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>49</sup>Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 118.

<sup>50</sup>Vernon K. Robbins, “Writing as a Rhetorical Art in Plutarch and the Gospels,” in *Persuasive Artistry*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 168.

understanding has implications for how each gospel writer may have handled his sources,<sup>51</sup> the primary spin off for this study is related to its effect upon the interpretation of the gospel sayings. The process of interpreting the sayings then, will include the identification of species of rhetoric in the chreia,<sup>52</sup> as well as the kinds of argumentation employed in it.

### The Importance of Chreiai for Interpretation of Gospel Sayings

The interpretation of the gospels as rhetorical documents is significant for gospel studies in general and for the subject of this thesis-project in particular. In general terms, rhetorical study of the gospels is not only in concert with their intent but sheds light on the nature of their composition. Examples of chreiai found in Palestine and used by rabbis at the time of Jesus have been uncovered and classified.<sup>53</sup> Even though these Jewish chreiai do not follow completely the intricate Greco-Roman rhetorical forms, it is undeniable that they were both abundant and popular in first century C.E. Palestine.<sup>54</sup> All of this adds some credence

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<sup>51</sup>The suggestion would be that each gospel writer elaborated a given chreia in light of his audience and rhetorical purposes. A possible example might be the account of Jesus blessing the children. Matthew's account (19: 13-15) is a more condensed version of Mark's (10:13-16) (Watson, "Chreia/Aphorism," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels).

<sup>52</sup>Robbins asserts that since the primary purpose of the chreia is to feature the main character of the story, most chreiai are at root epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric. The primary species of rhetoric in a given chreia, however, is determined by the final rhetorical goal of the text, and so also may be judicial (forensic) or deliberative (hortatory) in nature ("A Rhetorical Typology for Classifying and Analyzing Pronouncement Stories," in SBL Seminar Papers, ed. K H. Richards (Chico: Scholars- Press, 1984), 95-97).

<sup>53</sup>Watson and Hauser, Rhetorical Criticism, 118.

<sup>54</sup>George W. Buchanan, Jesus, The King and His Kingdom (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 65-68; Alan J. Avery-Peck, "Rhetorical Argumentation in Early Rabbinical Pronouncement Stories," Semeia 64 (1994):49-72.

to the remark of Papias recorded by Eusebius, that, "Peter gave his teaching in chreia form,"<sup>55</sup> and gives added support to the idea that Palestine in general and the gospel writers in particular would have been familiar with the use of chreiai in literary composition. In addition, comparative studies performed on both Greco-Roman and Christian chreiai demonstrate impressive reliability in their transmission over the centuries.<sup>56</sup>

The chreiai are significant also in terms of understanding the humour in gospel sayings. As has already been demonstrated, the pithy comments contained in many chreiai are prone to humorous interpretation. This is not to say, of course, that all chreiai contain witty repartee but it does assert that humour is often evident. When realizing that a good many chreiai come from the main character's response to some question or situation, the possibility of that response highlighting the perceived incongruity or humour in it is enhanced.<sup>57</sup> Humour is a frequent phenomenon in chreiai from the Cyrenaic and Cynic schools where the clever rejoinder was considered to be the ideal and the audience was often left speechless or in confusion.<sup>58</sup> Burton Mack makes the observation that "the chreiai of Jesus bear striking resemblance to the chreiai of the Cynics."<sup>59</sup> While this insight does not guarantee the existence of humour in gospel sayings, it may predispose one toward both

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<sup>55</sup>History of the Church, 3. 39. 15 quoted in Butts, "Chreia," 138.

<sup>56</sup>Buchanan, Jesus, 51-53, 71-74.

<sup>57</sup>Butts, "Chreia," 133.

<sup>58</sup>Mack, "Elaboration," 47,48; R. Bracht Branham, "Authorizing Humor: Lucian's Demonax and Cynic Rhetoric," Semeia 64 (1994):33-48.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 65.

looking for it and recognizing it.

### The Chreiai and Rhetorico-Contextual Interpretation

The above discussion necessitates some adjustments in the basic model for rhetorico-contextual interpretation presented in the previous chapter. While the first two and last two stages of the process remain unchanged, some fine-tuning is needed in stages three and four.

#### **Stage 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit**

The rather complicated process of determining the rhetorical species, questions and stasis of the unit may be somewhat simplified when applied to what is known about chreiai in the gospels. Many of these detailed determinations regarding questions and stasis are simplified by determining the basic chreia or thesis of the unit and its elaboration and/or supporting arguments. The choice of the taxonomy used is not as important as gaining an appreciation of the rhetorical structure of the unit. One might use Hermogenes' taxonomy or the simpler fourfold standard speech form of: *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (background and thesis, *argumentatio* (argumentation) and *conclusio* (summary and conclusion) or some eclectic blend of the options detailed in Table 1. When analyzed as a chreia or elaborated chreia, the unit's rhetorical species and arrangement help to determine each other in light of the rhetorical goal of the unit.

#### **Stage 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit**

To the list of questions to be asked of the text in this unit, two more might be added: What humorous devices are used?; and What are the intended effects of these devices upon



the audience? The answers to these questions would then contribute to the determination of the overall rhetorical effectiveness of the unit (stage 5) and to the contextualization of the message to the contemporary audience (stage 6).

### **A Text Case - Mark 10: 17-27**

For purposes of illustration, Mark's account of the rich young man will be interpreted by using the proposed rhetorico-contextual model. This passage has parallels in Matthew 19:16-26 and Luke 18:18-27. Since this test case will serve as a paradigm for those participating in the proposed workshop, it will be restricted to the use of the English text.

#### **L. Determine the Rhetorical Unit.**

The task of determining the rhetorical unit is made more difficult by the potential inclusion of verses 28-31. If included, the text would be composed of three parts: vv. 17-22; vv. 23-27; and vv. 28-31. All three are related to the theme of discipleship, and all include examples of salvation terminology such as: "eternal life," "treasure in heaven," "Kingdom of God," and "saved." They are related by the journey motif which begins in 10:1a, "And rising up, He went from there to the region of Judea..." since 10:17 begins with reference to a journey and then 10:32a refers back to it, "And they were on the road, going to Jerusalem..." which would function as a sort of *inclusio* for the unit. However, this may not be as conclusive when note is taken of the many other references to this journey to and around Jerusalem (eg 10:46; 11:1,11,12,15,19,20, 27; 13:1,3; 14:26,32). In the Matthean and Lukan parallels, this third section is connected grammatically to the previous two ("Then Peter answered and said to Him..."(Matt. 19:27), "and Peter said..."(Lk. 18:28)) by a conjunction

but that is not the case in Mark's account.

Granted that the three sections are linked by theme, however so is the previous section 10:13-16 on the blessing of the children and the succeeding sections 10:32-34 on Jesus' prediction of his death and 10:35-45 on the request of James and John since they also speak of walking the way of the cross in discipleship. The conception of the 'kingdom of God,' which is woven throughout this gospel, has a significant number of occurrences in this context (eg. 9:1,47; 10:14,15,23,24,25; 12:34; 13:8). The parameters of the text should be determined therefore by matters of internal coherence with the realization that many of the sections in this part of the gospel share a common theme. On this basis, then, vv. 17-27 have been chosen as the text in question. These two sections (vv. 17-22 and vv. 23-27) fit together in the normal Marcan pattern of a private explanation to the disciples after a public event or comment (but even then, seldom do the disciples 'get it'). Also, Jesus' explanatory comments in vv. 23-27 are enveloped by the repetition of his "looking" at the disciples (vv 23,27) which would not only intensify the content of his comments to them and connect with his "looking" at the rich man in v.21 but also serve as an *inclusio* for the unit.<sup>60</sup>

## **2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit.**

The background discussed under the previous stage helps to determine the rhetorical situation of the unit. Mark 10:17-27 is found in a context emphasizing discipleship in the kingdom of God that begins with Peter's confession in 8:27-30 and the succeeding prediction of the passion and call to discipleship in 8:31-38 and goes through until Jesus arrives in

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<sup>60</sup>Lamar Williamson, Jr. Mark (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 185.

Jerusalem in 11:1. The intermediate context is concerned with entrance into the kingdom as evidenced by the blessing of the children in 10:13-16 (“Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all” v. 15) and the text currently under examination (“...How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God” v. 23b).

The issue addressed on the historical level of Jesus and the disciples is that of discipleship; how one becomes a part of the eschatological kingdom. The call to discipleship is radical and requires a reversal of values from conventional norms within Judaism in that children are exalted and the law abiding rich (one who has kept the law ever since he was a child (v. 20)) are humbled. Human accomplishment is downplayed (“Then who can be saved?” (v. 26) and “With men it is impossible...”(v. 27)) and divine enablement is emphasized (“...all things are possible with God” (v. 27)).

The life issue on the canonical level is similar, assuming the traditional setting of Mark’s gospel. If indeed Mark was writing in Rome to Roman Christians who were facing difficulties from persecutions and false teachings, the emphasis upon the suffering of Jesus would address both these issues. Correcting false Christologies which were over-emphasizing the divine aspect of Jesus at the expense of his humanity and seeing Christ’s passion as a paradigm for discipleship were both addressed in Mark’s emphasis upon Jesus’ suffering.<sup>61</sup> Therefore in the light of the difficulties of walking the way of the cross, which for many in Mark’s audience might include renunciation of wealth and social position and also could include martyrdom, some encouragement would be appreciated. This needful respite would

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<sup>61</sup>Cf. Martin, Mark, 65-70, 145-62.

underscore the important truth that one's taste of the kingdom (i.e. salvation both here and yet to come) rests upon the power of God and not upon those rich by standards of the world. As a matter of fact, God tends to prefer and to reward those whom are lowly by worldly standards such as children (10:13-16) and the apostles (10:28-31).

### **3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit.**

The text falls naturally into two related chreiai (vv. 17-22; vv. 23-27); both being sayings chreiai. The first could be termed a response chreia or a call story and the second a statement chreia or a thesis story.<sup>62</sup> Although all chreiai tend to be undergirded by epideictic rhetoric since they display in some way the ethos of the main character (who is, of course, Jesus in this case),<sup>63</sup> these two chreiai are more deliberative or hortatory in terms of their overall rhetorical goal. While these chreiai do give insight into the character of Jesus, the main rhetorical goal is hortatory both on the historical and canonical levels. In the former it is the rich man and the disciples whom are being exhorted and in the latter level it would be Mark's audience.

An analysis of the rhetorical arrangement of these chreiai might be:

Mark 10: 17-22

A. Description of the situation

And as He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and began asking Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to

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<sup>62</sup>The terms "call story" and "thesis story" are take from Robbins, "Rhetorical Typology," 98-105.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 97.

inherit eternal life?”

**B. Argument from judgment**

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God above.”

**C. Argument from citation of an authority**

“You know the commandments, ‘DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, DO NOT DEFRAUD, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’”

**D. Response/Rejoinder**

And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.”

**E. Exhortation**

And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, “...go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me.”

**F. Rationale**

“One thing you lack...”

**G. Response**

But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property.

Mark 10:23-27

A. The Chreia/Thesis

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!”

B. Response

And the disciples were amazed at His words.

C. Argument from recitation/repetition

But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!”

D. Argument from analogy

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

E. Response/Rejoinder

And they were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?”

F. Rationale

Looking upon them, Jesus said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

The main point of this unit is understood by comprehending that the question of the rich man about what he could do to inherit eternal life is answered by Jesus’ statement of its human impossibility but divine possibility.

#### **4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit.**

The movement of the text goes from an encounter between Jesus and the rich man to one between Jesus and his disciples—from the specific to the general. The common theme is entrance into the kingdom of God. In both cases, the dynamic is supplied by Jesus' words and the reactions they elicit. The personal dynamics between the two encounters are relatively similar because Jesus seems kindly disposed toward the rich man (e.g. "And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him..." v 21) and the disciples (e.g.) Jesus' reference to them as "Children..." v 24) and they both reciprocate (the rich man kneels before Jesus and calls him "Good Teacher" and the disciples again are astonished by their master). Even Jesus' retort regarding the rich man's use of the appellation "Good Teacher" does not necessarily cast a polemical tone to their encounter. Given the unit's emphasis upon the divine in salvation, Jesus' response is proper in light of the Jewish reticence of applying the same adjectives to both God and humans.<sup>64</sup> Therefore the dynamics of the encounters in this unit surround the words of Jesus and their radical rhetoric, which according to Kennedy at least, is typical of the Markan style.<sup>65</sup> Appeal is made directly to divine authority and little rhetorical support is given outside of the divine source of the assertions. The appeal of the unit then is made deductively, premised upon divine authority and proceeds to make its point through the content of the message (*logos*) although the message does elicit emotional reaction (*pathos*)

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<sup>64</sup>Cf. C. S. Mann, Mark, Anchor Bible Vol. 27 (New York: Doubleday 1986), 399; William Lane, The Gospel According to Mark. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1974). 364, 365; Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark (London: MacMillan, 1963), 425.

<sup>65</sup>New Testament Interpretation, 7.

in the original audience. The reactions to Jesus' words move from grief (v. 22) to amazement (v. 24) to astonishment (v. 26).

In terms of rhetorical devices, the repetition of Jesus' "looking" (vv. 21,23,27) underscores the import of his words as well as serving as an *inclusio* for the second section of the unit. The repetition of Jesus' exclamation "How hard..." (vv. 23,24) underscores the point of human impotence in light of divine omnipotence (v. 27). The summary saying in 10:27 is made more memorable by an ABCBA chiastic structure.

The humorous device in the unit is found in 10:25 which is an obvious example of the humorous use of hyperbole. The sheer impossibility and absurdity of human ability in light of salvation is demonstrated humorously by a juxtaposition of two opposites. The camel, which is featured frequently in Jesus' humour, is the largest animal common to Palestine while the needle eye is the smallest of openings, hence the humorous incongruity.<sup>66</sup> The humour in this instance serves as an analogy in Jesus's argument, highlighting, in memorable fashion, the impotence of human merit in relation to salvation.

##### **5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit.**

In analyzing the rhetorical impact of the unit, it may be concluded that the radical nature of its message is developed and supported by the overall movement of the unit—the arrangement of the arguments and the responses of the original audience—so that it comes to a climax in the concluding saying of 10:27, "with men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." The message is effective in the historical context as

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<sup>66</sup>Sandifer, "Humor of the Absurd," 296; Lane, *Mark*, 369.



demonstrated by Peter's response in 10:28. The effectiveness in the canonical context can only be surmised. It would seem probable, however, that a radical message such as the one contained in this unit would be welcomed encouragement for believers who need reassurance in the midst of a hostile environment.

#### **6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit.**

If indeed the message of the unit is the power of God in relation to salvation in opposition to those considered to be empowered and in favour of the disenfranchised, contemporary parallels can be found. The greatest challenge to the process of contextualization comes in dealing with the different dynamics involved at present within the Christian community. Many North American believers have more in common with the rich man than with the early Christian community. Despite the relative affluence of today's church, the overall attitude toward wealth has declined since early Palestine. Rather than serve as a sign of divine approval, wealth (especially the wealth of others!) is often viewed with the suspicion that it may be ill-gotten.

In spite of these differences, the rhetorical "shock treatment" observed in the biblical text would appear to be the best option in communicating the message today. Depending upon the specific context of the modern sermon on this unit, some change might be made in the identity of the "antagonist" in the first section of the unit. This person needs to personify the one "who has it all" to the contemporary audience and that will change from context to context.

As far as the use of humour in the contemporary context, care should be taken to allow it to perform a function analogous to the original text --that of a memorable supporting

analogy to the main message. Frederick Buechner may have captured the essence of this saying for the modern day by stating "...that for a rich man to get to Heaven is about as easy as for a Cadillac to get through a revolving door."<sup>67</sup> However, in the opinion of the author, the original absurdity might be better served by stating "it is easier to drive a Cadillac through a keyhole than for a rich (or religious, etc.) person to enter the kingdom (or "receive salvation or eternal life" etc.)."

Once the humour in the saying has been contextualized, its rhetorical function in the original text needs to be replicated in the preacher's contemporary context. For purposes of illustration, a sermon on Mark 10:17-27 entitled "Divine Divestment" delivered by William H. Willimon<sup>68</sup> will be presented with editorial comments germane to this study enclosed within square brackets. Willimon preached this sermon in the Duke University Chapel, on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost.<sup>69</sup>

### **Divine Divestment**

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, came home after church one Sunday and wrote of his disgust at what happened there:

In the magnificent cathedral the Honorable and Right Reverend Geheime-General Ober-Hof Pradikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world, appears before an elect company and preaches with emotion upon the text he himself elected: "God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things are despised" *and nobody laughs.* (*Attack Upon Christendom, 1944*)

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<sup>67</sup>Wishful Thinking rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 98.

<sup>68</sup>Peculiar Speech (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 67-74.

<sup>69</sup>William Willimon, interview by author, 12 June 1997, Nova Scotia Agricultural College, Truro, Nova Scotia.

Today I am to preach on Mark 10:17-27. The story of Jesus and the Rich Man. Rick Lischer, Professor of Preaching at the Divinity School, was supposed to preach on this text. I thought that I asked him to preach on this text on this day. Two weeks ago Rick told me that he had not heard about it, had never received a letter from me, and was planning to be at his fortieth high school reunion. That is no excuse. He was supposed to preach on this text. Now I have to preach on this text. I had to leave my beach house yesterday, get in my \$15,000 car, and drive to my \$150,000 home, in order to preach to you on this text. I wonder if, when I am done, any of you will laugh. [Here Willimon must deal with the differing contexts between the original audience and his contemporary audience, including himself. Few attending Duke Chapel can identify with Mark's original audience in terms of socio-economic status. Willimon uses a rhetorical strategy of identification here to assure his audience that he is just as perplexed by Jesus' words as they will be].

Let us put this episode in context. Jesus has just blessed children (10:13-16). Jesus was lecturing away one day, everybody trying to pay attention, everybody taking notes on his theology lecture. But his disciples said, "Master, send these children away."

They were being distracted by the children. Somebody has pulled somebody else's hair. Somebody was rolling around in the dirt, wrestling with somebody else. "Master, send these children away."

Do you remember what Jesus did on that occasion? Mark says that he took a child and placed the child in the midst of them. In other words, this helpless, small, ignorant, vulnerable, and dependent little child, the one whom we in our society place at the margins of our society, Jesus put in the midst of them. We put children out on the fringes of our

society. After all, they are unproductive, dependent, and vulnerable. We have progressed to the point where our society treats its very young and its very old the same way: namely, we institutionalize them. We put them away in institutions and pay people to look after them. After all, both the very young and the very old make no contribution to society: they are unproductive, dependent, *small*.

The curious thing is that Jesus took those whom we put at the fringe of society and put them right in the middle of the disciples. Those whom we regard as distraction from the really important things, Jesus put in the middle of us in a last ditch effort to help us pay attention.

It is as if Jesus wanted to say, “You want to get into my kingdom? The only way to get into my kingdom is to be very small, very little, very needy. There will be no adults in my kingdom, no self-sufficient, liberated, autonomous, independent adults. There will only be children. Here is a kingdom that has a very small door.”

At any rate, Jesus has just shocked the disciples by pulling a child out of the crowd and putting the child in the midst of them.

As fate would have it, this episode is followed by another in which anything but a little, weak, needy, dependent, and small child comes forth to Jesus. Mark says the person who came to Jesus was “a rich man.” Matthew, when he tells the story, says that he was “young”. Luke says that he was a “ruler.” But all three Gospels agree that, whether he is young, a ruler, or what, *he is rich*.

This rich man comes to Jesus saying that he wants some of this “Eternal Life” Jesus has to offer. Evidently, despite the fact that he is rich, despite his having many things, he

doesn't have "Eternal Life." So he asked Jesus, "What must I *do* to have eternal life?"

What must I do (evidently, he has been very successful at his doing) to get eternal life. "Eternal Life" is just another way of saying "kingdom of God" in Mark's Gospel. "How can I get into your kingdom," asked the young man who has been very successful at getting to the top of this world's kingdom.

Jesus responds, "You want to get into this kingdom? Simple. All you have to do to get in God's kingdom is to obey all the commandments. Don't worship anything but God, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't kill, don't be envious of anything anybody else has, keep the Sabbath, stuff like that."

Robert Capon says that in invoking the anything-but-simple-to-follow Ten Commandments, Jesus expected this high achiever to recoil and say something like, "Gosh, Jesus, when you put it like that, why in the world should I be going out looking for something else to do, when I have done such a lousy job of doing the things that I have already been commanded to do?"

But this young man was a hard-core success. So he replied, "Gosh, Jesus, I have done all that since I was a kid in Sunday School." Evidently, this young man is a bigger success than even Jesus thought. He has not only been successful at getting material things but he has been a spiritual success as well. [It is not necessary to assume that the rich man's answer caught Jesus by surprise in order to make rhetorical sense of the unit. Worthy of note is the fact that Jesus quotes commandments from the 'second tablet' of the Law relating to social relationships. The rich man's success at keeping them all (which should be taken at face value) not only indicates the high level of his religious accomplishments but might also

be subtle hint (or even a “set up” by Jesus) to suggest that he might not be as “rich toward God,” to use Luke’s phrase, (i.e. in relation to the first tablet of the Law) as it would first appear].

In the context of that day, the young man’s success at keeping the Ten Commandments would not be that surprising. After all, because he is rich, he has plenty of free time on his hands, plenty of time to study the Bible and to do what the Bible commands. If he needs to take all weekend off to study the Bible, go to church, and do good things, he can afford it. It was believed that rich people had been blessed by God. One way they had been blessed is with enough free time to be a success at religion.

I very well remember the woman who told me, when I urged her to come to my church, that she found it difficult to come to church on Sunday morning. When I asked her why, she rather embarrassingly explained, “Look, I am a waitress. I work ten hours a day, six days a week as a waitress. On Sunday morning, when I wake up, I can hardly get out of bed. Worse, my feet are so swollen, I cannot get on my Sunday shoes. That’s why I don’t come to church.”

Because they thought that the rich were blessed with enough free time to read and obey the Bible, hire expensive psychotherapists, go to affluent universities [here Willimon comes closer to making the connection between his audience and the rich young man], and ponder the mysteries of life, you can imagine their shock when Jesus turns to this materially and spiritually rich young man and says, “So you have succeeded in obeying the Ten Commandments? Then let me ask you to do just one teeny weeny little thing for me. Go, sell all you have, and give it to the poor, and come follow me and you will have treasure in

heaven.”

To everybody’s amazement, Jesus considered the young man’s wealth, not as a sign of divine favor, but as a big problem.

“Strip down, raffle your Porsche, liquidate your portfolio, break free and give it all to the poor.” In other words, strip down, throw away your crutches, become weak, little, small, poor, and vulnerable. You can’t get in here, unless you come as a little child. Didn’t I say this kingdom has a very small door?

With that, Mark says, the young man slumped down, got real depressed, got into his Porsche, and drove away.

You see, this is a *call story*. It is very similar to other call stories in the Gospel of Mark (1:16-20; 2:14; 10:46-52). Someone is being invited to join up with Jesus and become a disciple. Interestingly enough in those stories of Jesus’ call and invitation, people come forth and follow. In this story, the man walks away. He walks away because he is rich.

As he is walking away, Jesus turns to his disciples (10:23-27), to us, to the church, and says out loud, “Man, it is really hard to get one of these rich ones into my kingdom.”

One of the disciples says, “How hard is it, Jesus?”

Jesus says, “Its hard. In fact, I would say it is about as hard for one of these rich people to get into my kingdom as to shove a camel through the eye of a needle.” [At this point Willimon might have continued the contemporizing of the biblical text by inserting something like, “Now in our time he might have said “It’s about as hard to drive a Cadillac through a keyhole (or in this case, ‘a Porsche through a pin hole’) as it is for one of these rich people to get into my kingdom.”]

That hard!

Can you see why I wanted Rick Lisher to preach on this text and not me? Let's face it, by the standards of that day, by the standards of this day, we know where we would find our place in this story. *We* are the rich young man. He is us all over [the identification between himself, his audience and the rich young man is now complete--he 'has' us!].

Anuradhi Vittachi (Earth Conference One, 1989) asks us to imagine the world as a village with one hundred families:

If this metaphorical village consists of one hundred families ... sixty-five cannot read. Some eighty families have no members who have flown on airplanes, and seventy have no drinking water at home. About sixty families occupy ten percent of the village, while just seven own sixty percent of the land... Only one family has a university education.

The rich young man is us all over.

And I really wish I could help you out of this "easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom" text. Creative homiletical attempts to change one Greek letter so that the word will not be "camel" but rather "rope" will not work. Jesus said camel, not rope. (Besides, it would be no easy thing to get a rope through the eye of a needle anyway!) Around the ninth century, some creative preacher claimed that there was a gate in Jerusalem named "The Needle's Eye" so that Jesus was talking about how difficult it was to get a fully loaded camel through this relatively narrow gate. No, that is an invention of a preacher like me who, back in the ninth century, probably had to preach this text to a congregation like us.

The disciples spoke for us all, "God! Who can be saved?"

And Jesus replies, "It's hard. It's hard. Impossible, for rich people to enter the



kingdom. In fact, it is impossible for *anybody* to enter this kingdom. But with God, all things are possible, even this.”

Just in case you watched the previous episode with Jesus receiving and blessing the little child (10:13-16) and thought that it was a sweet, nice, easy thing to come to Jesus, Mark records this. We can only come to Jesus as a small, needy, little child. But there is nothing sweet or nice about it. It’s hard.

As a preacher, I must not make this sound easy. It’s hard. In fact, its is impossible. Then Jesus says, “*With God, even this is possible,*” It is even possible for someone who is rich to divest and get into the kingdom. And I don’t know whether that it good news or bad. Jesus has clearly taught that you can only come into this kingdom as a child, as someone who is needy, small and poor. How can we come into this kingdom when we are all big, grown up, self-sufficient, well-to-do, and scored high on the SAT? Jesus says, “With God it is possible.” That is, with God, it is possible that, given enough time, *we* will get stripped down, made small, impoverished, divested.

With God, that is possible? This world’s kingdoms belong to those who sing “I Am Just a Material Girl,” and “It’s Money that Matters.” You can’t imagine the possibility of our being able to let go, strip down, and divest of those things to which we so ruthlessly cling in this life. But with God, Jesus promises, it may be possible. *And I don’t know whether that is a promise or a threat.*

As we go through life, getting our advanced degrees, earning our salaries, driving our cars, paying our mortgages, we had better look over our shoulder. When we get all secure, set-up, insured, and well-fixed, there may be that old Pursuer behind us, just waiting to jump

us in order to divest us. With God, it's possible. Lamar Williamson says, "If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, grieved, or amazed, we have either not yet heard it or heard it so often that we do not really hear it anymore."

After we spiritualize it, explain it away, this text sits there, grinning at us. It looks around at us all. We exclaim. "It's hard! Who then can be saved?" With God it may be possible.

She went to Honduras with the Duke Chapel Mission team on her spring break. Went to help the poor in Honduras, spent her spring break living with a poor family in the mountains of Honduras, sleeping on a dirt floor, living without electricity or running water.

In the evenings she sat with the family in the twilight, singing, listening to stories around the fire. In that family, the elders were cherished, the children were adored.

"That family," she said later, "made me think of my family. Compared with that family in Honduras, my family is dysfunctional. Why is it that we have so much, yet have so little of what matters?"

She went to Honduras to help the poor and surprise! She got helped. She went there rich; she returned poor. Which is good news because Jesus says, nobody who's rich and big can get into his kingdom. But then this good news: With God even the impossible is possible. Or is this bad news?

You make the call.

As Athol Gill sums it up in *Life on the Road*:

This is the only time in the gospels that we are specifically told of a person declining the call of Jesus — and, let the Western church mark and understand, he does so because of his material possessions! The young man who had such great potential disappears with the stage and we hear nothing

more about him. Even his name has been forgotten.

C. S. Lewis once noted, "Now all things are possible. All things are possible. It is even possible to get a large camel through the small eye of a needle. That's possible. *But it will be extremely hard on the camel.*"

## CHAPTER 5

### HUMOUR AS HEURISTIC: WORKSHOP DESIGN

Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama.... Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe.

Flannery O'Connor

#### Introduction

The ultimate purpose of this thesis-project is intensely practical. It aims at giving the minister a new and/or supplementary perspective from which to engage in ministry, especially in the ministry of preaching. To this end the more theoretical studies of the previous chapters are now to be applied for the practical use of those who will attend the workshop component of the study.

The material presented to this point not only points toward the workshop but also will serve, in a condensed fashion, as some required background readings for the workshop participants. The logic employed in the presentations of the chapters of the study will serve, in large part, as the paradigm for the workshop design. In particular, matters of the definition of humour and its cognate terms are foundational, followed by the main theories of humour. At this point the matter of how one's sense of humour might be enhanced is to be addressed. Once participants become more acquainted with these foundational issues, then a taxonomy

of humorous devices could be introduced with examples from the teachings of Jesus.

After the introduction to humour, the hermeneutical issues may be highlighted giving the workshop participants an increased appreciation for rhetorico-contextual interpretation. This increased appreciation would be aimed toward the gospels in general and the gospel sayings in particular. A chance to employ the rhetorico-contextual method in relation to a humorous saying would round out the workshop experience.

### **A Rationale for the Choice of Workshop Participants**

Professional education in Christian ministry should reflect and contribute to one's ministry context. The author's context of ministry is primarily one of educating church leadership (i.e. teaching in a small Bible college) among a small fellowship of conservative and independent churches (the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ) in a relatively isolated geographical location (the Province of Prince Edward Island). For this thesis-project to have relevance to the practice of ministry, it will reflect several characteristics dictated by the ministry context. First, it will be sensitive to the prevailing theological understandings of those in the group while at the same time attempting to supplement their knowledge and aptitudes. Second, the project will target a rather small group of individuals since the author's educational ministry area is small and is in the closest geographical proximity to only sixteen Christian Churches and Churches of Christ on Prince Edward Island. While the workshop will be publicized in broader circles, the primary ministry area remains small indeed. Due to the restrictions in workshop size several limitations present themselves in terms of evaluatory methods. The aims of the thesis-project are most amenable to quantitative

methods of evaluation but any sampling will not be large enough to be statistically significant. Therefore evaluation of the workshop will combine quantitative methods with more qualitative ones which are more applicable to the size of the sampling.

There can be few adjustments made to those chosen as a target group without violating the integrity of the ministry context. Even though the majority of the author's educational ministry is among students preparing for church leadership, a close working relationship with nearby supporting churches is indispensable. The ministries of those currently serving these churches have a great impact upon the lives of the congregations as well as those preparing for service. To enhance these ministries as well as those of students within the college program logically would reap the greatest harvest for the entire ministry context. At one time the author entertained the idea of limiting the workshop to only ministry students but that would have narrowed the sampling further and would have produced a rather specialized course in a small college which is struggling just to offer core curricular courses.

### **A Rationale for the Workshop Format**

The intensive, short-term workshop format has been chosen for the purposes of this thesis-project. Some of the reasons for this choice already have been intimated. However, a full rationale of this choice will become obvious as more is understood about the workshop format. A workshop is "a relatively short-term, intensive, problem-focused learning experience that actively involves participants in the identification and analysis of problems and

in the development and evaluation of solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

Workshops as adult educational formats have certain advantages as well as limitations. Thomas Sork considers the advantages to be: increased numbers able to participate due to a workshop’s short term nature; a workshop is very transportable from location to location; results of the workshop may be implemented immediately in the participants’ contexts; participants are forced to interact in novel ways to accomplish goals due to the intensive nature of the workshop; participants can concentrate on the issues at hand since they are removed from the distractions of their natural environment; well-designed workshops facilitate sharpened problem-solving skills; and are convenient in that they require few changes in room arrangement or equipment.<sup>2</sup>

The limitations of the workshop format are: fatigue or information overload may be possible; there is little time to correct learning problems when they become apparent; fatigue also may take its toll on the leader of the workshop; there is little opportunity to correct problems if they arise; the time constraints make it difficult to provide individual feedback to participants; and some who attend workshops do not possess the ability to engage in the participatory learning so necessary in the workshop experience.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously the workshop format is better suited to some contexts than others. Sork, again, is helpful in determining when one should consider using it in preference to other short-

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Sork, “The Workshop as a Unique Instructional Format.” in Designing and Implementing Effective Workshops, ed. Thomas Sork (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.8.

term education formats:

First, the workshop should be used in situations where the learning objectives emphasize problem solving....Second, the workshop should be used for solving problems that are relatively complex and generalized and that require intensive analysis....Third, workshops should be used in situations where the resources necessary to engage in problem solving are available and where they can be effectively incorporated into workshop activities during a concentrated period of time....Fourth...only if skilled leadership is available.... Fifth...only if participants come with, or can be provided with, the group process skills that they need to engage in effective problem solving....Sixth, the workshop should be used in situations where it is important to remove participants from their "natural" environment to bring about the desired changes in capabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Given these guidelines, the workshop format would seem to be the most appropriate given the content of the thesis-project and the proposed target group. Therefore a workshop offered on the campus where the author is employed to a group numbering between seven and fifteen would be the most appropriate scenario.<sup>5</sup>

### **Needs Assessment for Workshop**

In order to ground the assumptions of this study with the realities of the targeted participants for the workshop, a needs assessment exercise was completed. Permission was granted to consider those attending a regularly scheduled monthly meeting of the local Church of Christ/Christian Church ministers as a focus group<sup>6</sup> to respond to several questions related

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>5</sup>The number between seven and fifteen is the opinion of Mary Pankowski who states this size is large enough for a significant exchange of ideas but small enough to encourage informality, spontaneity and participation. "Creating Participatory, Task-Oriented Learning Environments," in Designing and Implementing Workshops, ed. Thomas Sork (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 13.

<sup>6</sup>For a basic description of the nature and functions of a focus group, cf. Richard A. Krueger, Focus Groups 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 20,21.



to humour, homiletics and rhetorical criticism. The first twenty minutes of the meeting on June 19, 1997 was given to this matter. With the author serving as administrator, the seven ministers responded to the following questions:

1. What is your view on the relationship of humour to the Christian faith?

2. How important is it for a preacher to have a good sense of humour?

- not important at all
- not very important
- important
- very important
- completely essential

3. How would you rate your own sense of humour?

- poor
- average
- above average
- excellent

4. How often, on average do you use humour in your sermons?

- never
- seldom
- sometimes
- often
- a lot

5. For what purposes do you presently use humour in your sermons?  
(check as many as apply)

- to gain rapport with the audience/congregation
- to regain the audience's attention
- to introduce difficult subjects
- to increase retention of sermon content
- to defuse tension in the audience
- to introduce the sermon
- to break down the audience's defenses against the sermon's aim
- out of habit

\_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is the role of rhetoric in the interpretation of Scripture?
7. What examples from the Gospels can you cite which demonstrate Jesus' sense of humour?
8. How many sermons have you preached on Jesus' humorous sayings?

\_\_\_\_\_ none  
\_\_\_\_\_ 1 or 2  
\_\_\_\_\_ 3-5  
\_\_\_\_\_ 5-10  
\_\_\_\_\_ more than 10

9. Would you be willing to commit yourself to participate in a 2-day workshop, complete with pre-workshop readings, designed to help you recognize and preach some of the humorous sayings in the Gospels?

\_\_\_\_\_ no, I cannot  
\_\_\_\_\_ yes, depending on when the workshop is offered  
\_\_\_\_\_ yes, I will definitely participate

10. Which dates in the autumn season would be most convenient for you?

First choice \_\_\_\_\_  
Second Choice \_\_\_\_\_  
Third Choice \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Office Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

The questions were designed to accomplish several objectives: 1) to determine their level of integration of humour and the Christian faith; 2) to ascertain their opinions as to the importance and use of humour in pastoral ministry; 3) to access their understanding of rhetorical criticism in biblical interpretation; 4) to test their perception of Jesus' sense of

humour; 5) to measure the number of sermons they have preached on Jesus' humorous sayings; and 6) to determine their level of interest and availability in terms of participating in the workshop.

Establishing and maintaining a non-threatening environment for this exercise was important in order to receive an accurate reading of their opinions and knowledge of the subject and to ensure a positive motivation toward their participation in the workshop. Before they answered the questions, the nature of the exercise was explained as not judging their competence but merely assessing the need for the proposed workshop. Three questions surfaced as they responded to the questionnaire. The first was a matter of clarification on the wording in question 4 as to the difference between "often" and "a lot". Recognizing the possible semantic difference between persons, the preference for such generic terminology was expressed over the option of asking for a numerical estimate of uses of humour in preaching. The latter option was shown to be rather unwieldy. The second request was in relation to the proposed cost for the workshop (an inevitable question among a gathering of ministers!). Since the workshop is to be offered part of a thesis-project, they were assured that they would bear no financial responsibility for the workshop and that their investment would be in their commitment of time and energy.

The results of this exercise coincided well with the expectations of the author. The first question, "What is your view on the relationship of humour to the Christian?" elicited a variety of responses. Two gave generic responses underscoring the importance of humour without any supporting argumentation; two mentioned humour as a pastoral resource in dealing with difficult life situations; two made reference to Jesus' sense of humour; and only

one saw any connection between humour and God's orders of creation and salvation. Keeping the format of the questions as one requiring a short answer rather than multiple choice was deliberate. Answers to the question suggest a lack of theological grounding wherein a view of humour is integrated into a Christian worldview.

Questions 2 and 3 related to their personal evaluations of the value of a sense of humour for the minister and how they rated this ability within themselves. It was hardly surprising to see that five of them considered a good sense of humour to be "very important" and with two stating it was "completely essential." In terms of self-evaluation, five felt their own sense of humour was "average" and two rated themselves as "above average." There would be few today who considered themselves to have a poor sense of humour. The tendency to give socially desirable answers is a common occurrence in needs assessment exercises.<sup>7</sup>

Humour in preaching was the subject of the next two questions. They were asked how often they used humour in their sermons. Four responded with "sometimes" and three with "often". While this question leaves the aspects of types of humour and its quality unanswered, oneself is seldom the best judge in these matters. Question 5 was a check list of the purposes of humour in their preaching. All of the options presented were checked off at least three times except for two which were not chosen by any present. The first of these was "to breakdown the audience's defenses against the sermon's aim" which in actuality was a negative expression of the option "to introduce difficult subjects" and the latter was chosen

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<sup>7</sup>Elayne M. Harris, "Planning and Managing Workshops for Results," in Designing and Implementing Effective Workshops, ed. Thomas Sork, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 47.

three times. The other option left out was “out of habit”, and again what others see as a habit in a person may not be viewed as such by the person himself. The options given related more to the rhetorical issues of sermon delivery rather than any humour present in the rhetorical structure of the biblical text.

Question 6 asked, “What is the role of rhetoric in the interpretation of Scripture?” Only one respondent demonstrated any knowledge of issues related to rhetorical criticism. This is an area in which few, if any, of those who participated would have any working knowledge.

As far as supplying examples of Jesus’ sense of humour, the results were more promising. While two could not supply any specific examples, five contributed good lists considering the length of time allowed for the exercise. Among the most frequently cited were: the camel through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:24; Mk 10:25; Luke 18: 25) and the speck in your brother’s eye and plank in your own (Matt 7:3, 4; Luke 6: 41, 42) which were mentioned three times each. Reference to the humour in the feeding of the 5000 also was cited three times which left the author pondering what they saw in that pericope that he did not.

In terms of numbers of sermons preached on Jesus’ humorous sayings, four admitted to not preaching any. One cited the “3-5” option and two the “5-10” choice. It is interesting to note that those who have preached these sermons were in the main the most senior among the others in terms of years of ministry—with one ministry spanning over four decades. Given these figures, this group has not given much homiletical attention to the humorous sayings of Jesus.

In summing up the results of the questionnaire, it would appear that those assembled as the focus group were open toward the desirability of humour but still lack a theologically grounded sense of the role of humour and the hermeneutical ability to address the humorous sayings in a rhetorically-sensitive fashion. Hence the conclusion would be that the need for the proposed workshop of this study exists within the author's ministry context.

### **Workshop Planning Model**

Due to the unique circumstances of this workshop in that it was related to personal research rather than a commercially viable or a church sponsored event, some of the normal steps for planning a workshop were altered. The model to be employed is as follows:

1. Determine needs or problem of a target group
2. Select workshop personnel
3. Develop the learning design
  - list learning objectives
  - determine structure and content of workshop schedule
4. Select aids and methods to support learning design
5. Select a location and date for the workshop
6. Publicize the workshop
7. Conduct the workshop
8. Evaluate the workshop.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Elayne M. Harris, "Planning and Managing", 45-52. Cf. James A. Davies, "Seminars and Workshops," in The Christian Educator's Handbook on Adult Education, eds. Kenneth Gangel and James Wilhoit (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 325-38 for more detailed planning models.

### Determine Needs or Problem of a Target Group

As stated above in the rationale for the chosen target group, those presently ministering to Church of Christ/Christian Churches on Prince Edward Island were targeted as the primary participants for the workshop along with some upper-class college students preparing for ministry. The problem statement, supported by needs assessment, may now be repeated from the Introduction of the thesis-project: there is a perceived need for many preachers serving conservative churches to increase their understanding of humour in its relation to the Christian faith. A greater appreciation of the theological underpinnings of humour may free the preacher to recognize humorous elements and devices in the process of biblical interpretation which will in turn impact the preaching of those texts. Therefore, this thesis-project is an attempt to facilitate a greater appreciation of the humorous perspective as it relates to the Christian faith in general and biblical interpretation in particular and to supply a specific methodology whereby particular manifestations of humour found in selected gospel sayings might be understood and communicated to a contemporary audience.

### Select Workshop Personnel

The matter of workshop presenter had already been decided, for better or worse, as the author of the thesis-project. Three other key persons were needed for the workshop to be successful. In groups of seven to fifteen participants, a facilitator and recorder/clerk are needed.<sup>9</sup> Both these positions are designed to enhance group dynamics. The third person needed is an external evaluator for the workshop to evaluate matters of workshop design and

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<sup>9</sup>Pankowski, "Learning Environments," 13.

learner satisfaction.

### **Facilitator**

The facilitator is a person who helps create and maintain a healthy learning climate in the workshop. According to Pankoswki:

The facilitator is a neutral servant of the group who does not evaluate or contribute ideas but who focuses group energy on a common task, suggests alternative methods and procedures, protects individuals and their ideas from attack, and encourages individual members to participate. Doyle and Strauss suggest several facilitation techniques: clearly defining the role of the facilitator as the steward of the group; getting participants to agree on a common problem and process before the workshop begins; “boomeranging” problems back to group members (for example, “that’s a good question. Who knows the answer?”); being positive, complimenting the group; avoid talking too much; supporting the recorder; accepting the inevitability of mistakes; and helping to educate workshop members about group dynamics.<sup>10</sup>

A person as important as this should not be selected by chance but appointed by the presenter before the workshop and suitably rewarded afterward.

### **Recorder/Clerk**

The task of the recorder is to enhance communication by creating a group memory of what group participants are saying.<sup>11</sup> Tools for this assignment include felt pens and large newsprint pads or plastic sheets on the walls. Enough is required of the recorder that the job might be rotated a bit. Davies suggests that an alert facilitator may “appoint” a person who has dominated the discussion to act as recorder.<sup>12</sup> Recorders are to be rewarded tangibly as

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 16.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>“Workshops,” 331.



well.

### **External Evaluator**

This person should be one well-versed in educational theory and practice, especially in that of adult continuing education. A qualified evaluator is to be invited to attend, observe and evaluate the workshop. The task of the external evaluator is to assess the areas of workshop design and implementation, learner participation and skills of workshop leader. Questions relating to the workshop design might include: What are the learning objectives for the workshop?; Are there enough or too many objectives?; Are the objectives realistic and measurable?; What is the overall impression of the workshop design?; What are the strengths and weaknesses of the design?; What is the number and quality of learning strategies used in the workshop?; Which learning strategies should be adjusted, deleted or replaced and which should not?; What adjustments need to be made to the workshop design?; Were there any deviations from the workshop design?; how many and why?

Questions dealing with learner participation might be: How many participated in the workshop?; How does the number of participants measure up to what was anticipated?; How involved, enthused and cooperative were the participants in the sessions of the workshop?; Did they stay for the entire workshop?

Leader skills might be assessed by asking these questions: Did he know his subject well?; Was he organized and prepared?; How were his oral style and delivery?; Was he enthusiastic?; Did he pace the amount of learning for the students appropriately?; Did he handle questions and interruptions well?; Did he maintain interest among workshop participants?

It is important that the evaluator offers a helpful perspective without upsetting an optimum learning environment. In practical terms, insights and evaluations should be reserved until after the workshop unless they might be of help before it is complete. Comments need to be made privately and constructively. For all intents and purposes during the workshop, the evaluator needs to be a benevolent and silent presence. This person should be chosen with care and suitably remunerated as well.

### Develop the Learning Design

A learning plan begins with the learning objectives. Rather than complicate matters with a host of complex objectives, Harris suggests any given workshop should have no more than three or four.<sup>13</sup> A list of learning objectives for the workshop are as follows:

Upon completion of the workshop the participant will have:

1. -heard and responded to the thesis upholding the importance of the role of humour in the Christian faith;
2. -evaluated his own sense of humour and participated in exercises to enhance it;
3. -displayed increased understanding of the rationale and methodology of rhetorico-contextual interpretation as it relates to the gospel sayings;
4. -applied the proposed rhetorico-contextual model in relation to the humour

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<sup>13</sup>“Planning and Managing,” 49. For helpful treatments regarding the nature, purpose and development of learning objectives, cf. Warren S. Benson, “Setting and Achieving Objectives for Adult Learning,” in The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Adult Education, eds. Kenneth O. Gangel and James C. Wilhoit (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993): 158-77; and J. William Pfeiffer and Arlette C. Ballou, Design Skills in Human Resource Development (San Diego: University Associates, 1988), 27-31.

in a gospel saying.

On the basis of these learning objectives, the following workshop schedule was proposed:

### Friday Sessions

Session Number		
1:00 - 1:30		Registration and Refreshments
1:30 - 2:00	I	Introduction to the Workshop
2:00 - 3:00	II	Defining Humour
3:00 - 3:30		Refreshment Break
3:30 - 4:00	III	Theories of Humour
4:00 - 5:00	IV	Introduction to a Theology of Humour (Mirthology)
5:00 - 6:00		Supper Break
6:30 - 7:30	V	Humour Enhancement
7:30 - 8:00		Refreshment Break
8:00 - 9:00	VI	Jesus and Humour

### Saturday Sessions

8:00 - 9:00	VII	Introduction to Rhetoric
9:00 - 10:00	VIII	Rhetoric and the Gospels
10:00 - 10:30		Refreshment Break
10:30 - 12:00	IX	The Rhetorico-Contextual Model
12:00 - 1:30		Lunch Break
1:30 - 5:30	X	Research and Writing
2:30 - 3:00		Refreshment Break
5:30 - 7:00		Supper Break

7:00 - 8:00	XI	Reporting Session
8:00 - 8:30	XII	Evaluation

### Select Aids and Methods to Support Learning Design

The next step in the planning process plots ways in which the general learning objectives of the workshop might best be brought to bear in each of the proposed sessions. Various learning strategies and teaching aids are suggested for use both before and during the presentation of the workshop.

### **Pre-workshop Preparation**

Some materials are to be sent out in advance to the workshop participants. These exercises and readings are to allow the participants to prepare themselves for the workshop experience in areas of its subject matter which might be unfamiliar to many of them. The package sent to each participant includes three humour inventories (one to be completed as self-evaluation by the participant, the remaining two also focus upon the participant and are to be completed by a colleague and spouse or significant other), readings taken from chapters in the thesis highlighting rhetorical criticism especially in light of the gospels and an explanation of the proposed rhetorico-contextual model and an example of how it is used in relation to a humorous saying of Jesus. These preliminary exercises and readings are to be accompanied by a cover letter explaining what needs to be done before the workshop and what each participant needs to bring to it.

### **Session I**

Part of the introduction to the workshop is to open up a perspective to faith and

ministry which may not have been considered legitimate in the experience of some who would attend. The workshop is to begin with the group listening to a song written and performed on the tape by Michael Card. The song refers to Jesus as “God’s Own Fool” and lyric sheets will be distributed so that both the message and music of the song might be appreciated.

After personal introductions are completed, all the participants will be asked to write down the objectives they have for this workshop. Each will be encouraged to think of anywhere from one to four personal objectives and then after sufficient time is given, they will be encouraged to share some of these objectives with the entire group. Some discussion (and probably some laughter) undoubtedly may arise from this interchange.

At this point the four objectives mentioned above will be communicated with the group and then the floor will be opened to whatever comments or questions might arise.

## **Session II**

The task of defining humour needs to be set in proper perspective for fear that the process to be taken so seriously that the main lesson is missed. Therefore this session will begin with the use of an overhead transparency of a Gary Larson cartoon entitled “Defining Humor.” Participants will then be led in a word association exercise which encourages them to vocalize the words that come to them when the term “humour” is mentioned.

With the aid of a listening sheet, a presentation will be made by the leader explaining the nature of the relationship between humour and related terms. At the conclusion of the presentation, the workshop participants will be divided into smaller groups and given the task of formulating their own definitions of “humour” and “sense of humour”. An overhead transparency with definitions of these two terms from the Oxford English Dictionary will be

displayed in order to give some direction to the groups.

### **Session III**

The session on humour theories may seem unnecessary to some but will serve a useful purpose in the process of coming to a theologically grounded understanding of humour. Part of that realization comes from the recognition that many explanations of the phenomenon of humour exist and coming to some conclusions about the nature of humour does not require a person to approve of every theory or expression of humour. Part of what is accomplished by a theory of any given subject is a standard by which alternative explanations and expressions of the subject are judged.

The content of this section is potentially overwhelming and so a presentation of the basic material will be made by the leader aided by the use of listening sheets by the workshop participants. Only three main theories of humour will be presented and opportunities for questions and comments will be incorporated in the session. Following the presentations, the participants will reassemble in their small groups and discuss the following three questions: 1) Can you think of a joke which illustrates the workings of each of the three main theories of humour? (i.e. what are they?); 2) Which of the three major theories of humour makes the most sense (or in this case, non-sense)?; and 3) What would your evaluation be, from a Christian perspective, of each of these humour theories? A time for sharing the results of this discussion would conclude this session.

#### **Session IV**

A theoretical understanding of humour is to be interpreted by a theological perspective in the minds of Christian believers. This session is a quick grounding in the principles of a theological understanding of humour, which for purposes of this workshop is dubbed “Mirthology.” During the presentation of the material, the participants will be encouraged to follow along by participating in a exercise called “webbing.” Each person will be given a handout with web-like figures on it. Each central idea of the lecturette will be placed in the middle circle of a web and the subordinate but connected ideas may each be placed on one of the extending webs.

A time to evaluate the content of this session will be provided by inviting the group to respond to selected biblical passages which have been used to discourage the use of humour. A general time for questions and reaction from the entire group is designed to give attention to any issues raised among workshop participants.

#### **Session V**

This session is intended to build upon the findings of the previous one in aiding each one at the workshop to enhance their humourous appreciation and practice. To begin, a handout, taken from Chapter 2 of the thesis-project dealing with enhancing one’s humorous perspective, will be discussed with the entire group. Following this exercise, the participants will divide into their small groups and complete some humour enhancement exercises. The session will conclude with an evaluation of the Humour Quotient Instruments which they were given to complete before coming to the workshop. Participants will be given time to

evaluate their scores, weighting how they scored themselves in comparison to how they were viewed by spouses and co-workers. Graphs will be given to each in order to plot the respective scores. Questions to be asked by each on in relation to their scores might be: What are the strengths of my sense of humour? What are the weaknesses? What strategies might I employ to improve my sense of humour?

### **Session VI**

This is a transition session where the application of humour is made to the ministry of Jesus. The entire group will view two video clips from “The Media Bible” on the gospel of Luke (6:39-49; 7:24-35) and attempt to detect the humorous sayings mentioned in them. Following this, a handout explaining the major types of humour found in the gospels along with examples of each will be explained. Upon discussing the various forms of humour and what they share in common, the group will revisit the same video clips to see if their perception of humorous sayings has sharpened or increased at all.

### **Session VII**

Rhetorical concerns will dominate this session. The workshop participants will be given a quick summary and overview of the history and important concepts of rhetoric. The majority of the rhetorical terms explained will be found in a table reproduced in Appendix A of this thesis-project. Conclusion to this session will come with a discussion of what rhetoric can contribute to hermeneutics and homiletics as well as the potential mis-uses of this discipline.



### **Session VIII**

This particular session as well as the following one is designed to co-ordinate with the assigned reading given to the workshop participants in advance. Fundamental to an understanding of how rhetoric may aid the interpretation of gospel sayings is a working knowledge of the chreiai. Part of the task of this session is to explain the nature, purpose and forms of the chreiai. The participants will be consulting their copies of the assigned reading regarding the chreiai as the discussion of the subject ensues. Time will be taken to answer questions and concerns that arise. An exercise where the entire group participates in analyzing an elaborated chreia (Matt. 7:1-5) which contains a humorous device will conclude this part of the workshop on the relationship of rhetoric to the gospels.

### **Session IX**

Working in concert with the assigned readings completed by each participant, this session will cover how the rhetorico-contextual model proposed by this thesis-project may be used in interpreting a gospel saying which includes a humorous device. The text case of Mark 10:17-27 which was given as assigned reading may be consulted as the steps in the model are worked through. Overhead transparencies will be used to aid in this process. Questions and comments both during and after the exercise will be encouraged and addressed.

### **Session X**

Participants will be guided in a long session of hands-on application of the proposed model. Each one will be allowed to choose a gospel saying from a printed list and then be dismissed to a study area close to the reference materials needed to perform this exercise. A

handout giving a summary of matters relating to the date, audience and purpose of each of the synoptic gospels will be distributed in order to save them some time in the interpretation process. The workshop leader will be free to move among them, answering questions and giving directions and suggestions where needed. What this session is designed to do is to offer an opportunity for each participant to work through the process for himself while guidance is available. In terms of outcomes of this exercise, each one is to determine the meaning of the saying, the type and function of humour in the saying and how he might go about communicating this all to a contemporary audience. This will not necessarily take the form of a full sermon manuscript but the basic aims and communication strategy (i.e. structure) should be established.

### **Session XI**

A time for sharing the results of the research will give an opportunity for each workshop participant to present his findings and receive feedback on his work. Part of the workshop experience will be to benefit from the insights of other participants. This should contribute to the overall motivation of each one to continue to practice what was begun in the workshop setting. The conclusion of this rather intensive learning experience will allow for the sharing of some laughter as the entire group benefits from the examples of Jesus' humour.

### **Session XII**

The final session is reserved for matters of evaluation. Each participant will be required to complete a written questionnaire evaluating the workshop. The final moments

will be spent wrapping up the “loose ends” and expressing thanks to those who had special tasks in the production and presentation of the workshop. A responsive litany encouraging joy and humour will conclude this session and the entire workshop.

#### Select a Location and Date for the Workshop

Given the resource requirements of the workshop, the logical location for it would be on site at Maritime Christian College. There all the audio-visual resources are available as well as the research resources needed for the research component of the workshop. Kitchen facilities are available for the refreshment breaks; a large room complete with projection screen and space for a humour resource display as well as places for the small groups to meet will be sufficient for the main sessions of the workshop. This location is not as secluded as a retreat center, which would probably supply the optimum conditions for the workshop,<sup>14</sup> but is a neutral location for the participants and does have the needed library resources.

The date of November 21, 22, 1997 was chosen in response to the preferences of those polled in the focus group. This date occurs before the busy season of Christmas and after the normal rush of launching the fall church programs. Since ministers have notoriously cluttered calendars, it was important to choose a time most convenient to the majority.

#### Publicize the Workshop

Due to the nature of the target group and the workshop leader’s relationship with them, publicity was largely through personal contact. The process began four months before

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. J. William Pfeiffer and Arlette C. Ballow, Design Skills in Human Resource Development (San Diego: University Associates, Inc., 1988), 105-114 for a detailed discussion of workshops site selection.

the date of the workshop by making a general announcement to a ministerial meeting. From that point, successive announcements were made at similar meetings but the majority of the publicity has been through personal conversations. By maintaining communication with the ministers in the area, it soon became obvious which ones were interested and which were not. The priority for the publicity of this workshop was to maintain lines of communication with those who expressed an interest. Each potential participant was sent written material regarding the details of the workshop as well as the pre-workshop readings and assignments. A confirmation call the day before the workshop was to gain a firm determination of those who were planning to attend.

#### Conduct the Workshop

The workshop took place on the proposed dates in the proposed location with twelve participants in attendance. Ms. Dawn MacKinnon M.A. served as facilitator and Mrs Sandy Sutherland M.R.E. served as external evaluator. Mr. and Mrs. Les and Cette Farewell, resident supervisors at Maritime Christian College were in charge of refreshment breaks. A few participants had some scheduling problems but the majority were able to attend most of the workshop. The materials given to each participant in the workshop are found in Appendix E.

#### Evaluate the Workshop

Evaluation strategies are to take various forms and target various aspects of the workshop design and implementation, learner participation, learner satisfaction and learner

knowledge, skill and attitudes.<sup>15</sup> In order to ensure greater accuracy in evaluation, a triangulation of evaluative strategies was employed. A questionnaire at the conclusion of the workshop was designed to gauge the participants' evaluation of the areas relating to workshop design and implementation, learner satisfaction and learner knowledge, skills and attitudes. Personal interviews with participants (selected at random) after the workshop are to cover similar areas of evaluation. These interviews were conducted after the workshop by the facilitator in order to encourage more honest responses. Copies of the forms used for the participants' post-workshop evaluation and the post-workshop interviews are found in Appendix F. The observation and evaluation of an external evaluation addressed areas of workshop design and implementation, learner participation as well as assessment of the leader's skills.

This workshop experience had to overcome a few potential difficulties. One was a target audience which is not always enthusiastic regarding continuing education opportunities and has personal schedule problems which make it hard for most to commit two full days to a workshop. Another was the massive amount of material to be covered in a short period of time without overwhelming those in attendance. Regardless of the challenges, it remains the belief of the author that such an educational experience may serve as a catalyst to improve the personal perspective and professional skills of those who could attend.

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<sup>15</sup>For discussions of workshop evaluation, cf. Jeanette Goodstein and Leonard D. Goodstein, "A Matrix for Evaluating Training," in the 1991 Annual: Developing Human Resources, ed. J. William Pfeiffer (San Diego: University Associates, 1991), 267-85; Davies, "Seminars and Workshops," 333-37; and Ronald M. Cervero, "Evaluating Workshop Implementation and Outcomes," in Designing and Implementing Effective Workshops, ed. Thomas J. Sork (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1984), 55-67.

## CHAPTER 6

### HUMOUR AS HOMILETIC: HUMOUR IN SELECTED SAYINGS OF JESUS

Why should Christians be such happy people? It is good for our God; it gives Him honor among men when we are glad. It is good for us; it makes us strong. 'The joy of the Lord is your strength' (Neh 9:10). It is good for the ungodly; when they see Christians glad, they long to be believers themselves. It is good for our fellow Christians, it comforts them and tends to cheer them.

Charles Spurgeon

#### **Introduction**

Giving credence to the old saw "the proof of the pudding is in the tasting," the task of this chapter will be to present the workings of the proposed rhetorico-contextual model in relation to several humorous gospel sayings. The validity of this thesis-project depends upon the conceptual and practical utility of the proposed method which is to be evaluated by its hermeneutical and homiletical treatment of the biblical text as well as its utility to the preaching minister who desires to present a sermon on that text.

Since the hermeneutical and homiletical purposes of this thesis-project have been very narrowly defined – namely, to a treatment of the sayings of Jesus which contain humorous devices – no broad claims have been made. What remains to be seen is whether or not rhetorico-contextual interpretation can produce credible results from the humorous sayings of Jesus. This is not to say that George Kennedy's basic model (along with the basic adaptations suggested in this thesis-project) cannot be applied to other genres or sub-genres

(e.g. parable, narrative, oracle, etc.). However, such application of the model is beyond the purposes of this study. Examples of the model in action will be limited, then, to a prearranged list of gospel sayings which contain humorous devices.<sup>1</sup>

The degree of practical utility for the preaching minister is also an important factor in judging the effectiveness of the model. For this reason, the majority of the material presented in this chapter comes from the research done by the workshop participants themselves. Time allotted for personal application of the rhetorico-contextual model was limited by the workshop format to the space of three and one-half hours, obviously not enough time to prepare a sermon manuscript, especially by employing a method so new and unfamiliar to them. The time was sufficient, however, to measure whether or not the basics of the method were workable.

The first example is a development by the author of the sample chreia exegeted by all the workshop participants in their small groups and the remainder are samples of individual exegetical treatments of texts chosen from the selected list of humorous sayings given at the workshop.

### **Matthew 7: 1-5**

#### **1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit**

Matthew 7: 1-5 is found as part of the larger unit of 7:1-12 which in turn is found

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The list of passages distributed to the workshop participants as examples to interpret included: Matt. 7:6; Luke 11: 37-41; Luke 11: 9:13; Luke 12: 35-40; Matt. 18: 21,22; Mark 2: 15-17; Matt 10: 24-33; Luke 14: 15-35; Luke 9: 57-62; Matt. 6: 2-4; Luke 7: 24-35 and Matt. 23: 27, 28. A more comprehensive list of gospel passages considered to be humorous is found in Appendix C.

within the Matthean discourse commonly labeled “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matt 5-7). Matthew 7:1-5 follows the section of the Sermon (6:19-34) which urges the practice of Kingdom values (cf. 6:19, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal;” and 6:33, “But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.”), and precedes admonitions for discernment (“Do not give what is holy to dogs....7:6) and prayer (7:7-11) and a statement of the Golden Rule (7:12). The connection between these four parts of 7:1-12 is not immediately apparent. D. A. Carson suggests a continuation of the theme begun in 5:20 in the call for a kingdom righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>2</sup> In light of this call, Jesus uses the six antitheses (5:21-48) as examples of the former over the latter, warns against hypocrisy (6: 1-18), urges kingdom perspectives (6:19-34), warns against judgmentalism (7:1-5) and lack of discernment (7:6), urges prayerfulness (7:7-11), and sums up with the exhortation of 7:12.

The section of 7:1-5 stands on its own in relation to this development. There are connections in the text with what precedes: the relationship between 7:1 and the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer (6:12),<sup>3</sup> and the term “hypocrite” (7:5) with the treatment of the same in 6:1-18. The change from the end of 6:19-34 and the proverbial saying in 7:6 would suggest 7:1-5 is a proper rhetorical unit. Added to this is the repetition of parallelism (pardon the redundancy!) in the text since there is some form of parallelism in every verse. All these

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<sup>2</sup>D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 182.

<sup>3</sup>Donald A. Hagner, Matthew Word Bible Commentaries, Vol. 33a (Waco: Word Books, 1993), 168.



factors would underscore that Matthew 7:1-5 should be the boundaries of the textual unit.

## 2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit

The issues addressed by the Sermon on the Mount as a whole display Matthew's pedagogical style and Jewish orientation. If Matthew approaches his account of the life of Jesus with a Jewish emphasis,<sup>4</sup> the issues of life and righteousness in the Messianic kingdom should receive detailed treatment. Issues relating to self-righteous judgmentalism would be a natural outcome of the previous exhortations which include, "therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). Pastoral possibilities springing from the rather human propensity toward a censorious spirit would be all the motivation Matthew would need to use these words of Jesus in order to teach the messianic community proper attitudes toward judging each other. Matthew's pastoral intent for this text is underscored by the use of "brother" in 7:3,4,5 which is an indication that it is pointed primarily at the Christian community.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit

This text is a statement chreia with a hortatory or deliberative intent in both historical and canonical levels. It can be analyzed in the following fashion:

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<sup>4</sup>Robert H. Gundry, A Survey of the New Testament rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 84,85; D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 80,81.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 169.

**Matthew 7: 1-5**

**A. Statement of Thesis/Chreia as Exhortation.**

Do not judge lest you be judged.

**B. Rationale**

For in the way you judge, you will be judged;

**C. Repetition of Rationale**

And by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.

**D. Example in Rhetorical Question Form**

And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?

**E. Repetition of Example in Rhetorical Question Form**

Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye? And behold the log is in your own eye?

**F. Concluding Exhortation/Expansion of the Chreia**

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

What becomes apparent in the text is the movement from the succinct prohibition of judgment to the appropriate attitude in which judging might be accomplished among members of the believing community. The movement in the chreia does not contradict the initial prohibition in 7:1 but illustrates the broad semantic range of the verb "to judge".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 183.

#### 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit

In terms of appeal, the text argues deductively and is derived by the authoritative prohibition which carries the weight of eschatological divine retribution--the phrases "...lest you be judged" (7:1), "...you will be judged" (7:2), and "...it will be measured to you" (7:2) are divine passives. Proofs center on *logos* (the message itself) and *ethos* (the authority inherent and perceived in the speaker).

As far as rhetorical devices are concerned, the most prominent would be the use of parallelism which is evident in every verse of the text. The rapid fire repetition and tight construction found in 7:1,2 might suggest a proverbial form or at least some form of word play.<sup>7</sup>

The rhetorical question is repeated in 7:3, 4 and serves as the rhetorical form for the humorous device employed in the passage which is an obvious example of hyperbole. To even picture the image of one with a log in his own eye attending to a speck of sawdust in another's is both ludicrous and rhetorically effective. The exaggeration of the case makes the form of the rhetorical question more powerful. A rhetorical question highlights the obvious in question form and this outrageous bit of hyperbole only serves to make the point even more self-evident. It is important to note that the humour in this text serves the rhetorical function of a self-evident example of the issue in question — the appropriate parameters for exercising judgment in the Christian community.

The prevailing tone of the passage has an "edge" to it. It is couched in largely negative terms, starting with the opening prohibition, carrying through the rationale and

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 184.

examples and concluding with the vocative “you hypocrite” (7:5). The severity of tone might suggest the prevalence of a censorious attitude within the church and the “tough medicine” needed to address the issue. Stiff warnings are most natural in difficult situations.

#### 5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit

Assuming that self-righteous judgmentalism is the issue being addressed, special rhetorical measures are required. What makes such a situation so rhetorically challenging is the self-deception of those being exhorted. There are none so blind as those who think they can see (John 9:41). Something rather dramatic is needed to cause them (us) to awaken from their (our) self-righteous slumber. The two main rhetorical strategies utilized in this text to combat this mindset are: threat of divine retribution and self-condemnation through the use of rhetorical questions. Given the context of the believing community, it is hard to imagine any more effective rhetorical strategies. The similar strategies used by the prophet Nathan in confronting King David with his sins (2 Samuel 12:1-15) are brought to mind.

#### 6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit

A censorious spirit is not only an ancient phenomenon and so the contextualization of this passage should not require any hermeneutical slight-of-hand. The consistency of the human propensity toward judgmentalism supplies the bridge needed to land this text in the contemporary situation. Even in the postmodern milieu of toleration and pluralism, many believers who have embraced the spirit of the age still may be judgmental--especially about those who are judgmental! Therefore most congregations would have concrete situations analogous to the one addressed by Matthew.

In searching for a way to contextualize the humour, the illustrative purposes of it in the original text must be kept in mind. As far as the constituent parts of the hyperbole are concerned, specks and logs remain part of the contemporary consciousness and so the sheer absurdity is readily experienced by completely or largely maintaining the same terminology. Due to familiarity with the speck/log idiom, a preacher might want to try to recreate its rhetorical impact in some creative way. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase is partially successful: "It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt?"<sup>8</sup> Peterson maintains the hortatory "edge" of the text but his example of the smudge on the face tends to diminish the absurdity of the humour and thus its rhetorical impact. The contextualized humour probably should maintain the connection with seeing (note the repetition of "seeing" vocabulary in the text: "look," "notice," "eye," (7:3), "eye," "behold," (7:4), "eye", "see" (7.5)) due to its important connection to passing judgment. One possible rendering might be: "Why can you notice the grain of sand in your brother's eye and not notice the whole sandbox in your own?"

The sermon which comes from this text should mirror the strong hortatory tone of the text while striving to allow the basis for the exhortation to proceed from the words of Jesus and not the position of the contemporary preacher. To place the locus of authority for the sermon in the person of the preacher could perpetuate the very attitude in the preacher which is condemned in the text. Such irony would be too much to bear.

Given the necessity of identification in the preacher's rhetorical strategy for this text,

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<sup>8</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993), 21.

the basic structure of the sermon's main body could employ the form of the rhetorical question. This device was employed by Jesus in the original historical context and would have been effective with Matthew's target audience. The needs of most contemporary churches may closely approximate the canonical context—self-righteous judgmentalism among and between members of the church is very much a contemporary problem. To have Jesus rather than the preacher ask the rhetorical questions would be fundamental to the communication strategy of the sermon. With this basic strategic focus stated, the following is a sample sermon based upon Matthew 7:1-5:

**To Err is Human, But to Judge is....**

James is certainly on to something when he compares the word of God to a mirror. To paraphrase his point, he says we can look at the Word in the same way we can glance in a mirror. The image is short-lived and we may soon forget what we saw. Maybe some of you are like me and are just as glad that's the way it is! But when we are serious about God's Word and want to do what it tells us to do, we take a good, hard, long look, and this time the picture stays with us. That's James' point, but we're left to wonder what to do when we don't like what we see in this mirror. What if, after a good, long look, we don't look good long? Really seeing that reflection in the mirror of God's Word can be unsettling to say the least. I've had the opportunity to be in the dressing rooms backstage at the theatre. Just for fun I sat in front of one of those mirrors surrounded by the bright makeup lights. The man staring back at me was at least ten years older than I was, had more grey hair and other facial irregularities I'd rather not mention.

Yes, a long look in God's mirror is always helpful, but not always easy. Some texts

are harder to look in than others — some are so downright threatening to us that we would rather just break the mirror and put up with the seven year's bad luck. This morning Matthew is holding up a doozy right in front of our faces.

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matt 7 :1-5 NIV).

Do you like what you see in this mirror? Is everything all right? Everything the way it should be and where it should be? Maybe—if we only take a quick glance. But if we sit down and gaze at the image for awhile, nasty blemishes may start to appear. When Jesus is taking us to task for being judgmental with each other—with one another as believers—this mirror can be devastating to a lot of us.

As a matter of fact as I was pouring over this text in preparation for this morning, busily pondering and writing in my study at home, I had to suspend my work to settle a domestic dispute. One of the kids had “borrowed” a little toy from another without permission. Then he lost it. A pretty open and shut case. The borrower was in the wrong and the ‘borrowee’ was in the right. So I called the borrower into my study to give him “the lecture.” Things were going like they were supposed to, until I reclined in my chair at the climax of my lecture and my back hit up against my desk. The same desk I bought from the college where I teach—or at least I thought I bought. In that moment of revelation—and I could have sworn I heard Jesus snickering in the background—it came to me that I had forgotten to pay for the desk. I hadn't bought my desk, I'd “borrowed” it. How

embarrassing! And I don't even have a mirror in my study!

Maybe you have experienced something similar. You've got a brother dead to rights. You see a fault or a sin in a sister that is just begging to be corrected to the glory of God, of course and for the 'good of the body'. Just when you have that Christian brother or sister in your sights, then it all backfires on you. Jesus knows us pretty well and that is why he wants us to think about our overly critical attitudes toward each other.

His words come near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, that part of Matthew's gospel where Jesus tells us how to live according to God's will, to be good citizens in God's Kingdom. He has a lot to say about the way we should live — how our desire and ability to do what God wants needs to come right from within us. It's to be a genuine expression of our new life in Jesus. As a matter of fact he says that unless our righteousness is more authentic than that of the religious leaders of his day, we'll never enter God's Kingdom (5:20). Even though these scribes and Pharisees looked good on the outside, their hearts weren't right with God. A lot of what they did was simply showing off—holy hot-dogging.

Jesus cuts through all that externalism and says that true goodness and holiness is an inside job — a matter of the proper attitude. An attitude that seeks God's Kingdom and his kind of right living. Jesus even makes fun of the big show put on by many of these religious leaders. They look so foolish next to the true standard of what God says is important. All that show and they are missing the point! They strike up the band but have missed the parade. That is why Jesus wants to be perfectly clear. His standards go below the surface to the inner parts of our very selves. We can't be satisfied with surface salvation. So our prayers are for God's will and groaning for his kingdom to come. Our wants are for his



kingdom and his righteousness and not merely external, material things. And our judging one another, our relationships with one another must reflect this deep commitment to God's kingdom.

So what Jesus is saying to us in this text is this: before you are tempted to be harsh, critical or judgmental of another Christian who has sinned, let me ask you a couple of questions. The first question is simply: "Why are you minding my business?"

There is no mistake about it — judging belongs to God. It is Jesus' turf, not ours. Jesus is very Jewish here and doesn't come right out and say that God alone is the judge. Paul is bold and comes right out and says it. "It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:4). When Jesus says "if we judge others, we will be judged" that is his point. It is God who does the judging. He is judge, that's his job. So when we are critical of each other we are stepping on God's toes — only he has the right to judge and condemn.

When you think about it, it makes good sense, doesn't it? After all, God did create us; he alone is God and has the right as well as all the knowledge to make an accurate judgment. We are prone to dwell on externals, to go with what looks good on the outside. Its that old Pharisee impulse again. Only God can look through the glitz and glitter on the outside and get to the heart of the matter. Only he knows all the reasons and seasons of our sin; and so we need to fight the temptation to try to give him a hand.

There is a really good reason to keep our judging jaws wired shut. Jesus says that God will judge us with the same severity that we use on others. So if we are hard on our brothers and sisters, he will be hard on us. Now, I think I know what you're thinking. You are saying 'Well in that case, I won't say anything against my fellow Christians and on the

Day of Judgment God is going to look the other way and let me in? But that's not the point. Remember that judging is a matter of internal attitude like everything else in God's kingdom. So we aren't tying God's hands by being apathetic toward sin in the lives of other Christians. God is still holy and will judge sin — theirs and ours. This principle relates to our experience of God's perfect judgment. When we are harsh to others, in a weak attempt to make ourselves look good, God's righteous judgment seems all the more devastating when he takes that same mirror and shoves it in front of our faces. Do you remember that T.V. commercial that comes on during the hockey game on Saturday nights? It says, "You know the kind of things that can give you a delightful thrill." It goes on to list a few like: "The tax department called—they owe you money." The last one they mention is: "The math teacher that failed you calls to ask you for a job." Now there's a thrill and...there's the point. We get back what we give out. That should remind us to be kind and fair knowing one day we, too, will surely face God's throne of judgment.

Jesus is right and his question stands. What are we doing minding his business? Our judgments are so limited, shortsighted and selfish. We've seen so many examples of how human judgement has fallen short. People labeled Robert Fulton a fool when he attempted to build his steamboat. Even his financial backers wanted their names kept secret because they didn't want anyone to know their involvement in such an absurd idea. Thomas Edison's first grade teacher sent a note home with him suggesting that he be taken out of school because he was "too stupid to learn." Lee Iacocca heard the same condemnation when he promoted the production of the Ford Mustang and later the first minivan. Jesus wants to save the wear and tear on his church and to save us the embarrassment of failing our own tests.

So he says, 'Let it go and leave the judging to God.'

As if Jesus' first question isn't tough enough to answer, he asks us another one. This time he asks, 'Why don't you mind your own business?' We could probably see it coming, but often our problem is that we do think we are minding our own business. That's why Jesus asked us the previous question first — because only when we understand that ultimately judgment belongs to God, can we keep our noses in our own business.

Jesus even starts to toy with us here. He shows us the most ridiculous situation we could imagine and then lets us know we've been looking in a mirror all along. He says it in this way, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in you own eye?" And then he asks again, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' When all the time there is a plank in you own eye?" It's pretty silly isn't it? Can you picture some well meaning busybody trying to take sawdust out of someone else's eye with a huge timber hanging out of their own? Pure self-righteousness! Probably even funnier if you had grown up in a carpenter's shop. Since most of us are more familiar with the beach, we might say, 'Why do you make such a big deal about a grain of sand in your brother's eye and ignore the sandbox in your own?' Pretty silly picture, isn't it?

To step back for a moment, we realize that Jesus has us all dead to rights. We all can be hypercritical of others on occasion and can feel justified in doing so. 'Its for their own good', we say. But it's not--and all Jesus has to do is to ask the right questions and we condemn ourselves with our own obvious answers. We feel like the conductor on a train to Brussels who had all the passengers change trains before he realized he was the one on the

wrong train.

Since we are caught up with externals, we think watching for sin in the lives of our brothers and sisters shows our holiness. Jesus doesn't call us holy, he calls us hypocrites. He says we need to take the log out of our own eye before we attend to the lives of others. And by realizing how foolish we must look with the log in our own eye we can see how important it is to mind our own business first.

A similar thing happens to King David, if you recall, in his whole sordid affair with Bathsheba. After committing adultery, David tries to cover his tracks by arranging the murder of her husband. The deed is done — end of story, as far as David is concerned. He gets back to his kingly duties. But God sends the prophet Nathan with a story that ruffles his royal feathers. There was a rich man with many flocks and a poor man with only one little lamb. One day when the rich man had company, he stole the poor man's lamb and served it for supper. David is so mad that he interrupts and pronounces a death sentence on the rich man. We already know he's a goner—royal roadkill. He's condemned himself with his own words. Sound familiar?

Jesus' point is simple. He asks us to be more concerned with what is going on inside of ourselves before we worry about what's wrong with someone else. To take care of our own glass houses before we cast the first stone (to mix our metaphors!).

Again we ask, is Jesus trying to say we are not to care about what goes on in the lives of other Christians? No, not at all. As a matter of fact he says that we need to take care of the huge log in our own eyes and then we're free to help others with their specks of sawdust. So judging isn't necessarily wrong so long as we have judged ourselves first. Then if it's for

their good and not ours, we can help others with those instances of sin— those irritating, festering bits of evil that start small and gradually infect the whole body. The apostle Paul agrees when he tells the Galatians that, “...if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (6:1).

So we have two questions to keep in mind when those critical thoughts pop in our heads; when something that another believer does that bothers or angers us. They are Jesus’ questions—not mine. He asks, “Why are you minding my business?”; and “Why don’t you mind your own business?” Be careful how you answer. It may be too revealing. You may just see something in yourself you’d rather ignore. But that’s what happens when you take a good long look in this mirror. All of sudden, all you can see is yourself with something huge hanging out of your eye. I don’t know what that object might be for you — maybe a car, a vault full of money, some huge token of power or popularity — I can’t see what’s in yours. It’s too hard to see around this big desk that’s in mine! Whatever it is, its what is keeping you away from God and everyone else in the church. The choice is simple enough: either remove that ten foot pole or learn to live ten feet away. You be the judge.

## **Matthew 23: 27,28<sup>9</sup>**

### **1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit**

Matthew 23:27,28 is part of a longer discourse which extends from 23:13-36. This longer discourse is a series of woes and warnings against the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 23:27,28 is one of the “woes” in the extended discourse.

### **2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit**

This situation is a discourse by Jesus directly<sup>10</sup> to the scribes and Pharisees immediately after he has warned the crowds and his disciples to ‘do as they say but don’t do as they do’ (23:3). The words are intended to directly denounce the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. It is full of strong language, hyperbole and analogy that is a direct and shocking affront to their position of respect and authority. This conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders is one that has been building throughout Matthew’s gospel and now pours out of Jesus in the specific direction of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew, speaking to a Jewish audience, spends more time on these sayings than the other evangelists.

You can imagine Jesus looking over the heads of the crowd to the finely dressed, phylactery-wearing group out on the fringes of the group. He has just told his disciples and

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<sup>9</sup>This passage was chosen by Brian Metzger, a minister in Summerside, PE. This section is the result of his work on the text during the 3.5 hour portion of the workshop designated for personal research.

<sup>10</sup>According to 23:1, this discourse was delivered to the crowds and his disciples, which given the time (Passover) and location (temple) could have included some religious leaders in the crowd (Carson, “Matthew,” 471) but invective does not need to be delivered directly in order to be effective. In other words, these “woes” might have been general public denunciations given in the hub of Jewish religious life.

the crowd not to be like the Pharisees. He then goes on to described their nature as spiritually deceptive with the underlying issue throughout the diatribe as being one of hypocrisy in spiritual leadership — what you see is not what you get.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit

Beginning in 23:13 and proceeding through 23:33, the argument is developed. The argument begins with a denunciation followed by a rationale (23:13). This pattern continues through 23:33 with an authoritative conclusion found in 23:34-36.<sup>12</sup> These denunciations all take the form of sayings *chreiai*. Rhetorical questions are used in the argument in 23:17, 18, 33.

An analysis of the discourse would be:

23:13	Invective and rationale
23:14	Invective and rationale <sup>13</sup>
23:15	Invective and rationale
23:16	Invective
23:17	Rhetorical question
23:18	Statement of quotation

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<sup>11</sup>Such an indictment of the Jewish religious leaders' hypocrisy, especially since it was delivered right in the temple (24:1), would have served Matthew's pedagogical purpose in showing how in Jesus the New has fulfilled and surpassed the Old (represented by the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees).

<sup>12</sup>Carson sees a chiasmic structure in the seven woes and ends the section at 23:32 with 11:33-36 as the authoritative conclusion. "Matthew," 477, 484.

<sup>13</sup>Matthew 23:14 is a disputed text.

23:19	Rhetorical question
23: 20-22	Rationale
23:23	Invective and rationale
23:24	Invective
23:25	Invective and rationale
23:26	Argument from analogy
23:27,28	Invective and argument from analogy
23:29-32	Invective and rationale
23:33	Invective

#### 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit

The appeal of this passage is based on the authority of Christ to judge but also on the exposure of the Pharisees' hypocrisy. The reasoning is inductive, taking specific examples of hypocrisy to draw the conclusion of guilt (cf. 23:31)<sup>14</sup> This is the reason we don't want to be like them. It is a combination of *pathos* and *logos*. Specifics are cited but in a way that was guaranteed to create an emotional response.

The repetition throughout the discourse builds to a crescendo as the guilty verdict is announced. The humour found in 23:27,28 is the juxtaposition of the outside and inside, beauty and rot. It is an invective.

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<sup>14</sup>The various denunciations are argued in deductive fashion with the invective followed by a supporting rationale. The use of rhetorical questions is a rather deductive approach as well (cf. 23:17,18,33). However, the group of invectives taken together as a group have a cumulative effect which appears to be rather inductive in its appeal.



## 5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit

The overall effect can be seen in the way it builds its case to a forceful final verdict on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (23: 34, 35) peeling back the veneer of righteousness with each “woe” and concludes with rot and self-condemnation. The impact of the humour is effective to create an immediate emotional response as something everyone would see but in its beauty be condemning itself to being avoided, alone, unclean; a testimony to the rot inside. This certainly would have been a startling exhortation to the crowd as well as a clear message to the Pharisees.

## 6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit

The message of the unit is a direct warning against the dangers of neglecting the inner life in favour of superficial piety. If the church ever has had a time when leaders did not face this temptation, I don't know when it would be. The forceful images and dire warnings would serve us today as much as they did then. With our use of flowers at funerals and even expensive, beautiful caskets, the comparison would be easy. However, the religious connection of uncleanness and death is less clear. Primarily though, the thesis of warning against the destructive nature of hypocrisy and its nature of disqualifying a person to minister before the Lord is still easy to grasp.

The humour would be less invective with the absence of the specific characters [i.e. the scribes and Pharisees] but still the juxtaposition to stir disgust for hypocrisy among the hearers could be maintained. Possible contemporary examples might be: a prostitute in a wedding gown or a crystal bedpan.

A sermon on Matthew 23: 13-36 might be entitled “The Woes and the Warning,” or “Majoring in the Minors,” and could develop the statement that “our interior life before God is more important than how we look before others.” If the sermon was delivered to a group of leaders, the main sermon divisions could include: Confused Priorities; Temptation to Pretend; and a Fatal Flaw. A sermon delivered to the congregation as a whole might use the divisions: Switched Price Tags, Empty Promises; and a Fatal Flaw.

### **Luke 9:57-62<sup>15</sup>**

#### **1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit**

The parameters of this passage are determined accurately by the paragraph divisions in the New American Standard Bible.<sup>16</sup>

#### **2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit**

The rhetorical situation is found as Jesus and his disciples are walking from one village to another after having been barred from a Samaritan village. So as Jesus is on the move, the questions asked of Jesus and his calls for people to follow him take on a more immediate and urgent sense.

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<sup>15</sup>The work on this passage was done by Alan Beck, minister in Murray River, PE.

<sup>16</sup>The opening phrase of 9:56, “As they were walking down the road...” would be a thematic continuation of the travel theme of 9:51,56. Luke 10:1 begins with “After this...” suggesting that 9:57-62 does indeed stand as the rhetorical unit, while it is part of the larger discourse in Luke 9:51 - 19:27.

### 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit

This text is a collection of chreiai of actions and words<sup>17</sup> and can be analyzed as surrounding the central theme of Jesus' call to follow him. It could be analyzed in this way:

- A. Proposition: Follow Me 9:59  
It seems like verse 59 should be mentioned first because it is the central theme of the text, repeated in three cases.
- B. Response: I will follow You Wherever You go. 9:57.
- C. Warning (using hyperbole): The Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. 9:59
- D. Restating proposition: Follow Me! 9:59
- E. Response: Permit me first to go and bury my father. 9:59
- F. Another warning (again using hyperbole): Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the Kingdom of God. 9:60
- G. Third response: I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say goodbye to those at home. 9:61.
- H. Warning Response: No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God. 9:62<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>It is a collection of double chreiai; 9:57,58; 9:59,60; 9:61,62.

<sup>18</sup>This analysis tends to combine rhetorical and thematic features in its approach and does not take the content of the chreiai in canonical order.

#### 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit

Jesus and his disciples are traveling on the road to another village and this seems to be the basis for all three individual conversations. Jesus gives the command. "Follow Me!" but does not give any rhetorical reasons, save his own divine authority, for the people to do this. It would seem that the preaching of the Kingdom of God is the highest, the only reason given to follow him. It is higher than any family obligation or advantage (9:60) as well as any sense of popularity or prestige (this poor lad couldn't even go and "brag" that he was giving up everything to follow Jesus; 9:61).

The humorous devices found here are: hyperbole in 9:58 (Jesus certainly did have places to stay, eat and sleep, though they might not be his 'own' so it is hyperbole to claim otherwise); irony in 9:60 (William Barclay contends that the man's parents weren't dead at all; what he was saying, in fact, was that he wanted to remain at home until his parents were dead, which might be years in the future. He also gives an example of an Arab prince in the modern day to back up his claim. Jesus certainly wasn't advocating abandoning a son's responsibility to his parents and family, cf. John 19:26,27);<sup>19</sup> sarcasm, possibly also a hint of travesty in 9:62 (comparing plowing a field with preaching the Kingdom. This humour is not 'funny ha-ha' but they are cutting remarks designed to shake the hearers out of their complacency, or to deter them from following him for any kind of personal gain.

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<sup>19</sup>Byron McCane preserves the sense of irony in this statement but does so by referring to the practice of secondary burial as the last ritual in the mourning process. The reference to "the dead" in both cases would refer to physical death, cf. "Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead": Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21-22," Harvard Theological Review 83.1 (1990): 40-43.

## 5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit

This text leaves the individuals with no doubt about the response they should have to Jesus—either follow him or be left behind. To those who heard this message first, the conclusion would be obvious—there was no material, family or social obligation that should hinder them from following Jesus. This message would have been a big encouragement at the beginning of the Roman persecution of the Church.

## 6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit

The following is a sermon based on Luke 9:57-62:

### **Introduction**

“Follow me!” Jesus is recorded saying that several times in the pages of Scripture.

Matt 4:19 - “Follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men.”

Matt 16:24 - “If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

John 21:29 - (After Peter’s betrayal Jesus says to him) “Follow me!

But here Jesus is walking down the road and he is calling people to “Follow Me”, both in a literal and in a spiritual sense.

Now, today, we can’t see Jesus walking down the road, so we are limited to the spiritual sense of his call and so this morning I want to look at the three people who were willing to follow Jesus.

## **Proposition**

Jesus commands us to follow him, regardless of the cost to our personal comfort, our family problems or our family connections.

### **1. Personal Comfort**

The first man seems to start the whole story in motion, although I suspect that perhaps it is in response to Jesus' call to follow him.

"I'll follow you where you go." He says.

NOTE: Jesus doesn't discourage the man and sneer at him and say "Sure you will" in a nasty way. But he does warn him, and us, by his next comment. "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Isn't that interesting, here is God in the flesh, Creator of heaven and earth saying he has no where to lay his head. The cattle on a thousand hills are his, yet he has no where to lay his head - ridiculous, isn't it? But that's the way it is with us sometimes.

In today's terms it might be like a young person going forward at a camp meeting. All expected it, happy about it. Or perhaps it happened in Church, it is so easy - everyone is excited for you, everyone wants to see you walk down the aisle and accept Jesus. And Jesus is excited about it too—but he wants to warn us—we might not be powerful or rich or settled, he certainly wasn't. We might even feel like we have nothing, but that's the joke, isn't it? We are children of the King! All the wealth of heaven belongs to us! The short term might look bleak at times but wait! Heaven belongs to the children of the King!

## **2. Family Connections**

Jesus certainly commands the next man to “follow him”. And the man is willing, “Just let me go and bury my father first.”

How sad, here’s this poor man walking with Jesus and his father is laying dead at home.

But notice - Jesus doesn’t sympathize, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” He callously says. Sounds rather insensitive, doesn’t it? But I want you to note something here. In Palestine of that day, and in this day, for that matter, the dead are buried as soon as possible, on the day they die, if at all possible. Jesus knows full well that this man’s father is alive and well. What he is asking for is permission to stay home, permission not to follow Jesus, until his father died, perhaps years in the future.

So how does that impact us today? We all have family obligations that could keep us from following Jesus. Perhaps it is an unbelieving parent who doesn’t want us to go to church, doesn’t want us to be baptized, doesn’t want us to follow Jesus. I know a woman whose husband was like that. He did everything in his power to keep her and the children from going to church. Some would say that he made her life a living hell. But she knew the difference. My mother-in-law would rather put up with a living hell than condemn herself and her children to an eternal hell. She kept going to church, and today all but the youngest two of her seven children have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Quite a testimony.

## **3. Family Ties**

The last person who said they would follow Jesus said “Let me first go home and say good-bye to my family.”

Now, most of us would say, “What’s wrong with that?” Sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? And notice, Jesus didn’t say that the man couldn’t go, He just makes this statement, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.”

Sometimes, far from being a problem in our Christian lives, our families can be our rock, so much so that we tend to put our trust in them instead of putting our trust in our Father, our trust in Jesus. And that seems to be the case here. This person wanted to go home, perhaps to bask in the warm glow of family and friends.

I can speak from personal experience here. My family is great, what fellowship we share! How hard it is to leave them. But I need to listen to Jesus. Sure, go home, say good-bye - then get back to work. Don’t lay around, moping about what you are giving up. The fact is you are gaining so much more!

### **Conclusion**

“Follow Me!” That’s the command.

“Follow Me!” That’s the challenge.

“Follow Me!” Will you obey? Will you follow the King?

Casting off all hindrances, all fetters? “Follow Me!” Jesus commands. Will you obey?



## **Luke 7:24-35<sup>20</sup>**

### **1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit**

Luke's point in the text is to answer John's question to Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Although 7:24-35 is a separate incident, it is related to 7:18-23 which precedes it and the purpose of the entire text is not just to define John but also his relation to Jesus. John's question is answered in 7:22, 23 and his relation to Jesus is addressed in 7:27,28 29; 33-35.

### **2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit**

Jesus has just completed two stories: one the faith of a Gentile and how Jesus healed this outsider's servant; and the other, the raising of a broken-hearted widow's only son. The text is followed by Jesus showing compassion to a prostitute and exalting her faith above a Pharisee's.

The John the Baptist stories have parts in common with these others: the hearing of the sick and preaching to the poor outcast (7:22, 23); also John's austerity in contrast to the Pharisee's ostentation. Two of the stories (the centurion and the prostitute) also contrast the true faith of the outsiders with the poor faith of the Pharisee as do the John the Baptist stories (7:29-34).

While there are these common elements in its four stories, which are part of Luke's goal in sharing Jesus' concern for the disenfranchised, still the main point of our story is

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<sup>20</sup>The work on this passage was done by Callum Beck, part-time minister in New Glasgow, PE and part-time instructor in Old Testament at Maritime Christian College in Charlottetown, PE.

somewhat different. It comes more under Luke's desire to show God's plan of salvation. John is the transition point between the two covenants. The text primarily is meant to make a theological point regarding the relation of the covenants. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, but the text also indirectly supports Luke's other concern to show God's love for the disenfranchised who have pure hearts.

Nolland, interestingly, takes 7:18-35 as the central theme of chapter seven; what precede and follow it illustrates the main point of Jesus being the Messiah who performs wonders.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit

The arrangement seems to be that of an honest question, the answer and concluding exhortation, in dialogue form, almost Socratic. Both sub-pericopae (7:18-23; 7:24-35) exhibit this dialogue form, but a cautionary comment should be made. The question in each sub-pericope is the same, i.e. "Is Jesus the Messiah?" In the second sub-pericope the question is assumed but not stated. Jesus' questions in 7:24, 25 are not part of the honest question but the beginning of his answer to the unstated question. In other words, he answers the same question, 'Is Jesus the Messiah?' in two different ways. The first one points to his miracles and indirectly to Old Testament prophecy (Isa 35:5,6), the second explains God's plan to send a prophet before the Messiah, and that John and Jesus are the fulfillment of this plan. The

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<sup>21</sup>John Nolland Luke 1-9:20 Word Biblical Commentaries, Vol. 35A (Waco: Word Books, 1989), 313.

caution then is not to confuse the rhetorical questions of 7:23,25 with the unstated question behind them (7:19). They are the beginnings of the answer in the second sub-pericope.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit

Outside of the question-answer and exhortation framework, there are many rhetorical devices Jesus uses to make his point. Jesus' answer to John's question is indirect and evocative since it invites further, deeper reflection. Jesus does not say directly, "Yes I am" to John's question but gives him the raw material which inevitably would lead him to the only logical conclusion. The power in the answer for John is not just that the miracles support Jesus' claim to be Messiah, but they also evoke the Old Testament prophecies which predict the Messiah's miraculous and evangelistic work (e.g. Isa. 35:5,6; 61:1). The proof is not only in the signs but also in the prophecies. John would therefore conclude, 'Yes, Jesus is powerful, a unique being, and this is all part of God's eternal plan.'

There are rhetorical questions and exaggerated comparisons used in 7:24-26. What a beautiful, hilarious contrast Jesus lays out between the wind-swayed reed and the pretty-appeared man with the wild, hairy prophet of the desert who equivocated on nothing!

Jesus makes a declarative and authoritative pronouncement in 7:26-28a "...one who is more than a prophet...for he is the forerunner of the Messiah. He was the greatest man who ever lived."

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<sup>22</sup>The rhetorical arrangement of the text includes a response chreia (7:18-23) and two statement chreiai (7:22, 24-28; 31-35) separated by a brief editorial comment (7:29,30).

There is a shocking declaration<sup>23</sup> made in 7:28b,” ... he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” This would stun the original audience and has the same effect today, causing us to ponder the statement.

Low burlesque is employed in 7:31,32 where Jesus makes a comparison of the great men of the time by using a playground ditty. There is the personification of Wisdom in 7:35.

#### 5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit

Relating to the question-answer and exhortation arrangement, the issue is raised clearly, answered powerfully and the warning against unbelief is made effectively. Jesus’ indirect answer (7:22,23) is so much more powerful than a straight “Yes.” The latter eventually would be doubted again; anyone can claim almost anything. Jesus’ answer gives John and the reader the material to answer the doubt whenever it would rise again.

The contrasts Jesus makes between John and the people who are blown by every wind of doctrine as well as that of the gorgeously-appeared to the great prophet are very effective. Again a prosaic response by Jesus might have been flat and unconvincing. But because of his rhetorical questions and word pictures, the image of this great, uncompromising prophet rises to full force in one’s mind so when Jesus then calls him “more than a prophet”, how can anyone help but give assent?

The authoritative declarations (7:26-28a) do have the air of one speaking with authority. The shocking declaration (7:28b) [a paradox] stuns the reader into reflection on its meaning. How could a simple Christian be greater than an awesome prophet?

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<sup>23</sup>I.e. a paradox.

The ditty (7:31,32) is so powerful and cutting in exposing the whiny unbelief of the Pharisees, regarding both John and Jesus. When they should have accepted them both, they rejected the first for one reason and the second for precisely the opposite reason.

7:35<sup>24</sup> is an effective final challenge to the Pharisees [and the readers]: “What are you going to do with these truths?”

#### 6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit

The question posed by John is relevant, ultimately relevant to all men. It could be considered the most important question of all: “Who do you say I am?” Jesus’ answer points us to many important truths: a) the compassionate work of the Messiah for the downtrodden; b) the incredible power manifested in the Messiah, even to the point of raising the dead; c) the Old Testament prophecies of the forerunner and Messiah have been fulfilled and God’s plan is coming to fruition and; d) the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old (7:28b).

#### Luke 11: 9-13<sup>25</sup>

##### I. Determine the Rhetorical Unit

The rhetorical unit would encompass 11:1-13 since this whole text deals with the issue of prayer. The text builds from the initial request of 11:1 and 11:2-13 is marked off by

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<sup>24</sup>7:35 is a proverbial saying according to Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990), 103.

<sup>25</sup>The work on this passage was done by John MacDonald, elder from Crossroads, PE and professor of Old Testament and Languages at Maritime Christian College, Charlottetown, PE.

employing “father” as an *inclusio*.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit

Luke sets this rhetorical unit in the locale of a place of prayer to which Jesus had retired. When he had finished, one of his disciples (one of the twelve?) asked him to teach them to pray. Does Luke not intend for us to assume that they had seen something significantly different in the way Jesus approached his Father and so he wanted his audience (a rather motley crew) to learn that they too could approach him quite simply, readily, urgently and confidently. It is interesting that both Matthew the Jew and Luke the Gentile felt the need to include this teaching moment — even though in a different Sitz im Leben.

## 3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit

The basic arrangement of the text flows from 11:1:

A. Exhortation                    11:1a

“... Lord, teach us to pray...”

B. Rationale                    11:1b

“... just as John also taught his disciples.”

C. Example of Content 11:2-4

D. Example of Constancy 11:5-8

E. Example of Confidence 11:9:13

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<sup>26</sup>Nolland, Luke, 610.

Each of the examples is connected to the previous portion with a coordinating “and”.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit

The basic type of rhetoric in the unit is hortatory and the rhetorical goal is intellectual in that it desires to teach about prayer. The modes of proof used are *logos* (11:2-4) and *pathos* (11:5-13), with a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning employed.

In terms of rhetorical devices used: *proem* in 11:1a; the repetition of “father” in 11:2,13; the repetition of “and” to connect sections of the text (11:2,5,9); and the 5 repetitions of “ask” in 11:9,13.

The humorous devices in the text are found in 11:11,12 in the form of rhetorical questions which contain some hyperbole and maybe a touch of travesty.

#### 5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit

As we approach this passage from the rhetorical perspective, we see Luke being very deliberate in his purpose. It is not to teach the disciples what to pray but how by a pattern or model, or even better maybe, by concepts, then with a sense of mission and in an attitude of trust.

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<sup>27</sup>This passage takes the basic form of a response *chreia*.

Interestingly we conclude here with the gift of the Spirit (again!) from the Apostle of the Spirit. Walter Liefeld refers us to “Acts 2:33; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4 where the Holy Spirit is promised.”<sup>28</sup> Strangely he avoids Acts 2:38 which seems to be a much closer parallel.

With a confirmation of the goodness of our Heavenly Father, Luke leaves us with a rhetorical question (11:13). He leaves that topic right there! The next thing Jesus is doing is casting out demons (11:14). We have to draw our own conclusions!

#### 6. Contextualize the Message and Impact the Unit

The humour of the rhetorical questions might be contextualized like this: if one of you fathers is asked by his son for a hamburger, you wouldn't give him a chunk of pavement, would you?; or if he asked for a chocolate bar, would you give him a sewer rat?; or if he asked for a cat, you wouldn't give him a skunk, would you?

A sermon outline on this text might include these main points: The Quality of Prayer, 11: 1-4; the Quality of Persistence, 11:5-8; and the Quality of Parenthood, 11: 9-13.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Walter Liefeld, “Luke,” in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Frank Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 949.

<sup>29</sup>The preliminary stages of this sermonizing were the basis for an extemporaneous sermon delivered at the Crossroads Church, November 30, 1997, when the minister was unable to preach due to illness. There is no manuscript or taped copy of the sermon available.



## CHAPTER 7

### HUMOUR IN RETROSPECT: THESIS-PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

Christian life has never flourished in a mood of unrelenting seriousness. Rather, it thrives in an atmosphere of serious joyfulness — the kind called for by our Lord when he invites us to be fully in the world, but not of the world, Such is the comic burden of our faith.

Richard Cote

The time has come to make a final pronouncement on the proposed marriage ceremony involving humour, hermeneutics and homiletics presented at the beginning of the thesis-project. Questions abound: Is this a good match? Are these three suitable for each other? Is it possible to secure the basis of a strong relationship so quickly? An evaluation of the workshop will attempt to answer these questions.

The nature of the study necessitated means of evaluation which were more qualitative than quantitative and descriptive rather than inferential.<sup>1</sup> The sampling of participants in the workshop was too small to present statistically significant data by normal standards and the overall purposes of the thesis-project related more to description than prediction, hence the qualitative-descriptive emphasis. In order to allow for the triangulation of evaluative strategies, the workshop was evaluated by means of an external evaluator, post-workshop

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<sup>1</sup>For an explanation of descriptive analysis and inferential statistical analysis, cf. Richard E. Davies, Handbook for Doctor of Ministry Projects (Washington: University Press of America, 1984), 159,160.

evaluation forms completed by each participant and randomly selected post-workshop interviews with two participants. The results of all three evaluation strategies will be presented at which time some general interpretations and conclusions will be drawn.

### **The External Evaluator**

Mrs. Sandy Sutherland served as external evaluator for the workshop. Mrs. Sutherland holds the M. R. E. degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and has served as Minister of Christian Education in United Baptist Churches in Riverview, N.B. (1979 - 1983) and Wolfville, NS (1986-1989) as well as an instructor in Christian Education at Atlantic Baptist College, Moncton, NB (1983 - 1986). Presently she serves in ministry with her husband in Truro, NS as pastor's wife, mother, church volunteer, elementary school volunteer, retreat speaker and adult workshop leader.

Mrs. Sutherland's presence at the workshop was unobtrusive and well-received. She participated in all the sessions and small group activities in the process of her evaluation. Her personal comments to the leader at the time of the workshop were spoken in private and were both supportive and constructive. Her written evaluation considered the matters of facilities, workshop objectives, organization of workshop material, variety of teaching-learning methods used, use of methods, instructor's presentations, instructor's rapport with participants and student participation. The evaluation in each of these areas included general ratings and then some practical suggestions for improvement. Her evaluation was as follows:

#### **Facility**

The facilities were excellent. The room was arranged to accommodate the use of a

variety of teaching-learning methods. All equipment was set up and prepared for use before the session began. Chairs and tables were arranged to facilitate group discussion.

### Objectives

The workshop objectives were good. Written objectives were appropriately clear and focused on the participants.

### **Suggestions**

Although the written objectives were clear and focused on the participants, "Objectives #1 and #3" could have been strengthened by telling how the desired behavior would be measured. For example, "Objective #3" could read "Upon completion of the workshop, the participant will have displayed an increased understanding of the rationale and methodology of rhetorico-contextual interpretation as it relates to the Gospel sayings by participating in group discussions and...."

Introductory comments sounded somewhat apologetic. A strong presentation of the practical value to be gained by participating in the workshop would have been more motivating.

### Organization of Workshop Material

The organization of the material was good. Usually, the content of each session built very effectively on the content of the sessions that preceded it.

### **Suggestions**

An explanation of the connection between a couple of the content units would have

facilitated the learning experience. For example, it would have been helpful to hear how the humorous devices (session VI) fit together with the humour theories (Session III). It would also have been helpful to have heard a clear explanation between the section on rhetoric (Session VII) and the chreiai (Session VIII).

Some of the participants found the 'chreia elaboration' dissecting exercise (in Session VIII) confusing. It would have been helpful to have had the chreiai information and exercise presented before the information on rhetoric. It would also have been helpful to have had the chreia elaboration exercise demonstrated in the large group first.

#### Variety of Teaching - Learning Methods Used

This was excellent. There were several "expressive" methods used to provide feedback and help participants grapple with content. There were methods, such as the video exercise, that allowed participants to make their own discoveries. All of these methods were exceptional choices for impacting the learning process.

#### Use of Methods

This was generally very well done. For example, the fact that the instructor was available to help participants with their research projects made the use of that particular learning method especially effective.

#### Suggestions

The "webbing" exercise (in Session IV) was a creative way to clarify content. However, because it was a new approach for most of the participants, it would have been helpful if they had been guided through it with more detailed instruction.

The chreia elaboration small group exercise would have been more productive if it had been demonstrated in the large group first.

#### Instructor's Presentations

These were very good. The instructor was always well prepared and enthusiastic about the material he was presenting. The instructor's presentations were well organized and he consistently explained difficult words and new terminology.

#### Suggestions

Although the instructor usually provided helpful examples and effective illustrations, there were two sections where examples would have made the material clearer and easier to grasp. It would have been helpful, for instance, to have general examples of humorous devices before the biblical examples were given. And, although most of the section on rhetorical terminology (Session VII) was strong with good examples, the two sub sections on "kinds of reasoning" and "types of argumentation" were not.

#### Instructor's Rapport With Participants

Excellent. The instructor appeared relaxed and at ease with both his presentation and the comments and questions of the participants. The instructor consistently invited questions and consciously reserved more time for these in sections where the content was harder to grasp. He was also adept at keeping group discussion on topic and following from one concept to the next. The instructor was usually affirming of the participant's comments and made corrections sensitively. The instructor also appeared sensitive to balanced thinking, to differing styles of humour, to the participant's comprehension of the materials, and to the

learning process itself.

### **Suggestions**

Participants would probably have enjoyed more time to discuss the material on humour.

### **Student Participation**

This was excellent. There were twelve participants and at least eight or nine of them made regular contributions in the large group discussions.

### **Suggestions**

Participants may have felt comfortable more quickly if they had all been given the opportunity to speak (even just their names) in the opening session.

### **Participant Post-Workshop Evaluation Forms**

Each participant was asked to complete an evaluation form at the conclusion of the workshop. Ten were completed, with the occasional question omitted. Table 2 below includes the raw data (i.e. number of answers, numerical totals and the mean) from seven of the ten questions on the evaluation form which employed numerical options (the evaluation form is found in Appendix F).

**TABLE 2**

n= number	t = total	m = mean	
<b>Question 1</b>	n=10	t=44	m=4.4
<b>Question 2</b>	n=10	t=41	m=4.1
<b>Question 3</b>	n=10	t=39	m=3.9
<b>Question 4</b>	n=10	t=37	m=3.7
<b>Question 7</b>	<u>Quantity of Teaching Methods</u>		
lectures	n=8	t=24	m=3
listening sheets	n=8	t=24	m=3
group discussions	n=8	t=24	m=3
webbing exercise	n=6	t=15	m=2.5
handouts	n=8	t=24	m=3
video presentation	n=8	t=23	m=2.9
humour exercises	n=7	t=21	m=3
song and lyric sheet	n=7	t=19	m=2.7
overhead transparencies	n=8	t=21	m=2.6
Humor Quotient Instrument	n=7	t=21	m=3
<b>Question 7</b>	<u>Quality of Teaching Methods</u>		
lectures	n=10	t=45	m=4.5
listening sheets	n=9	t=35	m=3.9
group discussions	n=10	t=44	m=4.4
webbing exercises	n=9	t=31	m=3.4
handouts	n=10	t=46	m=4.6
video presentation	n=10	t=39	m=3.9
humour exercises	n=9	t=40	m=4.4
song and lyric sheet	n=8	t=26	m=3.3

overhead transparencies	n=10	t=37	m=3.7
Humour Quotient Instrument	n=9	t=32	m=3.6
<b>Question 8</b>	n=10	t=30	m=3
<b>Question 9</b>	<b>Workshop Leader</b>		
knowledge	n=10	t=30	m=3
organization	n=10	t=30	m=3
style and delivery	n=10	t=30	m=3
responsiveness	n=10	t=30	m=3
learning climate	n=10	t=29.5	m=2.9
encouraging participation	n=10	t=30	m=3
feedback	n=10	t=29	m=2.9
clear presentation	n=10	t=30	m=3
enthusiasm	n=10	t=30	m=3
pace and amount of learning	n=10	t=29.5	m=2.9
handling questions and interruptions	n=10	t=30	m=3
maintaining interest	n=10	t=30	m=3

Four questions on the evaluation form were designed for personal responses rather than numerical options (Question 8 had both). Some of these comments were helpful in gaining an appreciation of participant's evaluation of the workshop.

When asked what parts of the workshop would most likely be applied to their ministries they stated: "seeing humour where I never thought it existed"; "an understanding of rhetoric in biblical interpretation" (this one was mentioned three times); "the abundance of humour in Scripture" (mentioned twice); "the ability to clarify rhetorical units for preaching



and teaching the Bible” (mentioned twice); and “an appreciation of the rhetorical aspects of the gospel’s composition” (mentioned twice).

Question 6 asked what they thought might be added to the workshop, expanded or deleted. The comments were: “more time was needed to grasp the rhetorical concepts” (mentioned three times); “more time needed to discuss the results of the individual research;” “delete the “webbing” exercise;” and “do more condensing and proof-reading in the advanced reading materials.”

In relation to their overall reaction to the workshop, they commented: “I got far more out of it than I ever expected;” “it helped to reinforce what I took in seminary;” “it started only as an effort to assist with a requirement for a doctoral program and ended up as a good and refreshing learning experience;” “the quality of the presentations, spirit and exercises were all top notch;” and “it was particularly good to study with others at this level.”

The last question asked for suggestions as to how the workshop leader’s technique might be improved. The suggestions were: “more time needed to cover all the material” (this was mentioned three times); “there was too much lecturing at points instead of small group work;” and “some of the sessions on Friday were too long.”

### **Post-Workshop Interviews**

Of the twelve participants in the workshop, only four attended every minute of every session. Scheduling problems, tardiness and winter storm conditions were contributing factors to this situation. In the main, however, most everyone attended at large majority of the workshop. For the matters pertaining to the personal interview, it was decided that only those who attended the entire workshop would be considered as potential candidates. Of

these four, two were chosen at random. The interviews were conducted on December 3, 1997 by the workshop facilitator, Dawn MacKinnon. Ms. MacKinnon is a therapist by vocation and was chosen to conduct the interviews for that reason and to assure a certain measure of accuracy in the responses. The interview questions can be found in Appendix F.

The first question was, "In what ways were the workshop objectives helpful to your present/future ministry?" Both responded to the effect that an understanding of how rhetoric might be applied to studying Scripture and, in turn, to their sermons was the most helpful aspect of the objectives. Neither responded to the next question which asked about ways in which the objectives were not helpful or relevant.

The third question asked their opinion about the workshop design. One responded that the introductory session of the workshop was already found in the advanced reading assignment (therefore was redundant). Another comment was that the workshop was "very well designed in that there was a good variety in means of presentation; it was relevant to the audience."

In response to a question regarding which teaching methods/learning strategies they most appreciated, both mentioned the lectures as valuable sources of information. One said, "Even though some topics were heavy, Blayne's presentation and communication of his material was easy to understand." One of the respondents also mentioned the small group activities as very helpful while the other listed them as unfavorable due to the mixture of personalities in his group.

As to the parts of the workshop which were most applicable to their ministries, one responded that he appreciated the practical application of the learning to a ministry context

as well as the group's participation in researching the chreia from Matthew 7 because "it was helpful to hear the perspective of others." The other listed the help given in biblical interpretation and in the understanding of rhetorical devices such as exaggeration.

Question 7 asked, "What were the strengths of the workshop?" One listed: the presentation was very educational; the level at which it was presented was very good; and the small size of the group. The other mentioned: the leader knew the topic well and presented it well and exhibited an ability to handle the questions and observations of others. In terms of weaknesses one mentioned the fact that only two women were involved (and they were serving as facilitator and evaluator) and the other noted the difficulty in getting a commitment from all the participants to attend all the sessions

No suggestions were made as to how the workshop might be improved. In describing their overall reactions to the workshop, one said, "I was very impressed," "the workshop was very well-planned," "the topic suited the audience;" and, "it was excellent — a very good job in each area." The other added: "it was very helpful in everyday practical ministry;" and "I would be willing to go to another workshop of its kind."

### **Interpretation of Evaluative Data**

The matter of interpreting descriptive/qualitative data will always run the risk of being biased in some way. However, taking the data from the three different evaluative strategies along with an appraisal of the samples of some of the participants' personal research found in the previous chapter, some conclusions may be drawn. These conclusions could be grouped under the rubrics of general strengths of thesis-project and areas for improvement and/or adjustment.

## General Strengths of the Thesis-Project

The basic problem addressed in the introductory remarks of the thesis-project was corroborated by the needs assessment performed. The author's personal interests in the areas of humour, hermeneutics and homiletics sufficiently dovetailed with the situation described in the needs assessment to formulate a remedial response to this situation. In other words, the thesis-project was relevant enough to the target group that it proved to be effective.

The general tenor of the data would support the conclusion that the thesis-project was successful in meeting the four objectives stated at the beginning of the workshop. Evaluative data were largely positive and participation in the workshop was high and enthusiastic. The participants left the workshop with increased appreciation for and skills in understanding humour and rhetorico-contextual interpretation. In sum, the thesis-project proved to be effective, engaging and relevant to the needs of the participants.

Although there seemed to be an overall sense of interest regarding all the areas covered in the workshop, a sense of unevenness was evident in terms of skills. The parts of the workshop dealing with humour posed little problem to the participants and they responded with such enthusiasm to the material on the composition of the gospels that it threatened to sidetrack the flow of the workshop. In the areas of rhetorical terminology and chreiai elaboration, however, the skill levels flagged a little. This was observable in the samples of individual research on humorous gospel sayings presented in the previous chapter. This is certainly understandable given the massive amounts of terminology to comprehend, not to mention the need to develop a facility or "feel" for the use of an approach to biblical interpretation completely new to most of them. Skill in rhetorical analysis takes time, but the

basics were communicated in the workshop and most were sufficiently impressed by the approach to have it play some role in their future attempts at biblical interpretation — especially of the gospel sayings.

Another matter of strength in the thesis-project was the rapport between workshop leader and the participants. The general sense of goodwill helped to produce a climate where the leader was at ease and participants were freed to grapple with new ideas. To predict how similar input would be received in a different context would be difficult to say. However, given the parameters of the thesis-project, this prevailing attitude was responsible, in part at least, for the relative success.

#### Areas for Improvement and/or Adjustment

Areas of strength appear to be more general, but aspects of the thesis-project which could have been improved can be more detailed. Particular areas of weakness become evident in the course of the study and are to be addressed as such in order to complete the evaluation process and make the necessary adjustments should the project be offered again.

One area to be addressed is that of time. Several expressed the need for more time, especially in the sessions dealing with rhetoric. This needs to be balanced with the reality that many already had difficulty in attending the sessions that were offered. To lengthen the workshop might be counterproductive, therefore other options might be considered. It could be possible to shorten a few of the humour sessions to free up a little more time for the rhetoric sessions. Another option might be to separate the material on humour from the material on rhetoric and present them on consecutive weekends. This would allow for more time for the rhetoric sessions in particular as well as for sharing the results of the individual

research. It might also allow for more time to be spent on the homiletical development of the humorous gospel sayings. Of the triad of humour, hermeneutics and homiletics, the latter received the least treatment. To split the input over two occasions, however, might present more scheduling problems.

Other areas of adjustment would include small changes. Rather than opt for changing the order of the sessions on rhetoric and the chreiai, more examples and illustrations for the rhetorical terminology and working through an example of the analysis of a chreia elaboration with the entire group before dismissing them to their small groups would dissipate the confusion and allow the original logic of presentation to remain intact.

A few other changes might include: the use of some icebreaker activities at the beginning of the workshop; dropping the “webbing” exercise due to its novelty and the constraints of time which would prohibit its needed explanation; and more thought given to the composition of the small groups since they were such a vital part of the workshop experience.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Upon completion of the thesis-project, a few final reflections come to mind. The study was proposed initially by using the image of a marriage ceremony. At this point, “after the ceremony,” much lies ahead. A foundation has been put in place. It will serve as a base for future endeavors (Appendixes A-D are designed to facilitate further exploration in the area of the rhetorico-contextual interpretation of humorous gospel sayings). Supplied with basic commitments and skills, the participants will be equipped to approach their task of biblical interpretation and preaching in a different light. Even outside the rather contrived parameters

of specially-selected humorous gospel sayings, the participants now will be able to “tickle” each text and if it “laughs,” be able to interpret the humour appropriately.

The end of the process, of course, is to interpret the content and intent of Scripture in accurate and relevant ways to the glory of the One who ordained the foolishness of preaching. In the insightful and compelling words of Michael Card:

When we in our foolishness thought we were wise,  
He played the fool and He opened our eyes.  
When we in our weakness believed we were strong,  
He became helpless to show we were wrong.  
And so we follow God’s own fool,  
For only the foolish can tell  
Believe the unbelievable, come be a fool as well.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Card, The Life, vol. 2 cassette, Sparrow, 1988.

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## APPENDIX A

### RHETORICAL TERMINOLOGY

#### ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION:

- the speaker or author
- the speech or text
- the audience or reader
- the occasion or situation

#### TYPES OF COMMUNICATION:

	Judicial (Forensic) Rhetoric	Deliberative (Hortatory) Rhetoric	Epideictic (Demonstrative) Rhetoric
Focus:	justice	expediency	adulation/denunciation
Setting:	law court	public assembly	public ceremony
Purpose:	to persuade	to persuade	to please or inspire
Time:	past	future	present
Emphasis:	speech	audience	speaker

#### GOALS OF COMMUNICATION:

- the intellectual goal of teaching
- the emotional goal of touching the feelings
- the aesthetic goal of pleasing so as to hold attention
- the volitional goal of persuasion

## CANONS OF RHETORIC:

Invention ( <i>inventio</i> )	discovery of material suitable to the occasion
Structure ( <i>dispositio</i> )	arrangement of the material in an organized whole
Style ( <i>elocutio</i> )	choice of appropriate words; use of tropes and figures of speech
Memory ( <i>memoria</i> )	formulation of mnemonic systems as preparation for oral delivery
Delivery ( <i>pronunciatio actio</i> )	features of oral presentation

## MODES OF PROOF:

1. Inartificial - the use of documentation to prove a point
2. Artificial or artistic
  - a) *pathos* - the quality of emotion evoked by an oration
  - b) *ethos* - the perceived quality of the orator's character
  - c) *logos* - the content or message of the oration

## KINDS OF REASONING: (which spring from the *logos*)

1. Inductive reasoning - the use of examples in reasoning
2. Deductive reasoning - the use of arguments by making deductions from accepted axioms

## TYPES OF ARGUMENTATION: (following from deductive reasoning)

1. Syllogism - a form of argument built upon an axiomatic major premise followed by a minor premise and a conclusion

2. Epicheireme - a form of argument built upon a non-axiomatic major premise followed by a minor premise and a conclusion
3. Enthymeme - a form of argument consisting of a proposition (not necessarily axiomatic) and a supporting reason

### TRADITIONAL PARTS OF AN ARGUMENT:

<i>exordium proem</i>	the beginning, in which the author gains attention or establish credibility or both
<i>narratio</i>	background or context for the discussion
<i>propositio</i>	proposition, thesis, or chief theme
<i>partitio</i>	delineation of the steps to be followed in the discussion
<i>confirmatio probatio</i>	proof and evidence in support of the proposition
<i>confutatio refutatio</i>	refutation or citing of inadequacies in the opposing viewpoint
<i>digressio</i>	digression, related items or arguments
<i>peroratio conclusio</i>	conclusion summarizing key points or calls for action

### ASSOCIATED RHETORICAL TERMS

<b>Aphorism</b>	a concise statement of a principle or precept given in pointed words; an adage or maxim.
<b>Chiasmus</b>	a pattern in which the second part is balanced against the first but with the parts reversed. Eg. "The sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27).
<b>Chreia</b>	a saying or act that is well-aimed or apt, expressed concisely, attributed to a person, and regarded as useful for living.
<b>Figure</b>	non-literal style of speech which involves the substitution several words in the place of others



<b>Inclusio</b>	a rhetorical device in which the opening phrase or idea is repeated, paraphrased, or otherwise returned to at the close. Eg. Psalm 8.
<b>Paraenesis</b>	a text which contains a series of admonitions, usually ethical and eclectic in nature and expressed generally rather than for a specific situation.
<b>Pronouncement Story</b>	brief narratives which exist in order to embody a saying or pronouncement. Eg. Mark 12:13-17.
<b>Topic</b>	a way of thinking about a given subject, or a general heading under which arguments are grouped for a particular subject.
<b>Trope</b>	non-literal style of speech which involves the substitution of one word for another. Eg. The metaphor, "The moon was blood."

## APPENDIX B

### HUMOUR TERMINOLOGY

<b>A Fortiori</b>	An argument from the lesser to the greater. Granting a certain fact, it becomes even more compelling on the larger scale.
<b>Burlesque</b>	A humorous device which highlights the discrepancy between subject matter style; exaggerated imitation. <b>High Burlesque</b> or <b>Parody</b> is when a weighty style is used in relation to more inconsequential subject matter. <b>Low Burlesque</b> or <b>Travesty</b> is where a weighty subject is addressed in a lesser style. <b>Caricature</b> targets the qualities of a person to produce a ridiculous effect.
<b>Comedy</b>	A drama which tells the story of common people who experience calamity and gracious or fortuitous reversal.
<b>Conundrum</b>	A riddle whose answer involves a pun. Eg. When is a door not a door? When it's ajar.
<b>Counter Question</b>	A question asked in response to one asked by one's opponent in order to silence the opponent.
<b>Double entendre</b>	A statement that is deliberately ambiguous, hinged upon a word which has more than one possible meaning. Eg. The man who refused to eat rabbit stew because he didn't like hair (hare) in his food.
<b>Farce</b>	A light, dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and an improbable plot.
<b>Humour</b>	(1) the quality of being amusing or comical. (2) the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is comical or funny.
<b>Hyperbole</b>	Bold overstatement, or extravagant exaggeration of fact in order to make a point.
<b>Invective</b>	A direct denunciation by the use of derogatory descriptions. The use of invective is not to express personal hatred but

commits the one using it and the one at which it is aimed to a moral standard.

<b>Irony</b>	A humorous device in which two levels of meaning stand in some opposition to each other and in which some level of unawareness is expressed or implied. The “punch” of irony depends in part upon someone failing to see it.
<b>Joke</b>	Something said or done to provoke laughter or amusement, especially a brief oral narrative with a climactic, humorous twist.
<b>Lampoon</b>	Broad satire, especially when intended to ridicule a person.
<b>Litotes</b>	A figure of speech in which something is expressed by a negation of the contrary. Eg. “Not a few...”
<b>Malapropism</b>	A humorous usage of a wrong word or expression; a bad pun. Eg. “He was a child progeny.”
<b>Meiosis</b>	A deliberate understatement, representing something as much less in magnitude or importance than it really is.
<b>Metaphor</b>	An analogy identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.
<b>Paradox</b>	A statement which combines seemingly contradictory or absurd elements that may actually be well founded or true.
<b>Paranomasia</b>	The technique of punning by changing a letter or syllable. Eg. “His sword is better than his word.”
<b>Proverb</b>	A saying that briefly and memorably expresses some recognized truth about life.
<b>Pun</b>	A play on words that are either identical in sound or very similar in sound, but are sharply different in meaning.
<b>Quip</b>	A witty or funny observation or response, usually made on the spur of the moment.

<b>Repartee</b>	The power or art of responding quickly, smoothly, pointedly, and wittily, or an exchange of such responses.
<b>Rhetorical Question</b>	A question for which there is a rather obvious answer but the speaker is more interested in increasing the rhetorical impact of his point than to induce the right answer.
<b>Riddle</b>	A question designed to test the mental agility and ingenuity of the audience.
<b>Sarcasm</b>	The blatant use of apparent praise for dispraise. Its sting is less direct since it uses inversion as a means of deflection.
<b>Satire</b>	A work or manner which blends a censorious attitude with humour for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. The satirist's goal is to go beyond tearing down to inspire a remodelling.
<b>Saw</b>	A familiar and often trite saying.
<b>Simile</b>	A figure in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed by the use of "like" or "as."
<b>Spoonerism</b>	An unintentional transposition of sounds in spoken language. Eg. "Let me show you to your seat" becomes "Let me sew you to your sheet."
<b>Wit</b>	The power to evoke amusement by remarks demonstrating verbal felicity or ingenuity and swift perception, usually of the incongruous. A statement which is brief, timely, deft, contrived and surprising.

## APPENDIX C

### HUMOROUS PASSAGES IN THE GOSPELS

(Taken principally from Jonsson, Trueblood and Botha)

Matthew	2:12	15:26
	2:16	15:26,27
	4:1-11	16:1-4
	4:19	16:18
	5:13	16:23
	5:15	17:24-27
	5:19	18:1-5
	5:20	18:21,22
	5:23,24	18:28
	5:25	19:24
	6:2-4	20:20-23
	6:5	21:16
	6:7	21:23-27
	6:25-34	22:1-14
	6:30	22:35-38
	7:3,4	23:3
	7:6	23:5
	7:9,10	23:13
	7:12	23:23,24
	7:15	23:25,26
	7:16	23:27,28
	8:18-22	24:28
	9:5	24:43
	9:12	25:1-12
	9:15	26:33-35
	10:16	26:51
	10:24,25	26:55
	10:30,31	26:69-75
	11:7,8	27:37
	11:16-19	
	12:27	
	13:24-30	
	13:44	
	14:25,26	
	15:5	
15:14		

Mark	1:17	10:25
	2:15-17	10:35-40
	2:19	12:41-44
	4:21-23	14:47
	7:9-13	15:26
	7:27,28	
	8:33	
	9:33-37	
Luke	4:23	13:10-17
	5:31	13:25
	5:34	13:31-33
	5:39	14:1-6
	6:37	14:7-14
	6:39	14:15-24
	6:41	14:28-32
	6:44	14:34,35
	7:24,25	15:11-32
	7:31-35	16:1-13
	7:36-50	16:19-31
	9:46-48	17:4
	9:57-62	17:7-10
	10:25-37	17:37
	10:38-42	18:1-8
	11:5-8	18:9-14
	11:11	18:25
	11:12	19:1-10
	11:19	22:25
	11:27,28	22:50
	11:33	23:6-18
	11:39,40	23:38
	11:52	
	12:7	
	12:13-21	
	12:22-32	
	12:28	
	12:35-40	
	12:54-56	
	12:58	

John	1:10,11	10:32,33
	1:42	10:35
	1:43-50	11:16
	2:1-5	11:37
	2:9-11	11:47-50
	2:13-20	12:4-6
	3:1,2	12:19
	3:4-10	12:25
	4:10-12	12:42
	4:29-38	13:29
	5:7	13:36-38
	5:18	16:16
	5:39,40	16:29-32
	5:42,43	18:1-11
	5:45-47	18:17-19
	6:30,31	18:29,30
	6:42	18:33,34
	6:51,52	18:38,39
	6:66-68	19:3
	7:3,4	19:5
	7:15	19:7
	7:19,20	19:12
	7:23	19:14,15
	7:26-30	19:19-22
	7:7:36	19:28,29
	7:41	19:38-42
	7:45-52	20:14,15
	8:6-8	
	8:19	
	8:22	
	8:41	
	8:47,48	
	8:52,53	
	8:57	
	9:16	
	9:24	
	9:27-29	
	9:40,41	

## APPENDIX D

### CLASSIC SERMONS ON HUMOUR

#### “Humour and Faith”

Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>1</sup>

“He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision” (Psalm 2:4)

This word of the Second Psalm is the only instance in the Bible in which laughter is attributed to God. God is not frequently thought of as possessing a sense of humour, though that quality would have to be attributed to perfect personality. There are critics of religion who regard it as deficient in the sense of humour, and they can point to the fact that there is little laughter in the Bible. Why is it that Scriptural literature, though filled with rejoicing and songs of praise, is not particularly distinguished for the expression of laughter? There are many sayings of Jesus which betray a touch of ironic humour, but on the whole one must agree with the critics who do not find much humour or laughter in the Bible.

This supposed defect will, however, appear less remarkable if the relation of humour to faith is understood. Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer. Laughter must be heard in the outer courts of religions; and the echoes of it should resound in the sanctuary, but there is no laughter in the holy of holies. There laughter is swallowed up in prayer and humour is fulfilled by faith.

The intimate relation between humour and faith is derived from the fact that both deal

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<sup>1</sup>Discerning the Signs of Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 111-31.



and with the incongruities of our existence. Humour is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones. Both humour and faith are expressions of the freedom of the human spirit, of its capacity to stand outside of life, and itself, and view the whole scene. But any view of the whole immediately creates the problem of how the incongruities of life are to be dealt with; for the effort to understand the life, and our place in it, confronts us with inconsistencies and incongruities which do not fit into any neat picture of the whole. Laughter is our reaction to immediate incongruities and those which do not affect us essentially. Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life.

We laugh at what? At the sight of a fool upon the throne of the king; or the proud man suffering from some indignity; or the child introducing its irrelevancies into the conversation of the mature. We laugh at the juxtaposition of things which do not fit together. A boy slipping on the ice is not funny. Slipping on the ice is funny only if it happens to one whose dignity is upset. A favorite device of dramatists, who have no other resources of humour, is to introduce some irrelevant interest into the central theme of the drama by way of the conversation of maid or butler. If this irrelevance is to be really funny, however, it must have some more profound relation to the theme than the conversor intended. This is to say that humour manages to resolve incongruities by the discovery of another level of congruity. We laugh at the proud man slipping on the ice, not merely because the contrast between his dignity and his undignified plight strikes us as funny, but because we feel that his discomfiture is a poetically just rebuke of his dignity. Thus we deal with immediate incongruities, in which we are not too seriously involved and which open no gap in the

coherence of life in such a way as to threaten us essentially. But there are profound incongruities which contain such a threat. Man's very position in the universe is incongruous. That is the problem of faith, and not of humour. Man is so great and yet so small, so significant and yet so insignificant. "On the one hand," says Edward Bellamy in *The Religion of Solidarity*, "is the personal life of man, an atom, a grain of sand on a boundless shore, a bubble of a foam flecked ocean, a life bearing a proportion to the mass of past, present and future, so infinitesimal as to defy the imagination. On the other hand is a certain other life, as it were a spark of the universal life, insatiable in aspiration, greedy of infinity, asserting solidarity with all things and all existence, even while subject to the limitations of space and time." That is the contrast.

When man surveys the world he seems to be the very center of it; and his mind appears to be the unifying power which makes sense out of the whole. But this same man, reduced to the limits of his animal existence, is a little animalcule, preserving a precarious moment of existence within the vastness of space and time. There is a profound incongruity between the "inner" and the "outer" world, or between the world as viewed from man's perspective, and the man in the world as viewed from a more ultimate perspective. The incongruity becomes even more profound when it is considered that it is the same man who assumes the ultimate perspective from which he finds himself so insignificant.

Philosophers seek to overcome this basic incongruity by reducing one world to the dimension of the other; or raising one perspective to the height of the other. But neither a purely naturalistic nor a consistently idealistic system of philosophy is ever completely plausible. There are ultimate incongruities of life which can be resolved by faith but not by

reason. Reason can look at them only from one standpoint or another, thereby denying the incongruities which it seeks to solve. They are also too profound to be resolved or dealt with by laughter. If laughter seeks to deal with the ultimate issues of life it turns into a bitter humour. This means that it has been overwhelmed by the incongruity. Laughter is thus not merely a vestibule to faith but also a "no-man's land" between faith and despair. We laugh cheerfully at the incongruities on the surface of life; but if we have no other resource but humour to deal with those which reach below the surface, our laughter becomes an expression of our sense of the meaninglessness of life.

## II

Laughter is a sane and healthful response to the innocent foibles of men; and even to some which are not innocent. All betray moods and affections, conceits and idiosyncrasies, which could become the source of great annoyance to us if we took them too seriously. It is better to laugh at them. A sense of humour is indispensable to men of affairs who have the duty of organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors. It reduces the frictions of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable. There is, in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance. We would not laugh if we regarded these foibles as altogether fitting and proper. There is judgment, therefore, in our laughter. But we also prove by the laughter that we do not take the annoyance too seriously. However, if our fellows commit a serious offense against the common good, laughter no longer avails. If we continue to indulge in it, the element of forbearance is completely eliminated from it. Laughter against real evil is bitter. Such bitter laughter of derision has its use as an instrument of condemnation. But there is no power in

it to deter the evil against which it is directed.

There were those who thought that some could laugh Mussolini and Hitler out of court. Laughter has sometimes contributed to the loss of prestige of dying oligarchies and social systems. Thus Cervantes' *Don Quixote* contributed to the decline of feudalism, and Boccaccio's *Decameron* helped to signal the decay of medieval asceticism. But laughter alone never destroys a great seat of power and authority in history. Its efficacy is limited to preserving the self-respect of the slave against the master. It does not extend to the destruction of slavery. Thus all the victims of tyranny availed themselves of the weapon of wit to preserve their sense of personal self-respect. Laughter provided them with a little private world in which they could transvalue the values of the tyrant, and reduce his pompous power to the level of the ridiculous. Yet there is evidence that the most insufferable forms of tyranny (as in the concentration camps, for instance) could not be ameliorated by laughter.

Laughter may turn to bitterness when it faces serious evil, partly because it senses its impotence. But, in any case, serious evil must be seriously dealt with. The bitterness of derision is serious enough; but where is the resource of forgiveness to come from? It was present in the original forbearance of laughter; but it can not be brought back into the bitterness of derision. The contradiction between judgment and mercy can not be resolved by humour but only by vicarious pain.

Thus we laugh at our children when they betray the jealous conceits of childhood. These are the first buds of sin which grow in the soil of the original sin of our common humanity. But when sin has conceived and brought forth its full fruit, our laughter is too ambiguous to deal with the child's offense; or if it is not ambiguous it becomes too bitter. If

we retain the original forbearance of laughter in our judgment it turns into harmful indulgence. Parental judgment is always confronted with the necessity of relating rigorous judgment creatively to the goodness of mercy. That relation can be achieved only as the parent himself suffers under the judgments which are exacted. Not humour but the cross is the meeting point of justice and mercy, once both judgment and mercy have become explicit. Laughter can express both together, when neither is fully defined. But, when it becomes necessary to define each explicitly, laughter can no longer contain them both. Mercy is expelled and only bitterness remains.

What is true of our judgments of each other is true of the judgment of God. In the word of our text God is pictured laughing at man and having him in derision because of the vanity of man's imagination and pretensions. There is no suggestion of a provisional geniality in this divine laughter. Derisiveness is pure judgement. It is not possible to resolve the contradiction between mercy and judgment, on the level of the divine, though humour, because the divine judgment is ultimate judgment. That contradiction, which remains an unsolved mystery in the Old Testament, is resolved only as God is revealed in Christ. There is no humour but suffering in that revelation. There is, as we have observed, a good deal of ironic humour in the sayings of Christ. But there is no humour in the scene of Christ upon the Cross. The only humour on Calvary is the derisive laughter of those who cried, "He saved others; himself he can not save....If he be the son of God let him come down from the cross"; and the ironic inscription on the cross, ordered by Pilate: "The King of the Jews." These ironic and derisive observations were the natural reactions of common sense to dimensions of revelation which transcend common sense. Since they could not be

comprehended by faith, they prompted ironic laughter.

There is no humour in the cross because of the justice and the mercy of God are fully revealed in it. In that revelation God's justice is made the more terrible because the sin of man is disclosed in its full dimension. It is a rebellion against God from which God himself suffers. God can not remit the consequences of sin; yet He does show mercy by taking the consequences upon and into Himself. This is the main burden of the disclosure of God in Christ. This is the final clue to mystery of the divine character. Mercy and justice are provisionally contained in laughter; and the contradiction between them is tentatively resolved in the sense of humour. But the final resolution of justice, fully developed, and of mercy, fully matured, is possible only when the sharp edge of justice is turned upon the executor of judgment without being blunted. This painful experience of vicarious suffering is far removed from laughter. Only an echo of the sense of humour remains in it. The echo is the recognition in the sense of humour that judgment and mercy belong together, even though they seem to be contradictory. But there is no knowledge in the sense of humour of how the two are related to each other and how the contradiction between them is to be resolved.

### III

The sense of humour is even more important provisionally in dealing with our own sins than in dealing with the sins of others. Humour is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humour is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to "stand off" from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready

to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.

It is significant that little children are really very sober though they freely indulge in a laughter which expresses a pure animal joy of existence. But they do not develop the capacity of real humour until the fifth or sixth year, at which time they may be able to laugh at themselves and at others. At about this age their intense preoccupation with self and with an immediate task at hand is partly mitigated. The sense of humour grows, in other words, with the capacity of self-transcendence. If we can gain some perspective upon our own self we are bound to find the self's pretensions a little funny.

This means that the ability to laugh at oneself is the prelude to the sense of contrition. Laughter is a vestibule to the temple of confession. But laughter is not able to deal with the problem of sins of the self in any ultimate way. If we become fully conscious of the tragedy of sin we recognize that our preoccupation with self, our exorbitant demands upon life, our insistence that we receive more attention than our needs deserve, affect our neighbors harmfully and defraud them of their rightful due. If we recognize the real evil of sin, laughter can not deal with the problem. If we continue to laugh after having recognized the depth of evil, our laughter becomes the instrument of irresponsibility. Laughter is thus not only the vestibule of the temple of confession but the no-man's land between cynicism and contrition.

Laughter may express a mood which takes neither the self nor life seriously. If we take life seriously but ourselves not too seriously, we cease to laugh. The contradiction in man between “the good that he would and does not do, and the evil that he would not do, and does” is no laughing matter.

There is furthermore another dimension in genuine contrition which laughter does not contain. It is the awareness of being judged from beyond ourselves. There is something more than self-judgment in genuine contrition. “For me it is a small thing to be judged of men,” declares St. Paul, “neither judge I myself; for I know nothing against myself; he who judges me is the Lord.” In an ultimate sense the self never knows anything against itself. The self of today may judge the self’s action of yesterday as evil. But that means that the self of today is the good self. We are to judge our actions through self-judgment. But we do not become aware of the deep root of evil actions in such judgments. We may judge our sins but we do not judge ourselves as sinners. The knowledge that we are sinners, and that inordinate desires spring from a heart inordinately devoted to itself, is a religious knowledge which, in a sense, is never achieved except in prayer. Then we experience with St. Paul that “he who judges us is the Lord.” There is no laughter in that experience. There is only pain. The genuine joy of reconciliation with God, which is possible only as the fruit of genuine repentance, is a joy which stands beyond laughter though it need not completely exclude laughter.

To suggest that the sense of humour is the beginning, but not the end, of a proper humility does not mean that the final fruit of true contrition destroys all vestiges of the seed from which it sprang. The saintliest men frequently have a humourous glint in their eyes. They retain the capacity to laugh at both themselves and at others. They do not laugh in their



prayers because it is a solemn experience to be judged of God and to stand under the scrutiny of Him from whom no secrets are hid. But the absence of laughter as a suffused element in all experience. There is indeed proper laughter on the other side of the experience of repentance. It is the laughter of those who have been released both from the tyranny of the law and from the slavery of pretending to be better than they are. To know oneself a sinner, to have no illusions about the self, and no inclination to appear better than we are, either in the sight of man or of God, and to know oneself forgiven and released from sin, it 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.

#### IV

We have dealt thus far with humour as a reaction to the incongruities in the character of self and its neighbors. We have discovered it to be a healthy, but an ultimately unavailing, method of dealing with the evils of human nature. But men face other incongruities than those which human foibles and weaknesses present. Human existence itself is filled with incongruities. Life does not make sense as easily as those philosophers, who think they have charted and comprehended everything in a nice system of rationality, would have us believe. Man's life is really based upon a vast incongruity.

Man is a creature who shares all the weaknesses of the other creatures of the world. Yet he is a sublime creature who holds the ages within his memory and touches the fringes of the eternal in his imagination. When he looks into the world within, he finds depths within depths of mystery which are never completely fathomed. Man is a spirit; and among the qualities of his spirit are the capacity to regard himself and the world; and to speculate on the

meaning of the whole. This man, is when he is the observer, the very center of the universe. Yet the same man "brings his years to an end like a tale that is told." This man groweth up like grass in the morning which in the evening is cut down and withereth. The brevity of human existence is the most vivid expression and climax of human weakness.

The incongruity of man's greatness and weakness, of his mortality and immortality, is the source of this temptation to evil. Some men seek to escape from their greatness to their weakness; they try to deny the freedom of their spirit in order to achieve the serenity of nature. Some men seek to escape from their weakness to their greatness. But these simple methods of escape are unavailing. The effort to escape into the weakness of nature leads not to the desired serenity but to sensuality. The effort to escape from weakness to greatness leads not to the security but to the evils of a spirituality which denies the creaturely limitations of human existence.

The philosophies of the ages have sought to bridge the chasm between the inner and outer world, between the world of thought in which man is so great and the world of physical extension in which man is so small and impotent. But philosophy can not bridge the chasm. It can only pretend to do so by reducing one world to the dimensions of the other. Thus naturalists, materialists, mechanists, and all philosophers, who view the world as primarily a system of physical relationships, construct a universe of meaning from which man in the full dimension of spirit can find no home. The idealistic philosophers, on the other hand, construct a world of rational coherence in which mind is the very stuff of order, the very foundation of existence. But their systems do not do justice to the large areas of chaos in the

world; and they fail to give an adequate account of man himself, who is something less, as well as something more, than mind.

The sense of humour is, in many respects, a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy. If we are able to laugh at the curious quirks of fortune in which the system of order and meaning which each life constructs within and around itself is invaded, we at least do not make the mistake of prematurely reducing the irrational to a nice system. Things “happen” to us. We make our plans for a career, and sickness frustrates us. We plan our life, and war reduces all plans to chaos. The storms and furies of the world of nature, which can so easily reduce our private schemes to confusion, do of course have their own laws. They “happen” according to a discernible system of causality. There is no question about the fact that there are systems of order in the world. But it is not so easy to discern a total system of order and meaning which will comprehend the various levels of existence in orderly whole.

To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom. Such laughter does not obscure or defy the dark irrationality. It merely yields to it without too much emotion and friction. A humorous acceptance of fate is really the expression of a high form of self-detachment. If men do not take themselves too seriously, if they have some sense of the precarious nature of the human enterprise, they prove that they are looking at the whole drama of life not merely from the circumscribed point of their own interests but from some further and higher vantage point. One thinks for instance of the profound wisdom which underlies the capacity of laughter in the Negro people. Confronted with the cruelties of slavery, and socially too

impotent to throw of the yoke, they learned to make their unpalatable situation more sufferable by laughter. There was of course a deep pathos mixed with the humour, a proof of the fact that laughter had reached its very limit.

There is indeed a limit to laughter in dealing with life's frustrations. We can laugh at all of life's surface irrationalities. We preserve our sanity for the most surely if we do not try to reduce the whole crazy quilt of events in which we move to a premature and illusory order. But the ultimate incongruities of human existence can not be "laughed off." We can not laugh at death. We do try of course.

A war era is particularly fruitful of *Galgenhumor* (gallows humour). Soldiers are known on occasion to engage in hysterical laughter when nerves are tense before the battle. They speak facetiously of the possible dire fate which might befall this or that man of the company. "Sergeant," a soldier is reported to have said before a recent battle, "don't let this little fellow go into battle before me. He isn't big enough to stop the bullet meant for me." The joke was received with uproarious good humour by the assembled comrades. But when the "little fellow" died in battle the next day, everyone felt a little ashamed of the joke. At any rate it was quite inadequate to deal with the depth and breadth of the problem of death.

If we persist in laughter when dealing with the final problem of human existence, when we turn life into a comedy we also reduce it to a meaninglessness. That is why laughter, when pressed to solve the ultimate issue, turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy. To laugh at life in the ultimate sense means to scorn it. There is a note of derision in that laughter and an element of despair in that derision.

Just as laughter is the “no-man’s land” between cynicism and contrition when we deal with the incongruous element of evil in our own soul, so is it also the area between despair and faith when dealing with evil and incongruity in the world about us. Our provisional amusement with the irrational and unpredictable fortunes which invade the order and purpose of our life must move either toward bitterness or faith, when we consider not this or that frustration and this or that contingent event, but when we are forced to face the issue of the basic incongruity of death.

Either we have a faith from the standpoint of which we are able to say, “I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life...shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39); or we are overwhelmed by the incongruity of death and are forced to say with Ecclesiastes: “I said in mine heart concerning the state of the sons of men...that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; ...as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath, so that man has no preeminence about a beast for all is vanity” (Eccles. 3:18-19).

The final problem of human existence is derived from the fact that in one context and from one perspective man has no preeminence about the beast; and yet from another perspective his preeminence is very great. No beast comes to the melancholy conclusion that “all is vanity”; for the purposes of its life do not outrun its power, and death does not therefore invade its life as an irrelevance. Furthermore it has no prevision of its own end and is therefore not tempted to melancholy. Man’s melancholy over the prospect of death is the proof of his partial transcendence over the natural process which ends in death. But this is

only a partial transcendence and man's power is not great enough to secure his own immortality.

This problem of man, so perfectly and finally symbolized in the fact of death, can be solved neither by proving that he has no preeminence about the beast, nor yet proving that his preeminence is a guarantee that death has no final dominion over him. Man is both great and small, both strong and weak, both involved in and free of the limits of nature; and he is a unity of strength and weakness of spirit and creatureliness. There is therefore no possibility of man extricating himself by his own power from the predicament of his amphibious state.

The Christian faith declares that the ultimate order and meaning of the world lies in the power and wisdom of God who is both Lord of the whole world of creation and the father of human spirits. It believes that the incongruities of human existence are finally overcome by the power and the love of God, and that the love which Christ revealed is finally sufficient to overcome the contradiction of death.

This faith is not some vestigial remnant of a credulous and prescientific age with which "scientific" generations may dispense. There is no power in any science or philosophy, whether in a pre- or postscientific age, to leap the chasm of incongruity by pure thought. Thought which begins on one side of the chasm can do no more than deny the reality on the other side. It seeks either to prove that death is no reality on the other side. It seeks either to prove that death is no reality because spirit is eternal, or that spirit is not eternal because death is a reality. But the real situation is that man, as a part of the natural world, brings his years to an end like a tale that is told; and that man as a free spirit finds the brevity of his years incongruous and death an irrationality; and that man as a unity of body and spirit can

neither by taking thought reduce the dimension of pure spirit. Either his incomplete and frustrated life is completed by a power greater than his own, or it is not completed.

Faith is therefore the final triumph over incongruity, the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence. There is no other triumph and will be none, no matter how much human knowledge is enlarged. Faith is the final assertion of the freedom of the human spirit, but also the final acceptance of the weakness of man and the final solution for the problem of life through the disavowal of any final solutions in the power of man.

Insofar as the sense of humour is a recognition of incongruity, it is more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason. But the sense of humour remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities. It must move toward faith or sink into despair when the ultimate issues are raised.

That is why there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies.

“God and Laughter”

George Buttrick<sup>2</sup>

He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh  
the Lord shall have them in derision.

Psalm 2:4, KJV

When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,  
we were like them that dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with singing.

Psalm 126:1-2, KJV

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God  
over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:10

Laughter is a strange portent. In a world held in mystery, in seeming nothingness, a world in which we can neither prove God nor escape him, our faces pucker in smiles. In a generation that competes in destructive weapons until final destruction looms, a cartoon appears in *The Boston Globe* showing Uncle Sam as a hitchhiker while two Russian sputniks flash past him, one of them with a little grinning dog on board. We laugh at our own predicament. We joke even about death. A friend of mine, a bishop, is still chuckling over a pompous, humorless mortician who congratulated him on “your *graveside* manner.” We can quip even in the act or moment of death, as when the not-so saintly Charles II apologized for being “so unconscionable a time in dying.” In a world dark with griefs and hollow with

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<sup>2</sup>Sermons Preached in a University Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, (1987)), 51-57.



graves we laugh. Even in war and sorrow we pity the man who cannot laugh. Why? Here are some comments that you can use to better purpose than I.

## I

There seems to be laughter in creation itself, and if so, that is the basic laughter. On the first day of history, so the Bible tells us, “the morning stars sang together.” Every new springtime breaks into the gaiety of flowering meadows and purling streams. “The trees...clap their hands”; the little hills skip like lambs.” These phrases come, of course, from our minds, but not without beckonings from nature. This laughter of creation may seem to us to be mockery when sorrow strikes, but it accords with our joyous moods. There is even a comic side to nature. A row of penguins looks for all the world like the speakers’ table at the annual banquet of the National Association of Manufacturers. The small boy rightly exclaimed on first sight of a camel, “I don’t believe it.” Children’s books, which are quite as important as our philosophies, feature this comic side of animal life. No somber God could ever have made a bullfrog or a giraffe.

This creation-laughter we see in little children. Nietzsche said gloomily: “Man ... alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was compelled to invent laughter.” But man did not invent laughter, or anything else, except from materials given to his hand. Who taught a child to laugh? Who needs to do any such teaching? You say that they imitate the chuckling of their parents? That only presses the question further back, even supposing it to be a valid question. Children laugh as birds sing: because they are made that way. We listen to a child’s laughter, listen guiltily, and wish that our laughter were as unspoiled.

Theologians and preachers sometimes discuss the “duty of cheerfulness.” It is a contradiction in terms and a horrible phrase in any event. Say, rather, that laughter is native and that our world has times and occasions that provoke it and that if we do not then laugh, we stultify ourselves. The Harvard man who placed an advertisement in *The Crimson* for the sale of a bike, offering as inducement for a bike that it “knows its own way to Wellesley,” is a benefactor in our community. The Anglican hymnbook has a hymn that should be in every handbook, “Glad that I live am I.” The Bible says again with deep wisdom: “There is ... a time to weep and a time to laugh.” We should not choke the laughter because tears sometimes stain our days. The laughter has its own rightful time and place. If people laugh even on the way home from a funeral (as they do, as any wise pastor can tell you), perhaps they should: that release is given in our pent-up sorrow. We believe despite our morbid moods that creation-laughter *is* basic. There remains for us what Browning called “the wild joys of living.”

## II

There is also the laughter of man’s dilemma. We quip by nature at our own predicament. Because the dilemma is a dilemma, because the predicament is always mixed with human guilt, this laughter has elements of derision, and it is never far from tears. Nature has cancer as well as flowering fields, death as well as birth; and human nature has monumental self-idolatry as well as neighborly kindness. Who can doubt this ambiguity in nature? It confronts us wherever we walk and wherever we stay. Who can doubt this ambiguity in human nature? Think of Hitler dancing a jig when France surrendered, and think of the long failure of statesmanship that was left with no better expedient than to fight his fire with fire.

In “this ambiguous earth” we can still laugh, but the laughter is now inevitably “mixed.” It has undertones of self-condemnation and overtones of irony. In bad men it becomes a bitter trampling sarcasm; and in good men, a rueful smile.

We should examine with more care this typical laughter of our adult life, for laughter also has gifts of wisdom. When are we ourselves comic? Whenever we try to live beyond the bounds of our ordained nature. And these bounds? We are in the material order and cannot escape it, even though we are never content with it; at the same time we see ourselves in the natural order, from a stance above our earthborn life, which we still cannot escape. The bounds of our nature are those of a precarious line between time -- which does not content us — and eternity — into which we cannot lift ourselves. Whenever we leave that line, we become comic. Henri Bergson argues that man becomes comic when he acts like a thing, that is, when he sinks below the ordained line of creaturehood; Alexander Bain likewise proposes that humor is always the humor of man’s “degradation.” Both are right, but both perhaps fail to see that man is comic when he tries to live above the line, when he poses as an angel or as his own god, as well as when he seeks a lower order of life.

Consider instances of a man becoming laughable because he is posing as a wiser or holier man than human nature grants — the comedy of his trying vainly to live above the line of precarious creaturehood. Ashes from a man’s pipe on an upper balcony are carried by a whimsical wind into the dinner of a man eating on a lower balcony. Says the one: “Why do you knock your ashes on to my terrace?” Says the other: “Why do you place your terrace underneath my pipe?” Neither man has power to control even the minor forces and vicissitudes of life, and both are angry in consequence because they are not gods or angels.

Thus our “calculated risks” in statesmanship or in the building of apartment-house balconies are always miscalculated. Our terrifying defenses do not defend, for our adversary tries to outdo us in terror. Thus comedy, and irony, and guilt and tears. To take another instance: a hobo falling on a winter slide that boys are using would not be funny, for we would be sorry for him as a victim of new misfortune piled on old misfortune; but if a bishop thus fell while wearing full regalia, or a professor dressed for a graduation ceremony, he would definitely be comic; for nobody can be as good as a bishop is supposed to be, or as wise as a professor sometimes thinks he is. We try to live above the line, and become comic.

Now take an instance of comedy and laughter that comes of life below the line of creaturehood. Two men imitating a horse; the one providing the forequarters and the other the hindquarters with a horseskin thrown over them to complete the disguise, always bring merriment, especially in an ice show; for the men are acting as less than men by sinking into horse nature (what Bain calls “degradation”), and the pseudo-horse is trying to be more than a horse since horses do not skate. Similarly with the cartoon showing a man in the subway, with a pigeon on each shoulder. “Where are you taking them?” He was asked; and he answered, “Don’t ask me: they got on at Fifty-ninth Street.” The man was less than a man, for he had become a perch for pigeons; the pigeons were more than pigeons, for they were imitating foolish humans who bedevil themselves with subways. Naturalism merits no rebuttal, for men have always laughed it out of court. A man sinking into the natural order is tragically comic (for example, the red nose of a drunkard: wood is painted red, not noses); and that laughter against naturalism is a stronger retort than any argument.

But mark the tragedy of our thus leaving the line of our ordained nature. We know in these instances that we are neither animals nor angels. So we become self-estranged, and estranged from the true ground of our nature in God. In that self-estrangement we imagine that God is laughing at us: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision." Perhaps God is laughing, perhaps he does hold us in derision, if there is that in God which in the deeps of his mystery answers to these human terms. There is "wrath" in God — the protest of his "pity." Always men have dimly sensed that derision. It is in *The Iliad*: "And unextinguishable laughter rose among the gods." Heaven laughs, with tears, at our foolish attempts to be more than men or less than men. That our boasted defenses should now darken over us as a final threat, that our refusal to confront the real problem (our constitutional anxiety and price) should lead us into a frenetic competition in sputniks, that our science should become instrument of our suicide, that our wealth should by our pursuit of it become taxed poverty, that our victories should reappear as defeat — this is the irony of history: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh." Creation's laughter is sheer joy, but adult laughter in man's dilemma is close to tears and shame. A certain story tells of a doctor's impatience when he could find nothing wrong with his patient: "Why don't you forget yourself? Go see the clown Grumaldi, and laugh." Said the patient: "I am Grumaldi."

### III

But there is another kind of laughter, the healing laughter of redemption. It is not a child's laughter, and it is not man's dilemma laughter. It is the joy of a new birth. Francis knew child's laughter in his earliest years in Assisi; and he knew adult laughter when as an

unruly youth in that city he was the “life of the party,” not without knowing and giving some real happiness; but the third laughter he did not know until with vows of proverty he gave himself to God before a high altar. Then and there joy was born in him by which he preached to the sparrows and danced in the village square. This laughter is the laughter of childlikeness beyond childishness. Perhaps our life is a pilgrimage from childish laughter through the laughter of our guilty dilemma, to the childlike laughter that comes of God’s forgiving and renewing grace. Many a man lives and dies only in the ruefulness of that middle term.

Can we find any parable of this best laughter? The small boy decided to run away from home: “I do not like this nasty house.” Always we rebel against the walls of creaturehood. His mother told him that she was sorry for his desire but that she would help pack. The lad was plucky: he left, scarcely able to lift the luggage. Where to go? When he reached the sidewalk, he sat there on the step between the garden path and the sidewalk. Where shall we go, where can we go, when we try to leave our humanness? His parents watched from behind window curtains. Soon he returned, saving face cheerfully: “I’ve been away a long time.” They agreed: “Was it a nice journey?” But, oh the joy of the homecoming for them and for him! “Even so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” This is the word of Christ. This is the joy that he revealed to our world. The bells of heaven ring whenever a man turns from his perverted skills and his insensate pride, from his poor attempts to live an animal life, to trust in the Power and the Love — the God who can lift him when he cannot lift himself.

Another parable, since here story is better far than argument? In the sequel to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christiana (Pilgrim’s wife), her children, and a friend called Mercy follow

him to the Celestial City. Christiana asks Mercy: "What was the matter that you did laugh in your sleep to-night? I suppose you was in a dream." Yes, Mercy had dreamed. She saw herself bemoaning the hardness of her heart, with people about her who were impatient of her complaint: "At this, some laughed at me, some called me fool, and some began to thrust me about" — the earthy answer to those ill-content with merely an earthy life. Then an angel came: "Mercy, what aileth thee?" As if she knew! Only angels know! "Peace be to thee!" Then she saw herself clothed in silver and gold, led by the angel through the skies to a throne, which was not "derision," for he who sat there said gently: "Welcome, daughter." Said Mercy: "So I woke... but I laugh?" She laughed and cried, with tears no longer bitter but rather childlike and at peace. "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing."

#### IV

Even the laughter of our dilemma is still laughter, as if we knew unawares that the dilemma is always held in light. To the portent of laughter Christian faith gives the Christ-event, the historical drama of uncoercive love. So we may now choose how to laugh. We can laugh because life despite its darkness is good: "Glad that I live am I." That is basic laughter, and sadness may wait its turn. We can laugh too loud: that is dilemma-laughter, its loudness confessing its insecurity. We can laugh ruefully, with realism for man's failures, yet with kindly judgment since we also are "in the same condemnation," well knowing that adult laughter is never far from tears. Are there not two faces over the proscenium arch of the theater, which portray our mortal life—a laughing face and a weeping face?

But if we will, we may laugh in the midst of the storm in “unmixed” laughter. We can “become as little children,” in a new childlikeness, beyond childishness and beyond the adulthood that has known too many roads and too many doors. We can laugh even in an atomic age, even in the storm that we have raised in our own unruliness:

Well roars the storm to those that hear

A deeper voice across the storm.<sup>3</sup>

“Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” “Be of good cheer”: laugh! Beyond the clinging doubt and beyond the unruly deed — God. Has he not “found” us in Jesus Christ? So *that* door is always open — into laughter.

---

<sup>3</sup>Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, sec. cxxvi, st. 1.



## APPENDIX E

### WORKSHOP MATERIALS

#### Pre-Workshop Materials:

1. Information Letter to Potential Workshop Participants
2. Memo Sent with Pre-Workshop Assignments
3. Assigned Readings: The Rhetorico-Contextual Method; Chapter 3, pp. 106-14.  
The Chreiai and Mark 10:17-27 Test Case; Chapter 4.
4. Humour Quotient Instrument

#### Workshop Materials:

1. Lyric Sheet to “God’s Own Fool.”
2. Workshop Purposes and Objectives.
3. Workshop Schedule.
4. Gary Larson Cartoon; “Analyzing Humor.”
5. Listening Sheet “Inlaws and Outlaws: Humour Cognates.”
6. Definitions of “Humour” and “Sense of Humour” from Oxford English Dictionary.
7. Listening Sheet “Humour Theories.”
8. Small Group Questions on Humour Theories.
9. Webbing Exercise for Presentation on Mirthology.
10. Listing of Passages which Condemn Frivolous and Filthy Speech.
11. Handout on Humour Enhancement; Chapter 2, pp. 56-60.
12. Humour Exercises.
13. Scoring Graph for the Humour Quotient Instrument.

14. Questions for Evaluating and Improving Sense of Humour.
15. “Jesus and Humour: The Quest for the Hysterical Jesus” Handout.
16. “Rhetoric Terminology” Handout. Cf. APPENDIX A.
17. Chreia Types, Presentations and Elaboration Handout.
18. Chreia Elaboration Exercise: Matthew 7:1-5.
19. Handout on Mark 10:17-19 and the Rhetorico-Contextual Method.
20. List of Humorous Passages from the Synoptic Gospels.
21. Handout on Synoptic Gospel Introductions.
22. Litany of Thanks for All Good Humour and Abiding Joy.

## **MEMO Re: Proclaiming the Messiah's Mirth Workshop**

### **Things You Need to Know:**

- The workshop will be held on **November 21,22, 1997** at **Maritime Christian College**  
503 University Ave.  
Charlottetown, PE  
C1A 7Z4  
(902) 628-8887  
(902) 892-3959 (fax)
- There will be **no registration fee** for the workshop. Refreshment breaks will be supplied but you will be responsible for your own meals during the course of the workshop (i.e. Friday supper, Saturday lunch and supper).
- There will be a display of **humour resources** at the workshop. This will be for purposes of display only. These resources may be ordered after the workshop is over.
- Because the workshop will cover a great deal of material in a short time, it is important for you to **be at all the sessions** on both days of the workshop.

### **Things You Need to Do Before the Workshop:**

- Read the assigned readings sent to you in advance.
- Complete the **Humour Quotient Instrument**. One is for your own **self-evaluation**, another is for your **spouse's (or best friend's) evaluation** of you and the third is for a close **co-worker's evaluation** of your sense of humour.

### **Things You Need to Bring to the Workshop:**

- Your completed reading assignments.
- Your completed Humour Quotient Instruments (3).
- **New American Standard Bible** as well as pen and paper.

**See you at the workshop!!!**

Dear Workshop Participant,

Enclosed are the readings to be completed before the “Proclaiming the Messiah’s Mirth” workshop. **There are a couple of things you need to know about this assignment.**

- the first seven pages give an outline of the model I am proposing for the interpretation of humour in the gospel sayings.
- the rest of the material is from another chapter in my thesis-project and deals with how the model relates to the gospels specifically and gives a test case for the model using Mark 10:17-27.

**Don’t panic if some of the rhetorical terms used in the readings are not familiar to you. We’ll try to clear away the fog during the workshop. So please go on reading even if all the terms don’t make sense.**

Just in case you wonder how all this talk about rhetoric fits into understanding and preaching Jesus’ humour, here is the purpose statement of my thesis-project:

This thesis-project is an attempt to facilitate a greater appreciation of the humorous perspective as it relates to the Christian faith in general and biblical interpretation in particular and to supply a specific methodology whereby particular manifestations of humour found in selected gospel sayings might be understood and communicated to a contemporary audience.

I hope that helps a bit. Enjoy the reading!!

## Humour Quotient Instrument

**Subject:**

---

Place the number best representing the answer to each question in the blanks provided. The subject of this exercise is the one to whom the pronouns "I," "me," and "my" refer. **Please be honest!**

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree

---

### Enjoyment of Humour

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I enjoy being around people who make me laugh.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I generally look for sitcoms or other funny programs to watch on TV.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When I pick up a magazine, I generally look at the cartoons in it first.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When I go to the movies, my preference is generally to see a good comedy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. It is important to me to have a lot of humour in my life.

### Seriousness and Negative Mood

- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I am in a serious frame of mind most of the time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I get annoyed by people who are playful while on the job.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I tend to have a pessimistic outlook on life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I am often in a negative mood (angry, anxious, sad, or depressed).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I often feel frustrated (either on the job or at home).

### Playfulness and Positive Mood

- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I often adopt a playful attitude in everyday life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I am a very spontaneous person.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I have a lot of fun in my life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I have an optimistic outlook on life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I am often in a positive mood.

## **Laughter**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I have a good belly laugh many times every day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I have a heartier, more robust laugh than most people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I am an emotionally expressive person in general.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I feel comfortable laughing, even when others aren't.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. One or both of my parents laughed a lot when I was growing up.

## **Verbal Humour**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I enjoy playing games or doing word puzzles, etc. that allow me to play with language.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I often tell jokes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I often tell funny stories.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I often create my own spontaneous puns.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 25. I often make other spontaneous witty remarks (other than those in #s 22-24).

## **Finding Humour in Everyday Life**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 26. I often find humour in the incidents that occur on the job.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 27. I often find humour in the incidents that occur at home.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 28. I often find humour in the incidents that occur outside work and family settings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 29. I often share with others the funny incidents I observe, or that happen to me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30. I am better at finding humour in everyday life than most people I know.

## **Laughing at Yourself**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 31. I have no trouble poking fun at physical qualities of myself that I don't like.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 32. I often find humour in my own blunders or embarrassing incidents that happen to me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 33. I often share with others the humour of my blunders or embarrassing incidents.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 34. I find it easy to laugh when I am the butt of someone else's joke.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 35. I have no difficulty telling jokes in which I am the butt of the joke.

## **Humour Under Stress**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 36. My sense of humour rarely abandons me under stress.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 37. I often seek out mass media humour (TV, cartoons, etc.) when under stress.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 38. I often use my sense of humour on the job to reduce stress and maintain effectiveness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 39. I often use my sense of humour to control the effect of stress on my mood.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40. My sense of humour is my most effective tool in coping with life stress.

## Humour Quotient Instrument

### SCORING:

**A. Add the numerical values of your answers for questions # 1-5, 11-30**

\_\_\_\_\_

**B. Multiply the sum of answers of questions # 31-35 by 1.5**

\_\_\_\_\_

**C. Multiply the sum of answers to questions # 36-40 by 2**

\_\_\_\_\_

**D. Add these three sums together**

\_\_\_\_\_

**E. Add the numerical values of your answers to questions #6-10**

\_\_\_\_\_

**F. Subtract the sum from #E from #D**

\_\_\_\_\_

(Source: Paul E. McGhee Ph.D.)

## God's Own Fool

It seems I've imagined Him all of my life  
as the wisest of all mankind;  
But if God's holy wisdom is foolish to men,  
He must have seemed out of His mind.  
For even His family said He was mad  
and the priests said, "A demon's to blame";  
but God in the form of this angry young man  
could not have seemed perfectly sane.

### Chorus

When we in our foolishness thought we were wise,  
He played the fool and He opened our eyes.  
When we in our weakness believed we were strong,  
He became helpless to show we were wrong.  
And so we follow God's own fool;  
for only the foolish can tell  
Believe the unbelievable,  
Come be a fool as well.

So come lose your life for a carpenter's son,  
for a mad-man who died for a dream.  
Then you'll have the faith His first followers had,  
and you'll feel the weight of the beam.  
So surrender the hunger to say you must know,  
have the courage to say "I believe."  
For the power of paradox opens your eyes  
and blinds those who say they can see.

Michael Card  
Used with permission  
CCLI #880528



## **Purposes and Objectives**

**This thesis-project is an attempt to facilitate a greater appreciation of the humorous perspective as it relates to the Christian faith in general and biblical interpretation in particular and to supply a specific methodology whereby particular manifestations of humour found in selected gospel sayings might be understood and communicated to a contemporary audience.**

**Upon completion of the workshop the participant will have:**

- 1. Heard and responded to the thesis which upholds the importance of the role of humour in the Christian life;**
- 2. Evaluated his own sense of humour and participated in exercises to enhance it;**
- 3. Displayed an increased understanding of the rationale and methodology of rhetorico-contextual interpretation as it relates to the gospel sayings;**
- 4. Applied the proposed rhetorico-contextual model in relation to the humour in a gospel saying.**

# **Proclaiming the Messiah's Mirth Workshop**

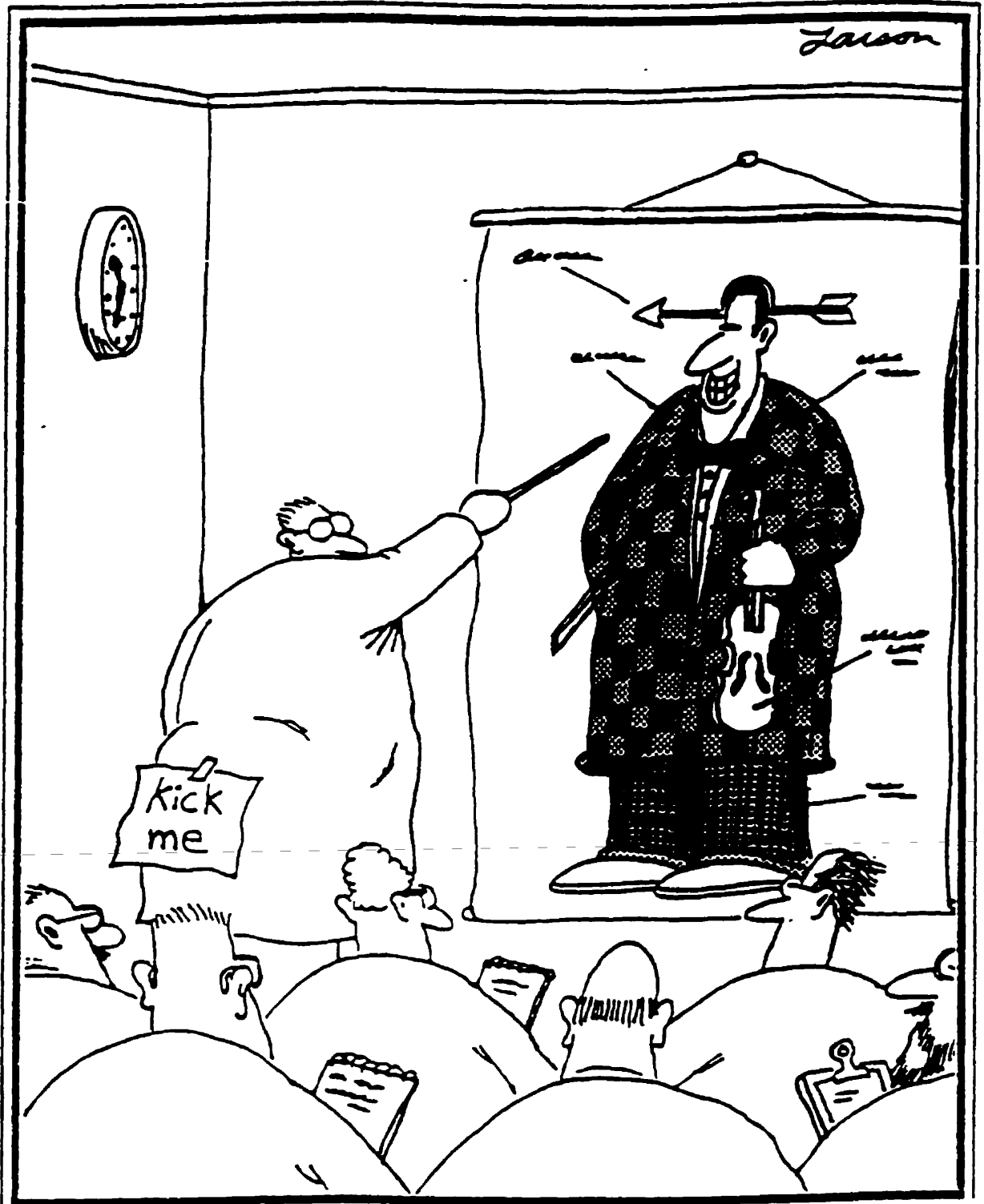
**November 21,22, 1997**

## **Friday Sessions**

<b>1:00 - 1:30 PM</b>	<b>Registration and Refreshments</b>
<b>1:30 - 2:00</b>	<b>Introduction to the Workshop</b>
<b>2:00 - 3:00</b>	<b>Defining Humour</b>
<b>3:00 - 3:30</b>	<b>Refreshment Break</b>
<b>3:30 - 4:00</b>	<b>Theories of Humour</b>
<b>4:00 - 5:00</b>	<b>Introduction to a Theology of Humour (Mirthology)</b>
<b>5:00 - 6:30</b>	<b>Supper Break</b>
<b>6:30 - 7:30</b>	<b>Humour Enhancement</b>
<b>7:30 - 8:00</b>	<b>Refreshment Break</b>
<b>8:00 - 9:00</b>	<b>Jesus and Humour</b>

## **Saturday Sessions**

<b>8:00 - 9:00 AM</b>	<b>Introduction to Rhetoric</b>
<b>9:00 - 10:00</b>	<b>Rhetoric and the Gospels</b>
<b>10:00 - 10:30</b>	<b>Refreshment Break</b>
<b>10:30 - 12:00</b>	<b>The Rhetorico-Contextual Model</b>
<b>12:00 - 1:30 PM</b>	<b>Lunch Break</b>
<b>1:30 - 5:30</b>	<b>Research and Writing</b>
<b>3:30 - 4:00</b>	<b>Refreshment Break</b>
<b>5:30 - 7:00</b>	<b>Supper Break</b>
<b>7:00 - 8:00</b>	<b>Reporting Session</b>
<b>8:00 - 8:30</b>	<b>Workshop Evaluation</b>



Analyzing humor

# INLAWS AND OUTLAWS: TERMS RELATED TO "HUMOUR"

## Listening Sheet

### 1. "Wit"

- a) The main characteristics of "wit" are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- b) "Wit" may differ from "humour" in that it is primarily  
\_\_\_\_\_ while "humour" is a bit more  
\_\_\_\_\_.

### 2. "Laughter"

- a) "Laughter" is related to "humour" as \_\_\_\_\_ is to  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- b) Not all laughter is brought on by \_\_\_\_\_.
- c) Three types of "laughter" are: funny \_\_\_\_\_,  
funny \_\_\_\_\_ and  
funny \_\_\_\_\_.

3. "Play"

a) A \_\_\_\_\_ is a prerequisite to a sense of humour.

b) The chief attributes of "play" are:

---

---

---

---

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4. "Joy"

a) Joy is a \_\_\_\_\_ which comes from \_\_\_\_\_ and is expressed \_\_\_\_\_ even in the midst of \_\_\_\_\_.

b) Therefore "joy" can be both a \_\_\_\_\_ of "humour" and \_\_\_\_\_ of "humour."

5. "Comedy"

a) "Comedy" is really a dramatic \_\_\_\_\_.

b) "Comedy" tells the story of \_\_\_\_\_ people who experience \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

## Definitions

Humour is that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun.

A sense of humour is the faculty of perceiving what is, ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject.

Oxford English Dictionary

# HUMOUR THEORIES

## Listening Sheet

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Theories

a) These are the predominate theories since the \_\_\_\_\_  
Period.

b) These theories see humour as a form of \_\_\_\_\_  
which establishes \_\_\_\_\_ at the expense of  
\_\_\_\_\_.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Theories

a) These theories state that humour results from a \_\_\_\_\_  
whenever someone is \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_ is probably the most  
renowned person to hold this view.

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Theories

a) The essence of humour is the \_\_\_\_\_ one receives  
when \_\_\_\_\_ is perceived.

b) There are many ways of perceiving \_\_\_\_\_ such as:

\_\_\_\_\_ expectations,

\_\_\_\_\_ opposites and

\_\_\_\_\_ similarities.

c) For \_\_\_\_\_ to be humorous it needs to be

accompanied by an \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_.



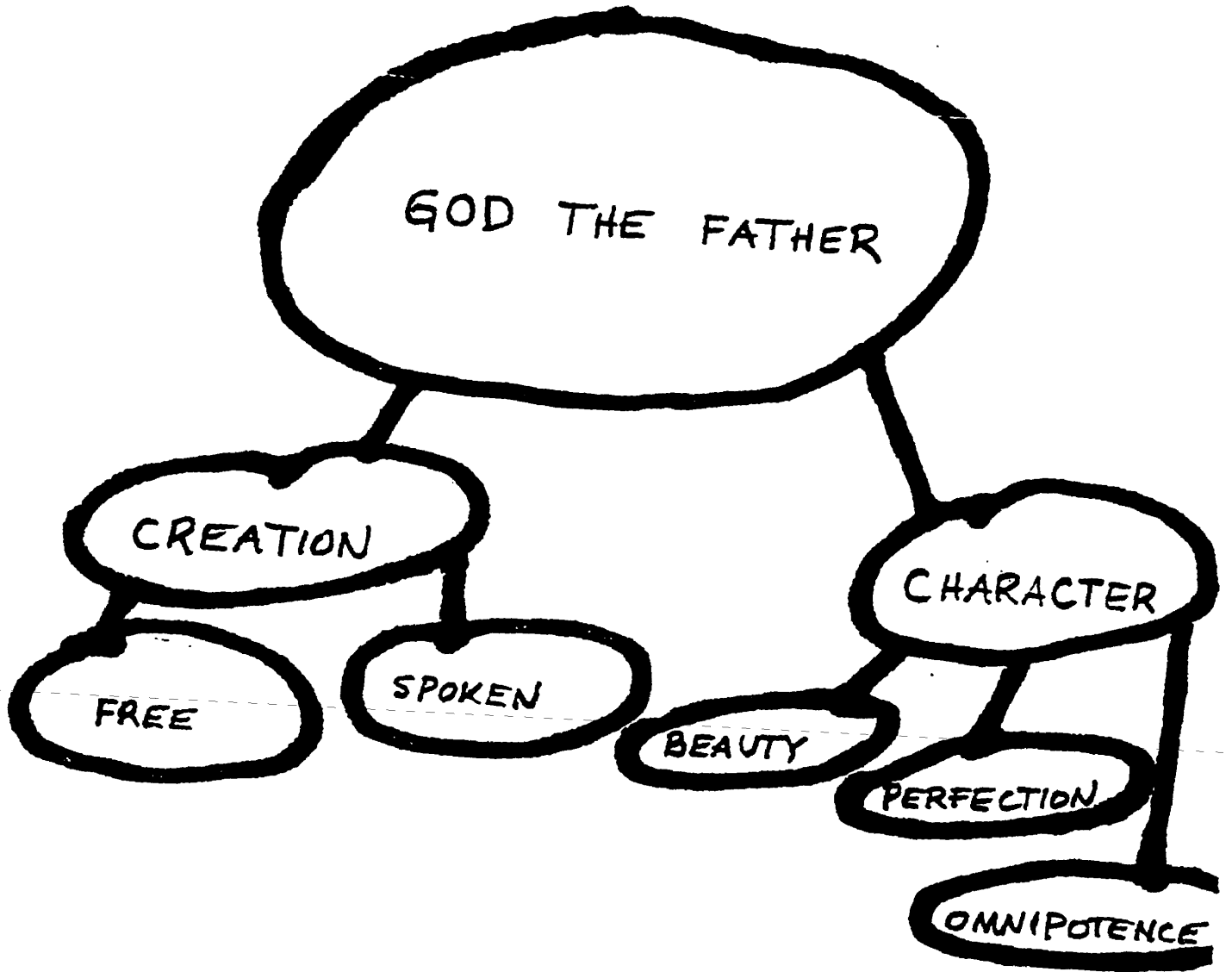
# **Humour Theories**

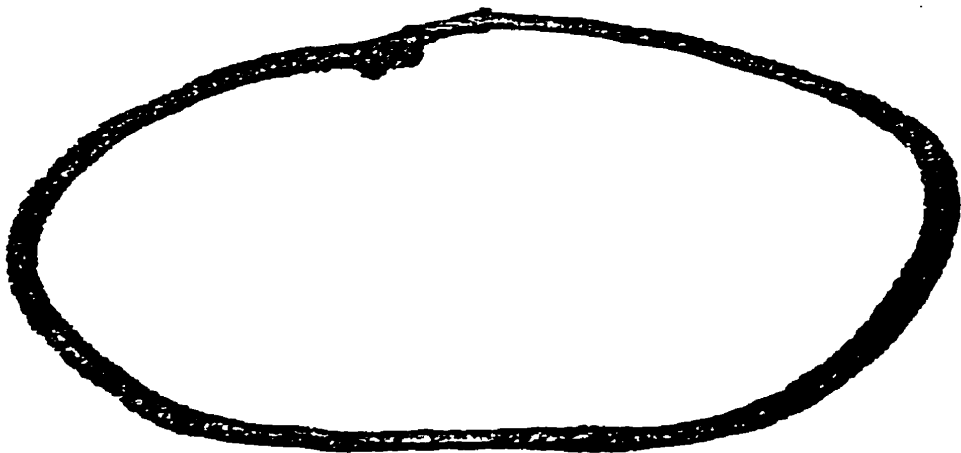
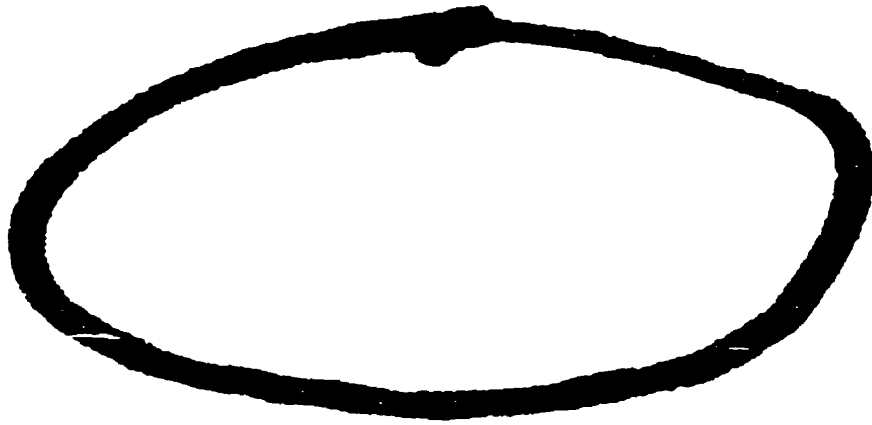
## **Discussion Starters**

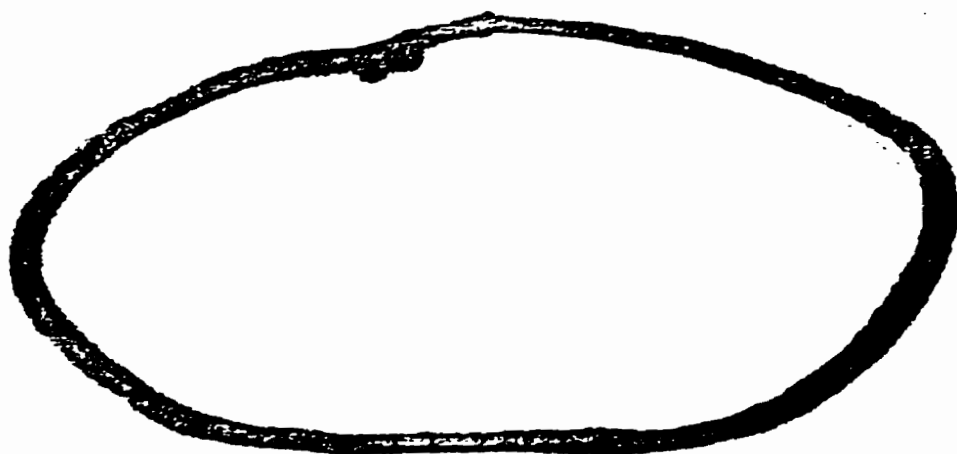
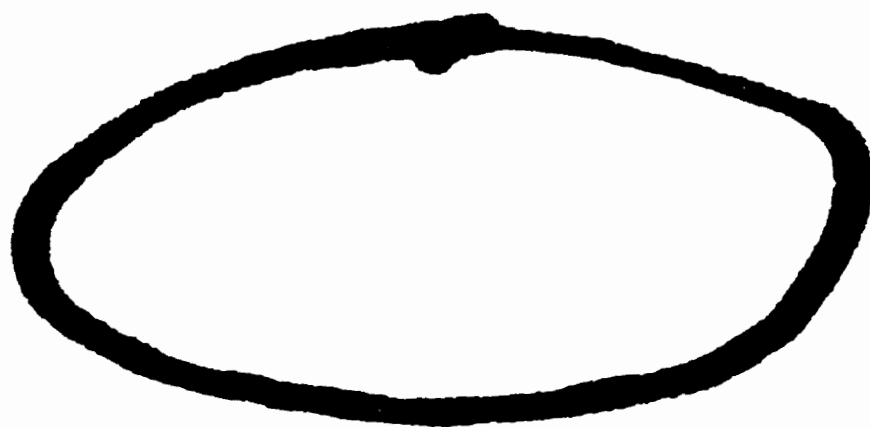
- 1. Think of one joke that would demonstrate each of the three major theories of humour.**
- 2. Which of these three main theories seems to be the best?**
- 3. Evaluate each of the three major theories from a Christian perspective.**
- 4. Compose your own theory of humour.**

# MIRTHOLOGY

## Webbing Exercise







# **Oh yeah, well what about these?**

Proverbs 19:1,3

Luke 6:25

Ephesians 4:29; 5:4

Colossians 3:8

1 Timothy 6:20

2 Timothy 2:16

Titus 2:7,8

James 4:9

## Humour Enhancing Exercises

### What's in a Word?

Find the smaller word inside the big word which relates to the clue.

SAMPLE:

A TV or radio commercial

BROADCAST

Unemployed young lady

DISMISSED

.....

Joy in being together

RELATIONSHIP

A tremendous berg

MAGNIFICENT

A group of air conditioning salesmen

CONVENTION

An angry display

FIREWORKS

Tabby's time off

VACATION

Going to the same delicatessen

FIDELITY

Rope inventory

RECORDING

Defence from decay

PROTECTION

Openly sneaky

OBVIOUSLY

Staff of a jewelry store

MANAGEMENT

Relaxing combatant

WRESTLER

Upright browning	STANDING
Unsuccessful track circling	COLLAPSED
Finding a blanket	DISCOVERY
Annoying decaying metal	FRUSTRATED
Porch builder	OCCUPATION
Headgear for any occasion	WHATEVER
President of a knife company	EXECUTIVE

(Source: Laurence Peter and Bill Dana)

### Multiple Meanings

Try to think of as many meanings as possible for the following words:

chair:

table:

pen:

book:

fan:

bow:

down:

page:

lot:

key:

## Daffynitions

Attempt to compose a humorous definition for the following words:

.....  
SAMPLE:

“privatize:” “Mike Hammer, Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe”

“loin cloth:” “what you have to do if you want to work in the garment district”  
.....

alarms:

arrears:

crook:

debate:

delight:

fungi:

insane:

mutilate:

vitamin

(Source: Paul E. McGhee, Ph.D.)



## Exaggeration

Here is a simple way to compose your own exaggeration jokes similar to those made famous by Johnny Carson:

1. Pick a subject.
2. Make a list of associations to this subject, using only nouns.
3. Pick an adjective to describe the subject.
4. Make another list of associations for the above adjective (nouns or verbs).
5. Find words within the two lists (from #s 2 & 4) that you can meaningfully connect. Connect them in a statement that makes sense in an exaggerated or absurd way.

.....  
SAMPLE:

He was so rich that he bought his dog a boy.

He's so clumsy he trips over cordless phones.

.....

(Source: Paul E. McGhee Ph.D)

## Finding Hidden Connections

Try listing terms related to two different subjects and then attempt to see ways in which you might observe humorous connections between the two. Try it with the two subjects of: **tourists** and **baseball**.

.....  
SAMPLE:

What do you wish every tourist would do?    Make a home run.  
.....

### Key Phrase

To the very brave, another way of exercising your humorous perception is to take a key word or phrase which is capable of differing interpretations, and use it to create your own joke.  
.....

SAMPLE:

“Stop coughing”

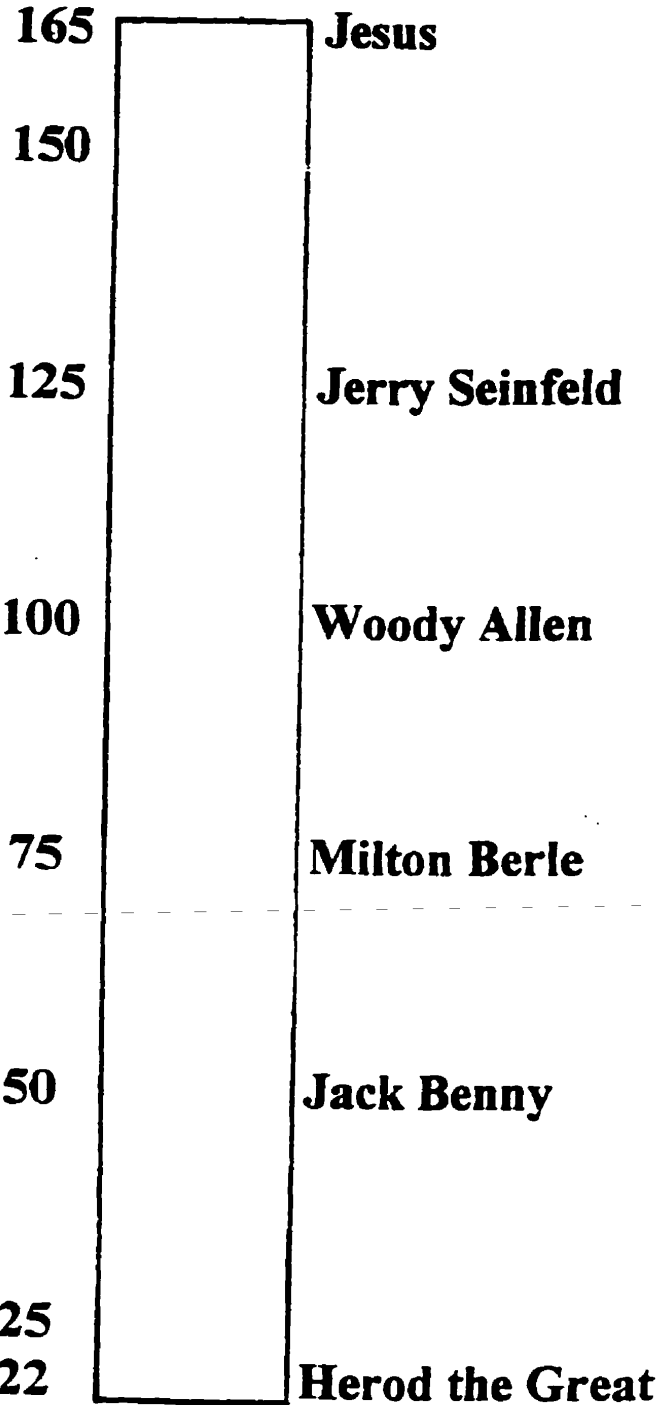
A young mortician’s apprentice lost a coffin out of the back of the hearse while he was driving up a steep hill. As the coffin rolled down the hill, the young man ran after it in desperation. As it rolled through town, he ran into the drug store, all out of breath and asked the pharmacist, “Do you have anything to stop this ‘coffin’?”  
.....

Try your own phrase or word. You might want to use:

“Bear with me”

“That is the point”

# Humour Quotient Instrument



# **Humour Quotient Instrument**

## **Evaluation Questions**

- 1. What are the strengths of my sense of humour?**
- 2. What are the weaknesses of my sense of humour?**
- 3. What strategies might I employ to improve my sense of humour?**

## JESUS AND HUMOUR: THE QUEST FOR THE HYSTERICAL JESUS

### Humorous Devices

**Satire.** Satire is a work or manner that blends a censorious attitude with humour and wit for improving human institutions or humanity. Satirists attempt through laughter not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodelling. Satirists are often personally involved with the objects of criticism and realize that their proposed remedy must not be seen by the audience as more repulsive than the disease.

Luke 7:24-28

**Irony.** Irony is a double-levelled literary phenomenon in which two tiers of meaning stand in some opposition to each other and in which some degree of unawareness is expressed or implied. The “punch” of irony depends in part upon someone failing to see it. Local irony occurs at a given point in the text though its punch may depend upon knowledge gained by the reader elsewhere, either in the text or outside it.

Luke 5:32; 13:33; 22:36 Mark 7:9 John 2:19

**Invective.** Invective is direct denunciation (in contrast to the indirect approach of irony) by the use of derogatory descriptions. The use of invective is not to express personal hatred but commits the one using it and the one at which it is aimed to a moral standard.

Matthew 23:13-32 Luke 11:42-52

**Sarcasm.** Sarcasm (literally “flesh-tearing”) is the blatant use of apparent praise for dispraise. It is less direct than invective in that it employs inversion as a means of deflection so that its sting is a little more indirect.

Matthew 9:12,13

**Burlesque.** The essence of burlesque is a discrepancy between subject matter and style. **High Burlesque** or **parody** is where weighty style is used in relation to more inconsequential subject matter. **Low Burlesque** or **travesty** is where a weighty subject is addressed in a lesser style. **Caricature** is another form of this exaggerated imitation in that it targets the qualities of a person to produce a ridiculous effect.

Parody: Matthew 16:2-4

Travesty: Matthew 11:16-19 (Luke 7:31-34)

Caricature: Matthew 6:2,5,16; 23:24

### **Humorous Use of Literary Devices**

**Hyperbole.** Hyperbole is bold overstatement, or extravagant exaggeration of fact, either for serious or comic effect.

Matthew 7:3; 23:24 Mark 10:25

**Meiosis.** Meiosis deliberately represents something as much less in magnitude or importance than it really is.

Luke 17:9

**Riddle.** A riddle is a question designed to test the mental agility and ingenuity of the audience.

John 2:19 Mark 2:19 Matthew 11:11

**Paradox.** A paradox is a statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd may actually be well founded or true.

Luke 9:60; 12:3 Matthew 5:5; 18:3,4; 21:31; 23:11 Mark 8:35

**Proverb.** A proverb is a saying that briefly and memorably expresses some recognized truth about life.

Matthew 5:14 Mark 6:4 Luke 4:23

**Metaphor.** A metaphor is an analogy identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.

Luke 13:32 Matthew 23:33

**Simile.** A simile is a figure in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed.

Matthew 10:16; 23:27

**A Fortiori.** This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. Granting a certain fact, it becomes even more compelling on the larger scale.

Matthew 7:9-11; 10:25

**Rhetorical Question.** This is a question for which there is a rather obvious answer but the speaker is more interested in increasing the rhetorical impact of his point than to induce the right answer.

Matthew 7:9-11; 11:7,8

**Counter Question.** A counter question is a question asked in response to one asked by one's opponent in order to silence the opponent.

Matthew 21:24,25; 22:18,19

## **The Chreiai**

### **Types of Chreiai:**

#### **Saying Chreiai**

**Statement Chreiai**

**Response Chreiai**

**Double Chreiai**

#### **Action Chreiai**

#### **Mixed Chreiai**

### **Manners of Presentation of the Chreiai:**

**as a maxim**

**as an explanation**

**with wit**

**as a syllogism**



**as an enthymeme**

**with an example**

**as a wish**

**in symbolic manner**

**in a figurative manner**

**using double entendre**

**with a change of subject**

**with a combination of some of the above**

**Elaboration of the Chreiai**

## **Matthew 7:1-5**

**Do not judge lest you be judged.**

**For in the way you judge, you will be judged;**

**and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.**

**And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?**

**Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?**

**You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.**

17 <sup>a</sup>And as He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and <sup>b</sup>knelt before Him, and *began* asking Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to <sup>c</sup>inherit eternal life?"

18 And Jesus said to him, "Why <sup>d</sup>do you call Me good? No one is good except God <sup>e</sup>alone.

19 "You know the commandments, <sup>a</sup>DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER."

20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept <sup>a</sup>all these things from my youth up."

21 And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have <sup>a</sup>treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

22 But at these words <sup>f</sup>his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property.

23 And Jesus, looking around, <sup>g</sup>said to His disciples, "<sup>a</sup>How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 And the disciples <sup>h</sup>were amazed at His words. But Jesus <sup>i</sup>answered again and <sup>j</sup>said to them, "Children, how hard it is <sup>k</sup>to enter the kingdom of God!

25 <sup>l</sup>"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of <sup>m</sup>a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

26 And they were even more astonished and said <sup>n</sup>to Him, "<sup>o</sup>Then who can be saved?"

27 Looking upon them, Jesus <sup>p</sup>said, "<sup>a</sup>With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

**1. Determine the Rhetorical Unit.**

**2. Define the Rhetorical Situation of the Unit.**

**3. Determine the Rhetorical Arrangement of the Unit.**

**4. Identify the Rhetorical Devices and Style of the Unit.**

**5. Evaluate the Rhetorical Effectiveness of the Unit.**

**6. Contextualize the Message and Impact of the Unit.**

## Humorous Sayings in the Synoptic Gospels

1. Matt 7:6                      Pearls before swine
2. Luke 6:39-45                Blind leading the blind; speck and log; tree and fruit
3. Mark 4:21-23                Lamp under a basket
4. Matt 23:23,24                Straining gnats, swallowing camels
5. Luke 11:37-41                Outside and inside the bowl
6. Luke 11:9-13                Snake for fish; scorpion for an egg
7. Luke 12:35-40                Householder and the thief
8. Matt 18:21,22                Seventy times seven
9. Mark 2:15-17                Healthy don't need a doctor
10. Matt 10:24-33                Slave/master; hairs numbered
11. Luke 14:25-35                Cost of discipleship; salt losing saltiness
12. Luke 9:57-62                Dead bury their own dead
13. Matt 6:2-4                    Sounding trumpets; left hand, right hand
14. Luke 7:24-35                John the Baptist; children's song
15. Matt 23:27,28                Whitewashed tombs

## **Gospel Introductions**

For purposes of ready reference in the interpreting of gospel sayings from the Synoptics this basic guide gives only summarized opinions representing recent opinions among conservative biblical scholars. The task of determining date, destination and purpose of these documents is a difficult one and conclusions are tentative at best. However, these 'best guesses' do ground the respective gospels in some historical context which is helpful for interpreting them. Most consider each gospel to have catechetical purposes in mind for the readers as well as evangelistic ones. Traditional authorship of each gospel is assumed.

### **Matthew**

Matthew exhibits a teacher's heart as well as that of an evangelist. He targets his gospel to a Jewish audience to show Jesus to be the promised Messiah in order to bring Jews to faith in him and confirm those in their faith after their conversion. While the Jewish bent of Matthew's gospel is evident, it also looks upon the mission among the Gentiles in a favourable light prompting Robert Gundry to term it "a Jewish Christian gospel with a universal outlook." Matthew probably wrote this gospel in Syria, possibly in Antioch in the mid 60's of the first century.

### **Mark**

Mark spends more time dealing with what Jesus did rather than what he taught. The fast pace and frequent Latinisms among other factors suggest a Roman audience. Beyond Mark's desire to evangelize are the pastoral purposes of his gospel. Many Christians in Rome were facing difficulties from persecutions and false teachings. Mark emphasizes the suffering of Jesus both to give a paradigm for discipleship and to correct the tendency to overemphasize Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity. He probably wrote his gospel from Rome anywhere from the late 50's to the mid 60's in the first century.

### **Luke**

Luke points his gospel toward a Gentile audience while not forgetting the relationship in salvation history between the two covenants--old and new. The third gospel is universal in scope and has a special interest in those who were disenfranchised (eg. women, children, Gentiles, sinners, etc.). Luke's message of salvation emphasizes the sovereign plan and activity of God to save all the nations through his Son. The upshot of

this gospel among those already saved is that it would give reassurance to any Gentile believer who felt out of place in a movement with Jewish origins as well as to any Jewish believer who was troubled by the influx of Gentiles into the church or at the lack of response to the gospel among his fellow Jews. Luke probably wrote his gospel in Rome (or possibly in Greece) before 70 A.D.

### Sources

More details regarding these matters may be found in books of New Testament Introduction or New Testament Survey. Other books of interest might be: R. T. France, Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), Ralph Martin, Mark: Evangelist and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), I. Howard Marshall, Luke: Historian and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), and Richard A. Burridge, Four Gospels: One Jesus? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

**Litany Of Thanks For All  
Good Humour And Abiding Joy**

Leader: For all pure comedy and laughter, and for the gift of  
humour and the comic spirit;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.

People: **For all that which makes us laugh at ourselves, and  
brings life into perspective;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

Leader: For the spirit of humour which binds us to our  
neighbor in the joy of laughing together;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.

People: **For the truth that humour brings to our lives,  
gently reminding us of our frailty and foibles;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

Leader: For all redeeming humour that saves us from taking  
ourselves and our projects too seriously;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.

People: **For all singers and musicians, for all who work in  
form and colour to increase the joy of life;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

Leader: For all who serve thee with mirth, and cheer, and  
gladness, and joyfulness;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.

People: **For all who serve men and women by joining mirth  
with charity, humour with healing, and comedy  
with truth;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

Leader: For all joy that heightens our lives, kindles our hearts,  
and enhances our faces with a smile;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.

People: **For the good news of the Gospel that lifts the burden  
of the heart and brings the merriment of  
reconciliation;  
Glory be to thee, O Lord.**

(Source: Lee van Rensburg)

APPENDIX F

WORKSHOP EVALUATION FORMS

Post-Workshop Evaluation

Proclaiming the Messiah's Mirth - November 21,22, 1997

We would be grateful if you would take the time to complete this evaluation questionnaire in order to help in assessing the workshop. Your sincere and constructive comments will be greatly appreciated. Thank-you.

1. Did this workshop meet its objectives? (Please check one)

1. \_\_\_ Not at all      2. \_\_\_ To a small extent      3. \_\_\_ To some extent  
4. \_\_\_ To a great extent      5. \_\_\_ Fully

Please comment: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How much of the program did you understand?

1. \_\_\_ None                      2. \_\_\_ Not much                      3. \_\_\_ Some  
4. \_\_\_ Most                      5. \_\_\_ All

Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How relevant was the workshop to your learning needs?

1. \_\_\_ Irrelevant      2. \_\_\_ Slightly relevant      3. \_\_\_ Somewhat relevant  
4. \_\_\_ Very relevant      5. \_\_\_ Extremely relevant

4. Did this workshop develop skills necessary to carry out your current/future ministry successfully?

1. \_\_\_ Almost none      2. \_\_\_ To a small extent      3. \_\_\_ To some extent  
4. \_\_\_ To a great extent      5. \_\_\_ Very relevant

5. The learning from this workshop that I am most likely to apply to my ministry is (please explain briefly): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



6. What topics do you think should be added to the program, expanded, or deleted?

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7. How useful and appropriate were the following teaching methods used in the workshop?

(Please circle where applicable)

Quantity:

Scale:

1 - Too much

2 - Not enough

3 - Good enough

0 - Not applicable

Lectures 1 2 3 0

Listening Sheets 1 2 3 0

Group Discussions 1 2 3 0

Webbing Exercise 1 2 3 0

Handouts 1 2 3 0

Video Presentation 1 2 3 0

Humour Exercises 1 2 3 0

Song and Lyric Sheet 1 2 3 0

Overhead Transparencies 1 2 3 0

Humour Quotient Instrument 1 2 3 0

Quality:

Scale:

- 1 - Poor
- 2 - Below Average
- 3 - Average
- 4 - Above Average
- 5 - Excellent
- 0 - Not Applicable

Lectures 1 2 3 4 5 0

Listening Sheets 1 2 3 4 5 0

Group Discussions 1 2 3 4 5 0

Webbing Exercise 1 2 3 4 5 0

Handouts 1 2 3 4 5 0

Video Presentation 1 2 3 4 5 0

Humour Exercises 1 2 3 4 5 0

Song and Lyric Sheet 1 2 3 4 5 0

Overhead Transparencies 1 2 3 4 5 0

Humour Quotient Instrument 1 2 3 4 5 0

Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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8. What was your overall reaction to this workshop?

1. \_\_\_\_ Quite negative      2. \_\_\_\_ Neutral      3. \_\_\_\_ Quite positive

Please comment: \_\_\_\_\_

9. Please rate the workshop leader in the following areas:

Scale:

1 - Poor

2 - Fair

3 - Excellent

Knowledge of subject	1 2 3
Organization and preparation	1 2 3
Style and delivery	1 2 3
Responsiveness to participants	1 2 3
Creating appropriate learning climate	1 2 3
Encouraging participation by all members of the workshop	1 2 3
Provision of good feedback	1 2 3
Clear presentation of learning points	1 2 3
Enthusiasm	1 2 3
Pace and amount of learning	1 2 3
Handling questions and interruptions	1 2 3
Maintaining interest	1 2 3

10. How could the workshop leader's technique be improved? \_\_\_\_\_

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Thank-you for taking time to give us your comments.

## Evaluation Interview

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. In what ways were the workshop objectives helpful to your present/future ministry?
2. In what ways were they not helpful or relevant?
3. What are your comments about how the workshop was designed?
4. Which teaching methods/learning strategies did you appreciate the most? Why?
5. Which did you appreciate the least? Why?

6. Which parts of the workshop were most applicable to your ministry?

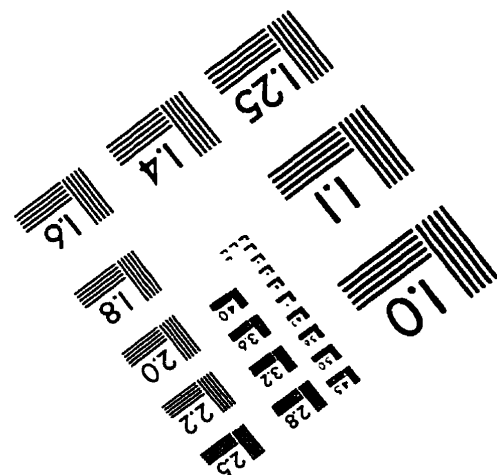
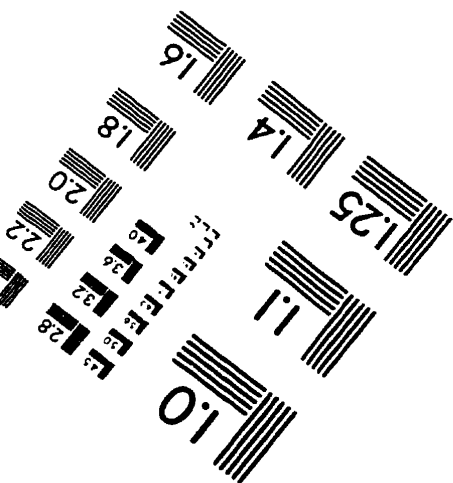
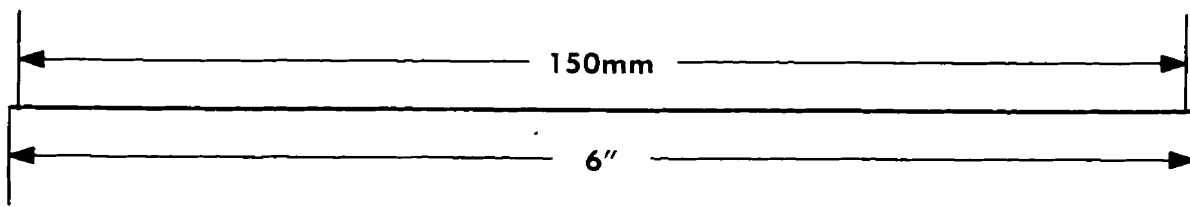
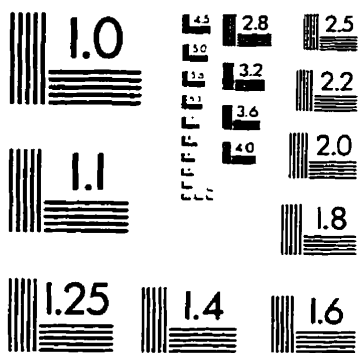
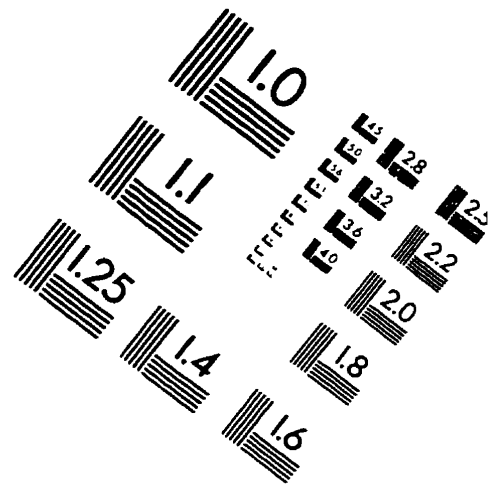
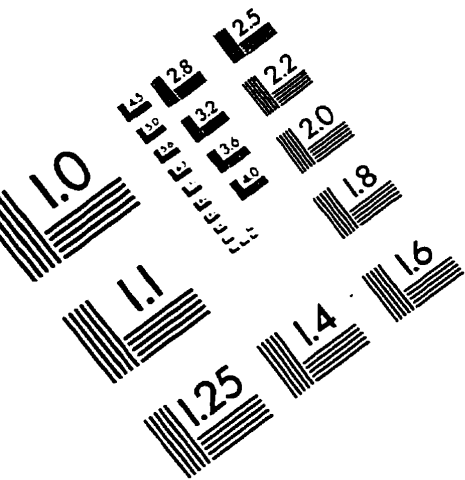
7. What were the strengths of the workshop?

8. What were the weaknesses?

9. What would you suggest to improve the workshop?

10. Please describe your overall reaction to the workshop.

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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