

HUMOR IN PREACHING: A FUNNY THING HAPPENED  
ON THE WAY TO THE PULPIT. . . .

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**Abstract**

Is humor appropriate and useful in preaching? This paper examines the role humor may play in preaching and the views of noted preachers, past and present, on the use of humor in sermons. The paper also presents a brief discussion of three major theories about humor and draws from the rhetorical functions of humor in public speaking, in order to suggest how to equip preachers to employ humor skillfully and carefully in the foundational, formal, and functional elements of sermons.

**Introduction**

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was known at times to let out a great roar of laughter in his preaching. Some observers criticized such laughter and his use of humor in preaching as irreverent. However, Spurgeon stated, "If my critics only knew how much I held back, they would commend me" (Thieliche, 1963, 26).

Is humor appropriate and useful in preaching? This paper presents selected perspectives on using humor in preaching, discusses three major theories about humor and how it functions to make people laugh, and offers suggestions on how preachers can use humor in sermons from a traditional homiletic.

**Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Using Humor in Preaching**

One of the first homileticians to voice an opinion on the subject of humor in preaching was Alexandre Vinet. He dismissed the usefulness of humor in preaching saying, "The pretence [sic] of correcting morals by comedy is vain. If the use of ridicule may be admitted in familiar conversation or in a book, it is out of place in an assembly where grave subjects are treated" (Vinet, 1854, 214). Austin Phelps agreed with this view fearing that the use of humor in a sermon would degrade the Bible (Phelps, 1882, 198-199). T. Harwood Pattison also rejected the idea of using humor in the pulpit: "Religion is too severe a matter to be treated in a trivial or jesting spirit. Figures of speech may be in place in a platform speech which are not to be tolerated in a sermon" (Pattison, 1900, 286). In a more contemporary work, John Piper rejected any notion of humor in the pulpit contending that laughter promotes an atmosphere which hinders revival (Piper, 1990, 56).

Phillips Brooks in *Lectures on Preaching* was one of the first homileticians to note the appropriateness of humor in preaching by responding to the critics who viewed humor as frivolous: "The smile that is stirred by the true humor and the smile that comes from mere tickling of the fancy are as different from one another as the tears that sorrow forces from the soul are from the tears that you compel a man to shed by pinching him" (Brooks, 1902, 57).

James Burrell was one of the few homileticians to devote a chapter to humor in his homiletical textbook, *The Sermon: Its Construction and Delivery* (Burrell, 1913, 233-238). Burrell defended his position by noting the use of humor by great preachers such as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Henry Ward Beecher, and Dwight L. Moody. Burrell noted that preachers should use humor with a purpose and not merely for entertainment: "The court jester has his place; but Christ's fishermen have little use for cap and bells" (Ibid., 237-238). Alfred Garvie promoted the use of humor in the pulpit on the grounds that it is a good gift from God (Garvie, 1920, 416). He also remarked, "Worse things may be heard in a church than a laugh" (Garvie, 1907, 234).

Charles Brown classified humor as one of the three "lighter elements" of a sermon. In his view, tasteful humor was effective in enabling the congregation to identify with the speaker's humanity, holding attention, providing a refreshing mental break, and increasing the comprehension of a truth on the mind of the hearer (Brown, 1922, 135-142). John Broadus also favored the use of humor in preaching as long as it was so interconnected to the message of the preacher and his personality that the humor seemed natural and unforced (Broadus, 1926, 26).

Webb Garrison also devoted an entire chapter to humor in his work, *The Preacher and His Audience*. Garrison asserted that humor is a powerfully persuasive device: "It is an affront to the God whom we serve to neglect the skillful use of humor in our preaching" (Garrison, 1954, 192).

A subsection of recent homileticians support the use of humor in preaching. Harold Bryson advocated humor based on its practical benefits: "If humor can help illumine and impact people, it can be valuable. But if humor is used to entertain or to display cleverness, it is entirely out of place" (Bryson, 1995, 395-396). John Stott conjectured, "So humour is legitimate. Nevertheless, we have to be sparing in our use of it and judicious in the topics we select for

laughter@ (Stott, 1982, 288). Warren Wiersbie offered one guideline: AIf humor is natural to the preacher, then it should be used in preaching; but one must never >import= jokes just to make the congregation laugh@ (Wiersbie, 1994, 275). Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix described the purpose of humor in the pulpit as Anot to get laughs but to drive home a point in an entertaining way@ (Vines and Shaddix, 1999, 246). Dave Stone identified Athe engaging humorist@ as a dominant style of communication. He noted concerning humor in preaching, AAappropriate humor, strategically placed, can be like a breath of fresh air to a person who=s been underwater for a minute@ (Stone, 2004, 83).

A limited number of homiletical texts have been written that deal exclusively with homiletical humor. Doug Adams wrote *Humor in the American Pulpit*, which traced the use of humor and the motivation for its use from George Whitefield through Henry Ward Beecher. James Heflin=s 1974 dissertation offered a broad overview of humor and its role in the sermon derived from communication theory. In his work *Humor in Preaching*, John Drakeford lightly treated a number of issues concerning humor. James Barnette advanced the field with his 1992 dissertation AHumor in Preaching: The Contribution of Psychological and Sociological Research.@ Joseph Webb digressed from classical homiletical theory to develop a philosophy of preaching based on the philosophy of stand-up comedy in his work *Comedy and Preaching*. A significant work recently completed on the subject is Michael Butzberger=s Doctor of Ministry project entitled AHumor as a Communication Tool in Preaching.@ He provided a theological and theoretical rationale for using humor in preaching. Butzberger covered a wide range of topics related to humor in preaching, such as examples of humor in the Bible; benefits of humor in life and communication; and helpful suggestions on using humor in the pulpit. One of the authors of this paper recently completed a Ph.D. dissertation in this area entitled *Toward A Methodology Which Equips Pastors To Use Humor Intentionally In Preaching*.

## **Major Theories about Humor**

Three major theories have emerged from humor research to explain the existence of humor, why people laugh, and the motivation for using humor. These theories include the superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. While each theory seeks to account for all instances of humor, many humor theorists note that none of these three main theories is adequate to provide a general theory of laughter. Nevertheless, each theory provides a helpful framework for understanding the existence of humor and laughter.

### ***Superiority Theory***

The superiority theory states that laughter emerges as Aan expression of a person=s feelings of superiority over other people@ (Morreall, 1983, 4). One may be seen as comical when he or she is viewed as Ainadequate according to a set of agreed-upon group or societal criteria@ (Lynch, 2000, 426). Morreall called the superiority theory Athe oldest, and probably still most widespread theory of humor@ (Morreal, 1983, 4).

Support for the superiority theory goes back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, who both believed that laughter was a form of derision and may hurt the character of the person causing the laughter. Plato warned of the danger of comedies having a morally corrupting effect on a person (Ibid, 5). Aristotle did not completely condemn a sense of humor, but he promoted moderation. He wrote, "Those who carry humor to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at any cost and aim more at raising a laugh than at saying what is proper and at avoiding pain to the butt of their jokes" (Aristotle, 1983, 8).

The conception of the superiority theory is attributed to the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes who stated, "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own" (Hobbes, 1840, 46). Charles Gruner expounded upon Hobbes's statement by noting that the two elements "sudden" and "glory" are the essentials for evoking laughter (Gruner, 1978, 30).

Anthony Ludovici expanded Hobbes's theory of "sudden glory" by explaining all laughter as a product of a person's feeling of "superior adaptation." He explained, "We laugh when we feel that our adaptation to life is superior. It may be a purely subjective state unprovoked by any external object, or it may be a state of mind excited by a comparison, as when we laugh at a school boy howler. Or it may be a bluff laugh, that is to say, pretended expression of superior adaptation when one is really feeling inferior" (Ludovici, 1933, 62). Ludovici pointed to the natural laughter of children at others with physical, mental, and cultural maladaptations as an illustration of this phenomenon (Ibid., 100-3).

Albert Rapp also traced laughter back to hostile origins. Rapp suggested that laughter had its roots in the primitive self. He attributed the source of all modern forms of wit and humor to "the roar of triumph in the ancient jungle duel" (Rapp, 1951, 21).

Humor theorists have identified benefits of superiority humor. Gruner argued that it actually lessens aggressive behavior by permitting "a great deal of emotional expression that would otherwise have to remain unexpressed and >bottled up inside= us or else released in less socially accepted ways" (Gruner, 1978, 35). Feinberg agreed, noting that "humor provides a vicarious form of aggression to relieve some of the accumulated tensions of modern society" (Feinberg, 1978, 25). Instances of superiority humor also serve as social correctives. Meyer observed that one of the functions of the royal fool was to teach discipline by laughter: "Foolish antics were laughed at to show that such behaviors or beliefs were unacceptable in serious society" (Meyer, 2000, 314). Meyer noted also that superiority humor may build group unity: "Laughing at faulty behavior can also reinforce unity among group members, as a feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed can coexist with a feeling of belonging" (Ibid., 315).

### ***Incongruity Theory***

The incongruity theory provides the perspective that "people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is odd in a nonthreatening way" (Ibid., 313). Laughter is placed in the realm of

the cognitive domain and thought to depend on one's ability to recognize that something is inconsistent with the expected rational nature of the perceived environment (Lynch, 2002, 428). When people experience what does not fit into normal expected patterns, incongruence occurs, and they experience laughter. Morreall explained, "We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that does not fit these patterns. As Pascal put it, 'Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees'" (Morreall, 1983, 15-6). The origins of the incongruity theory can be traced back to the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant who wrote, "Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake.) *Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing*" (Kant, 1987, 203). Such an occurrence can be observed when a joke builds expectations and then addresses them with nonsense. People experiencing the joke are left with little response but to laugh (Lynch, 2002, 248).

In his essay entitled *Laughter*, Henri Bergson noted that incongruity depends on a duality of meaning within a common situation: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (Bergson, 1956, 123). Lynch described Bergson's essay as "a landmark for humor theory" and explained that Bergson understood incongruity humor as both "situationally and relationally driven" (Lynch, 2002, 429). Helmuth Plessner built on the notions of Bergson. He contended that laughter comes when the natural release of the tension and the bind created by situations are so incongruous that humor is found to be the only possible interpretation (Plessner, 1970, 142).

### ***Relief Theory***

The relief theory posits the notion that "people experience humor and laugh because they sense stress has been reduced in a certain way" (Meyer, 2000, 312). The physiological symptoms of humor, such as laughter, take a higher priority in the relief theory than in the previous two theories. Humor is believed to stem "from the relief experienced when tensions are engendered and removed from an individual" (Ibid.). Laughter is the act of venting nervous energy (Morreall, 1983, 20). One may trace the beginnings of the relief theory as early as 1707. In that year, Anthony Ashley Cooper—also known as The Earl of Shaftesbury—published the essay, "The Freedom of Wit and Humour." He wrote, "And thus, the natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their *Constraint*; and whether it be in Burlesque, Mimickry, or Buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their *Constrainers*" (Cooper, Internet).

In the nineteenth century, Herbert Spencer furthered this notion by providing the first theory arguing that laughter was a physiological response to stored nervous energy created by irritable feelings (Spencer, 1860, 286-311). Sigmund Freud was attracted to Spencer's work because it included psychic energy as a component of the mechanics of laughter. Freud developed his theory of laughter in his work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which became the

primary text for the relief theory in the modern era. Morreall provided a succinct summary of Freud's theory: "In this book he distinguishes between three kinds of laughter situations, which he calls 'jokes,' 'the comic,' and 'humor.' The core of his theory is that in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, energy that we have summoned for some psychic purpose but which turns out not to be needed, and this surplus energy is discharged in laughter" (Morreall, 1983, 27).

While scholars disagree on whether any one theory can account adequately for every instance of humor, many accounts of humor can be attributed to all three theories. Meyer used the following joke to illustrate this point. "One printed announcement in a church bulletin noted that 'Weight Watchers will meet at 7:00 p.m. Please use the large double doors at the side entrance'" (Meyer, 2000, 315). Meyer wrote that proponents of the relief theory may argue that "the humor stems from the tension released when receivers realize that the juxtaposition of the meeting announcement and reference to the large doors was not directed at the receiver personally" (Ibid.). Incongruity theorists may argue that "the humor results from the surprise at seeing such a recommendation for entry following a serious announcement for a group of people concerned about their weight. The reference to the large doors violates social norms of politeness and respect, among others; thus the incongruity can result in humor" (Ibid.). Superiority theory proponents may claim that "the humor originates simply from the implied put-down of overweight people by reference to their particular problems (i.e., needing larger doors)" (Ibid.). Even though many humor theorists defend the adequacy of only one of these theories, each theory of humor origin can provide an explanation for many instances of humor. For this reason, the debate continues over which theory is "superior" (no pun intended).

### **Using Humor Within a Traditional Homiletic**

Any method of using humor in preaching should not be separated from the preacher's homiletical strategy. In this paper, the authors seek to show how humor can be used as a tool within the elements of traditional homiletics. In *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, John Broadus offered a rhetorical strategy for constructing sermons which included foundational, formal, and functional elements (Broadus, 1979, 29-51, 77-197). Humor may be used by preachers in various ways within each element of this strategy. The examples of humor employed in this paper were drawn from the preaching of Bob Russell, who is recognized for his skillful use of humor in sermons (See Russell, 1995, 5-10).

### ***Forms of Humor in the Sermon***

Many forms of humor exist; however, some forms may be more conducive to preaching. Two forms which preachers may find especially helpful are anecdotes and witticisms. Anecdotes—brief accounts of any fact or happening—allow preachers to relay real-life stories about people and, thus, raise the level of human interest in their sermons. Preachers have ample places from which to draw anecdotal material: personal reading, other speakers, stories from friends, and events in their personal lives. Personal anecdotes are especially beneficial for two

reasons. First, these anecdotes draw the congregation into the preacher's personal and family life. Second, personal anecdotes provide a vehicle for preachers to employ self-deprecating humor. Each of these benefits allows the preacher to break down barriers and build a connection with the audience by letting hearers see him or her as a normal person (Rushing, 2006, 122-123).

Preachers may also find witticism a clever or amusing phrase useful for creating humor in their sermons. These original or third-person quotes may stand alone, unconnected to other aspects of the sermon or be used to add humor in response to other aspects of the sermon such as an unhumorous anecdote. For example, Russell used the following third-person quote to describe the problem of hypocrisy: "Someone said, 'You can keep one foot in two different canoes for awhile, but eventually you're going to get real uncomfortable.'" (Ibid., 76). Witticisms may also be used to add humor to the reading of the text, a paraphrase of the text, explanation, application, unhumorous anecdotes, unhumorous illustrations, and humorous stories.

Satire can indirect criticism with a moral purpose is also useful to preachers because it allows them to criticize unbiblical lifestyles or beliefs without appearing overly insensitive. Russell criticized negative attitudes with satire: "The cure for a critical spirit is to replace criticism with a positive attitude. Refuse to become a grumpy old man or whiny old woman. You might get attention with all that criticism, but you don't win any friends. You'll never say, 'Let's go over to Hazel's house. I love to hear her gripe and complain! Don't you?'" (Ibid., 86). Many other humorous forms are available for use which can be sprinkled throughout sermons to add variety, such as original humor, joke, satire, hyperbole, descriptive language, and irony.

### ***Humor in the Foundational Elements***

Humor usually plays a limited role in the foundational elements of sermons. However, humor may be used to present or support a sermon's subject, proposition, and objective. Humorous statements and humorous stories are especially helpful to the preacher in introducing or further developing each of these foundational elements. To introduce a sermon's subject concerning senior citizens, Russell began, "This past week I asked the preaching team if I should gather a focus group to discuss the temptations seniors face. . . . Someone asked, 'Why? Just look in the mirror and preach from experience!'" I was going to fire the person who said that, but the next day I couldn't remember who it was! (Ibid., 88-89)! This method of introducing subjects may also help the preacher to diffuse subjects which are difficult or sensitive.

### ***Humor in the Formal Elements***

When used in the introduction, humor provides many benefits such as gaining attention and arousing interest in the sermon's subject. Bert Bradley noted, "If you can cause listeners to laugh at the outset of your speech, it does much to develop rapport between you and the audience" (Bradley, 1991, 212). Some forms are more suited for the introduction than others. Preachers should be especially careful about beginning with a joke for three reasons. First, preachers may be tempted to tell a joke unrelated to the sermon's subject and thus need two

introductions to the sermon. Second, if no one laughs at the opening joke, the preacher could have a difficult time recovering and presenting the message. Third, a joke may disrupt an appropriate worship mood leading into a sermon. The introduction is an excellent place for pastors to include self-deprecating personal anecdotes because anecdotes create empathy between preachers and their hearers. When using self-deprecating humor, preachers should always be truthful about the experience but never tell anything that might compromise their ministerial reputation.

Humor functions in the body of sermons primarily to enliven illustration. However, humor may also enliven explanation and application to a lesser extent. In the body, a preacher may use humor in varying degrees to clarify meaning, to impress truth, to provide mental relief, to provide emotional conditioning, and to emphasize sermon points (Heflin, 1974, 126-129). Any particular humorous item may accomplish one or all of these benefits. Enlivening explanation with humor provides a mental break to hearers in long exegetical sections of the sermon and emotionally conditions them to receive the truth. A preacher has other options in enlivening explanation such as quoting humorous Scripture, paraphrasing the text, or responding to the text with a humorous quip. Russell provided an example of responding with a humorous quip by saying, "When you see the word >therefore,= stop and think about what it is there for" (Rushing, 2006, 112).

Preachers who use humor in the conclusion should do so with extreme caution as not to minimize the magnitude of the moment or hinder a possible decision in response to the sermon. In rare and exceptional cases humor may be helpful in clarifying expectations during the altar call. Humor may also help clarify expectations and prepare the way for an altar call when the sermon's subject has been extremely difficult or controversial.

Preachers may also find on rare occasions that supplemental humor is appropriate in transitions. These opportunities may occur when a transition needs added strength to be successful. Also, at times, circumstances arise that cause the audience as a whole to think a common thought unrelated to the sermon subject such as, "This sermon is especially long today." Transitions provide opportunities for the preacher to address verbally such thought and redirect attention back to the sermon.

### ***Humor in the Functional Elements***

Intentional humor used in the body of the sermon can augment and enliven a functional element. Illustration is a natural and beneficial way to employ humor since humor can be used to illustrate the other functional elements. Humor which illustrates application may be especially helpful by making practical demands more palatable to hearers. Humorous illustration may also provide an efficient way for preachers to make and support arguments. Humor can be helpful to preachers arguing via testimony and analogy. Using testimony provides a way for preachers to draw from humorous life experiences to extend arguments. Humorous analogy comes with a special benefit to a preacher in that the same ludicrous appeal which makes the analogy funny aids the impact of the argument. For example, Russell used the following humorous analogy to argue against the philosophy of experiencing much of the world while a person is young and settling down and

following Christ at an older age: ASomeone described that philosophy as >sowing wild oats now and praying for crop failure later=@ (Ibid., 116).

Humor not only has the ability to illustrate explanation and application, but humor also has the potential to function in those capacities. Preachers may use humor to explain in sermons by quoting humorous texts which pertain to the subject of the sermon, by highlighting humorous aspects of the text through paraphrase, and by responding with a humorous comment to the reading of an unhumorous text and to their teaching concerning that text. Russell provided an example of responding to a humorous Scripture with his own humorous comment: AThe Bible records Job as saying: >The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me= (30:27), >my gnawing pains never rest= (30:17), and, last but not least, >my breath is offensive to my wife= (19:17). Why would that rank up there with the rest of his troubles? I think she probably complained about it every day@ (Ibid., 108)!

Humor can also help pastors apply biblical truth to hearers in various ways. Preachers can use humor to help listeners connect biblical truths to real-life situations which they often experience. Russell provided the following example: APride refuses to admit mistakes and weaknesses and bristles at the idea of ever going to someone for help because that would be to admit inferiority to another. That=s why, ladies, it=s so hard for men to stop and ask for directions or even go to the doctor@ (Ibid., 117). Laughter helps the preacher confirm that the connection has been made. Preachers may also use humor to help relate to people while conveying practical instructions. Witty comments which demonstrate to hearers that the preacher can relate to them help to add credibility to the instructions. An example can be seen as Russell gave instructions to parents: ANext week=s sermon is >I Wish My Children Would. . . .= We=re going to dismiss elementary programs so children can worship with their parents. Mom and dad, teach them appropriate behavior in worship. Take them to the restroom five minutes before church starts. Then tell them not to ask to go out during the service. If they have to leave, tell them they are being immature, and they=ll have to go to bed an hour earlier that night. It will amaze you how spiritual they=ll become@ (Ibid., 119).

## **Conclusion**

Humor can be an effective and beneficial tool for the preacher who can use it skillfully and appropriately. When using humor in sermons, a preacher should be intentional yet natural, i.e., should use humor with purpose yet in keeping with one=s personality (e.g., some preachers are naturally witty while others are not). And, most importantly, a preacher should utilize humor with integrity and care, just as in using illustrations and stories in sermons (especially in reference to one=s family and friends or church members).

Finally, when contemplating the use of humor in sermons, a preacher should ask, AWill the use of humor in my preaching make me a comedian or a communicator?@ The distinction is important in preaching.

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