



Is Church a Good Laugh?

By David Robertson

“And you stand laughing, raising a laugh like women of the world who are on stage. This has overthrown, this has cast down everything. Everything we do is turned into laughing, there is nothing steady, nothing grave. I don’t say these things just to men of the world. But I know those who I am hinting at. For the Church has been filled with laughter. Whatever clever thing one may say, immediately there is laughter among those present; and the marvellous thing is that many do not leave off laughing even during the very time of prayer. Everywhere the devil leads the dance, he has entered into all, he is master of all. Christ is dishonoured, is thrust aside. The Church is made no account of”.

No – this was not some miserable black suited Scottish Presbyterian minister, lamenting an outbreak of laughing amongst his congregation. This was the wonderful Greek preacher, Chrysostom preaching on Hebrews 6 at the end of the 4th Century. One wonders what he would have said about today’s entertainment industry in the church?! Chrysostom asks *“where do hear of Christ laughing? Nowhere – but he was sad often. He wept over Jerusalem, Judas and Lazarus. He wept? And do you laugh?”*. Christ was human so of course he would have laughed. He certainly knew how to use sarcasm, irony and other forms of humour. But I wonder if he would have been called ‘a good laugh’ – such an essential attribute for any friend, potential partner, workmate or even pastor in today’s culture? I have heard laughter many times in congregations – but rarely have I heard weeping. Surely that is an indication of something wrong?

Chrysostom goes on to anticipate his congregation’s objections:

But you say, what harm is there in laughter? There is no harm in laughter; the harm is when it is beyond measure, and out of season. Laughter has been implanted in us, that when we

see our friends after a long time, we may laugh; that when we see any person downcast and fearful, we may relieve them by our smile; not that we should burst out violently and be always laughing. Laughter has been implanted in our soul, that the soul may sometimes be refreshed, not that it may be quite relaxed.

Like so many areas in the Christian life this is a question of wisdom and balance. On the one hand I think of the response of the great Baptist minister, C H Spurgeon, when he was accused by a lady in his congregation of using too much humour in the pulpit: “You may well be right madam, but you should be thankful for what I don’t use.” Humour and laughter are not to be excluded. But the warning of Chrysostom needs to be heeded as well. I think of the well-known evangelical preacher who learned how to communicate by studying 50 stand-up comedians – it showed! He was a superb communicator – but the reverence and awe that we should have coming into the presence of God was often missing.

The Bible actually has a lot to say about laughter: “A joyful heart is good medicine” (Proverbs 17:22). Psalm 126 tells us of the laughter that comes from seeing the Lord doing great things for us. There is a time to weep, but there is also a time to laugh (Ecclesiastes 3:4). Jesus tells us that there is a time coming when those who weep will laugh. But Proverbs 14:13 warns us that laughter may be superficial and even in laughter the heart may ache. Psalm 2, 37 and 59 talk about the laughter of the Lord at the wicked. And Ecclesiastes 7:6 warns us about the laughter of fools. It is vanity.

But let’s return to the subject of laughter in public worship. I’m not speaking about the fashion that existed for a while known

as the Toronto blessing – where people fell down in fits of laughter. That’s not holiness, that’s hysteria. I’m talking about what we would recognise as laughter – the physical response to amusement, humour and fun. It’s not wrong – but the preacher or praise leaders should not seek laughs. We are not entertainers – we are there to worship the living God...that is both a solemn and a joyful business. We don’t go to church to have a good laugh...we don’t worry if the preacher is not a good laugh and we don’t mind if he is. But we do want to come into the presence of the Almighty Holy God – in such a way that we fall down

weeping but return laughing. How good if those who know we have been at church, would also see that we have been with the Lord – and that the Lord has done great things for us - things that cause us to laugh with joy.

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