
Preface

Only a fool raises his voice in laughter.

—SIRACH 21:20

Writing about laughter is about as enjoyable a project as one can have, not only because one keeps coming across the genuinely funny, but also because as the subject develops it becomes increasingly clear that humor is not a trivial or merely light-hearted part of life but rather an aspect of human being that is fundamentally important in learning to love, developing community, and, especially, in forming a relationship with God. Laughter lies at the heart of Christian spirituality and theology.

The notion that laughter is so important has not, it must be conceded, been all that common. Many parts of the Christian tradition, both ancient and modern, have not only had less positive things to say about laughter, they have actively seen laughter as contrary to any kind of spiritual development. The ancient but influential *Rule Of Benedict*, for example, sets out twelve essential steps to take towards that humility which is necessary to attain “that perfect love which casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). If the *Rule* is right then the tenth step definitely rules out my own quest for perfect love on the basis that this is only achievable by one who “is not given to ready laughter, for it is written: Only a fool raises his voice in laughter (Sirach 21:23).” What this might mean for someone who goes even further and writes positively about the spiritual significance of laughter I am not sure. Anyway, in case one misses the significance of the tenth step for some reason, perhaps hoping that there was some kind of mistake, the eleventh step is simply a reminder and reaffirmation of the tenth step, saying that maturity is gained by one who “speaks gently and without laughter.” On this basis the twelfth and

final step to humility remains unattainable and perfect love an impossibility. In more contemporary times humor has been significantly rehabilitated and seen as an important and valuable part of life that promotes health and enhances relationships. Yet the spiritual significance of laughter remains under question with its apparent triviality challenging the seriousness of discipleship. In *Laughter and the Grace of God* I take the contrary view and argue that the theological role of humor has been underestimated, that laughter is no impediment to holiness and that a sense of humor is an essential part of our relationship with God. For God has a good sense of humor as well. And laughter is an excellent way to both show love and cast out fear. Laughing at evil and the devil in all its forms is a good and biblical way of overcoming its power. Moreover, as it will be shown, laughter is not only not opposed to achieving love, it is in fact not possible to genuinely love another without laughter. And the great Christian themes of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and sanctification cannot be either understood or lived without laughter. The tragedy is that the church has for so long so neglected, and has even feared and repudiated, this great gift of God. This book aims to restore laughter to its proper place in relationships with God, in the life of the church, and in theological reflection.

Laughter and the Grace of God is the continuation, and the conclusion, of a loose series of four books that began with an exploration of trinitarian theology in *The Message of the Trinity: Life in God* (InterVarsity 2004) and especially the notion that this doctrine is a way of expressing the truth that the believer actually shares in the life of God. This strongly participatory understanding of the Trinity led on to reflections on the nature of the relationship that develops, and *God is Friendship: A Theology of Spirituality, Community and Society* (Seedbed 2013) explores the intimacy of relationship with the gracious God who does not want servants so much as friends. The implications of this for understanding the importance of a playful attitude towards God and in the spiritual life generally were not immediately apparent to me and it required some fairly direct (and playful) intervention by God to get me to focus upon it in *The God Who Plays: A Playful Approach to Theology and Spirituality* (Cascade 2017). The central role laughter plays, and the sad theological neglect of the concept in the life of the church, became apparent during the writing of that book and so a fourth and final volume (unless God has another joke in store) has emerged. *Laughter and the Grace of God* puts laughter at the heart of our relationship with God and laughter's importance is far greater than the proportion of time that it

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might occupy in a relationship. The book considers the role that laughter plays in Scripture, in the life and ministry of Jesus, in Christian discipleship, and in the structure of theology.

Once again I am grateful to Asbury Theological Seminary, the President, Dr. Timothy Tennent, my colleagues on the faculty, and the Board of Trustees for the semester sabbatical that enabled me to do much of the writing. It is a privilege to have time set apart for thought, study, and writing. I am even more grateful to my wife, Barbara, who, as always, has provided great love and support. I think we have laughed more than ever of late.

May God bless with the gift of joy and laughter all who read this book.

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