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JESUS AND HUMOR

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“No one has seen a terrorist laugh, or forced a smile from a strict conservative Christian. They are usually so sad that they seem to be going to their own funeral. It is enough to see their contracted faces. It is not uncommon for them to be reactionary and even violent.”

Theologian Leonardo Boff

In the year 451 A.C., the fourth council of the church was held, named officially: The Council of Chalcedon. This assembly was in charge of confirming Christian doctrine against the heresies of Eutiques and the Monophysites. Based on dialogues and reflections among 400 bishops, one of the most important conclusions for Christology was reached: Jesus, the Son of God, was perfectly God and perfectly human. He was truly God and truly man. Jesus presented two natures: unconfused, unaltered, unchanged, undivided, united in one person and in a perfect hypostasis. In simple terms, the group of theologians that made up this Council stated that **Jesus was not only divine, but also lived in full human condition, without restricting himself from any experience.** He lived like any man who has passed through the earth and suffered every sensation that each of us has ever experienced.

Despite the emphasis on the dual nature of Jesus, traditional theology and also preaching

seems to have emphasized only the divine condition of Jesus, setting aside his humanity, which gets hidden in the background and often forgotten completely. In the words of Karl Rahner, we would say: “most of us are secretly monophysites when we think and talk about Jesus.” It seems that the preaching we hear every Sunday, or the theology we learn in seminaries, have been heavily influenced by the writings of Paul and John, that certainly emanate solemnity, as opposed to the Gospels of Mark, Matthew or Luke which describe for us a simpler and more human Jesus.

Attention to the supernatural, the miraculous, the magnificent, or to what is out of our reach, has caused us to fall into the sin of creating an incomplete image of Jesús. Some authors, driven by these notions, have written, preached, and spoken of Christ like a serious, rigid, and formal teacher who only passed through this earth to fulfill his eternal purpose: to be crucified on a cross.

It's just that we've focused our gaze almost exclusively on the cross ... in the suffering Christ. And at times we've been surrounded by crucifixes. I am not saying that this is wrong, in fact the apostolic kerygma (first preaching) is about this: the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We should all preach about Christ's loving act of giving His life for man. But the questions that arise are: **Isn't the way Jesus lived his life just as important as his death?** Didn't he also teach us to live?

Indeed, in John 10:10, he promised an abundant life to those who came to him, so are we - as disciples of the Teacher - reflecting this promise?

We have incorrectly labeled Jesus' last hours on earth as the Passion of Christ. The truth is, in approaching the Gospels, we find that his true "passion" begins in the manger. It is there that God, made man, loves passionately, and gives himself completely for his creation. His passion is characterized by opening the Kingdom of God to the marginalized, weak and vulnerable. It is with them that he decides to spend most of his days - investing his time, and therefore, his life. Talking about Jesus' life, we have to remember his emphasis on "blessed are you when..." - on the happiness and hope he gave to those whose hearts were broken because of a religious system that closed its doors on anyone "unfit."

A JESUS WHO DOES NOT SMILE

Reflecting on Jesus, only to find support for our doctrines, is how **we have gotten stuck with a Jesus who does not smile, who is not happy, and who lives a life without humor.** Why haven't we given Jesus a joyful face? Why is there so little literature that develops Jesus' sense of humor?

How many theologians have researched Jesus' playful personality? Or is it perhaps

How many theologians have researched Jesus' playful personality? Or is it perhaps that we have fallen into Hollywood's iconography of imposing in our literature a white man, well-shaved, and with perfect long hair? If the Teacher's main preaching was the Good News, why not dare to read Jesus through the lens of humor - of good humor.

Few writers have delved in deep and asked about Jesus' sense of humor. For example, Eduardo Arens has done a good job in his book, "The Humor of Jesus and the Joy of The Disciples." It's just that for some, even for you who are reading this, asking yourself this question might feel on the edge of blasphemy. Who has ever wondered if Jesus had moments of laughter? Or if Jesus told any jokes? Did a friend ever tell a story that made him laugh so hard that he cried? Have you wondered if, in the middle of one of the many meals he attended - and there were many - if he ever burst out laughing at something funny that happened? The truth is, the Bible does not literally describe any events like this, just like it does not tell us that Jesus was white with long hair.

But if we look closely at some of Jesus' experiences, we find out that joy and good humor were an important part of his interpersonal relationships and in His way of explaining the truths of the Kingdom.

I think we may be able to, as an exercise, start looking at Jesus through the lens of humor and find between the lines, the positive and joyful life he led. Perhaps it is a good time to stop reading the Gospels through the filter of doctrine and dogma and start noticing on their pages a more human - and a more cheerful - Jesus.

HUMOR

Humor isn't merely a joke or a mockery. It goes beyond hilarity. Humor is an attitude of life, a disposition of the soul to live positively.

As we Chileans joke, humor does not come and go, it is with you all the time. Good humor is the result of a positive and optimistic outlook during any life circumstance.

According to Estrella Martínez and Rodrigo Pura-Araya in their book Communication and Interactivity, "Humor – or the ability to perceive something as funny – is universal; no human culture exists without it. From a historical-anthropological point of view, humor has been present in every community sustained by man." Humor is man's heritage, and Jesus, fully man, lived in a community that transpired joy and a sense of humor.

First, Jesus grew up in Galilee, a Mediterranean cultural climate, characterized by being witty, clever and cheerful. Optimism and good humor were part of the idiosyncrasies of every Mediterranean town. Jesus surrounded himself with a creative population, with constant feasts. They liked music and poetic rhythms. Latin traits actually mimic those of the Mediterranean man - the jovial spirit, expressivity and easy-going amiability.

All those who lived in this region used the world around them as a source of inspiration to create stories, parables and songs. The rich nature that surrounded Jesus inspired him to refer to the Kingdom of Heaven using birds, trees, and animals.

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Matthew 6:26

Second, it is interesting to note that none of Jesus' parables relate to a funeral or wake; the Gospels do not record any reference to the Kingdom of Heaven like that. He does, though, speak of parties and banquets (Luke 14). In the same gospel of Luke in chapter 15,

Jesus tells three parables and they all end with a celebration:

- The Lost Sheep: the shepherd gathers his friends and neighbors.
- The Lost Coin: the woman gathers her neighbors and friends.
- The Prodigal Son (or better said, The Parable of the Merciful Father): the father commands his servants to prepare a calf for celebration.

To find the humor of Jesus in the Gospels - which in essence is Good News - we must look between the lines of the text for the personality of Jesus. We must seek what the passages tell us about him and what insight they give to his amiable temperament. Let us discover in each of his answers, the positive attitude the good teacher maintained during his life.

IRONY

In a special way, Jesus uses irony in certain passages, which is a unique form of humor.

EXAMPLE 1

There is a passage in the Gospel of Mark where we see a group of Pharisees and Herodians (who despite their mutual enmity come together to test Jesus) trying to surprise him with a tax question.

They knew that if Jesus answered wrongly they could use his words to accuse him in the future. Therefore, they asked him directly: Is it right that we pay taxes to Caesar or not? Jesus, knowing their intentions, does not respond with a direct yes or no.

He does not give a quick answer, because he wants to touch something deeper and he handles situations like these with irony.

To the surprise of the Pharisees, he asks them to bring him a coin. This is intentional, as no Pharisee should be carrying foreign coins, let alone coins with engraved images. This revealed that they were accepting the authority of the Roman governor and were devoted to a pagan man. They were clearly violating God's first commandment to Israel. Jesus goes on and asks them: Whose image is this? He uses a rhetorical question that makes the questioners look foolish. The answer is obvious: Caesar. Jesus solves the situation by saying, "Then give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." Jesus turns the question around with irony, leaving them trapped and speechless. He gave them an answer, as they asked, and in doing so, laughed at them.

EXAMPLE 2

The scene where Jesus heals Jairus' daughter, the ruler of the local synagogues (Mark 5:21-43) is a well-known one. If the main theme of the text is the healing of the little girl and Jesus' compassion as he faces the pain of others, then look at Jesus' response and positive attitude. "The girl sleeps." Who would ever think to answer this way in front of the family of the deceased? Does it make any sense to say that the girl was just sleeping? The text says that the people laughed at him and his nonsense. Jesus' response shows a humorous side again; despite being in a tense situation, he sees things differently - in a more trusting, optimistic way.

Clearly, Jesus was not mocking the girl's condition, much less the family, rather, he really trusted that his Father could resurrect her. His full confidence in God makes him a man that approaches life with optimism.

EXAMPLE 3

Another interesting scene is one where Jesus meets the rich young man (Mark 10:17). After the young man puts fortune and following Jesus on the balance, he opts for his fortune. Jesus concludes his dialogue by saying, "Dear children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

I imagine more than one of those who were present were laughing at what they just heard - a camel and a needle? It is ridiculous. No one expected an answer like that. What Jesus said is clearly loaded with irony, and therefore humor. Yes, many have justified this phrase by saying that it is referring to a gate on the outskirts of Jerusalem that in biblical times was called, "Eye of Needle." So far though, there are no archaeological finds of gates by this name.

But, if we focus just on Jesus' sentence, it is ironic and clearly stating: "It is impossible!" In other words, there is no physical way for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, there isn't. But hold on a minute, Jesus isn't over yet. In the verses that follow, the Teacher of good humor affirms: "For men this is impossible, but for God anything is possible." Jesus explains this in such a silly way, that only God has the power to change the heart of man. Here again He shows his cheerful temperament in the face of a difficult situation.

COMPARISON

Jesus also used comparison as a communication tool. This is also very typical of humor. This is also very typical of humor.

For example, when he speaks of John the Baptist, he says... "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the

wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?...” John was quite the opposite of someone who dressed in fancy clothes. He lived in the wildest way a person could live at the time, and listening to Jesus refer to John the Baptist in this way would clearly provoke a knowing smile.

These are just a few situations in which we find Jesus using comparison, irony, and even sarcasm to teach a truth about the Kingdom. What I want to express with these examples, is that if we make the effort to re-read the Gospels in light of humor, I believe we will encounter Jesus’ jovial demeanor. Of course, He was not a stand-up comedian or a showman. **He was so human that he lived with a great sense of joy and humor.** He was not a man who only came to earth to die (how sad would that be!), rather he lived his life fully, with deep friendships, close relationships and sincere conversations. He let others touch him, interrupt him, and enjoy being with him. He showed his disciples how to live and go through this life doing good (Acts 10:38).

The Pharisees related to God by making sacrifices and fasting, but Jesus did not. The good Teacher was not an ascetic man, nor was He known for constantly fasting or basing his relationship with God in terms of deprivation. In fact, it is Jesus who considers himself a man who celebrates and drinks (Matthew 11:19). He is the groom, and while he was on earth, He showed us how to live the fullness of life with joy.

What did the Ethiopian feel after Philip shared the gospel with him? The biblical writer expresses this: "...the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). And in contrast to the eunuch, how much have we as the church continued on our way rejoicing?

CONCLUSION

Jesus saw God as His Abba - intimate and good. He was the Son who made His father happy. In other words, we can hear God saying of Jesus, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." (Matthew 3:17) What tender words! Jesus' life caused deep pleasure for God, His Father.

The joy of Jesus was not a "supernatural" joy, but a human joy, a joy born from a heart of man, from a happy man. He declared that even in the fear of poverty, the evil of hunger or the problem of pain, you can consider yourself a woman or man who is truly blessed.

If, for Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was a message of joy and good, which included the marginalized, oppressed and discarded, and if His simple personality allowed children to approach Him, then in the same way these traits should be present in each of us. Good humor should be an attribute that characterizes anyone who decides to follow him. It should be a notorious attribute of your church.

To be the church that Jesus imagined is also to be a church full of joy, a church with good sense and use of humor.

Josue Valenzuela is part of the Singular team in Chile. He is making disciples through his thriving on-line comedy business Es de canuto (It's a Protestant thing) with over 40K followers on Instagram and a growing number of invitations to speak at live events throughout his home country, Chile. He is an International Trade engineer and has a Bachelor's degree in Theology; he volunteers at his local church in Santiago and is an advocate for the humor he sees in Jesus.



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