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## WHEN WITNESS SMILES IN BRAZIL

An exploratory analysis of humour from a Reformed Theological perspective.

Master's thesis for the Master of Intercultural Reformed Theology  
(MIRT)

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## **DEDICATION**

*In honour of my dear and humorous grandmother Mirtes Albino Bastos,  
who is now laughing with her Love in heaven.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Historically, theological research has been towards doctrinal, scriptural, ecclesiological, and spiritual matters. And it could not be otherwise, because Theology is an answer to God's revelation. The reverent, devotional, godly, and exhaustive pattern of theological study indisputably points to the effort and seriousness that are invested in the quest to understand God, man, environment, purpose, and life. On the other hand, some themes and ideas remain in a peripheral position to various theological issues, humour among them.

In general terms, humour can be related to joy and happiness, which are themes closely related to Christianity. It is consistent with Scripture to understand the Christian faith by considering the presence of joy in the present, and fully restored in eternity. Thus, joy related to humour could be a Christian possibility. However, this idea is not comfortable for all Christians. Historically, one can find resistance to laughter and humour in some writings of church fathers, as well as in some theologians after the Reformation. The reason for this, perhaps, is that for some, the first impression of humour is one of distrust because it is usually related to situations and effects contrary to what is commonly recognised as the aim of the Christian life, such as moderation, respect, humility, and kindness.

However, the understanding that humour is essentially something evil, sinful, and harmful should not be the complete picture of it. Therefore, a good and consistent perspective of humour would help a better understanding of man and his relationships with his neighbour, the world, himself and with God. Humour could be included in the Christian life and combined with all the other aspects and aims of faith, and exploring this idea is what motivates this research.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

To guide the reader of this research, it is important to mention the description of the problem, what is not yet covered in the discussion on humour, and what is intended to be contributed by this research.

### 1.1.1. Description of the problem

The historical complexity of humour is intriguing. From the ancient to contemporary thinkers, it has been a challenge to understand it. So many ideas and different uses of it show that. It can be a (dis)harmonic combination of linguistics, emotional, rational, and social elements. Also, it can have different motivations and uses. In common sense, humour is positively related to joy, laughter and fun.

Humour is an important topic today, not only to philosophers or to television shows. It became a wide interdisciplinary research field recently. Psychologists recognize the importance of humour in human relationships<sup>1</sup>. Also, some educational methodologies<sup>2</sup> are developing and implementing more and more strategies of teaching to in some way improve the capacity of learning of students with humour and jokes. Business and Administration Schools<sup>3</sup> are studying how humour could contribute to reducing management problems and improving the connection and identification with employees. Marketing strategies<sup>4</sup> are considering how and when to apply humour to better connect messages to the target market, especially on social media. And in common life, hardly someone does not appreciate a good conversation with the right dose of humour.

However, depending on the context, culture, idiom, intention, manner, timing and even religion, it could assume different meanings and results. Also, humour can happen in different ways and achieve distinct degrees of effect. One joke like “*How does a rabbi make coffee? He brews it!*” could provide different impacts. Depending on who is telling and who listening, it could sound like a pun, a joke, irony, sarcasm, or insult, for example. So, it is quite hard to understand all its implications at first sight.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura E. Kurtz, Sara B. Algoe, “When Sharing a Laugh Means Sharing More: Testing the Role of Shared Laughter on Short-Term Interpersonal Consequences” in *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 1 (2017). <https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/when-sharing-a-laugh-means-sharing-more-testing-the-role-of-shar/11733488> (accessed June, 10, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Henderson, “Laughter and Learning: Humor Boosts Retention” in *George Lucas Educational Foundation Blog*.(2015). <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/laughter-learning-humor-boosts-retention-sarah-henderson> (accessed June, 10, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Alison Beard, “Leading with Humor” in *Havard Business review* (2014). <https://hbr.org/2014/05/leading-with-humor> (accessed June, 10, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Olenski, “The CMO's Guide To Using Humor” in Forbes Website (2018). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveolenski/2018/06/15/the-cmos-guide-to-using-humor-in-marketing/?sh=3d24657562bf> (accessed June, 10, 2022).



The picture can become even more complex when the religious element is present. Not infrequently the combination of humour and religion has led to the risk of disrespect and violence. The sad example of the terrorist attack on the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo in January 2015, in response to cartoons disrespectful to the Islamic faith, points to the gravity of this issue. Another example, in Brazil in late 2019, there was an episode of violence in response to comedians. The artistic group *Porta dos Fundos* published on NETFLIX a special Christmas humorous program, where the person of Jesus Christ and Christian doctrines were directly attacked in the form of satire and sarcasm. The public response was one of repudiation and revolt on the part of Christians (Catholics, Evangelicals and Protestants) who felt insulted in their faith. In addition, unfortunately, two Molotov cocktails were criminally thrown at the headquarters of the artistic group, where one person was seriously injured. Fortunately, this kind of extreme situation is not common, however, it demonstrates that humour and religion undeniably have a point of tension, especially regarding the definition of their boundaries.

This concern also extends to ordinary life situations and relationships. People may feel insecure about making humour or being the object of it. They do not know whether they will be correctly interpreted, or whether they will be embarrassed or ashamed by others. In the end, humour can be a source of laughter and satisfaction for some and suffering and distress for others. Thus, humour is an important and relevant topic both for study and understanding within and outside academic life.

### 1.1.2. The state-of-the-art

This discussion is also important from the point of view of what humour could signify conceptually and culturally. There is an apparent gap in this understanding, and this includes theological discussions. With few exceptions, little has been produced to understand humour from a theological-reformed perspective, especially in Brazil. From there, if humour was created by God, it must have a good structure and function, defined by God. Here, even though it is not intended to construct a metaphysics of humour (perhaps this will never be possible), it is necessary to have some consistent concept of what humour is and its function from Scripture and a Reformed worldview. If God created humour, it must be good in meaning and purpose. Also understand that after the fall, man's humour, like the rest of creation, was affected by sin. In this sense, it would be possible that the insecurity that humour produces for

some, including those within Christian circles, is an effect of a lack of clarity about what it is and how it should be used. The problem extends not only to the need for understanding but also to the experience of humour consistently from a theological perspective.

### 1.1.3. Expected contribution

On the premise that humour is generally associated with different aspects, a better understanding of them could provide a substrate for discerning humour. For example, Scripture treats human joy as something originating from God, hourly as an act of his general goodness, and hourly as a fruit of special grace as an effect of salvation. It is also possible to read in the narrative tones of joy between relationships and at specific times when the divine message reaches and changes the condition of the heart. Thus, especially within relationships, humour could be a flexion, result, or effect of joy. If so, it needs to be understood and harnessed, because humour, as a human element, was created by God and has its purpose.

This understanding could provide a valid framework of humour to be used as an effective tool for Christian witness. God created joy as an expected emotion/blessing within human life. If humour is closely related to joy, it would be possible to relate it to other gifts like pleasure, happiness, and amusement from the perspective of God's grace. It would be possible to understand how to apply humour in the Christian life to reveal something about God's grace. Perhaps, in some contexts like Brazil, this is a real possibility of a powerful Christian witness of joy and other elements, through humour. Perhaps, not only in Brazil but in many other places and cultures, humour could be understood as a blessing, by which God's grace could be shared. This possibility needs to be recognised and explored.

Christians should be able to use humour in such a way as to enjoy it as a God-given blessing that can be shared with others, and it provides a sufficient significance of humour understanding to this research. Although humour is an important topic and has also become increasingly important in public life, there still is a tension between faith and humour.

## 1.2. Research objective

As stated earlier, if humour was created by God, there must be a space for it within the Christian life. Thus, a survey of humour from a Reformed worldview can open a new point

of reflection. This reflection can provide a safer environment both to laugh and to make others laugh together as a double witness to God's grace. The present research aims to develop an exploratory understanding of how humour and Christian witness can be positively related from a Reformed perspective.

It is also important to mention that this research is not intended to explore all the possibilities of humour, either in Scripture or in culture and language. Thus, my research does not intend to develop a complete theory of humour, but at least a preliminary concept of "Christian humour". It is worth including the caveat that, although the topic reflects on humour, the reader will not find a primer of jokes or pranks. However, indirectly, I hope that the reading may elicit at least a few smiles. The main purpose of this research is to theologically discern humour and its compatibility with Christian witness, especially in Brazil.

### **1.3. Research Question**

To achieve this goal, the main question is to discern what would be the role of humour in the Christian witness. To answer this main question, some steps are necessary. First, to explore the meaning of humour in Scripture; second, to verify the compatibility of humour with the Christian faith from the Reformed worldview; third, to recognise a concept of humour that is consistently biblical and sensitive to cultural reality; and finally, to explore how humour could be applied as a tool for Christian witness in a defined context, as in Brazil.

### **1.4. Positionality of the researcher**

My interest in the study of humour is based on the conviction that the Christian was also created to laugh. I remember as a child, I was sitting in church with my parents and during a song I began to laugh uncontrollably. I was singing and some words were from very old Portuguese, with words that nobody used anymore. However, to my surprise, some of them reminded me of an English video game. When I made the connection, it was enough for me not to be able to stop laughing. I remember my mother telling me to be quiet and stop laughing because we were in church and this was no time for that. My mother was right, but somehow this memory of laughing in church during a service has never faded. From then on I tried to be careful not to laugh when I was "before God". The "not laughing" in the church did not generate

a feeling of restriction or prohibition, but of the inadequacy of laughter before God. Later, as a pastor, I realised that in some counselling, humour helped decrease tension and facilitated the reception and absorption of pastoral guidance. On the other hand, I also noticed that, in other moments, humour did not bring any benefit or even provoked discomfort and insecurity. In some sermons, the presence of humour also seems to captivate and keep open the bridge of contact with the listeners in the church. However, there is always the risk of being misinterpreted, or even considered inappropriate. Thus, my interest in this research lies not only in understanding the care needed to avoid negative effects in the use of humour but also in exploring how humour can be used positively in Christian life.

### **1.5. Chapter's Structure**

The present research is divided into four areas of exploration. After this introductory chapter, the second chapter explores the possibility of the presence of humour in Scripture; the third chapter discusses a concept of humour from a reformed point of view; the fourth explores a contact of this concept of humour with some contemporarily accepted theories; and finally, the fifth chapter applies the concept of humour, focusing on the link between humour and Christian witness.

Explaining a little more about the division of each chapter, the second chapter explores the presence of humour in the Old and New Testaments. The research from the Colombian theologian Milton Acosta (O.T.) and the one from Icelandic theologian Jakob Jónsson (N.T.) were observed. In their works, both understand that it is possible to verify the presence of humour in both the Hebrew and Greek content of Scripture. The way that they understand the presence of humour is explored here with at least two examples proposed by each theologian. The purpose of this chapter is to open the possibility that humour is present in Scripture in linguistic form and as a literary style.

The third chapter explores the idea of humour in the face of the Reformed worldview. This chapter aims to find compatibility between the sense of humour and the reformed worldview. To this end, after the introduction on what is worldview, the Reformed worldview and humour are put into perspective. Starting from the Creation-Fall-Redemption framework, it is explored how humour could be fitted in. In creation, humour can be perceived as a universal and relational human element, which takes different forms and uses in every age and

culture. In the fall, it is recognised that man was affected in his relationship with God and his neighbour, and humour was directed towards mockery, derision, and insult. Redemption, as a reordering reality, recognises that from Christ and in the power of the Spirit, God restores all things, including humour.

The fourth chapter has two parts. The first explores the concept of humour. This concept has been elaborated on the humour elements of Jakob Jónsson. These elements are sincerity, joy, sympathy, and amusement. In the second part of this chapter, this concept is in the face of other contemporary discussions. Humour is generally discerned in its functions and mechanisms. Among the various types recognized, there are functions of humour as an intra- and interpersonal relief mechanism, a defence mechanism in the face of incongruities, and a tool to demonstrate superiority. Thus, with the combination of the elements and the comparison with the Reformed perspective, this chapter aimed to recognise a concept of humour in face of some discussions related to it.

Finally, the fifth chapter is discussed how humour is understood in the Brazilian context and how it could be applied as a tool for the Christian witness. The first section recognizes a cultural approach to humour from a descriptive perspective in Brazil. The second section of this chapter brings a more concrete contact to this discussion from the ideas and understanding of the Brazilian Christians interviewed. The third part of the chapter seeks, through examples, to recover how the concept of humour proposed here can be applied as a tool for the Christian witness. The concern in this chapter is more practical and with a view to the compatibility and opportunities that the Christian can embrace with a view to positive Christian witness. The purpose of this chapter is to point out how humour, despite its misuses and applications, can be a positive and valuable tool for Christian witness.

In addition to this introduction, some information is necessary for the reader. First, the Bible version used here is the New International Version (NIV). In addition, the methodology for this research combines two orders of resources, the bibliographical and the qualitative research, thus seeking to achieve breadth and at the same time focus on the theme presented. Thus, both theoretical discussions can be observed and the personal testimony of those who relate faith and humour to work or ministry. After these initial considerations, the research will begin with an exploration of the theme of humour from the Scriptures.

## 2. HUMOUR IN THE BIBLE

As mentioned in the introduction, this chapter aims at an exploratory biblical look at humour in Scripture. The effort here will be in search of answers to two questions: "Is there humour in the Bible?", and, if so, "in what form?". These are two fundamental questions for this research. It is important to bear in mind that if there is humour in the Bible, it may not be exactly in the form that someone in the 21st century is used to. John Morreall says that "*What we won't find in the Bible are the words humor, humorous, amuse, amusement, and funny. None of these had their current meanings before the 17th century*"<sup>5</sup>. For Morreall, the closest word to humour in the Bible is laughter, "*So the most promising things to look for are narratives about events that make people in those narratives laugh and words and phrases that biblical writers used to make readers laugh*"<sup>6</sup>. To answer the questions, I will take as my starting point the answers given by theologians who have already investigated and reflected on this topic. I use Milton Acosta's work to explore the humour in the Old Testament and Jakob Jonsson's to explore the humour in the New Testament. By way of example and a brief explanation of their perspectives, I will take only two passages from each Testament, according to the explanations of these authors.

### 2.1. Humour in the Old Testament

The Colombian theologian Milton Acosta in his work in Spanish, "*El humor en el Antiguo Testamento*" (Humour in the Old Testament), works on some general concepts regarding humour. Already at the beginning of his work, he recognises the acute difficulty in defining humour, and the proof lies in the absence of consensus among scholars on the subject. He attributes this difficulty "*both in the human psyche and in the society where it occurs*"<sup>7</sup>. However, he recognises that humour "*This is a human reality that does not need to be demonstrated*"<sup>8</sup> and "*a disposition of mind, something that does not transcend the subject that*

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<sup>5</sup> John Morreall, "Biblical humor" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014). 81.

<sup>6</sup> Morreall, 2014, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Milton A. Acosta, *El humor en el Antiguo Testamento*. CENIP, Ed. Puma. Lima-Peru. 2009. 18. Original: "tanto en la psiquis humana como em la sociedade donde ocurre".

<sup>8</sup> Acosta, 2009, 18. Original: "es uma realidade humana que no precisa ser demonstrada".

*contemplates the comic*"<sup>9</sup>. He distinguishes humour from humourism, the latter being a literary style, and the former as being a state, a disposition, "*an attitude to life*"<sup>10</sup>. After commenting on the models (catharsis, superiority, incongruity, criticism, drama) and functions of humour (producing pleasure, mitigating pain, subverting the status quo), the author reaches conclusions about the functions of humour. For him, humour lubricates relationships, corrects life's imbalances, criticises, confronts reality, connects people and preserves meaning<sup>11</sup>. In the sequence, the author understands that humour is not a novelty, as it has always been present in all peoples and, even if its use was different throughout the ages and cultures, it could not be absent from the Bible.

In dealing explicitly with the presence of humour in the OT, Acosta lists at least nine reasons that may hinder its contemporary recognition in the Bible: 1) respect and reverence for Scripture; 2) our concept of humour and the inspiration of Scripture; 3) excessive familiarity and unfamiliarity with the biblical text; 4) the habit of using the Bible as proof-text; 5) the difficulty of finding piety in humour; 6) academic influence; 7) a limited understanding of humour; 8) personality effects; 9) cultural factors<sup>12</sup>. The combination of two or more motifs can modify the perception and/or interpretation of humour in Scripture. On other hand, Acosta is aware that it is important not to impose on the text something foreign to it, "*We can easily end up talking about humorous stories in Scripture, when in fact we are imposing our own sense of humour on it.*"<sup>13</sup>. Finally, Acosta concludes that humour in O.T. is a serious "*means for reflection*"<sup>14</sup> and that through it some biblical authors expressed self-criticism and a call for change. Also that humour "*allows enjoyment of the text*"<sup>15</sup>, Thus the human element and literary richness open the reading to the "*ethical humour, spy humour, leper humour, humour in promises, superstition humour and scatological humour*"<sup>16</sup>. After this brief explanation, following Acosta, two examples will be mentioned of biblical passages where humour is present, the case of Isaac and the trapping of Jonah.

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<sup>9</sup> Acosta, 18. Original: "una disposición de ánimo, algo que no trasciende del sujeto que contempla lo cómico".

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18. Original: "una actitud frente a la vida".

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54-58.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.73. Original: "Fácilmente, podemos terminar hablando de relatos humorísticos en las Escrituras, cuando em realidade lo que hacemos es imponerle nuestro próprio sentido del humor".

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 73. Original: "médio para la reflexión".

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74. Original: "permite el disfrute del texto".

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 76. Original: "humor ético, humor de espías, humor de leprosos, humor en promesas, humor de superstición y humor escatológico".

### 2.1.1. The Case of Isaac

About the curious case of Isaac in the book of Genesis, Acosta comments on the particularities present in the text, especially perceived in Hebrew. The first is that there is a keyword that unites Abraham, Sarah, and their son Isaac. This keyword is "tsahaq", which means to laugh. Abraham was the first man to laugh in the Bible (Gen 17). Sarah was also the first woman to laugh in Scripture (Gen 18), and both did so in the face of God's directly spoken promise. Acosta goes so far as to comment that "*Abraham upon hearing this great and sublime promise, perhaps the most important in the entire Bible, falls on his face to the ground and laughs! This is something absolutely extraordinary*"<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the word "tsahaq" is the root of the name given to Isaac, the son of the promise given by God. Besides some other details proposed by the author, it is interesting to recognise this resource of intentionality, of showing laughter, is present in the construction of this narrative. Laughter is present throughout the course of God's covenant with Abraham, from the promise to its fulfilment. It begins with laughter based on an inability to understand, and ends with the laughter of satisfaction. God's promise would be something so out of the ordinary, for both parents, that humanly it would not be possible to believe. Thankfully, God's will overcomes the human inability to accept and understand His purpose. In the end, Abraham and Sarah laughed together at the fulfilment of God's promise. There seems to be a redeeming inversion of laughter, once motivated by the inability to believe and understand, then sustained by the fulfilment of the promise. This intentional and comparative inversion, added to the sonorous and repetitive character of the keyword laughter, could, according to Acosta, indicate the presence of humour within the Hebrew text, although it is not as clearly perceived in translations in other languages.

### 2.1.2. Jonah's trap

If the first example carries a more veiled form of humour, the second seems to bring it a little clearer. The book of the prophet Jonah is also worked on by Acosta, firstly introducing it and situating it in some debates about its historicity, but also its stylistic construction. Intentionally the author focuses on style and message, which he understands to be where the humour lies. Although not extensive in content, the prophetic text of Jonah contains several scenarios where God is actively acting with mercy. For Acosta, the "*fundamental conviction of*

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<sup>17</sup> Acosta, 86. Original: "Abraham al escuchar esta gran y sublime promesa, quizá la más importante de toda la Biblia, se postra rostro en tierra para reírse! Esto es algo absolutamente extraordinario".



*the biblical faith: God is merciful*<sup>18</sup> is the recurring counterpoint to the situations provoked by the prophet Jonah. The text seems to be constructed in a form of parallelism where God's grace is reacting to human reality, both in Nineveh and Jonah. Even if we do not quote all the details pointed out by the author, it is worth mentioning at least some of the main ones, starting with the call of Jonah. The prophet is called to preach in Nineveh but sets out to flee from God's presence by going to Tarshish. In this escape, while Jonah was resting deep inside the ship, God sends a furious storm that rages against the ship. Jonah, who is fleeing from the divine call, is awakened in the boat and summoned to pray to God and cry for mercy. During the anguish of the storm, Jonah protects himself by keeping silent, but fortune befalls him. Jonah is cast into the sea, the storm ceases, and he spends three days inside a large fish. Interestingly, in the boat, he was sleeping peacefully, but in the belly of the fish, Jonah is awakened to pray. While praying within this unusual journey, he gives thanks recognising that Salvation belongs to the Lord. In Nineveh, he preaches unwillingly, yet repentance is manifested throughout the city. Jonah, the one who did not repent when he saw the reaction of the Ninevites, is enraged to see the merciful action of God. Jonah, the one who was sure of God's favour and mercy, is infuriated to know and see that God would be merciful to the people of Nineveh, who were enemies of his people. Finally, God shows grace, not only on the Ninevites but also in the face of the incoherent and selfish reactions of the prophet.

Among Acosta's conclusions regarding the stylistic form of the prophetic text is the perspective that Jonah was written as a type of trap text, and therein would be the author's intentionality. He says *"when we reflect on the subject and discover the humour, we are no longer so sure, because we ourselves have been put into evidence"*<sup>19</sup>. The surprise, within a prophetic text that places great theological themes and regional conflicts, is in the author's intentionality in bringing the reader to a self-reflection by identification. In this self-reflection, a conclusion that is aimed is *"Why are things the way they are and the way we are? That is to say, why is there a man like Jonah who seems ridiculous and perverse to us, but who on reflection ends up being better than us?"*<sup>20</sup>. Finally, this construction of humour, the comparison between mercy and mercilessness, goodness and wickedness, divine and human,

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<sup>18</sup> Acosta, 175. Original: "convicción fundamental de la fe bíblica: Dios es misericordioso".

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 185. Original: "cuando reflexionamos en el asunto, y descubrimos el humor, ya no estamos tan seguros, porque nosotros mismos hemos sido puestos em evidência".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 186. Original: "¿Por qué son así las cosas y así nosotros? Es decir, ¿por qué hay um hombre como Jonás quenos resulta ridículo y perverso, pero que luego de reflexionar termina sendo mejor que nosotros?".

would provide the mechanism for deep reflection of self and incoherence. In the end, it would promote the recognition that God's grace is always greater than human wickedness.

These two examples, even if briefly put, seem to support some form or intentionality of humour within the Old Testament text. It seems, at least acceptable, the possibility of both content and intentionality present in the first division of Scripture. In this sense, it would be possible to consider that there is a double dimension of humour in both passages. That is, the way the biblical story was constructed and the content itself. In both passages, God and man are participating. In both God is actively doing something that is beyond what the human characters understand or want to understand. Especially with the prophet Jonah, God extrapolates the usual and from absurd situations demonstrates grace. Thus, it is not only the way the story is told that carries the humour, but the divine attitude itself seems to include some degree of intentional humour. If the great success of a lazy prophetic ministry does not indicate a sign of humour, perhaps the sign of three days inside a great fish "teleguided" to Nineveh might help. It would not just be the fact narrated, but how God decided the fact itself. In the next section, we will, from another theologian and another lens, look at the possibility of the presence of humour in the New Testament.

## 2.2. Humour in the New Testament

While humour seems to be present in Hebrew culture and linguistics, comedy is recognised as a Greek artistic genre. Greek language and culture are important elements in the New Testament context, but is it possible to find humour or comedy in the New Testament? In his work *Humour and Irony in the New Testament*, the Icelandic theologian Jakob Jónsson argues that, although comedy can make use of humour, not all humour is comedy. This distinction is important, since for him comedy, as an artistic genre, is not present in the NT, but humour and comics are. He also makes a brief comment on the difference between Greek and Roman humour. Greek humour would tend to reflect, *"not to give a final answer to the questions, but to stimulate thinking"*<sup>21</sup>. Roman humour, on the other hand, *"consists of realistic description of things and events, followed by playful commentary"*<sup>22</sup>. Despite this distinction,

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<sup>21</sup> Jakob Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament : Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash*. Beihefte Der Zeitschrift Für Religions- Und Geistesgeschichte, 28. Leiden: Brill, 1985, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 38.

Jónsson says *"I do not think it is of any great importance in connection with the humor of the New Testament"*<sup>23</sup>. Thus, for him, the humour present in the New Testament would have another format and purpose. We will go more deeply into this in the next chapter. For now, as an example, we will see how he understands humour to be in the Gospels and Acts.

### 2.2.1. Humour in the Gospels

Commenting on the person of Jesus in the Gospels, Jónsson argues that even if many do not accept the possibility of humour in the Gospels, it is there. According to him, to understand Jesus' kind of humour, one would need to have correct context positioning from Scripture. He states: *"His words will not be understood by those who not have the whole of Old Testament as 'music in his soul'"*<sup>24</sup>. From this, it would be possible to perceive and correctly understand the mood present in Jesus' talks and teachings, just as his original listeners would have perceived it. Moreover, he complements and explains that *"Jesus' humour is not humour for the sake of humour. He is not telling jokes just in order to make men laugh"*<sup>25</sup>. On the contrary, the purpose of Jesus' humour is higher, for as a teacher he used it as a teaching tool. In her explanation, he states: *"Jesus' humour is educational and homiletic humour, like the humour of the rabbis – it serves the purpose of enlightenment, stimulation and joy, but, most of all, of illustrating religious truth"*<sup>26</sup>. The Icelandic theologian understands that it does not seem compatible that Jesus was a person of downcast or extremely serious mood, but happy and witty.

While recognising the danger of imposing our own ideas on Jesus, if Jesus was a joyful person, we would expect this feeling to be present not only in his teaching but in the way he taught. This seems to be present when Jesus makes the pun in calling the disciples to make them "fishers of men" (Matth 4:19) when he directs Peter regarding the tribute of the two drachms (Matth 17:24-27) and when he responds to Martha's request regarding her sister Mary (Luke 10:38-42)<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, Jesus, several times, used images and examples in his teachings that would be antagonistic or absurd and this could have generated some humorous effects. Passages that relate Jesus' talk of casting pearls before swine (Matt 7:6), and giving

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<sup>23</sup> Jónsson, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 168.

serpents, stones and scorpions to hungry children (Matt 7:9-10), would intentionally produce an important effect of his message. Not infrequently the interleaving of absurd ideas with wisdom can sound comical<sup>28</sup>.

Jesus also appropriates elements present in the ordinary lives of the people around him to point out inconsistencies and incoherence. Jónsson cites the widow who tirelessly questioned the wicked judge to do justice in her cause (Luke 18:1-8) and the Pharisees who blew trumpets for themselves when they gave alms (Matth 6:2)<sup>29</sup>. He also recognises a more recurrent presence of irony in Jesus' speech, especially when dealing with those who opposed him. He says: "*We cannot deny that many passages in Jesus' speeches and conversations are ironical rather than humoristic in their form*"<sup>30</sup>. In this way, humour and irony would be present, but irony would normally assume a position of resistance and opposition to the deceptions, lies and distortions of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders.

Finally, commenting on the person of Jesus, he states: "*Jesus calls his message a joyful message, good news and, as I have repeatedly mentioned, He was regarded by his contemporaries as a man of joy*"<sup>31</sup>. This joy of Jesus did not make it impossible for him to recognise the tragic aspect of life, quite the contrary. The joy of Jesus would be "*deeply rooted in His consciousness of the good as a ruling and victorious power in the world. He suffers, not only because of His own wounds, but because of His sympathy with others*"<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, Jesus' humour was not only a rabbinic way of transmitting and sharing general truths but also a way of dealing with specific issues. Related to the humour present in the teachings of Jesus, Jónsson states: "*He is not only teaching but also fighting*"<sup>33</sup>. The strength of this struggle of Jesus against evil was underpinned by his joy in his purpose, and at times Jesus used humour as a tool for this.

### 2.2.2. Humour in the rest of the New Testament

As stated earlier, the humour of the N.T. is located within a very specific contextual window. It has a material consistency with the Old Testament, even though the content is in

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<sup>28</sup> Jónsson, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 198.

the Greek language. Besides language, other factors, such as the lifestyle of almost two thousand years ago and the structure of society, interfere with this interpretation. Therefore, attempts to find humour are not only an exercise in remaining open to what would be funny or amusing but in being able to recognise when humour was intended not only by words but also by intentions. In this sense, Jónsson understands that, besides the Gospels, some passages would carry this sense and purpose, but he recognizes that in the Acts narrative this factor is more easily demonstrated.

In Acts, he considers that the accounts of the first decades of the missionary development of the early church contain some order of humour. Either by the transmission of events that narrate unusual situations or by the intentionality of the author by which he recorded the events. He states: *"The dramatic tension and the great variety of scenes, along with the enthusiasm of the author, makes it natural that we should find humor in the narration"*<sup>34</sup>. Jónsson finds several curious elements in the account of Pentecost (Acts 2), of when the apostles were released from prison (Acts 5), as well as of Peter (Acts 12), in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), in Peter's vision (Acts 10), and when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra (Acts 14). These and other passages seem to carry intentionality beyond informing. Some elements could be recognized and shared with humour. Among these accounts, I have selected two that caught my attention, that of Simon Magus and the sons of Skeva.

#### 2.2.2.1. Simon Magus

Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24), as narrated in the biblical text, was someone who formerly inhabited the region of Samaria, who practised magic and deceived people. The text indicates that he was someone respected and feared by many, even being called *"the great power"*. With the preaching of the Gospel in that region, many people were converted and baptized, and this included Simon Magus himself. The text relates that Simon had a great interest in the signs and miracles that God operated through Philip. When Peter and John came, the baptized of that region received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of their hands. Simon Magus, understanding that this was something that could be acquired, tried to buy a spiritual capacity for the money. The text informs us that Peter rejects Simon's attitude and

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<sup>34</sup> Jónsson, 208.

intention, and rebukes him for repentance. Simon was afraid and responded by asking the apostles to pray for him for God to have mercy on him and his attitude. This passage can be investigated and various doctrinal discussions can emerge, for example, as to the significance of receiving the Spirit through the laying on of hands, why Philip could not do so, and whether Simon Magus had been converted from the heart. Looking, however, at the focus of this research, Jónsson understands that it is possible that Simon was a true Christian, but was doctrinally still confused. He says of Acts' writer Luke: *"He says nothing about the reason why Simon became a Christian and he does not give his readers the idea that Simon was insincere in joining the congregation"*<sup>35</sup>. For Luke, it was not only sinful Simon Magus' attitude *"but so absurd and idiotic that when he describes the episode he cannot help making it also comical"*<sup>36</sup>. According to Jónsson, it was to be expected that the reading of the episode *"would cause the audience to laugh in spite of the serious situations"*<sup>37</sup>. Humour often uses the resource of pointing out the inconsistencies and incoherence between belief and value systems to point to a truth. The way the evangelist narrates the episode, selecting specific points of the facts that occurred, hints at the humorous intentionality of the narrative. This narrative is not an anecdote, or a curious case to make one laugh, but includes a way of demonstrating how incorrect desire and understanding are related to incorrect behaviour. This corrective function of humour, among other functions attributed to it, will be further explored in the third chapter of this research. In this sense, the possibility of evangelist Luke's intentionality of humour should not be dismissed so easily.

#### 2.2.2.2. *The sons of Skeva*

Another very curious account is that of the seven sons of Skeva (Acts 19:8-16). While the apostle Paul was preaching the Gospel in Ephesus, God, by his hands, performed extraordinary miracles, including the expulsion of demons. Among the Jews, there were groups of "walking exorcists". Simon Kistemaker says: *"A number of ancient manuscripts attest to a variety of incantations that Jewish exorcists employed, and as this account discloses, the city of Ephesus proved to be a statehouse of magical scrolls"*<sup>38</sup>. The biblical text recounts that one day

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<sup>35</sup> Jónsson, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>38</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*. 6th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007, 687.

when these sons of Skeva tried to use the formula *“In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out”* (Acts 19:13), the evil spirit answered them. In the biblical accounts, the moments when there was communication with evil spirits were moments of tension, but it does not seem to be the usual sense proposed by Luke. The response of the evil spirit, to the surprise of the seven brothers, was: *“Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?”* (Acts 19:15). At this moment the evil spirit leapt upon them and had more strength than all of them put together. Ashamed, the seven brothers fled naked and wounded from that house. The effect (v.17-20) was to demonstrate that the spiritual condition present in Paul's life and the message was greater in meaning and power than that experienced by all who believed in magic powers.

Jónsson understands that this history *“is not only humorous because of their vain attempt to drive the evil spirit out of the man, but because of the conversation between them and the spirit”*<sup>39</sup>. Here, the intentionality of Luke's narrative would have been in denouncing the inconsistency between life and word. The message behind this narrative is that it is not enough just to know the right words, but also to have the right heart. Repeating memorised words, as if they were magic sayings with the capacity for spiritual interference, is inconsistent with the message of the Gospel and has no effect on the spiritual power of darkness. Luke, narrating this episode, probably had in mind that the Gospel message was on a different order of consistency and power, which is why the attempt by Skeva's sons was so vexatious. The narrative feature of comparison between Paul and these walking exorcists should, without much difficulty, generate a funny effect, because of the shameful end they met, because they thought they had some authority. As stated in the introduction, humour need not necessarily be linked to the use of funny words, but also in the form intentionally arranged for an end and purpose that relates to and produces humour. The laughable is not always humour, but the humour in some order is expected to produce the laughable. Here in this passage, the laughable is shown in the inconsistency between the exorcists and the magic formulas. At the same time, it shows the consistency of the truth of the Gospel and the demonstration of power.

In this chapter the aim was, even if it flew over the theme, to try to recognise at least the possibility of the presence of humour in the Scriptures. Through the examples and understandings of Milton Acosta it would be possible to consider the hypothesis that, through

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<sup>39</sup> Jónsson, 217.

the writer's language and style, humour was intentional in the Old Testament. Also, through the examples of Jakob Jónsson, it would be possible to admit it in the New Testament, even if in a different form and a different language from the Old Testament. If humour is present in Scripture, not only as a quoted human element but as an element of style and content of the message, there must be a coherent and positive way for its use within the Christian life. In this sense, an understanding could arise that God intentionally used humour to reveal some important truth to man. The idea of humour within the religious context, including the Reformed, can bring discomfort and insecurity. Therefore, it is worth investigating whether the idea of humour is compatible with a Reformed worldview, which will be done in the next chapter.



### 3. HUMOUR FROM A REFORMED WORLDVIEW

In this exploratory research, it is necessary to include reflection on worldview. As seen in the previous chapter, humour in Scripture has been related to cultural aspects, language, beliefs, and values. All these elements are relevant to the understanding of a worldview. Charles H. Kraft, in his book *Worldview for Christian witness*, presents important reasons for the study of worldview. Among these reasons, I list at least two, “*a people’s basic perception and picturing of reality stem from their worldview*”<sup>40</sup>, and “*it is important for us as Christians to understand our own worldview*”<sup>41</sup>. Thus, for a consistent understanding of humour in Christian life, it is important to understand how it is related to the worldview.

In preparation for the look at humour and reformed worldview, we begin with a brief introduction to what worldview is. It is a concept imported from philosophy and used within the circles of theological reflection. Its meaning is, in general terms, related to the way of perceiving, understanding and living in the world. Each person is included in social, cultural, ethnic, and religious reality, among other factors, which may interfere with the understanding of reality. It is not my aim to deepen the reflection on the constitutive elements of a worldview or how they are differentiated. But, the understanding regarding the meaning of worldview lays a foundation for understanding the reformed worldview and how it can be related to humour.

For this purpose, two works may be useful, such as *Universe next door* by James Sire, and *Worldview in conflict* by Ronald Nash. Also, David Naugle, in his work “*Worldview: the history of a concept*”, develops interesting research regarding the importance that the study of worldview has assumed within Christian circles, at the same time evaluating the origin and historicity of this reflection from the 19th century onwards. For Naugle, “*Its popularity is due in part to its attempt to provide a comprehensive explanation of reality that is rooted in the Word of God*”<sup>42</sup>. Naugle, in the preface, outlines what would be the central connection between the sense of worldview and Scripture. He states: “*I argue that a worldview is an inescapable function of the human heart and is central to the identity of human beings as imago Dei*”<sup>43</sup>. For Naugle, man was created with this function, or framework, through which he

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Howard Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>42</sup> David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2002, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., xix.

interacts with the world, with his neighbour, and with God. It is also important to consider that there is not only one Christian worldview. The Christian worldviews such as Roman Catholic or Oriental, despite having common points, also have their particularities and differentiation, however, our observation will be for the Reformed worldview.

### 3.1. Reformed Worldview

Continuing on the Christian worldview, Albert Wolters' definition is useful as a starting, *"the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things"*<sup>44</sup>. As well, we can understand that worldview plays an important role. Wolters expounds that worldview is not only structured as a construct resulting from the environment, but also contains some order of presuppositions, or fundamental beliefs. He also states, *"Our worldview shapes, to a significant degree, the way we assess the events, issues, and structures of our civilization and our times"*<sup>45</sup>. As it was said before, through this framework the whole reality of life is perceived, understood, and experienced in a particular way. In this book, Wolters also advocates that, for the Christian, the worldview *"must be shaped and tested by Scripture"*<sup>46</sup>. In this sense, to the Christian, there is an objective reference for the worldview, which needs to be following the teachings of Scripture. Thus, the Christian worldview would need to have Scripture as the unifying aspect of its structure and elements. Thus, the consistency and coherence of this worldview will be linked to its degree of commitment to the central truths of Scripture. Finally, it is possible to evaluate whether the worldview and the elements within it are perceived and interact consistently with Scripture.

Going a little further, a Christian reformed worldview, besides being based on Scripture, has a characteristic that, for Wolters, is correctly put by the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck *"God the Father has reconciled His created but fallen world through the death of His Son, and renews it into a Kingdom of God by His Spirit"*<sup>47</sup>. This idea can also be put as *"'grace restores nature' that is, the redemption in Jesus Christ means the restoration of an original good creation"*<sup>48</sup>. In a few words, this framework is Creation-Fall-Redemption. Thus, if

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<sup>44</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1985, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 11.

the focus is on the search for a consistent concept of humour from a reformed worldview, this framework needs to be in perspective. Next, building on this reformed framework, the idea of humour is explored.

### 3.1.1. Created by God

The doctrine of creation is fundamental to the Reformed worldview. It is from it that the starting point of existence and meaning can be established in divine revelation and providence. Because of the *imago Dei*, man has received the capacity to experience life with some derivated aspects from God. Bavinck says, “*The entire world reveals God’s attributes and perfections, and every creature is in its own way the embodiment of God’s thought. But only human beings are images of God, head and crown of the whole creation*”<sup>49</sup>. According to the Dutch theologian, “*the whole human being is image and likeness of God, in soul and body, in all human faculties, powers, and gifts. Nothing in humanity is excluded from God’s image; it stretches as far as and constitutes our humanity and humanness*”<sup>50</sup>. Thus all the so-called natural aspects were placed in man to point to a reality that transcends him. Aspects present in the human race as corporeality<sup>51</sup>, senses, emotions, feelings, reason, intelligence, creativity, personality, sociability, morality and faith, point to something greater than the man himself.

The question that needs to be answered is whether humour was created by God. This is an important question and its answer is valuable for this research. It is from a creational perspective on humour that it will be possible to reflect consistently from a Reformed perspective. The first step in answering this question would be to find in Scripture some correspondence or instruction on humour. As seen in the previous chapter, it is possible to notice biblical humour in textual form and narrative intentionality, yet there are no instructions or prescriptions regarding humour itself, approving or disapproving of it, or even explaining it.

Another difficulty is finding humorous elements in the biblical account before the fall. However, it's possible to speculate that it might have been at least funny when in Genesis 2:19, God brought the animals to Adam so he would name them. One thing that can be considered funny is that Adam got the names right because the name "slug" doesn't go with the animal

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<sup>49</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*. Edited by John Bolt. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011, 317.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2011, 328.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 2011, 327.

called monkey. It may also have been funny if, when Adam looked at the animals, he tried to find a mate. No animal could talk to him or understand him. And worse, if Adam tried to tell a joke no animal could laugh with him. In fact, God was right when he said “*It is not good for the man to be alone*” (Gn 2:18, NIV).

What biblically can be associated with humour is the emotion/feeling of Christian joy, but even then it is not explicitly laid out. Despite this, in the Bible, there are clear instructions against sin manifested in the form of disrespect, mockery and humiliation, which can be facets of the misuse of humour. Later in this chapter, the perversion of humour will be explored. Even acknowledging this difficulty, the apparent absence of this kind of biblical approach does not in itself undermine the existence of the phenomenon of humour, nor does it render it useless for theological reflection. It is not because the Scriptures do not deal with black holes<sup>52</sup> in the centres of galaxies that they cease to exist and target for theological reflection and contemplation of the glory and power of God. A Christian who understands that our galaxy was created by God while recognising the reality of humour in human life, can also understand that the conditions for humour were given by God for a good purpose. As will be seen in the next chapter, this good purpose can be related to sincerity, joy, sympathy and amusement, as basic elements of humour. These elements fit well within the perspective of Christian witness in a Reformed worldview. But for now, the following will deal with the recognition of humour present in human history.

### 3.1.1.1. *The investigation of humour and laughter*

Just as astronomers study and investigate the universe, other people have studied and investigated humour. On the importance of revelation in creation, Bavinck comments, “*Not only mind but also matter, not only man but also nature, possesses divine origin, having first been in the thought of God before coming into existence. The doctrine of creation preserves the divinity, goodness and sacredness of all created things*”.<sup>53</sup> Creation preserves and carries information about the One who created it and its creative purpose. All of God's creation is not

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<sup>52</sup> Perhaps interesting reading about black holes and a creative intentionality of God. Christine A. James and John A. Bloom, *Black Holes as Evidence of God's Care*. Religions 2021, 12(3), 201; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030201>. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/3/201/htm> (accessed June 25, 2022)

<sup>53</sup> Herman Bavinck, *A filosofia da revelação*. Tradução Fabrício Tavares de Moares. Brasília, DF: Editora Monergismo, 2016, 95. Original: “A doutrina da criação preserva a divindade, a bondade e sacralidade de todas as coisas criadas”.

only known through Scripture but is also known through observing and experiencing God's created life. As C. S. Lewis said, "*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else*"<sup>54</sup>, from the lens of the Christian faith it is possible to have the correct and appropriate knowledge of reality. And this can include the investigation of humour. Through the lens of a reformed biblical worldview, it is possible to evaluate the consistency of knowledge coming from the investigation of creation itself. Humour has long been the subject of investigation by thinkers, philosophers, artists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. In this sense, when creation reveals true knowledge about itself, it is pointing in some way to God who created it.

Moving closer to the Reformed tradition, Bavinck also states that the world is inexplicable without God<sup>55</sup>. For him, the meaning of everything that exists is given from God in creation. Therefore, when someone observes the reality around him and investigates creation, he can find true information even if he interprets it incorrectly. Bavinck, regarding the importance of theology and the natural sciences, also says "*God's presence and activity is neither restricted to the natural order nor excluded from it*" and "*Theologians and natural scientists should respect each other and acknowledge the respective limits of their work*"<sup>56</sup>. In general terms, this principle serves to recognise the validity of research into other areas or objects, such as humour, while, at the same time, it is referencing the interpretation of the truths of Scripture.

The French historian Georges Minois, in his interesting work *History of laughter and derision*, states that "*Laughter is part of human nature*"<sup>57</sup>. Although he recognises the difficulty of defining humour, he states that "*it is universal, and that is one of its great qualities. Of course, the trace of humour is inevitably embodied in concrete structures and cultures, but it can be appreciated by all because it always goes beyond the ground that gives rise to it*"<sup>58</sup>. Also, the philosopher Henry Bergson, also French, in his work *Le Rire*, investigated what laughter and comics are. In the first chapter, he elaborates, "*there is no comicality outside what is properly*

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<sup>54</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Lewis's memorial stone in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey*. (2018) <https://www.cslewis.com/surprised-by-misquotes/> (accessed June 26, 2022)

<sup>55</sup> Bavinck, 2016, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 85.

<sup>57</sup> Georges Minois, *História do riso e do escárnio*. Tradução Maria Elena O. Ortiz Assumpção. São Paulo: UNESP, 2003, 100. Original: "*O riso faz parte da natureza humana, mas não de sua essência, o que não prejudica em nada seu caráter bom ou mau*".

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 54. Original: "*é universal, e essa é uma de suas grandes qualidades. Com certeza, o traço de humor encarna-se, inevitavelmente, em estruturas e culturas concretas, mas pode ser apreciado por todos porque sempre ultrapassa o chão que lhe dá origem*".

human" and "We will laugh at an animal, but because we will have surprised in it an attitude of a man or a certain human expression"<sup>59</sup>. These introductory characteristics presented in the studies of these two authors provide some understanding that humour can be understood as a historical and comprehensive reality in humanity.

Although it is indicated that the anthropological understanding of both Minois and Bergson diverge from biblical-reformed anthropology in their fundamentals, something could be seized upon. The authors mentioned above, consider humour as something central and essential to the human being. This perspective, if taken to its ultimate consequences, could promote reductionism. To have a man as an animal that laughs, as Bergson mentions, would be an injustice to what the human being is. On the other hand, from the biblical conviction in creation, it would be possible to consider that if humour is universally recognisable, man was created with this capacity to produce, recognise, and appreciate the humour. Complementing, it is important to mention that humour is a complex combination where emotions, will, thought, and intention are experienced together. Thus, it can be considered that humour is the result of the combination of more basic elements. This combination can be the result of (co)creativity that aims at joy.

In chapter 3 a concept of humour and its nature will be proposed, but for now, it could be located within a complex combination where emotions, will, thought, and intention are experienced together. However, this experience of humour was not always positive after the fall. Emotions, will, thoughts and intentions were corrupted by sin. We will explore below what can be considered a distortion of humour.

### 3.1.2. Affected by Sin

As mentioned earlier, the Reformed worldview adheres to the biblical structure of Creation-Fall-Redemption. If humour was created good, as were all other things created by God, after the fall of mankind it was profoundly affected. The whole of mankind after the fall was affected in its relationships. In the words of the American theologian Francis Schaeffer, from the Genesis 3 account, it is understood that fallen men are "*separated from God*,

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<sup>59</sup> Henri Bergson, *O riso: ensaio sobre a significação do cômico*. Tradução Natanael C. Caixeiro. Rio de Janeiro, Ed. Zahar, 1983, 7. Original: "não há comicidade fora do que é propriamente humano" e, também, "Riremos de um animal, mas porque teremos surpreendido nele uma atitude de homem ou certa expressão humana".

*separated from themselves, separated from other men, separated from nature*<sup>60</sup>. In this sense, the fall had implications and results extending to all creation quantitatively and qualitatively. This framework of Schaeffer's separation may be useful here for understanding humour from the fall of man. Therefore, for this research, I select at least two forms where the abuse of humour can be identified: mockery against God and mockery against one's neighbour.

### 3.1.2.1. *Mockery against God*

As seen in Reformed theology and worldview, one of the effects of the fall was the breakdown of the positive relationship between man and God. Bavinck explains that the original sin *"was disobedience to God, doubt, unbelief, self-elevation, pride, homicide, theft, covetousness, and so on. Adam's sin was a reversal of all created relationships and a rebellion against God decisive for the whole world"*<sup>61</sup>. The relationship between laughter and the divine, according to Minois, seems to be something as old as the accounts of religions. He says: *"We find them again in Phoenicia, where ritual laughter accompanies the sacrifice of children, in Babylonia and Egypt, where the priests of Thebes greet the blessings of the Nile with laughter"*<sup>62</sup>. He also adds *"What, then, do the Greek myths tell us? In the first place, a unanimous observation: the gods laugh"*<sup>63</sup>. This relationship between man and the divine is plural, and the study of this area exceeds the limits of this research. It is worth acknowledging that, at least historically, there has been some attempt to connect laughter and the sacred, sometimes man laughing as an offering to the divine, sometimes the divine as laughing when interacting with man.

However, there are also two other possibilities, man mocking divinity and divinity mocking man, and perhaps these are the most recurrent. If humour and sin are universal, one must expect that there is something related to them in Scripture. In this sense, looking at the biblical context, Jónsson, in relating religious feeling and mockery, states: *"It is not necessary to discuss or mention any examples to prove that scoffing at the divine has always been*

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<sup>60</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *Gênesis no Espaço-Tempo*. Brasília: Editora Monergismo. Kindle Eletronic Edition, 84. Original: *"separados de Deus, separados de si mesmos, separados dos outros homens, separados da natureza"*.

<sup>61</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 370.

<sup>62</sup> Minois, 15. Original: *"Nós os reencontramos na Fenícia, onde um riso ritual acompanha o sacrifício de crianças, na Babilônia e no Egito, onde os sacerdotes de Tebas saúdam as benesses do Nilo com uma gargalhada"*.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 15. Original: *"O que nos dizem, pois, os mitos gregos? Em primeiro lugar, uma constatação unânime: os deuses riem"*.

regarded as blasphemous, or at least contrary to any sentiment of devotion”<sup>64</sup>. To mock God in attitude and words motivated by unbelief, rebellion, or contempt, is biblically considered a sin. In this sense, Hennie Kruger's interesting article mentions, among other texts, the first chapter of Proverbs, where man mocks Wisdom, and Wisdom mocks and laughs at scoffers. For Kruger, “Doubtless, Wisdom represents God’s own voice and teaching”<sup>65</sup>. Wisdom's advice is rejected, and this is taken as a form of mockery. Wisdom's response is “I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you; I will mock when calamity overtakes you” (Prov 1:26, NIV). For Kruger, in this passage, the sense of laughter would not be linked properly to humour, but divine laughter is a reaction to human wickedness itself. Kruger explains that in this case mockery and laughter were used “as instruments of conflict”<sup>66</sup>.

Mockery on the part of man is an unjustified sin, but on God's part, it is a judgmental reaction to human wickedness. In another interesting article, Jan Martijn Abrahamse comments on the text Psalm 2:4, which states that God mocks those who oppose his rule, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (NIV). Here, the construction appears to be similar to the previous text. In response to human wickedness, God expresses a part of his judgment by mocking his enemies. Abrahamse argues that an intratextual analysis of this Psalm will point out that “God's laughter is not about God per se, but about a liturgical way of life that celebrates God's supremacy”<sup>67</sup>. In addition, he also argues that “His laughter reverses our perception of the powers that be in light of his own purposeful plan. As we observed, God's laughter enables marginal people to face the fury of the powerful, oppression, and imprisonment, and yet not be discouraged by tragic circumstances”<sup>68</sup>. Abrahamse's proposal is interesting and will be commented on again in the last chapter of this research. For now, it must be recognized that, biblically, it must be considered a sin when man mocks God. God's answer against sin is his justice, which in these passages is demonstrated in the form of mockery. This understanding seems to resonate with the text in the N.T. of Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (NIV).

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<sup>64</sup> Jónsson, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Hennie A. J. Kruger, 2014, ‘Laughter in the Old Testament: A hotchpotch of humour, mockery and rejoicing?’, In *die Skriflig* 48(2), Art. #712, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i2.712>. 7. (accessed June 17, 2022)

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Jan Martijn Abrahamse, “Appropriate Divine Laughter: Psalm 2’s Theological Gesture for a Comic Theology Proper.” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 15, no. 3 (2021): 185–207. doi:10.1163/15697312-bja10019, 202.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.



With the fall, man was separated from God, and his natural response is one of opposition to Him, rejecting both His rule and teaching. Sometimes this opposition is demonstrated through mockery against God. To some, it may seem funny to laugh at God, or any idea of divinity. Here a form of the corruption of humour could be recognised when what is said or done to produce laughter and reflection, is motivated by an impulse of rebellion and opposition to God. Unfortunately, the fall corrupted and separated man from the possibility of *“laugh with Him”*<sup>69</sup>.

### 3.1.2.2. *Mockery against neighbour*

With the fall of man, from the reformed worldview, not only the relationship with God was affected, but also the relationship between men. Bavinck comments that *“sin’s corruption touches all dimensions of our lives”*<sup>70</sup>, so it was to be expected that the experience of humour could also occur in a sinful direction against one's neighbour.

In this sense, in the N.T., one of the passages that touch on the theme of the fall and its effects on separation is in the Sermon on the Mount. Among several teachings, in Matthew 5:22, Jesus deals with man's separating relationship with his neighbour through violent language. It is written *“(…) anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”* (NIV). It is not possible here to offer an in-depth study of the text, but some central points, when understood correctly, can provide an understanding of what Jesus taught about insult and mockery. In this passage, two words are important: *“ῥακά”*, and *“μωρέ”*. The word *“ῥακά”*, which only appears once in the NT, is recognized as an expression of Aramaic origin used in Jesus' time. This word could mean, “empty” or “empty-headed”, and as used by Jesus could be used as an insult. The word *“μωρέ”* on the other hand, as will be seen later, has a more common usage within the NT, and is even an expression used by Jesus. However, more than the words, the centre of this passage is the motivation of the heart. Actions against a person such as anger or hatred (an elaborate feeling against someone), insulting and cursing to attack someone are violent attitudes and produce evil. Jesus, with his rhetorical feature of hyperbole, is making it clear that feelings matter as much as actions. The Brazilian theologian Hernandes Dias Lopes, commenting on this passage, says: *“While the courts on earth have no jurisdiction to judge*

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<sup>69</sup> Abrahamse, 206.

<sup>70</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 109.

*anger and insulting words, God's court judges the innermost forum. We will give an account to God not only of our actions but also of our words and intentions*"<sup>71</sup>. In this passage, Jesus teaches that the disposition to insult with words is recognised as unjust violence and is as serious as murder. Therefore, in addition to actions, He instructs that words matter to God and neighbour and must be used in the right way and with the right motivations.

Sins against one's neighbour may manifest themselves in different ways, but they are viewed seriously by God, even when by mere words. The fall corrupted human relationships and the language related to them. So even an insult can be considered something funny, and therefore related to humour. Here is the connection: the insult, which is violence through words, can be disguised with the funny. This is not about humour, but about the corruption of it, its sinful direction. Bavinck explains that in the fall "*Human love, intellect, will, and freedom are not removed but redirected: from God to the creature; from seeking the true, the good, and the beautiful to considering lies as truth, pursuing evil as good, and accepting slavery as freedom*"<sup>72</sup>. The fall brought about a loss and not a removal of human characteristics. There was a redirection of humanity towards destruction, which was previously directed towards God. Humour has not been lost, it has been corrupted. So, just as the effort of corruption may seem rewarding to the corrupt, unfortunately, the insult may sound like a funny thing to the violent.

### 3.1.3. Redeemed in Christ

Thus far, the aspects relating to humour and creation and the fall of man have been noted. But it is necessary to recognize that, from the Reformed point of view, the Scriptures point to a condition of restoration of all creation from the person and work of Jesus Christ. From the Reformed worldview, the lens that observes reality includes the perspective that there is a restoration of creation after the fall. Bavinck says, "*In creation, God manifests the power of His mind; in revelation, the centre of which is redemption, He unveils to us the greatness of His heart*"<sup>73</sup>. In this sense, this worldview is ultimately optimistic, hopeful and joyful. Even in the face of the corruption that sin has brought upon God's creation, the

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<sup>71</sup> Hernandez Dias Lopes, *Mateus: Jesus, O rei dos reis!*. São Paulo: Hagnos, 2019. 199.

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 374.

<sup>73</sup> Herman Bavinck, *A filosofia da revelação*. Tradução Fabrício Tavares de Moares, Brasília: Editora Monergismo, 2016. 33. Original: "*Na criação, Deus manifesta o poder de Sua mente; na revelação, cujo centro é a redenção, Ele descerra para nós a grandeza de Seu coração*".

expectation of redemption over the whole cosmos sows and brings forth hope for the believer. The American theologian Albert Wolters, from this Reformed perspective, also develops the sense of redemption in his work *Creation Regained*. For Wolters, "*Redemption is recreation*"<sup>74</sup>, that is, it is the gracious act of God in redeeming, reorienting fallen creation into redeemed creation.

This whole process was accomplished in revelatory preparation from the Old Testament, in consummation in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ, and the renewal of the kingdom through the Holy Spirit. Redemption is a trinitarian act of grace. It is through this Trinitarian work that man's relationship with God, with himself, with his neighbour and with nature is restored. Through grace, God works reconciliation. In two Bible passages, the apostle Paul touches on this subject, in 2 Cor 5:19 "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ*" e Col 1:20, "*and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*" (NIV). Bavinck, in commenting on the perspective of redemption from the reformers, states: "*Since by his sacrifice Christ met the requirements of God's justice, he objectively changed the relation between God and humankind and, consequently, all other creaturely relations*"<sup>75</sup>. In this sense, Redemption, in the Reformed worldview, includes the gracious rescue and reordering of creation, not only with an eye to eternity but also in the present.

A person redeemed in Christ, being redirected by the work of the Spirit, should be able to experience *recreation* in his life, and this should take everything, including humour. This combination can also be seen in Wolters' sense of *structure-direction*. He comments: "*structure denotes the 'essence' of a creaturely thing, the kind of creature it is by virtue of God's creational law. Direction, by contrast, refers to a sinful deviation from that structural ordinance and renewed conformity to it in Christ*"<sup>76</sup>. The axis of the Reformed worldview understanding is the restoration of the created structure for what man feels, thinks, experiences and accomplishes according to the divine purpose in Christ. Thus, preliminarily, it is possible to understand that humour, as creatively established, was redeemed to be experienced by redeemed humanity in Christ.

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<sup>74</sup> Wolters, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 428.

<sup>76</sup> Wolters, 73.

This chapter has looked at how humour can be recognised from the lens of the Reformed worldview. It was admitted that humour is included within the creational framework as part of the human experience established by God. It was assessed that, with the fall, man in all his relationships was affected and that what was created for a good purpose became redirected into corruption and evil. Thus humour, like other elements of human life, has taken on a perverse direction and mockery, insult, and derision can be recognised as funny. It is also recognised that, through grace, God, in Christ, has reconciled the broken parts and is, through the Spirit, sanctifying and reordering the fallen creation to creational orientation. Although a concept of humour has not exactly been developed in this chapter, it has been possible to consider whether the idea is consistent with the Reformed worldview. However, in the next chapter, the aspects already presented here will be considered the "structure" of humour, in Wolters' terms. From this structural idea of humour, this concept will also be compared with other ideas and functions already established concerning humour.

## 4. A HUMOUR'S CONCEPT

As already mentioned, conceptualising or defining humour is not an easy task. It is not easy to define the terms, meanings, and functions of humour. The aim of this chapter is, from a reformed perspective, to point out a concept by relating it to some widely known theories of humour. For this, as a starting point, the sense of humour and its constitutive elements proposed by Jakob Jónsson (sincerity, joy, sympathy, and amusement) will be reexplored and connected to a Reformed perspective. Subsequently, the most familiar theories of humour (Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity) also were put into perspective with the Reformed worldview. By the end of the chapter, it was possible to recognise a preliminary and general definition of humour.

### 4.1. Jónsson Concept

As mentioned, Jónsson recognizes some constitutive elements of humour. For him, humour is an emotional-intellectual disposition to translate (and connect) the truth with sincerity, joy, sympathy, and amusement. This is a possible combination that could provide an acceptable directional sense of humour from a Christian perspective. Although Jónsson is not a Reformed theologian, since his tradition is Lutheran, his idea may be adequate within the Reformed worldview. In this sense, in this section each of these components of humour is explained, as well as their compactness with the Reformed perspective is assessed.

#### 4.1.1. Sincerity

For Jónsson, *“Humour is a subjective sentiment and must be understood as such. The humourist is sincere”*<sup>77</sup>. In Jónsson's understanding, the condition of sincerity in humour has a central motive, for it is through this that humour differs from irony. While humour does not modify the language, irony transforms the message from the inversion. An example of biblical irony, cited by the author, is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jónsson interprets that Jesus is criticising false religiosity in this passage. He admits that Jesus' listeners, hearing about the attitude of the Samaritan as opposed to the indifferent behaviour of the

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<sup>77</sup> Jónsson, 22.

Levite and Priest, clearly perceived the criticism of the religious inconsistency present in their day. Jónsson comments that *“Several times it is said that the Pharisees or the priests had become angry when Jesus had told a story that seemingly was very innocent”*<sup>78</sup>, because they understood that through parables Jesus was criticising them. At the same time, Jónsson indicates that *“The reason has obviously been their own understanding of the irony that provoked laughter among the people. Just because it lies in the nature of ironical expressions that they have the appearance of innocence and ignorance, it was difficult for those who were attacked to prove that they had any reason to become offended”*<sup>79</sup>. Thus, the irony could function as a clever rhetorical criticism, through ambiguous formatting.

Humour, according to Jónsson is different, as it is sincere, that is, it does not alter or invert the message. It is important to mention that, for Jónsson, both humour and irony can have their use for good purposes, just as Jesus himself did, but they are different regarding how they communicate the truth. Therefore, humour should be an instrument of communication, without linguistic inversions, and oriented toward truth through sincerity.

An additional comment is that, eventually, a person can be sincere without being aware of the deception. In other words, a person can be sincerely mistaken. There is a curious story that can illustrate this: *“One day a man mistook the telephone number of his wife's work, calling another place. When he was answered, he asked to speak to Mrs Annie Wan. The operator could not understand and asked him to identify himself and repeat the request. He replied, 'I am Sam Wan and I need to speak to Annie Wan, my wife', and added, 'Annie Wan has a sister called Avery Wan, do you know her? To which the incredulous attendant replied, 'you've got to be kidding me’”*. In this example, both characters are sincerely mistaken. Mr Sam Wan thinks he is calling the right place and the attendant believes he is being pranked. However, despite this curious example and many others like it, the humour that is being observed in this research necessarily combines sincerity and truth with the same intention.

As seen, the sense of sincerity proposed by Jónsson is rooted in the idea of truth and it is a central value for the Christian faith. As is mentioned in Hebrews 10:22<sup>80</sup>, sincerity is deeply related to truth. It is also in line with Reformed theology. Bavinck, in speaking of the

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<sup>78</sup> Jónsson, 183.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>80</sup> Heb 10:22 - Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (NIV).

Christian's sincerity both towards God and neighbour, is specially placed in a commentary on gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, *"These gifts. and their use must agree with the confession of Jesus as Lord and be sincerely and readily used for the benefit of one's neighbor and fellow body member"*<sup>81</sup>. Thus, sincerity is a mark of public Christian witness, when shared with truth and clarity. Joy, as a constitutive element, should not be separated from sincerity, and so we will see about joy in the next point.

#### 4.1.2. Joy

In addition to sincerity, Jónsson includes joy as a constitutive element of humour, *"If I am right that humour has its psychological origin in joy and triumph and is akin to the tendency of happy children to play, then the different forms of comical expressions, traditional and original, are to be understood as a revelation of such sentiment"*<sup>82</sup>. In this sense, joy would be the emotional and sentimental basis for humour, being one of its constitutive elements.

Also, for Jónsson, joy is directly related to an optimistic disposition. He states, *"that at the beginning of the Christian era the optimistic and joyful attitude to life was so common and so deeply rooted in the religious feeling of the people that humour was a natural expression of religion"*<sup>83</sup>. For him, the sense of Christian joy is a result of faith convictions. In this sense, he states *"The humorist is broadminded and tolerant, optimistic and hopeful, even if the situation is tragic, the outlook bad and the matter he is concerned with serious"*<sup>84</sup>. It is also said by the author that the Christian must not be *"indifferent to life or ignorant of the seriousness and importance of the battle which human beings must fight, but the struggle will be looked upon as a game from the point of view of one who definitely believes that nothing of true or everlasting value will, after all, be destroyed"*<sup>85</sup>. Thus, facing reality in conflict and sadness, the joy of humour would be rooted in fundamental truths of faith. A Christian who understands God's sovereign and eternal rule, his love revealed in Christ and his redemption that prepares for eternity, will be able to experience the joy of hope. This sense of joy finds resonance within a Reformed perspective.

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<sup>81</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 477-478.

<sup>82</sup> Jónsson, 104-195.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 25.

#### 4.1.3. Sympathy

The third element that needs to be included in humour, according to Jónsson, is sympathy. He states: *"Humor is kindly, and in its genuine form it includes the quality of sympathy"*<sup>86</sup>. The sympathy of humour is what will also distinguish it from irony and sarcasm. As mentioned earlier, irony generally uses the inversion of language to assert something. For example, the sentences *"you were as subtle as a falling brick"*, or *"your words were sweeter than a lemon"* are typical examples of irony, in which the use of words seems to propose a light disguise to the real intended meaning. Jónsson, in exploring the theme, also understands that *"humour is always sympathetic, but irony can be either friendly or unfriendly"*<sup>87</sup>. The sympathy perceived by Jónsson has the sense of understanding the other in his context. Humour tends towards identification and irony and sarcasm towards differentiation or criticism. As stated by Jónsson, irony can be friendly or not, just as criticism can be friendly or not. One of the functions of irony is to express an opinion about something but in a critical tone. When the criticism is mild and not intended to offend, it can be considered irony. However, sarcasm is the accentuated criticism with the intention of offending or attacking someone. Often sarcasm is used as a weapon to humiliate another person. Whoever uses sarcasm and irony, in this sense, assumes a place of superiority over the other.

The sympathy present in humour has this character of identification and closeness. Jónsson, when commenting on the sympathy and joy of Jesus, expresses *"Jesus' joy does not mean that He is immune to the tragic aspect of life. Quite the contrary. He is a man of sorrows, and He does not close His eyes and pretend to see only the good and beautiful in human life. But the joy is deeply rooted in His consciousness of the good as a ruling and victorious power in the world. He suffers, not only because of His own wounds, but because of His sympathy with others"*<sup>88</sup>. Jónsson, by exemplifying Jesus, arranges well the arrangement between joy and the sad reality of life. To him, it is through identification that joy can be shared in confronting fallen reality. Therefore, the sympathetic confrontation of humour is not violent but intentionally welcoming, promoting a sense of well-being, even in the face of adversity.

This sense of identification, present in Jónsson's concept of humour, also finds support when observed through a reformed worldview. Bavinck states that *"The reality of the*

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<sup>86</sup> Jónsson, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 195.



*incarnation reminds us that Christ came not to remove us from the realities of this world but to save us in them*<sup>89</sup>. This sense of sympathy, related to Jesus' incarnation, supports and validates the understanding that it is necessary for the Christian to live in the world and, through faith, to identify with his neighbour to share welcome and salvation. Therefore, the idea of sympathetic humour, which does not resort to irony or criticism, having its nature welcome, could also be recognised within the Reformed perspective.

#### 4.1.4. Amusement

The last element of humour that is pointed out by Jónsson is amusement. All elements have a certain degree of subjectivity, and perhaps the latter has the most pronounced degree. What amuses one person may be very different from what amuses another. Jónsson also seems to be ambiguous when he talks about amusement, as he sometimes has it as a constitutive element, and sometimes has it as a function of humour. He says *"the comical and joyful together are the essence of what we call amusing. I am inclined to regard the underlying feeling of humour and irony as something playful"*<sup>90</sup>. He also concludes about the purpose of humour: *"Both humour and irony may be prophetic, educational, polemic or just amusing"*<sup>91</sup>.

Jónsson's sense of amusement does not carry negative ideas like transgression, but positive ones like playful mode. To make the connection between Jónsson's thought and Reformed worldview, Calvin Seerveld, a Reformed philosopher, can provide aid. For Seerveld *"The ordinary human ability to be humoured and to be merry, to indulge imagining things and to be playful, displays concrete functions of a person's aesthetic life"*<sup>92</sup>. Seerveld's idea that God in creation endowed man with allusiveness, whereby he can experience humour in amusement mode, is compatible with Jónsson's thinking.

Thus far, it is possible to recognize that this set of elements proposed by Jónsson, sincerity, joy, sympathy, and amusement are useful to understand the humour in coherence with the reformed Christian perspective. In the following, other meanings, and uses of humour in three different theories of humour will be observed.

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<sup>89</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 631.

<sup>90</sup> Jónsson, 17.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task*. Downsview: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980, 49.

## 4.2. Others humour's theories

As has been seen so far, much can be discussed about humour. Humour has proved to be an intriguing and for many an especially provocative topic. Historically there have been various attempts to understand and explain it. In this sub-chapter of the most known theories of humour will be mentioned and how they can be recognised from a Reformed Christian worldview. The three theories are Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity. It is also considered how the three theories relate to the reality of sin in human life. The multiple attempts to theorize humour demonstrate that language is not enough to cover everything. What one theory covers, the other misses, and this demonstrates that the phenomenon of humour, besides being more complex than one might primarily think, is also more diverse and extensive than the boundaries of a single culture. In fact, the "tradition" of this field of language elaborates at least three ways of interpreting humour, and its references are based on the effects produced, intentionally and unintentionally.

### 4.2.1. The superiority theory

The Superiority Theory can be located in the ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle<sup>93</sup>, and it was also developed by several other philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes<sup>94</sup>. In general terms, it elaborates the understanding that humour is present in the relations of comparison and competition, in the power search, and in flagging what is different or inadequate. At the same time, it produces effects of belonging and identification and in some senses, even correction or modification of behaviours and ideas by the pressure generated<sup>95</sup>.

This kind of humour expressed in jokes and speech potentially produces amusement, but usually at the cost of shame and humiliation of the other. The biblical parallel that opposes this kind of humour can be found in Proverbs 26:18-19 *"Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!'"* (NIV). Furthermore, the text from Matthew 5:22, previously cited in this research, also serves as a warning to the

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<sup>93</sup> Leon Golden, "Aristotelian theory of humor" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 60-62, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014), 61.

<sup>94</sup> Jon E. Roedeklein, "Hobbesian theory" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 340-342, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014), 341.

<sup>95</sup> Elias Thomé Saliba. *História cultural do Humor: Balanço provisórios e perspectivas de pesquisas*. Revista de História, núm. 176, 2017, 1-39, São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo  
<https://www.revistas.usp.br/revhistoria/article/view/127332>, (accessed December 05, 2021), 14.

sinful and violent disposition of the one who uses language to humiliate or attack someone, even if it seemed funny or harmless to him. Both passages can be applied to the understanding that the dynamic of humiliation for the promotion of some other sense, value, or even humour is not appropriate in the Christian life.

The only exception present in Scripture is related to the divine act of demonstrating superiority, that is, only God has the right to demonstrate his superiority, and usually He does so against all those who arrogantly and sinfully try to affront his will and law. The article published by Jan Abrahamse<sup>96</sup>, before mentioned, offers this kind of understanding from some insights from the exegesis of the text of Psalm 2 when God intentionally mocks his enemies and mocks the very reality of the sin of rebellion against him.

As seen earlier, from a Reformed point of view, an attitude of superiority, maintained by a willingness to humiliate the other, is incompatible with Christian ethics. This is the teaching present in Matthew 23:12 *"For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"*(NIV). Given this biblical teaching, it is not possible to make arrogance compatible with humour in the witness of the Christian life, nor in the Reformed worldview.

On the other hand, some recognise that a type of defence mechanism is also present in this type of humour. René T. Proyer states that *"Historically, a psychoanalytic standpoint of humor as a defense mechanism has been highly influential in different disciplines"*<sup>97</sup>. In this sense, humour could be recognised as a form of opposition to injustice, being a way of facing reality, as mentioned in the previous section. The next theory addresses a commonly recognised element of humour, relief.

#### 4.2.2. The relief theory

As for the Theory of Relief commonly attributed to Sigmund Freud<sup>98</sup>, also in general terms, one should understand that it is related to the dynamics of releasing repressed inhibitions, thoughts, and feelings. In this perspective, the interest focuses on the opening of expressions or behaviours that, when manifested, will produce the reward of relief or the

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<sup>96</sup> Abrahamse, 185–207.

<sup>97</sup> René Proyer, "Defense Mechanism" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 193-194, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014), 193.

<sup>98</sup> Will Noonan, "Inversion, Topsy-Turvi" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 393-397, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014), 394.

decrease of stress or anguish coming from an emotional cause, for example. To some extent, the figure of the court joker present in the Middle Ages, who had the right/duty to joke about what and who not to play with, exemplifies the idea of social relief. For example, jokes and imitations of important people and even of the king would promote a kind of laughter that was intended to deal indirectly with some dissatisfaction or discontent. The clown, or the joker, would have the right to say what no one else could, a kind of spokesman that indirectly produces relief from tensions, including those of a political order<sup>99</sup>.

The problem with this theory is that it could, directly and indirectly, promote a form of violence justified by relief. When the performance of evil is justified by the production of relief, there is a major problem in the order of values. It would be the equivalent of saying that sin is the justification for the relief of tension or the solution of a problem. For the Christian, values must underlie thoughts and precede actions (Prov 2:11-15)<sup>100</sup>. This theory, if applied to sinful impulses, will serve as an instrument of injustice. In Portuguese, there is a saying "*this is paying courtesy with another's hat*", in English there is a similar idea, "*It is easy to be kind with the money of others*" when one wants to infer that someone is promoting himself using something that is not his. The relief derived from the humiliation of others would be the victory of human wickedness. Despite this, it is also possible to consider the relief promoted by humour from the right intention and right attitudes. When relief through humour is promoted for the benefit of others, it can be understood to be recognised as a form of kindness and is compatible with the Reformed worldview. This will be further explored in the next chapter. The last general theory to be addressed, perhaps one of the most widely accepted, is incongruity.

#### 4.2.3. The incongruity theory

According to Saliba, the incongruity theory, although not complete, is the broadest in its approach. He states that "*Its amplitude derives, above all, from the more general thesis that humour arises from the essential duality between perception and representation of the*

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<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Pageau, *The Metaphysics of Clown World*. Jonathan Pageau Chanel. An interesting insight is <https://youtu.be/MzEwaUCw9Bo>. (Accessed February 12, 2022).

<sup>100</sup> Prov 2:11-15 "For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who have left the straight paths to walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways".

*world*<sup>101</sup>. Avoiding the denser part of language theories and the proposed scripts also related to this theory, it is important to recognise that the potential of humour lies in the ability to communicate through comparison. Unlike superiority theory (competition idea), this one attempt to explain the reality of the humour present in comparative combinations. Thus, when a fact is told that initially generates a concern but ends up in something totally unexpected and improbable, there is great potential for humour. For example, "A pastor is called to pray at his mother-in-law's wake. When he gets there, he raises his hands in the air and says, 'God, receive my mother-in-law into heaven with the same joy that I bid her farewell here on earth'"<sup>102</sup>. This kind of construction directs the expectation of a reverent and respectful sad moment to an unexpected outcome, producing incongruity.

One biblical passage that seems to have this framework is the episode when David pretends to be mad in front of King Achish to save his own life (1 Sam 21:10-15). According to Jónsson, it is quite possible that the great warrior's decision to save his own life by pretending, because he was afraid, is curious, to say the least, and could have been humorous, especially to the first readers<sup>103</sup>. Going a little deeper into the idea, this mechanism of comparison generally uses some referent. Incongruence is only possible where some congruence is accepted and known. When some information breaks or opposes the established congruity, incongruity, often hidden, arises. This mechanism of making discoveries, mentioned earlier in the *amusement* element, can intentionally be used in the form of humour. This will be explored in the next chapter when, in the Christian life, the witness to truth can also be accompanied by kindness and humour.

All these theories are attempts to decode and interpret humour, and at this point, it is possible to see that they resemble each other at times, and at others, they distance and contradict each other. There is, however, an interesting possibility concerning these theories as to the redirection of their structures to positive ends. Just as it is written in Proverbs 15:1 "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"(NIV), so too may it be possible to direct content with the form to a fruitful end.

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<sup>101</sup> Saliba, 15. Texto original: "Sua amplitude deriva, sobretudo, da tese mais geral de que o humor nasce da dualidade essencial entre a percepção e a representação do mundo".

<sup>102</sup> Internet joke site, from which the example was taken. <https://piadas.biz/de/pastor>. (accessed July 2, 2022)

<sup>103</sup> Jónsson, 45.

In this chapter, it was possible to recognize that Jónsson's humour elements (sincerity, joy, sympathy, and amusement) are compatible with the Reformed worldview. It was also possible to evaluate compatibility and incompatibility between some of the most known theories of humour (superiority, relief, and incongruity) and the Reformed worldview. Taking up and bringing together what has been explored in this chapter, a preliminary concept of Christian humour, from a Reformed perspective, could be placed as an affective, cognitive and linguistic disposition to share/communicate the truth by combining sincerity and joy with sympathy and amusement, promoting and reinforcing relational connections and may favour a general sense of well-being. In the following chapter, to explore in a defined context, humour in Brazil will be in perspective.

## 5. HUMOUR AS WITNESS

After exploring the biblical possibility in the second chapter, compatibility with the Reformed worldview in the third, and the development of a concept in the fourth, this chapter discusses how humour is understood in the Brazilian context and how it could be applied as a tool for Christian witness. To achieve this objective, the first section recognizes a cultural approach to humour from a descriptive perspective in Brazil. Although Brazil is a huge and multiculturally diverse country, at least a general perspective on what can be recognized about humour.

The second section of this chapter brings a more concrete contact to this discussion, sharing some ideas and opinions about humour with five Brazilian Christians who were interviewed. All are directly involved with humour, whether in professional or ministerial work in the church. Although the total number of interview questions was eight, here, the participants' opinions are combined into two groups of answers: 1) "What do you understand as humour?"; 2) "How do you relate humour and Christian witness?". The remaining survey questions served as contextual support for the correct understanding of the two main questions.

The third part of the chapter seeks, through examples, to recover how the concept of humour proposed here can be applied as a tool for 1) showing truth, 2) connecting people, and 3) healing through shared joy. The importance of this chapter lies in the recognition of the connection between humour and Christian witness. Thus, it is necessary, to begin with, a flight over a general sense of humour for Brazilians, as follows.

### 5.1. The general perspective of Brazilian humour

As mentioned, Brazil is a country with many diversities, both due to its territorial characteristics, its colonization model and the interactions and miscegenation over 500 years of history. For this reason, it is not possible to speak about just one Brazilian culture, even one Brazilian humour. However, would be possible to at least indicate, in general terms, what can characterize humour in *Tupiniquim* lands (an indigenous word that refers to Brazilian territory).

Perhaps one of the most important researchers of humour in Brazil, Elias Thomé Saliba, can offer some direction. During an interview given to Márcia Junges, he stated:

"Humour, in general, is one of the highest instruments of communication"<sup>104</sup>. For Saliba, humour is a genuine form of expression that produces its effects: "*Laughing brings people together, provokes their emotions and mobilises their minds - as well, of course, as relieving tension. This is universal*"<sup>105</sup>. Also, in this interview, Saliba comments on what, for him, is one of the strong identifications of Brazilian humour. He says: "*I think that typical Brazilian humour is parodic. But not a parody in the original sense, of 'parallel song'. Brazilian life is so full of incongruities that, to make humour, he makes a parody of real life*"<sup>106</sup>. This characteristic is not necessarily exclusive to Brazil, but, in general terms, it could distinguish it.

In the classic book *Raízes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda interprets that, in general terms, Brazilians are formatted in what he calls cordiality. Here, the meaning of cordiality is different from the common one. For him, in the cordial man, "*The friendliness in dealing, the hospitality, the generosity, virtues so boasted by foreigners who visit us, represent, in fact, a definite trait of the Brazilian character*"<sup>107</sup>. However, in Holanda's analysis, this characteristic is based on the way the Brazilian people developed historically. Holanda, however, warns that "*It would be a mistake to assume that these virtues can mean 'good manners', civility. They are, above all, legitimate expressions of an extremely rich and overflowing emotional background*"<sup>108</sup>. In this sense, humour for Brazilian people must have a strong connection to emotions.

Ariano Suassuna, one of the greatest names in Brazilian literature and dramaturgy, during one of his humorous lectures, stated that "*Everything that is bad to pass is good to tell, and everything that is good to pass is bad to tell*"<sup>109</sup>. Suassuna seems to translate one of the curious facets of Brazilian culture. In general, Brazilians like to share with others the difficult

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<sup>104</sup> Márcia Junges, *As Raízes do Riso e a ética emocional brasileira*. Revista do Instituto Humanitas Unisinos, Ano XI, Ed. 367 (1-55), 2011. <https://www.ihuonline.unisinos.br/media/pdf/IHUOnlineEdicao367.pdf>, (accessed July 18, 2022), 26. Original: "*O humor, em geral, é um dos mais elevados instrumentos de comunicação*".

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 26. Original: "*Rir aproxima as pessoas, provoca suas emoções e mobilizam suas mentes – além, é claro, de aliviar a tensão. Isto é universal*".

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 26. Original: "*eu acho que o humor brasileiro típico é paródico. Mas não paródia no sentido original, de 'canto paralelo'. A vida do brasileiro é tão cheia de incongruências que, para fazer humor, ele faz uma paródia da vida real*".

<sup>107</sup> Holanda, 228. Original: "*A lhanza no trato, a hospitalidade, a generosidade, virtudes tão gabadas por estrangeiros que nos visitam, representam, com efeito, um traço definido do caráter brasileiro*".

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 228. Original: "*Seria engano supor que essas virtudes possam significar 'boas maneiras', civilidade. São antes de tudo expressões legítimas de um fundo emotivo extremamente rico e transbordante*".

<sup>109</sup> Ariano Suassuna, *Aula espetáculo Ariano Suassuna. Parte 1*. <https://youtu.be/B3KN-dn-R5s>, 5m10s. (accessed July, 15, 2022) Original: "*Tudo o que é ruim de passar é bom de contar, e tudo o que é bom de passar é ruim de contar*".



situations they have experienced in life. It's a way of sharing real life. At the same time, Brazilians, in general, find it difficult to listen to the stories about the continuous success of others, either because it gives a sense of superiority or because it implies that their life is better than others. The Brazilian demonstrates how important the degree of sympathy is in its cultural dynamics, including humour.

For Saliba, laughter comes from a reaction of connection and integration. In the socially fragmented environment due to the colonization model and the entrance of several different ethnic groups, *"a fragmented comic representation of the country was built, giving Brazilians, in those ephemeral moments of laughter, the feeling of belonging that politics had taken away from them"*<sup>110</sup>. Thus, to Brazilians, humour, often motivated against the injustices and incongruities of life, produces the effect of identification, acceptance and belonging. This cohesion and power of connection that Brazilians experience is a strong indication of one of the functions of humour, which could be put to good or bad use. The negative effect that humour can have on violent and offensive behaviour should also be seen. The same force of integration that humour potentially carries can be the same that favours exclusion. The connective ability of humour is not an evil resource, but it can be applied to negative behaviours.

These general aspects that were punctuated, provide some general reference regarding humour in Brazil. From the mentioned characteristics, Brazilian humour is parodic and strongly related to emotions. Furthermore, it facilitates, promotes, and strengthens bonds between the participating people, even when used in a violent or offensive disposition. In the next section, a more specific perspective on humour is reached through the opinions and ideas of Brazilian Christians who work professionally or ministerially with humour.

## 5.2. Interviews Perspectives

Besides a general perspective, a more specific one was also necessary and was made possible through data collection through interviews. These interviews were conducted between May and July 2022, all electronically. Three of them through video-conferencing and two through audio recordings, with all the content being transcribed in Portuguese and

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<sup>110</sup> Junges, 25. Original: *"construiu-se uma fragmentada representação cômica do país, dando ao brasileiro, naqueles efêmeros momentos de riso, a sensação de pertencimento que a política lhe subtrairá"*.

electronically translated into English. The criteria for the selection of participants were: 1) identify themselves as Christians, and 2) publicly have some professional or ministerial involvement with humour. These were the minimum criteria for the theme of the present research to be addressed. For having a general character, no criteria of geography, gender or age were established, nor even of theological tradition. Unfortunately, only men participated, because, in the period established for the research, no woman was found who fulfilled the criteria. The participants of the interviews are: Daniel Araújo(D.A.)<sup>111</sup>, Glauberson Giffony(G.G.)<sup>112</sup>, Jasiel Botelho(J.B.)<sup>113</sup>, João Netto(J.N.)<sup>114</sup>, e Laci Augusto(L.A.)<sup>115</sup>, and, for legal purposes, all have declared their consent to be mentioned by name.

### 5.3. Answers in the interview

#### 5.3.1. What do you understand as humour?

Among the interviewees, the concept or idea of humour was approached differently, even though they found common points. D.A. understands that humour, primarily, is a state of mind, but also the ability to find something funny in situations. For D.A. humour, even when funny, its use can be risky "*sometimes humour can generate a terrible trauma*" for a person.

G.G. understands that humour is "*a way for us to find hope, even in the face of adversity*". He claims that he came to this realisation after receiving several messages from

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<sup>111</sup> Daniel Araújo - musician, comedian and producer of content for Youtube through the PAX Channel, since 2014 and that has 792,000 subscribers and over 104 million views, son of a Methodist pastor and understands himself as a Christian since his childhood, currently lives in São Paulo. <https://www.youtube.com/c/DanielAraujoPax>

<sup>112</sup> Glauberson Giffony - lawyer, and lay worker in a church in Uberlândia, and produces content for the internet through Tiktok with over 750 thousand followers. His content is religious with motivational messages but is best known for videos with questions sent by followers and humorous answers, being a Christian since childhood, currently living in Minas Gerais. <https://www.tiktok.com/@glauberson.giffony>

<sup>113</sup> Jasiel Botelho - pastor for over 40 years, writer, a missionary for SEPAL in Brazil, founder and president of the mission Youth of Truth and a cartoonist. As a cartoonist, he has published humorous cartoons that touch on different subjects such as religion and politics. Today his humorous work can be accessed through Instagram and his blog "Porque Deus é Humor" (Because God is humour), currently living in São Paulo. <http://jasielbotelho.blogspot.com>

<sup>114</sup> João Netto - circus performer, actor and comedian for over 40 years. He has worked for the largest television station in the country and is one of the actors in one of the most popular comedy programmes in Brazil. He became an evangelical after his fame, and currently lives in the United States, where he continues with his shows and presentations. - <https://www.instagram.com/joaonettoreal/?hl=pt>

<sup>115</sup> Laci Augusto - graduated in scenic arts, is currently a server of the judiciary power, founder of the Christian theatre group Companhia do Riso, for which he has made dozens of presentations throughout Brazil. He has also participated in several competitions of jokes on television, being recognized as one of the few comedians who always made light humour for the family, currently living in Brasília.

people stating how impacted they were by the humour present in his content. According to him, *“they found a smile amidst difficult moments and situations”*.

J.B. affirmed that *“humour was created by God. Animals are happy and play, but the mental humour, the rational humour, only man have that”*. J.B. complements, *“of course, there is bad humour and good humour. Just as there is evil and good within us, there is humour that amuses everybody and humour that exploits somebody's defect and weakness for some to enjoy”*. J.N. understands that humour is something *“directly linked to emotions. It is scientifically proven that laughter has healing power. You smile, create and release endorphins. Laughter releases substances that are good for health, just as anguish is bad”*. From his professional perspective, he also understands that *“the function of humour is to lead people to emotional relaxation. Often people look for a comedy show at night, after a day of work, a week of work, they schedule to watch a humour show to see the guy talk nonsense. Nothing to add to the person's knowledge, but (seeking) the relaxed, laughter as a form of pleasure. So, the purpose of humour is to lead people into a relaxed amid the turbulence that is life”*.

L.A. found it difficult in trying to put his understanding of humour into words, but through his examples humour could be identified as something positive that could promote a connection between people. In his words, he states that *“humour is something that reaches people”*, and *“this world without humour would be too boring, it would be unbearable”*.

It is interesting to note that in Portuguese, as well as in Dutch, unlike in English, the word “humor” can mean both mood and humour, and at some points, both meanings were given in the same answer. It is considered that, as a general conclusion to the first question, for the interviewees, humour is perceived as a human characteristic, which can provoke positive reactions such as connection, joy, and relief, as well as negative ones such as offence, trauma, and exclusion.

### 5.3.2. How do you relate humour and Christian witness?

In the second question, the interviewees elaborated answers on how their witnesses as Christians could be related to humour. In this regard, D.A. stated, *“I think it can be related. There are several videos of me on YouTube where I talk about my experience inside the churches. And I use humour for everything, even for the misfortunes in my life. You can use humour, I can use humour to do that. Today as an artist, I understood that I don't have the mission of catechizing anybody. So I don't talk about Christ, I try to be Christ wherever I go”*.

For D.A. through humour, it is possible to touch on sensitive and even painful subjects in a non-aggressive way, and this can include subjects considered religious taboos. He also comments that through Christian witness it is possible to manifest some aspect of salvation. In his words, *"I think that's what our life is all about, saving people by giving them a good day, regardless of whether or not they believe in Jesus"*. D.A.'s perspective is positive about the possibility of linking humour and faith, especially when humour touches on points in people's ordinary lives, including situations of problems and difficulties.

G.G., as to this question, also understands that it is possible to relate humour to the Christian faith. He says *"To begin with, you do not go to heaven crying, you go to heaven smiling"*. However, in his response, he shows himself to be more cautious about the relationship between humour and witness. *"I think that is the "X" of the matter, to take the Word with humour is different from taking the Word as a joke. I don't believe the Gospel is a joke, and I don't like to joke with the Gospel. Sometimes we joke about some situations in people's daily lives, but never about the Word"*. For G.G. humour can be related to practical themes of faith, but with caution and seriousness of the truths of the Gospel, and the Bible cannot be a reason for joking. He also understands that it is through humour that some opportunities to talk about Jesus are opportunities, because, in his opinion, humour *"is a way of breaking down barriers, of disarming people who are secure in situations and don't want to listen"*. Thus, G.G. understands that there is positive space for humour and Christian witness when certain precautions are observed.

J.B., in turn, related humour and Christian witness in another approach. As a cartoonist and preacher, although he understands that it is possible and positive to make this relationship, there is a great risk of being misunderstood, and therefore excluded. He comments that, as a pastor, he has already been segregated for the reason of not being recognised as a serious person. In his words, when he was participating in programs *"when they needed the games they asked me, but when they needed something spiritual, I realised that I was discriminated against"*. In his opinion, even though he was a duly ordained pastor, he did not receive the expected confidence to, apart from humour, address more serious issues. Because of this, for a period he decided to *"change my temperament and not joke anymore and only speak in a serious way. This disturbed me a lot because I began to feel that I was having a dual personality"*. According to him, through humour he managed to reach many people, even today, but *"this cost me a price and consequences"*. Thus, in J.B.'s opinion, the

relationship between humour and Christian witness is positive, but he also recognises that this must be done with caution, and at the same time, he is aware that there will not always be the correct interpretation of what is the intention of humour.

On humour and Christian witness, J.N. understands that it is possible for there to be such a relationship. In his words, *"The Christian faith and humour can go together as long as you respect, first, the laws of God"*. As a comedian who became a Christian after achieving fame, he partially changed his content and the way he performed it, even though he kept the same characters. Thus, he continues to do his humour show, but now it is *"humour without immorality, without bad words, making a pure humour, a family humour. So, I show where a child can see"*. These changes occurred as a form of adjustment and compatibility with his Christian testimony. Thus, J.N. showed himself to be more open to the relationship between humour and Christian witness, adding that he currently produces a comic theatre play, where he presents the theme of the transformation of life through faith in Jesus Christ.

L.A. brought several accounts of his experience as an artist and comedian inside and outside the church environment. As founder of the group "Cia do Riso" (Laughing Company) he travelled through many places in Brazil, visiting churches and youth and teen programmes and presenting his humour activities. Having participated in several television programmes as a joke teller, one of his concerns was to keep the level of his jokes compatible with his Christian testimony. He tells that in a competition on the television programme, he was in the final and was tempted to tell a dirty joke to win a car as a prize. But he preferred to maintain his standard of "clean" jokes. He was not the winner, and in his own words he comments, *"Since that day people have been saying, 'you were that guy who went there and didn't tell any immoral jokes'. Look, what if I had done it? I would have burned my ministry, to say the least. God preserved me"*. For Lacy, the witness was closer to the recognition that he maintained a standard of language compatible with Christian principles, without offence, swearing or dirty jokes.

From this selected material from the responses given in the interviews, it was possible to see that the participants were able to maintain some connection between their faith and humour. For them, Christian witness is an important part of their artistic expression, even though most of them are not ministerially linked to their churches. The content of the interviews has proved useful, especially in pointing out how Christians could deal, either ministerially or professionally, with the tense relationship between humour and Christian

witness. From what could be observed, most declared that the safest way to deal with this tension is to be vigilant about the language and type of content to be presented.

#### 5.4. Humour as tool

As stated by Bavinck, *“Christians can only bear witness to the truth, trusting that the God who has revealed himself to us as Creator and Redeemer is the same who provides his followers with wisdom to understand his revelation”*<sup>116</sup>. The Christian is given the privilege of witnessing God's love and grace through new life in Christ. Christian witness can be manifested through God-given gifts, characteristics, and opportunities. As it says in 1 Pet 4:10 *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms”* (NIV). Humour can be used in a way that testifies to the very thing that sustains human joy, the grace of God. In the following, starting from the concept of humour adopted here, some ways in which it can be applied to be a tool for Christian witness by showing the truth, connecting people and healing through shared joy are combined.

##### 5.4.1. Showing Truth

As seen in the previous chapter, one of the general explanations of humour is Incongruence Theory. It is widely recognised that humour has the function of using incongruity to promote the comic and the laughable. Salvatore Attardo states that *“Incongruity and incongruity-resolution theories are most clearly essentialist: they claim that the essence of humor is the perception of the incongruity and its resolution, or merely the unresolved perception of incongruity”*<sup>117</sup>. The notion of incongruity and its resolution can be useful for the revelation of truth through humour. This does not seem to be an idea far removed from the biblical text, especially within the wisdom literature of the bible.

The book of Proverbs is especially rich in different kinds of teachings for the life of the one who fears God because *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of. Knowledge, but fool despise wisdom and instruction”* (Prov 1:7, NIV). Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart understand that *“The book of Proverbs is the primary locus of prudential wisdom—that is, rules and*

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<sup>116</sup> Bavinck, 2011, 67.

<sup>117</sup> Salvatore Attardo, *The linguistics of humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 64.

*regulations people can use to help themselves make responsible, successful choices in life.*"<sup>118</sup>. The purpose of biblical proverbs is to point out the truth for the good life according to God's will. They also explain that *"A proverb is a brief, particular expression of truth. The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable"*<sup>119</sup>, complementing that the proverbs *"do not state everything about a truth but they point toward it"*<sup>120</sup>. Thus, a proverb conveys truth through a balance between the text and the author's intention. As it is stated *"Thus a proverb should not be taken too literally or too universally if its message is to be helpful"*<sup>121</sup>. The truth present in the book of Proverbs is set within its own context and language but carries values and principles that are universal and could be translated and accommodated to different cultures and languages. In this sense, the authors understand that when the correct translation occurs *"Such a selection is a transcultural decision for which the proverb, correctly understood, provides sound, godly advice"*<sup>122</sup>. Thus, the truth encapsulated in ancient Hebrew formatting, can and has been useful to the believer throughout the centuries.

Proverbs are not necessarily humour, but this does not imply that they cannot be applied through humour. Recall the concept of humour proposed here, it is an *affective, cognitive and linguistic disposition to share/communicate the truth by combining sincerity and joy with sympathy and amusement, promoting and reinforcing relational connections and may favour a general sense of well-being*, can positively match the intentionality of proverbs. Some examples of biblical proverbs can illustrate: *"Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!"* (Prov 6:6 NIV), and *"Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife"* (Prov 21:9 NIV). Both passages use linguistic resources to translate some teaching. The first one is talking about the importance of work and the second one is functioning as advice for someone who wants to get married. Depending on the circumstance, the moment, and the way one shares, the teaching of truth can be more easily grasped, or it can be rejected. As the text says *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger"*(Prov 15:1 NIV), truth translated with sympathy and amusement, pointing out

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<sup>118</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993, 237.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 247.

something that is not right, without violent disposition, can minimize the discomfort of correction, especially in more delicate or difficult situations. Moreover, proverbs, when well chosen and applied in the right way and on the right occasion, can contribute both to arouse interest and through interest produce greater fixation. Fee and Stuart, in this sense, state *“the proverbs are phrased in a catchy way, so as to be learnable by anyone”*<sup>123</sup>.

Besides biblical proverbs, popular proverbs can also be very useful, and can often be related to biblical truths. In Brazil, being a tropical country, much of life experiences and practical knowledge are combined and transmitted in proverbs that include elements from the forests. This feature causes the imagination to be activated and the perception of the idea to be enhanced. Some examples include: *“em rio que tem piranha, jacaré nada de costas”* (In a river that has piranhas, alligators swim on their backs), *“cada macaco em seu galho”* (each monkey in his own branch), *“papagaio que anda com joão-de-barro vira ajudante de pedreiro”* (parrot that walks with red ovenbird becomes a bricklayer's helper). The first proverb teaches about being cautious in risky situations, and finds parallels in *“The prudent see danger and take refuge”* (Prov 22:3, NIV). The second is normally used when someone is interfering in matters that do not concern them, as in *“Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own”* (Prov 26:17, NIV). The third means that friendships can influence, and can be used for good or bad influences, as in *“Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm”* (Prov 13:20, NIV). Thus the intentional and combined use of proverbs can be very useful not only for teaching truth but also for facilitating its absorption and application in practical life. The use and creation of proverbs can be an interesting way to witness the truth of Scripture in a way that is culturally adapted to its context, which conveys this same truth with the disposition of humour. In Brazil, a proverb that is accompanied by hearty laughter is a proverb that is not easily forgotten.

#### 5.4.2. Connecting people

As mentioned earlier, humour can promote connections between people. Gill Greengross states that humour can help break down barriers and distance between people, acting as a social lubricant. In addition, humour *“facilitate(s) bonding in social groups, as a way to promote cooperation, and is especially important when people do not know each other very*

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<sup>123</sup> Fee, 239.



*well or when conflicts arise*"<sup>124</sup>. From Greengross' perspective, humour is primarily functioning as an icebreaker, but he also understands that, through laughter, humour can be positive in already established human relationships. He states that *"Laughter is contagious, and when everyone in the group laughs and shares the same feeling, it is easier to work together and reach the group's goals"*<sup>125</sup>. Thus, humour, as already mentioned in the previous chapter can work positively as an agent of integration.

This characteristic of connectivity and integration can also be taken advantage of by Christians. In his interesting article, Koos Tamminga comments on the importance of joy and laughter in relationships at Encounter Church (Ontmoetingskerk) in Amersfoort, in the Netherlands. His article addresses the topic of the inclusion of people with disabilities in the dynamics of the church. He comments on how laughter performs a special function of connection and well-being for those who suffer from a disability, as well as generally for all other congregants in the church. He states *"the role their laughter plays: it breaks boundaries between people and thus creates a sense of togetherness or encounter within the formal setting of the liturgy. Laughter connects people who report they would otherwise not really know how to connect with one another because of their perceived differences"*<sup>126</sup>. The example of Encounter Church replicates, through laughter and joy, one of the biblical principles expressed in *"Offer hospitality to one another"* (1 Peter 4:9, NIV). In this example, the interesting connection between laughter and hospitality promotes a fruitful outcome within the faith community. Tamminga also understands that this reality also includes humour. He comments that humour is also part of the context shared on Sunday morning in the church, *"I am not the only one who resorts to smiling, laughter, and humor to communicate. When Elder Henk enters the church on a Sunday morning[...], often joke around with some of the residents first, which sets an atmosphere of familiarity and provides him with the opportunity to be in contact with people"*<sup>127</sup>. Tamminga also argues that *"there is a fine but noticeable line between laughing with and laughing at others"*<sup>128</sup>. This intentional care reveals important aspects of humour, sympathy and joy. Christian humour is not based on the dishonour and exclusion of the other,

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<sup>124</sup> Gil Greengross, "Evolutionary explanations of humor" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo, 219-222, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2014). Encyclopedia, 221.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>126</sup> Koos Tamminga, *Receiving the Gift of Laughter: How Joy Transforms the Life of an Inclusive Congregation*, *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 2020, 24:3, 300-316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1750533>, 306.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 305

but precisely the opposite, it is inclusive insofar as it sees the other as a neighbour, a neighbour to laugh and rejoice with.

It is evident that the success of the communion is not achieved by only one factor but, without a doubt, the elements of joy, laughter and humour play an important role in this church. The example of this particular characteristic of the Encounter Church expresses a relevant witness for its local context and could serve as a model for other churches. Churches in Brazil, which are generally recognized as welcoming, could add to their dynamics a more joyful welcome, perfecting the testimony through Christian hospitality.

#### 5.4.3. Healing by shared joy

As seen in the previous chapter, humour is also related to the production and maintenance of well-being. Recent studies point out that the use of humour is positive when combined with therapeutic techniques. An article published in 2019 in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* shares interesting results regarding humour's potential to reduce anxiety in the treatment of patients with addictive disorders. The study concluded that *"the addition of an integrative laughter therapy module to the standard treatment regimen in a day hospital for addictive disorders may lead to a greater improvement in measures of self-esteem, anxiety and happiness compared to treatment as usual"*<sup>129</sup>. Another study carried out in a hospital in Rome, pointed out that the presence of clowns to interact with play and humour with children with respiratory diseases increased the chances of recovery and decreased the length of hospital stay. The reason, according to the study, is that the clowns' interaction produced positive psychological impacts. It states *"Humor can be seen as an easy-to-use, inexpensive and natural therapeutic modality to be used within different therapeutic settings, for temporarily alleviating some of the daily distress experienced by different ailing populations"*<sup>130</sup>. In another study, from the mental health perspective of people who have experienced trauma, a *"multidimensional definition of humor (i.e., including cognitive, affective, behavioral, and motivational elements) was applied to examine humor use*

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<sup>129</sup> Seyla de Francisco, Cristina Torres, Sandra De Andrés, Ana Millet, M. Teresa Ricart, Elvira Hernández-Martínez-Esparza, Mercedes Abades, and Joan Trujols. 2019. "Effectiveness of Integrative Laughter Therapy to Reduce Anxiety, Improve Self-Esteem and Increase Happiness: A Naturalistic Study at a Day Hospital for Addictive Disorders" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 21: 4194. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16214194>

<sup>130</sup> Bertini M, Isola E, Paolone G, Curcio G. *Clowns benefit children hospitalized for respiratory pathologies*. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med*. 2011;2011:879125. doi: 10.1093/ecam/neaq064. Epub 2011 Mar 15. PMID: 21785637; PMCID: PMC3137769.

in therapy with trauma survivors”<sup>131</sup>. Among the findings are that the use of humour “can help trauma survivors to create some emotional distance from negative emotions and allow them to cope with stress, although the effectiveness of such efforts depend on contextual factors and the specific forms of humor that are used”<sup>132</sup>. Thus, these studies indicate that humour, from a therapeutic perspective, has a positive interaction in medical treatments, contributing to the improvement of people's mental and physical health.

Joy is a fundamental element of health and well-being. The verse “A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit” (Prov 15:13, NIV) also relates, even figuratively, how joy has direct effects on a person's life. John Piper, in his book *Desiring God*, states that “I must pursue joy in God if I am to glorify Him as the surpassingly valuable Reality in the universe. Joy is not a mere option alongside worship. It is an essential component of worship”<sup>133</sup>. For Piper, joy is one of the components of worship, being a gift of the Spirit of God, and should have regular participation in the Christian life. Quoting Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (NIV), Piper understands that faith in Christ cannot be separated from joy in Him, even when a Christian faces deep trouble and sorrow. In his words, “It is not possible for vital, genuine faith in the Fountain of Joy not to partake of that joy”<sup>134</sup>. The Christian, even when downcast, has, through faith, access to the source of joy that is God.

Joy is a gift from God which, from faith in Christ, has sufficient grounding to be experienced and shared. Taking Piper's theological understanding of joy as a reference point and the examples of how joy and humour are associated with psychological and physical healing, it would be possible to associate the promotion of joy through humour. Humour could serve as a complementary therapeutic benefit for people who are going through difficult times. Humour, in the terms proposed here, different from escapism, can be a form of coping against sadness.

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<sup>131</sup> Rebecca Rutchick, “On humor and healing: a qualitative analysis of expressions of humor in therapy with clients who have experienced trauma” (2013) in *Theses and Dissertations*. 365.  
<https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/etd/365>, 253.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 254

<sup>133</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, Logos Bible Electronic Version, 2003, 23.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

As seen, one of the factors that compromise the psychological health of individuals is the negative effects produced and associated with events and feelings. Factors such as sadness, anxiety, guilt, and trauma are present in the lives of church members, as well as other people. As seen, humour can serve as a perspective broker and a strong ally in promoting people's connectivity. But, in addition, humour can be an agent that contributes to the welcoming of those who are in situations of emotional and spiritual vulnerability.

Humour can serve as a perspective corrector when it reminds a person of their humanity and limitation. A mistaken understanding of oneself and reality, such as heightened feelings of self-confidence and sanctity, can cause an emotional imbalance in the face of the level of anguish and anxiety arising from real-life frustrations. One way of coping and welcoming this situation is intervention through humour. For example, when it is very common for people to seek the pastor to share about the deep sorrow and guilt due to sin and its effects. Sometimes people do not know how to deal with feelings of spiritual frustration. One alternative to approaching situations like these through humour would be for the pastor to say, *"First, thank you for your courage to share a little of your life. Second, I'm very relieved that you told me what's going on, I was thinking that I was the only sinner with problems here"*. Interventions like this, combined with the right attitude and tone of speech, can act as an agent of inclusion. First, by recognising the person before seeing their problem. Second, by breaking the idea of a spiritual superiority, which is a common trait in the Brazilian religious context. Third, this phrase also puts into perspective that the conflict with sin is a reality faced by all true Christians. Becoming aware of this can promote welcome and inclusion in what could be a "support group" or discipleship for the Christian walk.

It must be acknowledged that this, and the other suggestions in this chapter, are not definitive standards. Nor should they be considered as such because each context, each person, and each situation require careful analysis to assist those who are facing spiritual problems, avoiding that the intervention or counselling is impaired. This chapter aims to offer an initial reflection that humour can be positively associated with the Christian life and its witness. Whether in simple attitudes, where truth is translated with joy and fun, or when the power of connectivity and the welcome of laughter is used to maintain communion in faith, or when it is a way of facing the reality of life, humour can be positively associated with Christian witness.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was directed toward the positive correlation between humour and Christian witness. As we have seen, scholars of the New and Old Testaments admit the hypothesis that, through the content, writer's language and style, there was humour intentionality in Scripture. It was also observed, from a reformed worldview, how humour can be understood. Humour was admitted as a part of the human experience established by God. It was assessed that, with the fall, man in all his relationships was affected and that what was created for a good purpose, such as humour, became redirected into corruption and perverse direction as mockery and insult. It is also recognised that, through grace, God, in Christ, has reconciled all the creation with Himself, and through the Spirit, He is sanctifying and reordering everything to creational orientation. Besides that, by the elements of humour from Jakob Jónsson, it was possible to recognize a compatible concept of humour with the reformed worldview. And the concept elaborated was an affective, cognitive, and linguistic disposition to share/communicate the truth by combining sincerity and joy with sympathy and amusement, promoting, and reinforcing relational connections and may favour a general sense of well-being. And in the last part of this research, it was offered an opening reflection on how humour is, in general terms, understood in Brazil, and how it could be positively associated with the Christian life and its witness. Whether it is in simple attitudes where truth is translated with joy and amusement, or when the power of connectivity and the welcome of laughter is used to maintain fellowship in faith, or when it is a way of facing the reality of life, humour is a blessing from God.

Finally, my attempt was at least to provide a reflection that would explore and provide more resources and security for an open approach to humour within the Christian life. Recognizing both a general context, given the universality of humour, and my local context in Brazil, I conclude that a Christian, from the sense of humour elaborated here, should be more secure in experiencing, enjoying, and sharing a more joyful spirituality with humour.

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*  
(Psalms 126:1-3, NIV)

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