

Vic, this was formerly formatted with indented paragraphs and half-lines separating them. If this formatting has not carried through acceptably, please let me know and I will re-work the formatting and send it to you. Thanks, Cecil

FR 305

Don't Ridicule The Church!

Cecil Hook

An influential brother wrote an editorial recently bemoaning the fact that some ridicule the church. He begged whoever has been poking fun at the Church of Christ to stop such a profane practice. Since he listed no names, I do not know if I am on his list. Although I think I understand his defensive position, I believe he is too defensive.

When we cannot laugh at ourselves, we are taking ourselves too seriously. We must be able to admit our misdirections and inconsistencies before we will accept any proper change. Where teaching and logic fails, sometimes a good laugh at ourselves can prevail.

We laugh at the behavior of our young children and grandchildren. And when we act like children, I hope that God laughs at us. I wonder if his ministering angels swap funny stories about us.

Imagine one guardian angel approaching others with, "Hey, guys, I have a good one to tell you. In one group of disciples, a man may stand before an assembly and read a portion of the scriptures aloud, but if it is made into a song, he cannot sing it solo in the assembly! And a woman may sing a prayer aloud in the assembly, but she is not allowed to recite or read that prayer there! Now, ain't that a good one!"

And the Lord and his angels may laugh when ---

* A choral group is not permitted to sing in the "worship service," but after a "dismissal prayer" it may entertain that same assembly with spiritual songs.

* Eating a meal in fellowship in a church building is considered to be sinful, but drinking from the water fountain and use of the restrooms are not.

* Eating in the church building is sinful for adults but kids may eat cookies and babies may have their bottles during the sermon.

* Disciples may not eat together where they meet to pray, sing, and teach, but they can pray, sing, and teach where they meet to eat together in homes, parks, and halls.

* Even though many think their sins have been forgiven they expect God to hold them accountable for their sins in a final day of judgment.

* A man is not permitted to sit in the room and listen to a woman while she teaches, but he may buy a tape and listen to her or read her message.

* A woman is doing the will of God when teaching her husband, sons, or other men in her kitchen but is sinning if she does it in a church building.

* The library of a preacher training school has books written by many denominational writers, but those of a certain brother (me!) are not permitted.

* When talking about abortion, some disciples contend that life begins at conception, but in discussing spiritual life, they contend that life begins at birth in baptism.

* Most who claim to be reconciled to God through our Mediator still relay their prayers through the Mediator as though they were still alienated from God.

* Many pious preachers brand others who teach error as false teachers thus implying that they themselves have all the perfect answers and teach no error.

* Many disciples in the Church of Christ denounce others for observing days while they themselves observe fifty-two each year, observing the first day of the week as *the Lord's Day* with certain rituals to be observed on it exclusively.

* Teachers urge that we must obey all the commandments in order to be saved but cannot provide the inquiring sinner a check-list of those commandments.

* Even most of the believers who teach salvation by grace instead of works contend that we must give account in a final judgment for the deeds done in the body, whether they are good or bad.

* Disciples are urged continuously to study the Bible to learn for themselves, but if they learn something different from the party *shibboleths*, they are denounced for teaching it.

* Americans going to France, the wine country of the world, take along Welch's grape juice, and those going into Mexico, the land of unleavened tortillas, take Matzos along for the Lord's Supper.

* Vacationers dare not stop for assembly where no *Church of Christ* sign is seen on the premises.

* In one setting a person may speak of his sainted deceased mother as being in heaven with the Lord then at other times maintain that the resurrection and determining judgment are yet in the future.

* Although it is contended that baptism for the remission of sins puts one into the church, persons from other churches who have experienced that are required to be baptized again to be accepted in a Church of Christ.

No doubt, you can add to this list of inconsistencies. Would you not prefer that I poke fun at them rather than elevating them to soul-threatening issues? Or should we just let them rest to save our pride? If you are too serious to laugh at the egg on your face, I feel sorry for you. Perhaps the angels do also.

I hope that God can shake his head and smile when he hears one of us in

the Church of Christ declare ourselves to be a unity movement -- with two dozen splinter groups! We won't even join with others in a Thanksgiving program. We are reluctant to call on a preacher from the Christian Church to lead a prayer in our assembly. Carl Ketcherside accurately observed that we are no more a unity movement than a hermit is a crusader! How laughable! Do we really take ourselves seriously? Are doctrinal scruples more important than unity? God allows for different scruples but not for rejection and division (Rom. 14).

And back to the good brother who wrote the editorial. I heard him speak at a unity meeting. He called upon those in the Christian Church to give up their non-scriptural instrumental music for the sake of unity. He put himself in the place of the weak brother with offended conscience. For the sake of unity, they should give up their non-essential practice. But would this brother give up multiple cups, Sunday school classes, congregational cooperation, church-owned property, and hired surrogate elders (preachers), all of which are non-scriptural and non-essential and have been made the cause for divisions, for the sake of unity? Certainly not. Those being addressed who used instruments were too genteel to throw such questions back to him. I was agitated by his inconsistent proposal. But poking fun at it may be more practical than letting it upset me.

When that brother assailed all who poke fun at the church, he was equating the splinter group in which he has partisan alignment with the one, true church of the Lord! If you can laugh when you hurt, then that is laughable also. For many years we have heard jokes about a little group in heaven who thought they were the only ones there, but many of our people still have not been softened by the humor. They picture their little group like Elijah on Mount Carmel standing alone for God, while there are the seven thousand who have not bowed to Baal who would stand with them if they would but recognize and accept them instead of rejecting them. That is pathetically humorous.

No disciple that I am aware of pokes fun at the church as God's universal congregation. It is his holy people. No sincere disciple should be subject to derision. But party spirit, pride, and pomposity deserve it, for they cause us to defend our inconsistencies.

Jesus ridiculed the super-religious of his time. An ophthalmologist working on your eyes with a stick in his own. A blind man insisting on leading other blind people. Eating soup from a cup or bowl that is sparkling on the outside but is never washed of its filthy inside accumulation. Those so zealous in protecting the integrity of the kingdom that they close the gate to keep people out. Gaggling at a gnat but then swallowing a whole camel. Jesus prodded with cutting humor. Was he too belittling?

Paul also used stinging, sarcastic ridicule to deflate the proud. The tongue speaker must have been speaking to God since no one else could understand him (1 Cor. 14:2). Undercutting Jewish bigotry, he wrote facetiously, "We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" (Gal. 2:15). (Also consider Gal. 5:12; 2 Cor. 11:4, 19.) His humor was intended to make them see

themselves.

When we won't respond properly to teaching and common sense, some more shocking method like Jesus and Paul used may be effective. Ridicule may cause us to see our own misdirections, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies. When our pious, pompous, proud postures are punctured, we can laugh at ourselves and relax enough to admit our need for reform.

If teaching and teasing fail to change our attitudes, then any gracious smile of our Father must eventually change to censure and condemnation. []

(Cecil Hook: June 1995. Revised February 2006)