

Dangerously Funny

By Dan Ruppel

"...{He} helped push the culture forward into the light of open and honest expression. He went after the powerful people, to punctuate the pretentiousness and pomposity of the privileged." Who is this quote referencing? Is it Jesus and his incriminating commentary of the self-righteous religious power brokers? And who made this insightful comment? Is it the opinion of a culturally observant theologian? No, the writer is comedian George Carlin commenting on the controversial, iconic humorist Lenny Bruce.

In days of old, the court jesters had the sole opportunity to fearlessly and courageously share "reality" with the king. If anyone else in the kingdom dared to share an opposing or critical view with the King, his life would be in grave jeopardy. Today, in our political correct culture, where paranoia of offending abounds, this same dynamic applies. From Lenny Bruce to George Carlin, from Richard Pryor to Chris Rock, from Mort Sahl to Jon Stewart, Dennis Miller and Bill Maher; it's the comedians who have the courage, as well as arguably the most effective vehicle, to proclaim their views and ideologies without restraint to a culture fearful of firm convictions.

In fact, a recent study revealed that 20somethings primary source of news and political opinion came from TV comedians.

Looking at this dynamic within the Christian community, it is encouraging to report that Christian comedy is exploding! Comedy based in a Christian worldview is accepted, embraced and becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment outreach within the Christian community. Literally hundreds of comedy shows are presented weekly in churches throughout America, resulting in an amazing growth in the number as well as the quality of Christian comedy performers. A rising number of churches are also presenting their own comedy sketches on Sunday mornings -- some larger churches even employing staff comedy writers. And now the popularity of comedy from a Christian perspective has spilled over into the secular arena. Nationally, comedy clubs have opened their doors to nights of Christian comedy, which have been greeted enthusiastically by capacity crowds. This explosion has not gone unnoticed by the mainstream media. Recently Christian comedy has been the subject of interviews on CNN, FOX News, The Washington Post, The New Yorker, The Wall Street Journal, The Christian Science Monitor and Radio America.

It is encouraging to see growth both in acceptance and use of humor within the Christian community. But as I look out over the Christian comedy landscape, one thing is dramatically missing...DANGER. Yes, "danger" - an essential element in the craft of comedy, but one that is commonly misunderstood. Oftentimes when we think of a "dangerous" or edgy comedian, we think of a material earmarked with vulgarity or gratuitous immoral subject matter. A logical assumption. Most of today's acerbic comedians have erroneously associated being edgy or dangerous with being shocking or foul. This is a very narrow definition of a cutting edge approach to comedy, one that has oftentimes caused Christian humorists to retreat from the mere idea.

As Christians we too often sanitize our material because we don't want to offend anyone. Am I saying, "be deliberately offensive in order to be cutting-edge and dangerous"? No! Let me state emphatically that I'm not

advocating setting out to offend the personal taste and moral sensibilities of anyone, especially our audience. Our model is to speak the truth in love. Love is the motive, but speaking the truth will often ruffle some feathers. Jesus spoke what was on His heart. His words were dangerous -- they pierced hearts, they challenged sacred cows. Ultimately, His words got Him in more trouble than His actions (Luke 23:5). How many God fearing men or women were there in the Bible who didn't offend someone? Not many. They feared God not man. They spoke boldly from their righteous convictions. Performers must not be afraid to challenge an audience's beliefs. They can't be afraid to make them feel slightly uncomfortable. If someone has their philosophical feet in the aisle, don't be afraid to step on some toes.

The prophet Elijah who jeered and mocked the prophets of Baal by basically saying that their god was a "girlie man," wasn't afraid of challenging sacred cows. The prophets of Baal had put on quite a performance, while Elijah quietly sits there and watches with a good deal of cynicism. The prophets begin to call upon Baal -- nothing happens. They jump up and down -- nothing happens. They become fanatics and display so much emotion that their actions become hysterical. On the fringe of this comical demonstration, stands Elijah all alone. After a few minutes an ironic smile crosses his face and then sarcastic ridicule comes from his mouth. He begins to taunt the prophets, questioning their gods and eventually challenging them to show themselves real and alive. 1 Kings 18 reads, "At noon Elijah began to taunt them. 'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened'" (NIV). Elijah challenges the teachers of false doctrine, and slays them; not with the sword, but with argument.

Comedy offers a wonderful platform for today's faith based comedians to examine contemporary values in light of Christian truth. It has long been the role of the artist to critically view the world, creatively synthesize his observations, and offer a fresh outlook in a manner that will inspire the imagination of the audience. What makes the comedian unique, and distinctly effective, is his humorous filter. Once the comedian has observed life through this filter, he has in his comedic arsenal the means of safely relaying his viewpoint in a way that is easily treated and palatable for the audience.

Calvin College Professor Quentin Schultze in his book *Television: Manna From Hollywood?* comments:

Although comedy can be merely play, it can also be serious commentary on our culture and God's creation. Comedy can reinforce our prejudices, fuel our stereotypes, build our pride, and harden our hearts--all in the seemingly benign response of laughter (55).

The court jester played a vital role in cultures ruled by monarchs. The King was able to assimilate the truth, because humor helped him to question ideas and customs and see his situation from a fresh perspective -- a perspective that he may have been previously blinded to. When we face difficulties or decisions, we too can be blinded to the bigger picture because of the serious consequences often attached to these predicaments. The miracle of humor is that it can enlighten us to alternative views and approaches. As the jester knew well, the larger the issue, the greater the comedy needs to be...and the more dangerous!