

## **Why Aren't We Laughing?**

**By Dan Ruppel**

“Why isn't there more comedy on Christian television?” That's the question that stood out for me at the “Future of Christian Television” workshop at NRB 2005 in Anaheim.

Having worked in the comedy field for 30 years, I was excited to hear the lively discussion that followed this question. The spirited banter validated what I have been hearing in many Christian circles – the cry for more comedy!

After the workshop, I thought of three areas that may be affecting why we as Christians are missing golden opportunities to infuse more laughter into our programming.

**1) Comedy Writers Need To Work Too!** Christian comedy writers are out there. However, is Christian television embracing them? In Christian media, comedy writers are rare. This fact is due largely to Christian TV generally abandoning the scripting and creative development process because it is tied to the much-needed revenue generated by paid programming. Unfortunately, the bulk of this programming follows the tried-and-true talking head or magazine-style interview format.

I want to know why these sermon-based broadcasts neglect the creativity of comedians. Think about the powerful complementary impact that comedy writers could make by injecting hilarious theme-based sketches in between segments featuring the speaker.

**2) Lighten Up!** Communicating the Gospel and the truth of God's Word is a serious business – and the results of our efforts will be measured in eternity. However, that doesn't mean we have to be so serious in our programming that we can't make people smile and even laugh.

Dr. Humphrey Osmond, a professor of psychiatry at Princeton University, has speculated, “Jesus had an excellent sense of humor and pungent wit. If he hadn't, he could not have made such a favorable impression on publicans and sinners, and such an unfavorable impression on the religious establishment.”

By incorporating comedy programming, we can break down the stereotypical view of Christian TV – that we're self-righteous, prideful, rigid religionists – and we'll find our audiences increasing and more souls being won to Christ.

**3) Head into the Danger Zone!** As Christians, we too often sanitize our programs because we don't want to offend anyone – when we should be cutting edge and dangerous in our approach.

Am I saying we should be offensive? No! Our model is to speak the truth in love. Comedy offers an invaluable platform for examining contemporary values in light of Christian truth. Comedians have the unique opportunity to offer cultural observations in a manner that is easily entreated and palatable for a wide audience.

All that said, I think it's time for Christian TV to embrace comedy in all of its various forms. Audiences are asking for comedy. Just look at the success of mainstream sitcoms. The masses want comedy – so let's give it to them! A whole generation of writers and entertainers are ready to provide it.

Let's embrace comedy as a tool to share God's Word. If we do, I think we'll soon discover that few tools of communication can draw people to Christian truth more effectively than comedy.

### CHRISTIAN COMEDY IS EXPLODING!

Just thirty years ago, the church community as well as many in society at large, looked at Christian Comedy as nothing more than an oxymoron. Today, comedy from a Christian base is accepted, embraced and possibly becoming the most popular form of entertainment 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 their capacity crowds. This explosion has not gone unnoticed by the secular media. Recently Christian comedy has been the subject of interviews on CNN, FOX News, The Washington Post, The New Yorker, Christian Science Monitor and Radio America. We are also seeing the beginnings of a refreshing trend of Christians slowly dotting the staffs of network television's most successful sitcoms.

### BUT WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

Faith based humor has been with us from the beginning of creation. Back in the garden, Adam sorting through llamas and aardvarks in hopes of a potential mate, had to put a snicker on God's face. Soon after Adam delivered perhaps the first punchline to justify his disobedience when he told God, "It's this woman you gave me!" Years later, the prophet Elijah jeered and mocked the prophets of Baal by basically saying that their god was a "girlie man" who was probably on vacation. Jesus Himself used exaggeration and incongruity, two comedy staples, when He told of a man with a wooden plank in his eye who was attempting to remove a speck from another man's.

In modern times, religious humor has long been with us – be it a pastor who used a comical illustration, a youth group performing a comedy sketch at camp or a Christian humorist in the "good ole boy" ilk of Grady McNutt. But Christian Comedy as we know it today, presented in a contemporary style with social relevance, had its beginnings in the mid 1970's.

Christian Comedy has two primary pioneers: Mike Warnke, a humorist based in Nashville who mixed stand-up with Christian testimony and Isaac Air Freight, a sketch comedy team out of Los Angeles, shaped in the mold of the newly premiered *Saturday Night Live*...only from a Christian perspective. "People would ask me what is Christian Comedy?" says IAF founder Dan Ruppel, "Is it making jokes about God?" (*His reply was that we're not...*) I'd reply that we're not laughing at God, (*but rather*) /the humor is based/ on the absurdity of mankind attempting to live a purposeful, meaningful life without a relationship with their Creator."

Throughout the 70's and 80's, Warnke and IAF's popularity increased nationally as they

toured almost exclusively as the Christian communities main resource for humor. Beginning in the early 1990's a number of comedy club stand-ups with a strong Christian faith, began to fill the growing number of requests for church appearances. These talented performers brought a smart, professional sensibility to the craft of Christian comedy. Following their lead, we are now seeing an increasing group of polished comedic performers, who, having honed their craft before a faith filled audience, are now headliners in comedy clubs as well as writers and performers on network sitcoms.