

## EXCERPT



### ***What's So Funny About God?*** *A Theological Look at Humor*

December 31, 2019 | \$20, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5267-3

Jokes often touch on the biggest topics of our existence, but many Christians haven't taken humor seriously. This insightful yet delightful crash course from philosopher Steve Wilkens argues that viewing Scripture and theology through the lens of humor helps us understand the gospel and avoid the pitfalls of both naturalism and gnosticism, while facilitating a humble, honest, and appealing approach to faith.

## Reading Christianity Humorously

The point of this book is not that we should scour Scripture looking for humor on every page, although there is a lot more there than we usually recognize. Instead, the suggestion is that we should employ the structures and mechanisms of humor to gain insight into the Christian faith. Stated otherwise, the idea is that we think of Christianity, and ourselves, humorously. This is an “adverbial” approach to faith and humor. Adverbs, if I remember my junior high grammar correctly, describe actions and modify verbs; they talk about how something is done (and frequently end in -ly). The primary theme in this book, then, is to meditate on what we might see in Scripture and in our faith when we look at them humorously.

It is hard to define humor itself. A dictionary definition such as “something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing” hardly seems to capture the richness and variety of humor. Instead of attempting to define humor, it seems more helpful to focus on how it works. Humor builds on punch-line surprises, disruption of the conventional, reversal of expectation, juxtaposition of seeming incommensurate things, challenging boundaries, misinterpretation, redefinition of the familiar, satire, paradox, irony, and other related devices. If these elements are also part of the very fabric of the Christian story—and I'm convinced they are—then reading Scripture humorously holds the possibility of opening dimensions of the faith in new ways, seeing things from a fresh vantage point, and recognizing some spiritual blind spots. God defeats Israel's enemies with a woefully undermanned military force armed with band instruments (Judges 7), elevates Jacob the gimpy swindler to the role of Patriarch of the Chosen People, and adopts us as heirs of eternal life “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8). Doesn't it seem possible that these incongruities and surprises share common ground with humor, and isn't the delight we should feel at the oddity of these stories akin to the delight we experience in a good joke?

The flip side of this adverbial methodology will provide a secondary motif within the book, in that I will raise the question of what it might mean to think about humor theologically. Jimmy Fallon's cue line to signal the beginning of his *Tonight Show* monologue is, “Here's what people are talking about.” If we listen carefully, we discover what those around us are talking about through their humor. Jokes about death, sex, gates of heaven judgment, money, politics, and marriage cue us in to the fact that ultimate issues are top of mind for people. Gallows humor and quips about aging and nonfunctional body parts expose human fears and provide glimmers of hope. Insecurities and a sense of impotence are often the undertones in sarcasm directed at the wealthy and powerful. Self-deprecating humor is often the only form of confession that we will hear from friends and neighbors. This list will grow as we move through the book, but suffice it to say here that humor is often the conduit by which we express our frustrations, anxiety, joys, loves, and opinions about life's biggest issues. Since these are obviously matters of theological concern, we ought to be theologically attuned to humor.

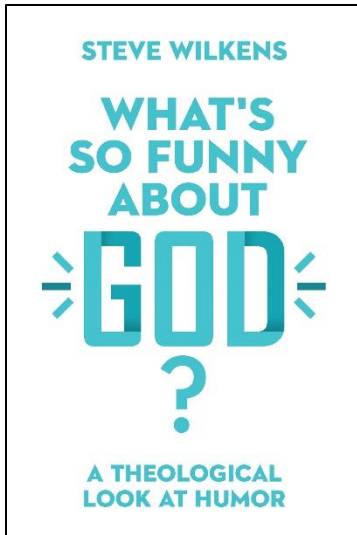
The aim of these musings about humor's relationship to Christianity is not to create a happy-face church that is more fun than our usual offerings, an alternative to the comedy club without the two-drink minimum. Not to say that some congregations couldn't make things a tad more interesting. Some churches feel like a hostage situation in which they hope the captives will hang around long enough that Stockholm syndrome will kick in and they'll eventually join the cause. Instead, I view interpreting faith humorously as a way, one way, of thinking about who we are and who God is. I'm



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“Arguing that our unique ability among animals to appreciate humor is linked to our rationality, moral sensibility, and aesthetic sense, Wilkens makes a good case for adding a fourth transcendental to the true, the good, and the beautiful—the funny. Along the way, he provides comedic interpretations of biblical books like Jonah and Esther and others in the New Testament. This is the best Christian understanding of humor to date—and by far the funniest.”

**John Morreall**, author of *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*

working hard to be sensitive to the tunnel vision that often accompanies the zeal of a new convert. Reading Christianity humorously has brought a freshness to my faith, and I'm excited about this. But it leads to the temptation to overstate the case and see humor even where it isn't.

The Christian faith has a broad array of valid forms of expression. Sermons, heartfelt conversation, devotional thoughts, and a range of other forms all have their place and are useful. Still, I'm also convinced that one of the most potent ways of expressing, understanding, and deepening faith is woefully underutilized. Too often, humor has been sidelined, even discouraged, as a means of exploring, learning about, or growing in faith. However, Ecclesiastes tells us there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (Eccles 3:4). It seems that many Christians are overdue on finding a time to laugh, and I am convinced that our life in God's presence warrants a lot more laughter than we've imagined.

—Taken from the introduction



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**Steve Wilkens** (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is professor of philosophy and ethics at Azusa Pacific University. His books include *Hidden Worldviews*, *Faith and Reason: Three Views*, *Christianity & Western Thought* (volumes 2 and 3), and *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics*. He has also taught as an adjunct faculty member at Mount San Antonio College, Glendale Community College, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Azusa Pacific University's C. P. Haggard Graduate School of Theology.

# What's So Funny About God?

## Why prompted the idea for a book on theology and humor?

**Steve Wilkens:** Quite simply, I love humor and I love God. I was interested to see where the intersections were, but very few people seemed to be addressing this connection. The more I thought about it, this lack of attention appeared increasing odd because humor is one of my main love languages. If humor is a vehicle for love, I was convinced that God, who is love, had to be in there somewhere. Since I found so little out there on a deep meditation on God and theology, I concluded that if I was going to find such a book, I was going to have to write it myself. In addition to finding a lack of interest in humor and laughter, I also wanted to address the fact that theological writing almost always lacks a sense of play, levity, and joy. This seems to be a mismatch of medium and message since hope, joy, delight, and similar themes are major theological motifs.

## Where do we find God's sense of humor around us and in scripture?

**Steve:** Humor works through a number of tools such as misdirection, redefinition, surprise, sarcasm, irony, paradox, and particularly incongruity. The book's chapters are constructed around the incongruities that are scattered throughout theology: humans as ensouled animals, Jesus as both human and divine, life coming from death in the resurrection, seeing the supernatural in the mundane, the Christian as sinner and saved, and living in suffering at the same time we experience resurrection life. Ideas that seem contradictory but yet require each other stand at the heart of the faith. A comedic sense allows us to see where they appear in Scripture and understand them as God's joke for us.

## What do hope *What's So Funny About God?* contributes to theology and our understanding of God?

**Steve:**

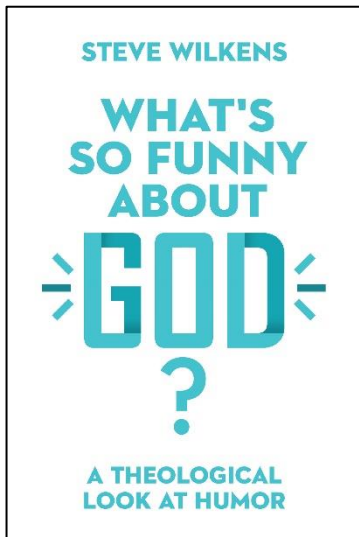
- It helps open up a much-neglected area in theology. If theology has something to say about every area of significance in human life, then humor, as a universal phenomenon that brings joy and goodness to life, seems to have a rightful place in theological discussion.
- It reveals the mistaken notion that laughter is the opposite of seriousness. Most jokes deal with the most significant dimensions of our life—marriage, death, illness, child-rearing, work, sex, God. In fact, many people only feel comfortable expressing the joys, shortcomings, frustration, and fears in the deepest parts of life through humor.
- If the good news is truly good, examining its various facets through the lens of humor may help academics express the joy and winsomeness of God's faithfulness, grace, and forgiveness in new ways.



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## Q & A



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“Steve Wilkens is funny in many ways—but God? In this funny but also serious guide, Wilkens shows what humor is and how the Bible, theology, church folks, and yes, even God, are indeed funny. Who knew? This book is even funnier than the six volume Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, at a fraction of the cost! You should buy it.”

**Alan G. Padgett**, professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary

#### **How does this book relate to the body of your scholarly work?**

**Steve:** In terms of my subject area, this is a new direction, with the exception of a little book I did on Christian trivia with IVP a few years back. However, in most of my work, especially work directed toward a student audience, I have written with a light touch and incorporated enough humor to attempt to hold attention to the subject without distracting from the topic.

In terms of future scholarly trajectory, I am planning a second book in which humor becomes the vehicle through which to encourage a fresh (or refreshed) perspective on Christian life. In short, I am finding humor to be a transformative element in how I view my faith, and I'm actively thinking about how I can play a role in helping others rethink their own walk.



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