

# The Laughing Messiah

by Greg Hartman

**F**rom 1997 to 2001 I operated one of the most dangerous, ungodly, immoral and unhealthy websites on the Internet. Or so you might have thought if you read my e-mail (see “Unclear on the Concept”). The site, which I ran for About.com until the dot-com bubble burst, was a Christian humor site.<sup>1</sup>

I learned several interesting things during my tenure as a Christian humor columnist: That I was nearly unique in my field, that it’s impossible *not* to offend someone if more than 25 Christians read what you write and that the body of Christ desperately needs to grow a funny bone.

Don’t Worry—Be Happy

In *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, Philip Yancey tells the story of a series of public debates between G.K. Chesterton, Sigmund Freud, H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw:

“Shaw, seeing history as a struggle between the classes, proposed a remedy of socialist utopianism. Wells interpreted the past as an evolutionary march toward progress and enlightenment (a view the rest of the century would do much to refute). Freud held up a vision of humanity free of repression and the bondage of the subconscious.

“Ironically, all three of these progressives held in common a rather stern countenance. With furrowed brows and dark, haunted eyes they would expostulate on their optimistic visions of the future. Meanwhile, with a twinkle in his eye, laughing at his own jokes, Chesterton would cheerfully defend such ‘reactionary’ concepts as original sin and the Last Judgment. In the public debates, typically he would charm the audience over to his side, then celebrate by hosting his chastened opponent at the nearest pub. Chesterton seemed to sense instinctively that a stern prophet will rarely break through to a society full of religion’s ‘cultured despisers;’ he preferred the role of jester.”<sup>2</sup>

Chesterton’s philosophy seemed to be “If God be for us, who can be

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against us?” followed quite naturally by “Don’t worry—be happy!”

Earnest and Dreadful Stuff

I once stumbled across a fascinating letter and response on humorist Garrison Keillor’s website:

A woman who worked in a church office asked, “Why—if the Bible says a cheerful heart is good

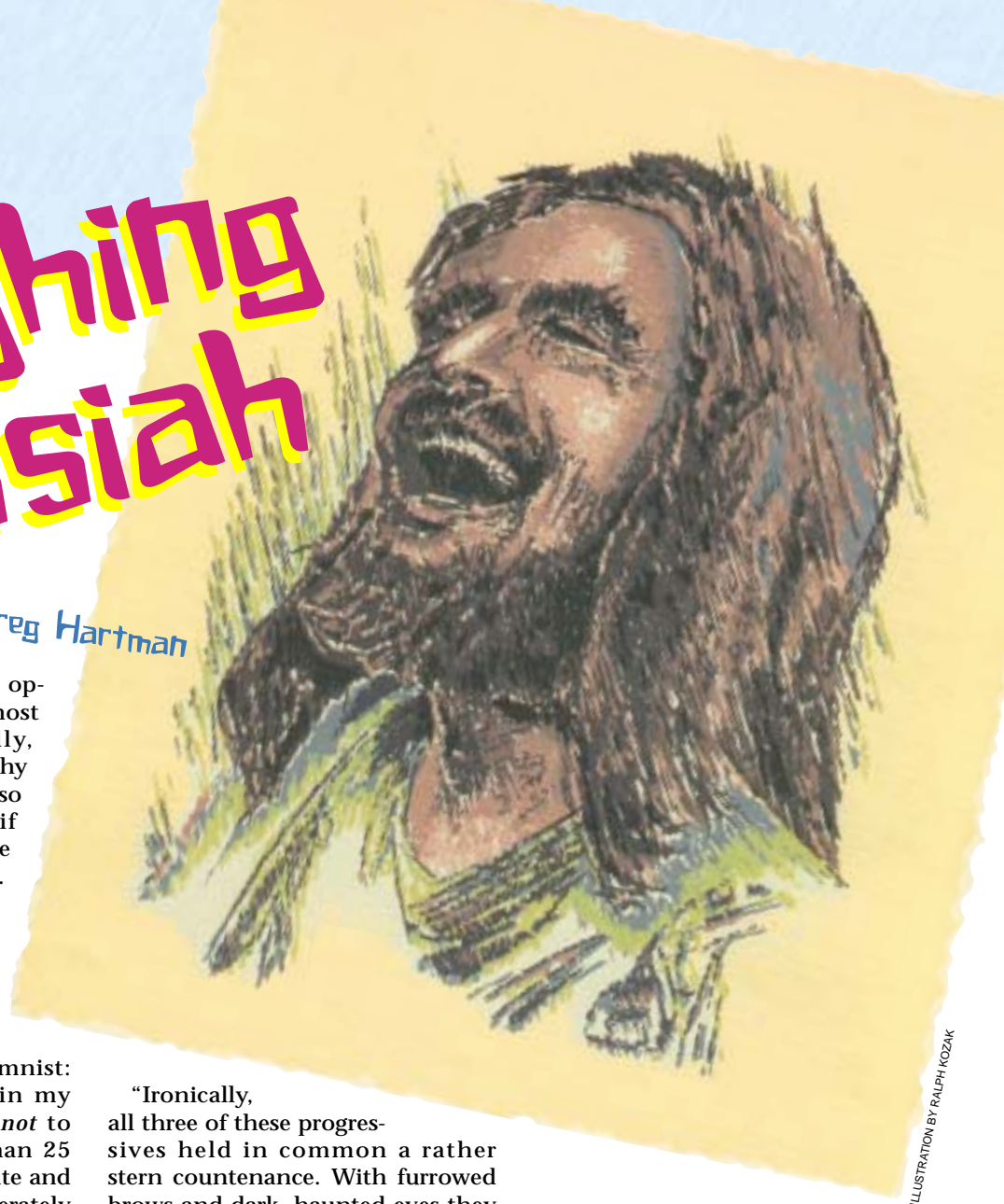
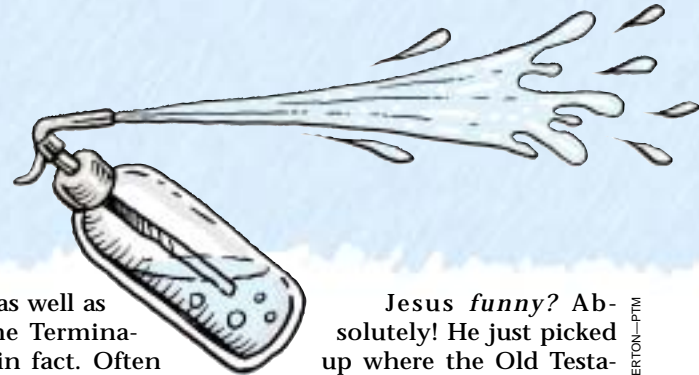


ILLUSTRATION BY RALPH KOZAK



SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS, MONTE WOLVERTON—PTM

medicine—are Christians so grumpy all the time?” Keillor responded:

“Christians aren’t immune to the blues, but you can keep your sense of humor, keeping in mind the comedy of the gospels. Clearly, Christ gives his followers a satiric sense of the world, of its transitory values, that should make a Christian feel buoyant and cheerful. On the other hand, most of what’s been written on the topic of Christian humor is pretty earnest and dreadful stuff.”

If this world is temporary, if we’ve peeked at the end of the book and we know God wins, why are we so—well, earnest and dreadful about everything? Keillor probably isn’t even a believer, but he caught something many Christians miss: The Bible is a comedy in the classic literary sense: A story with a happy ending. Not only that, it’s *loaded* with comedy in the modern slapstick-and-pratfall sense as well.

Are you aghast at the thought of comedy in the Gospels? If so, you probably have in mind the Jesus described in a Renaissance-era forgery ascribed to Publius Lentulus, Pontius Pilate’s successor:

“He is a tall man, well-shaped and of an amiable and reverend aspect; his hair is of a color that can hardly be matched, falling into graceful curls...and his beard, and of a color suitable to his hair, reaching below his chin...his eyes bright blue, clear and serene. No one has ever seen him laugh.”

Ah, yes—the Earnest and Dreadful Jesus. Looks like an American rock star, not a Palestinian carpenter. Never cracks a smile; emotes about

as well as the Terminator, in fact. Often appears in movies; nowhere to be found in the Gospels.

I’ll never forget a funeral I attended several years ago. Joanne, a pastor friend’s wife, had died unexpectedly, and at her funeral her numerous grandchildren placed precious little momentos in the casket with their granny. One of them propped up a small portrait of Jesus that Joanne had given him. In

the picture Jesus was laughing. Not just smiling, mind you—his head was thrown back and his mouth wide open, roaring with glee, as if he’s just heard a great Samaritan joke.<sup>3</sup>

I heard a couple of ladies whispering in the pew behind me: “I wish someone would take that picture of Jesus out of there,” one of them fumed. “It’s so *irreverent*,” the other agreed.

Get Behind Me, Satan

I wondered if they’d ever read the Gospels. How could the Earnest and Dreadful Jesus give playful, semi-insulting nicknames to his disciples? Who would accuse the Earnest and Dreadful Jesus of being a drunkard? How could the Earnest and Dreadful Jesus be so funny?

Jesus *funny*? Absolutely! He just picked up where the Old Testament left off, as he said himself—and the Old Testament is funny, too.

- Balaam, hotshot prophet for hire, misses seeing an angel—although his donkey sees it—and sees no significance in the fact that his donkey can suddenly talk (Numbers 22:18-30).

- When the priests of Baal try unsuccessfully to summon him, Elijah wonders aloud if Baal is silent because he’s busy going to the bathroom (1 Kings 18:26-27, NLT).

- In quick succession, Elisha opens the eyes of his scared servant, blinds the overconfident Aramites about to attack him, tells them he’s not Elisha but he knows where Elisha is—and leads them right into the king’s stronghold. The king, an earnest and dreadful sort of

guy, begs to kill them all. “Nah,” Elisha says. “Throw ‘em a party and send ‘em home; they’ll leave us alone.” He does; they do (2 Kings 6:14-23).

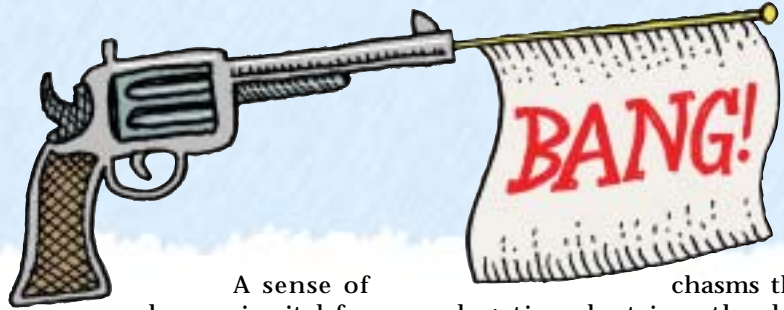
- Isaiah chuckles at the stupidity of a carpenter who bows before the idol he just carved, intoning, “You made me” (Isaiah 44:15-19).

- When the woman at the well starts an argument about the relative merits of various temples, Jesus sweeps it aside with an embarrassing exposé of her sex life. “Sir,” she says, “I can see that you are a prophet” (John 4:17-19).

- I especially enjoy Jesus’ insane hyperbole. Who can forget the plank-eyed speck inspectors, the

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.  
—Proverbs 17:22

If any cleric or monk speaks such words, laughter, let him be anathema.  
—An ordinance from the Second Council of Constance, 1418



camel-swallowing gnat-strainers, the slave who owed his master billions of dollars and promised to pay it all back or the business manager who praises his accountant for embezzlement?

### The Laughing Messiah

I love a good laugh, but is that all there is to humor? No way. Humor is a powerful tool.

- Humor is disarming: Jesus knows, as does every satirist, that the sword of truth can hurt less—yet cut deeper—when it’s tempered in humor.

Bruce Marchiano brilliantly avoids the Earnest and Dreadful Jesus in *The Visual Bible*. During the Sermon on the Mount, Marchiano’s Jesus picks up a huge shepherd’s staff, holds it next to his eye and delivers the familiar rebuke against hypocrisy with George Carlin-style mugging and exaggerated, sweeping gestures. Jesus is laughing, the adults are laughing and the kids are laughing at this goofy Messiah with the log stuck in his eye.

In the midst of all the laughter, Jesus—with a huge grin—says: “You *hypocrite!*” And when the sword of truth pierces them to the heart, the people are laughing so hard—at themselves—that they barely feel it.

- Humor is healthy: Doctors today know what Solomon knew:

A sense of humor is vital for good physical and psychological health (Proverbs 17:22).

chasms than apologetics, doctrine, theology or debate. There’s more than laughter to carrying the gospel to the lost, of course. But without the bridges humor can build, we may not be able to reach them at all.

- Humor helps us not to take ourselves—or anyone—or anything else—too seriously: I don’t know about you, but nothing sticks in my craw quite like celebrities who believe their own P.R.

Once I saw Madonna on a talk show discussing *Sex*, her book of pornographic photos. When asked about her detractors, she said, “I think people are afraid of me and my art because they don’t understand what I’m really trying to say.”

I’m not afraid of Madonna, and I think I know what she’s trying to say (something along the lines of “Hey everybody! Lookit me! Lookit me!”). Still, I was impressed that she could say it with a straight face.

True, Madonna’s just an entertainer, whereas the work of Christians is ministry. And don’t get me wrong—I take the gospel very seriously indeed. Almost everything else is negotiable though.

Without being flippant about life, I strive not to take myself or anything else more seriously than necessary. It’s a fine line sometimes, but

## Ready, Aim, Fire!

If satire is a legitimate weapon for Christians to use in public discourse, who should we wield it against? As a public service, allow me to suggest a few targets:

### People who view the Bible as a political weapon and Jesus as a celebrity endorsement:

- ▶ The Zealots (John 6:15)
- ▶ Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:18-20)
- ▶ PETA, which insists that Jesus was a vegetarian
- ▶ Cannabis Culture, which insists that Jesus smoked marijuana<sup>1</sup>

### People who play at intellectualism until it forces them into hypocrisy:

- ▶ The Pharisees (Matthew 9:34)
- ▶ The Jesus Seminar, which published the findings of its research before the research began<sup>2</sup>

### People who don’t want Christianity to be true. They are not interested in truth; if they study the Bible at all, it is to nitpick, not to learn:

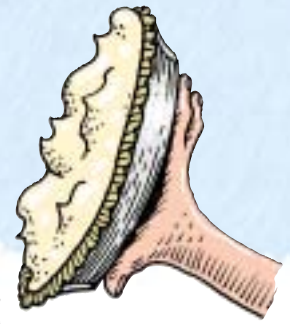
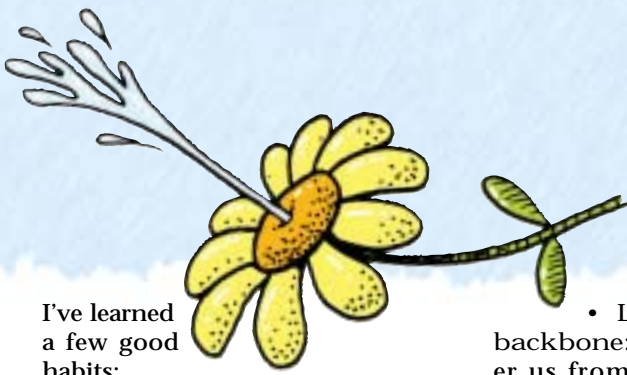
- ▶ Those who tried to trap Jesus (Matthew 22:15-22; John 8:3-7)
- ▶ “Free” Thinkers, who somehow are free to think of nothing but atheism
- ▶ Bible “contradiction” collectors<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I’m not making this up. In fact, their spokesman contacted me when I ran the Christian humor site and challenged me to a televised debate. When I declined, he sneered that I was afraid I would lose, but the reality was that I didn’t want to dignify their ideas by suggesting they were worth debating in the first place.

<sup>2</sup> I’m not making this up either.

<sup>3</sup> I don’t know why a humor columnist would be a target for this stuff, but I got e-mails all the time from people who sneered, “You think religion’s so hot—what about this?” and then repeat a Bible difficulty they’d heard somewhere. I usually responded like this: “Incredible—after 2,000 years YOU thought of the one argument that has brought Christianity crashing down around our ears!”

- Humor builds bridges: Public discourse today has degenerated into special-interest groups screaming across chasms at one another and wondering why no one listens. The ability to laugh—especially at ourselves—will, in my humble opinion, do more to bridge those



I've learned a few good habits:

1. When I look at myself in the mirror first thing in the morning, I quote Ecclesiastes 9:4: "A live dog is better off than a dead lion."

2. If something happens to me that's going to tempt other people to laugh at me, I try to make it easy for them and laugh first.

3. If I find myself in the sort of situation about which people tend to say, "A year from now this is going to be really funny," I forego the waiting period and laugh immediately.

4. If I can't find humor in a situation at all, I take stock: Is it really that serious? Some catastrophes really are that serious. But catastrophes are rare, thankfully, and if it's not a catastrophe, I refer back to No. 3.

• Humor can warn: When Jesus did his log-in-the-eye schtick or accused the Pharisees of swallowing camels, did anyone laugh? I think so. Did that mean his warnings weren't real? No.

Humor can disarm, as I said before. And an unarmed person is more likely to take a warning seriously.

What Are We Afraid of?

Why aren't Christians more willing to use and enjoy humor—especially satire?

• Lack of backbone: Lord, deliver us from the sin of being too nice! Some people have the spiritual gift of being offended, as my pastor says. Get used to it. If we can't bring ourselves to face the possibility of offending someone, we'll never be able to consistently speak the truth (Proverbs 27:5-6).

God is for us (Romans 8:31),

or that we have the right, if not the obligation, to warn of God's judgment against sin, we'll stay seated and silent (John 7:24). Furthermore, if our own walk is inconsistent, we'll only add to the perception that Christians are hypocrites (Romans 2:23-24).

• Lack of insight: You don't have to be a celebrity to take yourself too seriously; even small-town pastors can get caught in self-idolatry. We can hardly wield satire legitimately if we're targets ourselves (Romans 12:3).

If I Had a Hammer

Can humor be used inappropriately? No doubt about it (Ecclesiastes 7:6). The more powerful a tool, the more destructive its misuse. If you ask me, the abundance of crude, cruel humor in the world today just proves it's a tool Christians can and should use more effectively.

We serve a wisenheimer—I mean, mighty God. Let's all enjoy a good laugh with him. □

<sup>1</sup> No, the term Christian humor is not an oxymoron. I was asked if it was hundreds of times by people who no doubt thought they were hilarious. I felt the way basketball players probably do when people say "How's the weather up there?" Hyuk hyuk hyuk.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places* (New York: Moorings, 1995), pp. 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> "Hey Jesus—how many Samaritans does it take to screw in a light bulb?"  
"I dunno, Peter. How many?"  
"Two: One to screw it in and the other to tell everyone it's just as good as any light bulb in Jerusalem!"

Greg Hartman is an award-winning humorist who nevertheless don't get no respect—no respect at all.

## Unclear on the Concept

Part of running the Christian humor site was sending out a joke via e-mail every day to about 15,000 subscribers. One of my favorite pastimes was collecting responses from people who were, to be charitable, unclear on the concept: You're supposed to laugh at jokes!

To Whom it may concern:

*This is a stench in the nostrils of God. How can you say that this is Christlike in any way? Please remove me from your mailing list. You should be ashamed. The Lord rebuke you.*

Dear Mr. Hartman

*Please DO NOT send me any more e-mails. I don't find humor in your e-mails, and I don't believe humor should be related to Christianity. I always take being a Christian very seriously. There is no joking about it.*

This is my favorite:

To Greg Hartman:

*When I found this "Christian humor site" I was thrilled. Until I just checked it out a little closer. CHRISTIAN? How DARE you!!! I immediately deleted your site from my favorites. Tonight, I find that it DID NOT delete. Talk about being "of the devil," this site surely is. How you can get away with calling this "Christian Humor" is unbelievable. My consolation is knowing you will answer come Judgment Day.*

Hope she wasn't on her church's hospitality team.

I take that back. This is my favorite response of all time:

Dear Greg:

*I struggle with severe chronic depression. Sometimes the only way I can get going in the morning is by reading your jokes. I just wanted you to know someone appreciates what you do. Now that reader got it!*

• Lack of confidence: A satirist needs the guts to stand up in public, point at the actions of someone else, and—loudly—say, "Wrong!" If we don't really believe