

# Laughing For The Lord

**Tired of being so serious? Christian comedians are helping God's people loosen up, enjoy a good joke and spread the joy.**

About 500 people are squeezed into a theater at West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles for a Saturday evening of live comedy. Smiling and snickering, they prod Christian comedian Robert Duckworth for more. Onstage, he's animating for them like a young Bill Cosby, waving his hands and wiggling his fingers, mimicking the object of his banter—church ushers.

“Ushers are like gangs! Haven't you noticed that in church, ushers all wear the same clothes—like gang members?” deadpans Duckworth, pausing for punch.

“Ushers treat the collection plate like it belongs to them. You can't even get change,” he whines, molding a mock scowl and revealing one of his many faces. “And they have all of these rules. They will not let you get away with anything! I tell you, if we wanna catch bin Laden we should send a bunch of ushers.”

At this, single moms, former street thugs, unsaved visitors, an entire Pentecostal youth group, grandmas, grandpas and at least one Baptist pastor explode in a belly-busting, knee-smacking uproar.

Duckworth is second up on this night at the monthly, always-sold-out Gospel Comedy Slamm. Christian comedians Nazareth, Bone, Willie Brown and Lamont Bonman follow him, receiving equally robust chortles.

“We need this,” says recording artist Kecia Lewis, who performed between comedy acts. “Humor has a way of helping the church not take itself so seriously. This is an opportunity to let our guard down and laugh at ourselves.”

Indeed.

Whether laughing at themselves or something else equally as funny, Christians are guffawing like never before. The funnymen and funnywomen making them laugh aren’t merely grown-up class clowns, either. They’re legitimate hams, gifted impersonators, quick-witted improvisators, clever storytellers and seasoned satirists.

And more.

They’re comedians with a cause—they love Jesus. Many segue from rollicking repartee to personal testimony—or to an altar call, as Lamont Bonman did at Gospel Komedy Slamm. Eighty people answered his invitation that night.

Divine humor just may be the next big wave to burst on the Christian scene and beyond. “The door is so wide open,” says Christian comedienne Chonda Pierce. “Part of this is where the world is at—we are a desperate people needing to laugh. God is saying, ‘Funny people ... go to work.’”

## **Separation of Church and Humor**

The Christian reformer Martin Luther once said: “If you’re not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there.”

Evidently, some Christians don't expect to see him there. Smirking theologians over the years have panned the idea that Jesus laughed. He wept—but never told a joke, the argument goes. Other believers, such as holiness folks and fundamentalists, have a reputation for banning almost everything that amuses.

Maybe it's because Christians don't like to laugh at themselves that people outside the church's four walls end up doing it for them. Former Saturday Night Live cast member Dana Carvey, who was raised in a Protestant church, drew from his own adolescent experiences at church to create his biting "Church Lady" stereotype. Similar imagery of solemn liturgical practices and dour presentations of the gospel, some believe, has helped identify the church as a fun-free zone.

"Some places, it was considered sacrilegious and inappropriate to laugh in church," observes Dan Ruppel of his experiences with the popular '70s and '80s comedy troupe Isaac Air Freight.

Mark Anderson, a Christian and part owner of The Improv comedy clubs in Dallas, Phoenix and Washington, D.C., says: "For years the idea of 'Christian comedy' was literally a joke. Christians were viewed as overly somber people with no joy in their lives. To a certain extent, Christians are still perceived that way."

Even believers fall for this thinking. Annalee Gallegos, 16, who attended the Gospel Comedy Slamm, says: "I didn't expect it to be funny. I thought it would be some preacher telling me it was OK to smile. But this was really funny! It was as good as anything on TV."

So what happened? When did Christians get so funny?

Actually, the honing of Christian comics' art and humor has been coming for a while. However, today—for the first time—clean comedians, Christians who do comedy, Christian comics and church comedians (there are distinctions among the four types) have come together under one umbrella.

Eight years ago Mike Williams—a Florida-based church comedian and former writer for comic Carrot Top of AT&T's "10-10-220" TV ads—started a Christian comedians e-mail list of 12 people with the help of fellow funnyman Justin Fennell. Today the list has become an association—the 80-member Christian Comedy Coalition.

At a meeting of the coalition in January, organized by Williams, about 70 of the church's funniest met face to face at Biola University in La Mirada, California. It was the second such meeting—the first was last year at Pierce's Funny Farm in Tennessee. A third is planned for this summer.

Before Biola, most Christian comedians were lone rangers—many didn't know other comics existed. At Biola, they bonded, traded tips on their craft and displayed their gifts of comedic gab.

Mark Lowry, who began his career singing and performing in local theater productions before turning to comedy, joined the others at Biola but wasn't expecting much. A showcase performance by several of the comics changed his mind.

"I was surprised. I heard 10 comedians, all of them funny," Lowry says. "Four or five of them were cough-up-a-lung funny."

Williams agrees.

"I have never had a night in my life where I laughed so hard," he says. "All of these guys have credibility and are working in comedy at least part time. We are showing the world that we can write clean comedy, and it can honor God, too."

"[The new comedians'] craft is so excellent," adds Ruppel—president of the Christian Comedy Coalition—who recently left a staff position with a Foursquare church in Downey, California, to get Isaac Air Freight going again. "We are united in our mission to bring a Christian message to comedy and to the world. It is a specific calling."

"However," he adds, "when we began, we were too heavy on the message and sacrificed our jokes. We had to learn, and we had to get funnier."

"[Christian comedians] cannot have this ambiguous he that can [refer to] Jesus or someone else. If we are going to be effective ... we have to blend in a message."

Vernard "Bone" Hampton, president of Comics4Christ, says comedy—whether performed by Christians or non-Christians—has to be real to get anywhere with an audience.

"To be a good comic you have to figure out what about you is funny. The best comedy is based on pain and conflict," he says. "Everything is set up in the world to not be a Christian, so I am trying to live as a Christian in the world—this is what makes comedy so real."

“We talk about things we all go through, even as Christians, but are taboos in church—like how you struggle with lust. How do I make this funny, but still get the point across?”

Bob Smiley—very popular on the public high school circuit—unfurls hysterical yarns that tack a biblical truth on the end. Usually his stories are taken from his everyday life, such as the one about an extremely overweight man who climbed into the public hot tub with Smiley at a Las Vegas hotel. Smiley, being a good Christian, immediately got up to leave, but the man who physically repulsed him was a Christian who had joined Smiley to try to share Christ with him.

Jennifer Rawlings, a Los Angeles-based mainstream comedienne who has also performed her act at The Church on the Way—a leading Foursquare congregation in nearby Van Nuys—notes: “We, as Christians, take ourselves so seriously—we think we are so superior. Clearly we are not. We are all sinners. If we cannot laugh at ourselves and be honest with ourselves, how are we going to be ... light in the world? We must be real.

“Real people have emotions and feelings. If we do not laugh at ourselves, we miss the boat. God is the one who is perfect, and we are not.”

Thor Ramsey, who headlines at mainstream comedy clubs and has been featured at the Vineyard Church in Anaheim, California, points out that a comedian’s role is actually “prophetic” in nature.

“A comedian’s job is to say what everybody else is thinking but no one is saying. There is a prophetic role in that they are truth-tellers,” he observes.

“Most comedy is based on criticism, things that are so dumb, but we still do them. Sin opens up the way for more humor.

“It is a coping mechanism ... if you don't laugh, you will cry. It can play a part in the healing process.”

## **Christian Night at the Improv**

Comedy has long been seen as a viable ministry tool, yet only recently have the quality and quantity quotients risen. During the 1990s and the first few years of this century, the kind of unabashed humor once relegated mostly to vacation Bible schools or singles retreats has leapfrogged into the Christian mainstream.

One-liners, once punched out primarily as sermon primers by only the most jocular of pastors, have bolted into every crevice of churchdom. Suddenly it is permissible for Christians to be silly, slap-sticking, belly-laughing crackups.

Whereas Youth With A Mission's and Jews for Jesus' mirthy antics—which often featured whimsical street drama as an entree to evangelism—were once seen as extreme, today every other church in America seems to follow the Willow Creek include-a-comedy-bit-on-Sunday-morning mantra. Seeker-friendly churches are fast becoming snicker-friendly churches. Even Southern California's Biola University now offers instruction in pulpit-wise funniness.

As recently as five years ago Jeff Allen, Isaac Air Freight, Mark Lowry, Chonda Pierce and Mike Warnke—and to a lesser

degree Paul Aldrich and Burt Rosenberg—were about the only nationally laughed-at Christian acts. Today the roster of the holy and zany has expanded exponentially.

Pierce and Lowry, by far the biggest names, have announced tentative plans for a national tour—together and with a lineup of fellow wits. The Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) has hooked up with impressionist Phil Snyder for a pilot featuring Christian comedy acts, and on another show TBN regularly features pastor-turned-cut-up Dennis Swanberg. Bonman's Gospel Comedy Slamm sells out every month in Los Angeles and is being replicated in churches across America.

Outreach Ministries of Vista, California, has announced the launching of a new division called Christian Comedians (formerly part of Adam Christing's Clean Comedians), with the idea of helping churches host events headlining believers who have punchlines.

Bone, Ramsey and a growing gaggle of others headline at mainstream comedy clubs—some of the venues actually have “Christian” nights. One of them is the West Palm Beach Improv in West Palm Beach, Florida, founded by Renee Hart. Hart discovered a profit-making answer to cries to clean up comedy.

“It got so bad, my mother would not come—and I own the club,” she says. “So [early in 2002] we started a Christian night, and it has been sold out every time except once—we even make money.”

Hart's club brings in the likes of Ramsey, Bone, Robert G. Lee, Nazareth and others for a two-night run once a month. The local Christian radio station has been promoting the events.



It has been such a hit that Hart has added a late afternoon youth show.

“Comedy is cleaning up, in general,” she says. “It was a party scene. Now it is more like a business. Comedians are more serious now. You still have the dirty comics, but I don’t book them as often—the public does not want it.”

“We [Christian comedians] are no longer a stepchild,” says comedian Lee. “We are coming into our own. The church is always 20 years behind the culture. There was a comedy explosion in mainstream society in the 1980s, and now it is happening in the church.”

And, on some fronts, the church is taking that momentum back to the mainstream. The notion that secular audiences are a hard-sell for Christian comics is perhaps that—just a notion. Non-Christian crowds these days at least seem more receptive to Christian comics—but only if the comedy is done right. Several professional comedians have been successful in non-Christian settings—an accomplishment that mostly has to do with their being painfully honest.

It was in the mainstream atmosphere that Teresa Roberts Logan became a club comedienne. Logan, who had memorized all of the Isaac Air Freight sketches as a youth and had considered being a missionary, took her brand of smart-alecky, stand-up humor to clubs—but she has never felt pressure to be vulgar.

“I am just me, so I don’t really think about it,” she says. “I am the same person at church that I am at clubs. I feel like Jesus is right there laughing with me.”

Rawlings has had much the same experience.

"I figure there are millions of people just like me," the mother of four says. "It is not about the church. It is about life. Reality is what makes me laugh."

A number of Christians who have worked in mainstream clubs all agreed with Bone's bottom line: "In comedy, they will allow you to talk about anything you want, as long as you are funny."

But even Bone, who has studied under Steve Harvey and appeared with Sinbad, admits that not everything done in church can be done in a club.

"When I am at a club, I assume no one in the room is a Christian. I talk in a vernacular they will understand, not churchese," he says. "If I am in a club I cannot say, 'God has blessed me with so much, except getting a wife.' The room will be blank. The world doesn't view a wife as a blessing."

Sherri Shepherd, who plays Ramona on the ABC sitcom *Less Than Perfect*, started in secular clubs long before she became a Christian. She too finds she must adjust her act.

"I talk about my journey as a Christian and make it funny," the comedienne says. "In church I can talk about trying to submit to my husband, but I cannot use the word submit in a club, so I talk about getting along. Submission does not go over with women in the club crowd. But, still, a lot of times I find ways to get God in, and they do not know they are getting the gospel."

“Christian comedy is something that has a spiritual base,” Snyder explains. “In order to appeal to people who are outside the church you want to be as good as or better than those in the world, without compromising the message.”

“Comedy, to me, is just a communications skill,” Lowry concludes. “Just being funny is OK, but if you are a Christian comedian, sometime during the night you better come around to the cross.”

By “coming around to the cross,” Christian comedians mean weaving a message into the one-liners and sketches or having an altar call at the end.

“I would rather take it a step further and make my comedy about something—make it matter,” Pierce adds. “In my house, all roads lead to the cross.”

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## Clean Can Be A Scream

**What is really shocking in comedy these days is when comics don't use four-letter words.**

Dressed in black pants, a brown shirt and a leather jacket, 40-something Christian funnyman Nick Arnette leaps onto center stage. His first joke evokes the first groans: “Fu-ton,” he states, exaggerating the first syllable, “is Japanese for sore back.”

It's not a “Christian” one-liner, as some would define it, but—in sharp contrast with so much of the dirty humor in

comedy today—it's clean.

Arnette, who once toured with Jerry Seinfeld, calls himself “a Christian who does clean comedy.” On this night he's the first act of the Superbowl of Clean Comedy being held in Southern California at the Whittier Area Community Church.

He unloads one crowd-pleaser after another, ending with a shtick that would have made Seinfeld himself smile: “What do you call a dude in Mexico? Madudo! In India? Hindude! In Ireland? O'Dude! And Jesus fed the multitudes.” Silly to the core, Arnette seemingly invents fun out of thin air.

The crowd of 100 or so laugh through routines by Michael Joiner, the Panic Squad (a Canada-based improv team), Scott Wood and Teresa Roberts Logan.

Adam Christing, a comedian himself and president of Clean Comedians, put together the event as a benefit to raise money for playground equipment for children in Estonia.

The entire Superbowl cast, in fact, is part of Clean Comedians, a loosely knit group that includes comics, ventriloquists, humorists and a dead-ringer impersonator of George W. Bush. Clean Comedians books corporate meetings, school programs, private parties and other nonchurch events—about 350 in 2002—for those on its roster of 76.

“The core of my vision is to be salt and light in a secular arena,” Christing explains. “People say, ‘Why do you keep it clean?’ and that gives us a chance to give our testimony.

“Comedy always has a balloon to pop. We want to make sure it is delivered in a spirit of fun. Jesus never attacked an individual.”

Christing and his fellow clean comics fashion their family-friendly sets as a response to the trend in mainstream comedy to bypass traditional decency.

“Mainstream comedy over the last 20 years has become vulgar, crass and predictable,” says Mark Anderson, owner of the clean comedy venues Wonderama in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Old Towne Theater in Alexandria, Virginia. “Now what is shocking is when someone does not use four-letter words.”

How hard is it to be clean and funny?

“For me it is not restrictive. It comes easier,” Scott Wood says. “The cleanness comes out of the lifestyle I live. I do a church one night; I do a comedy club the next night—same act.

“You can still talk about life and be clean. You don’t have to put people down, use four-letter words or vulgarities,” Wood explains. “I save all of my foul language for the freeway—no, no, I’m kidding!”

Arnette adds: “I think we are held to a lot higher standard. [We must use] material that glorifies God—if Jesus was in the room, He would not be embarrassed to hear it. Once you stop fighting [the trend to be vulgar], God can bless you with other, better material.”

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