

A Serrated Edge

A Brief Defense of Biblical Satire
and Trinitarian Skylarking

by Douglas Wilson

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This book is for Rachel, who is one
of our graces in submissive wit.

*Whatever is funny is
subversive, every joke is
ultimately a custard pie.*

George Orwell

*Absurdity is always a
serious art.*

G.K. Chesterton

PREFACE

Prolegomena to Any Future Big Words

This small book may be considered as a work of exhortation. As I say this, I am mindful of Ambrose Bierce's definition of this most virtuous activity. "Exhort, v.t. In religious affairs, to put the conscience of another upon the spit and roast it to a nut-brown discomfort."

So perhaps I should say this is a work of *defensive* exhortation. As the editor of the magazine entitled *Credenda/Agenda* I am often asked something along the lines of, "What gives?" Behind such penetrating questions is the common assumption that the foibles of modern evangelicalism are treated, within our pages, with a less than perfect tenderness. This causes distress in some quarters, glee in others, and FAQs for the editors.

The assumptions behind such questions are fairly widespread, *fairly* here meaning "kind of" and not "with considerable justice." From time to time, some folks will make their way out to Moscow, Idaho, which is the magazine's point of origin, in order to visit us. Prior to their arrival, their only knowledge of the

place comes from the pages of our magazine. And after a short time here, they frequently discover that the people they meet who are associated with the magazine are, well, pleasant, and this disorients them. Not what they thought was on the menu.

A story not related to *Credenda* still illustrates the principles involved quite nicely. My wife was once in conversation with a woman she did not really know, and, as the conversation developed, the lights began to go on in the other woman's head. She then asked if my wife was married to Douglas Wilson. When Nancy confessed that this was in fact the case, the woman she was talking to expressed herself well. "But you seem so *nice!*"

Our investigations reveal that the austere world of black and white careful analysis, epistemological invective, doctrinal sarcasm, and eschatological jihad has obscured our sunny selves from public view. This is not necessarily a bad thing because our sunny selves can also take some getting used to. But we still thought a small book was in order. In the pages of *Credenda*, we are too busy doing what we do to explain it fully, but at some point an explanation is still called for. So here is a slim volume to put right next to that ever-growing *Hardy Boys in the Apocalypse* series by LaHaye and Jenkins. Call it our *apologia* for not apologizing.

Who will read this modest effort? Well, for starters, a lot of people initially got on our mailing list because some zealous reformer in their family added his whole Christmas card list, and the said reformer is now in some trouble with his Aunt Henrietta, a soft-spoken amillennial Lutheran. So zealous name-adders should read this, if only to have something to say at the next tense family get-together at Thanksgiving.

And then there is the curious fellow who likes what we are doing but still feels guilty about it. He laughs at most of the

jabs but then starts violently, comes to himself, and shakes his head quietly. *Tsk*. Guilt-free polemics is a whole new concept, and he might go for it if a biblical case is made for it.

Another potential reader is the ammo-gatherer. He is trying to come up with a platonic form letter to the editor, one that will shut us up for good, and you know, it might.

But at the end of the day, even if customers do not start clogging up Canon Press's order lines, we still have the option of sending the book out as a gift to those who support the magazine financially. This is the preaching to the choir angle, but this cliché overlooks the fact that choirs sometimes need preaching to.

If I can stay on track, the book will be organized around two basic themes. Objections to our *joie de vivre* can be divided into two general categories. The first is that what we are doing is unkind, and therefore unbiblical. The second is that what we are doing is counterproductive, that we are chasing people away from our position. Our response to these objections could be summarized in a two-fold fashion, reading from left to right as *O yeab?* and *Nub ub*. But this requires further development.

ONE

Satiric Bite

There is a marked difference between a gun in a gun cabinet and that same gun being employed on the field of battle. A man could know all about a particular make of gun but still lose his composure when it is pointed at him. In a similar way, satire can be quite delightful if the objects of the attack have been dead for centuries, but, as it turns out, contemporary satire is a different matter.

For various reasons, satire is studied today as something of a museum piece, in much the same way that a military historian might analyze a crossbow. The learned and respectable among us have agreed to abandon the use of satire, leaving this particular form of abuse to the buffooneries of late night comedians. Our academicized scholars have gravitated to *respectable* discourse, along with other forms of surrender.

This does not mean we have no knowledge of literary and learned satire. The names Swift, Erasmus, and Juvenal come to mind. But who does this kind of thing any more? Can anyone

name a respectable academic journal where one theologian might dismiss another as a barking dog? Literary academics have studied satire as a literary genre, and they have described it well. Moreover, to their credit they have even seen that this genre is pervasive throughout Scripture, so much so that the Bible can actually be described as relying heavily on satire. “Satire is prominent in the biblical narrative, where wholly idealized characters are a rarity and deficient or immoral human behavior is the staple.”¹

Satire treats the foibles of sinners with a less than perfect tenderness. “Satire is the exposure of human vice or folly through rebuke or ridicule. . . . It might consist of an entire book (*e.g.* Amos), or it can be as small as an individual ‘proverb.’”² But nevertheless, if a Christian employs satire today, he is almost immediately called to account for his “unbiblical” behavior. There are many explanations for this, and it is hoped that this small book will address the more important of them. But we should begin by noting the true *oddness* of our position. Suppose a man were to refer to certain respected theologians dismissively as having graduated from Bag of Snakes Seminary. He would instantly be upbraided for his un-Christlike behavior. Unfortunately for the one delivering the rebuke, it was discovered shortly thereafter that the speaker was Christ (Mt. 23:33).

According to literary analysis, satire consists of four basic elements. There is, in the first place, an object of attack, which can be specific or general, but which is more likely to be par-

¹ Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1998), p. 762.

² *Ibid.*

ticular, concrete, and very specific. The reason for an attack at all is usually a specific problem or group, and if an attack is too general, then it will tend to miss the target. And so this is why the prophet Jeremiah attacked idolaters, the Lord Jesus attacked self-righteous Pharisees, the apostle Paul attacked Judaizers, Ireneus attacked Gnostics, and Luther attacked the papists. This does not mean that only one legitimate target exists at a given point in time, but usually a man is called by his gifts and circumstances to fight one battle at a time. There were idolaters around during the lifetime of Ireneus but he still had it out with the Gnostics. In my writing, the object of attack has usually been what I call *modern evangelicalism*. I bring this up not to introduce a little autobiographical interest but rather to make an important connection. The reason for writing this small book is to give an answer to those who are distressed or concerned over such tactics, and consequently it is necessary to give a specific defense of these specific attacks. For now it should suffice to say that modern evangelicalism (not historic evangelicalism) is represented by what one president called the axis of treacle—*Christianity Today*, the Christian Booksellers Association, Wheaton College and its environs, Colorado Springs and its environs, Thomas Kinkade, and Jerry B. Jenkins.

The second characteristic of satire is the satiric vehicle. This is usually some kind of story, descriptive narrative, or word picture. A person might write a novel or short story in order to lay waste to a particular target, or he might include a brief description of his target in the course of doing something else. Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* is a book-length demolition job of various social strata in New York City, from Wall Street high flyers to racial agitators. The prophet Isaiah delivers a devastating aside in his description of the daughters of Zion strutting their stuff

down at the mall (Is. 3:16-26). At the same time, the description might be as brief as a single potent metaphor. Solomon does this when he says that a beautiful woman without discretion is like putting lipstick on a camel or something (Prov. 11:22).

The third characteristic of satire concerns its tone, which can be divided into two basic categories. Literary scholars have named these approaches after the two Roman satirists who embody them. “Horatian satire (named after Horace) is light, urbane and subtle.”³ This form of satire has a deft touch and relies on a knowing or discerning audience. One biblical master of this was Luke. If a reader is not paying attention, the satiric element can be entirely missed. For example, Luke delivers a jab at the philosophy department at the University of Athens. All the learned johnnies there “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21).

On another occasion, Luke reports in a very dry manner about how Sosthenes was getting beat up outside the courthouse. But inside, Judge Gallio remained supremely indifferent. “And Gallio cared for none of those things” (Acts 18:17). Luke makes fun of the debating skills exhibited by a rioting crowd. “But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:34). Something similar happened when Paul got to an unacceptable part of his speech to a crowd. “And as they cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air” (Acts 22:23). In none of these instances does Luke use a heavy hand, but in all of them we find out what he thought, and what his chuckle probably sounded like.

But still there are times when it is necessary to set aside the

³ Ibid.

surgeon's scalpel and pick up a Louisville Slugger. "Juvenalian satire (named after Juvenal) is biting, bitter and angry, as epitomized by the book of Amos and Jesus' oratory against the Pharisees in Matthew 23."⁴ This is a "take no prisoners" approach, and the difference between the two tones is the difference between needling and cudgeling. "Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria, which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink" (Amos 4:1). This quotation from the Authorized Version can be misleading—*kine* means cows—and when we also take into account our tendency to cover all quotations from Scripture with three layers of our high gloss holyspeak varnish, it is not surprising that we miss what Amos does here, and how potent his insult actually is. Picture the prophet ministering in Texas among the monied interests of big oil there, and imagine what would happen when he started talking about the Heifers of Houston in his after-dinner speech. "Yeah, you. With bangly earrings the size of softballs."

The Juvenalian approach can be harsh or buoyant. When Jesus describes His adversaries as vipers, the tone is a straightforward denunciation. But if someone were to describe a bureaucrat as one asleep at his desk so long that one side of his head was flat, this would be Juvenalian also—the point being most unsubtle—and funnier than simple denunciations like "lazy bureaucrat." Jesus uses both forms of Juvenalian satire. For example, He calls His opponents whited sepulchers, which is kind of harsh and critical, and He also says they like to strain minnows out of their coffee while missing the sea lion in there, which is kind of funny.

In the satire of a magazine like *Credenda*, we have tried to be

⁴ Ibid.

what might be called jolly Juvenalians. This is not done because the other tones are objectionable, or because we believe ourselves to be particularly good at it, but simply because this has suited our goals and personalities better. As mentioned above, the Scriptures are thoroughly satiric. This being the case, it is not surprising that the Bible contains examples of the various kinds of satiric tone. We do not find a divine requirement for a “one size fits all” approach, but one approach may suit a particular set of editorial personalities better than another.

And last, satire requires a norm, which for biblical satire is the character of God as revealed in the Scriptures. There is always a sense that the satirist knows what “ought to be.” He does not talk about it *directly* a great deal, but he assumes it constantly. When Pharisees are rebuked for hypocrisy, the decency of honesty is assumed. When they are mocked for not knowing that gold has no power to sanctify the altar, the duty of not inverting perspective is assumed (Is. 5:20). When Jesus talked about how the Pharisees would diligently tithe out of their spice rack while forgetting details like mercy and justice, He was assuming the honesty of proportionality.

Now the biblical norm has two functions in our discussion. The first is the norm of overt example, which has been discussed briefly here. But the second aspect of this is the normativity of the Trinitarian worldview. To simplify, in defending satire, it should be enough that the Scriptures contain massive amounts of it. But defenders of modern satire often find (as I have) that the simple fact that the Bible contains such language is by itself entirely unconvincing. And this is because certain non-Christian assumptions have come to dominate how we read the Bible.

When Jesus looked on the rich, young ruler and loved him,

it is very easy for us to say that we should be loving as He was. When preachers make such applications, no one thinks anything of it. But when Jesus looked on the rich, old rulers and insulted them, why do we tend to assume that this is never, *ever* to be imitated? It is conceivable that such a division is defensible, but why does it never have to be defended? Some might say (and do say) that we are not Jesus, and so we do not have the wisdom to insult properly. Fine. So why then do we have the wisdom to *love* properly? Can't we screw that up too?

Instead of seeking to learn our paradigms of behavior from the Scriptures, we tend to bring our assumptions, learned elsewhere and from others, and view the Scriptures through those assumptions. This is not a superficial problem; it goes down to the bone. The prophets, the apostles and our Lord Jesus all exhibit a vast array of verbal behavior, including tenderness, love, insults, jokes, anger, and more. What standard do we use to sort this material out?

When this standard is a scriptural one, the same range of expression will be found in those who imitate the Scriptures, and that range will exhibit scriptural proportions. But when the standard is nonscriptural, and has excluded a certain type of expression as being *a priori* un-Christ-like, it then will not matter how many passages are cited which show Christ being un-Christ-like. And at that point we may take a jibe from Christ's arsenal and say that wisdom is vindicated by her children.

TWO

The Meaning of Arrogance

Far from being urbane and civilized, respectable (and widely respected) academic discourse on the part of evangelicals in the realm of basic theological debates is actually a manifestation of spiritual surrender. The assumption that collegiality is owed in *all* debates is an assumption based on widespread but false notions of neutrality, and since neutrality is impossible, acceptance of such assumptions is simply a tacit way of going over to the other side. The “other side” in this case is the view that the bonds of academic collegiality are deeper and more profound than the bonds created by baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The phrase *inescapable concept* points us back to the fundamental issues of life. For example, when we consider the “concept” of Deity, we see that it is “not whether, but which.” It is not *whether* we will serve God, but rather *which* god we will serve. It is not whether we will impose morality through law, but rather which morality we will impose, and so on.

In the same way, God has divided the world between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and since that time ridicule has been inescapable. It is not *whether* we will ridicule a group, it is *which* group we will ridicule—and whether we will notice when we have done so. Whenever ridicule is applied from within a particular worldview to those outside it, that ridicule is almost always invisible to most of those within the ridiculing group. Satire, ridicule, and invective, however, are always immediately obvious to those outside the group that produced it.

To say that ridicule is necessary is not to say that every person in the world has to stand on street corners yelling at the passing motorists. It is not to say that everyone has to talk. In Paul's wonderful image, the body has different organs, there are different gifts. But everyone within the body is complicit in such activity, all the time. Some kind of antithesis is always manifest, everyone in the world lines up in terms of it, and in that act of lining up, one either ridicules the other side or accepts the ridicule delivered to the other side in their name and on their behalf. A man does not have to be a soldier to be protected by an army. And if he is not protected by an army, the time will quickly come when he will cease to be a nonsoldier, because he will be dead.

In the same way, everyone in the world receives the protections of a certain society or group. That group defends itself, necessarily, by means of ridicule, satire, and so forth, defining itself over against the other groups by these means. Of course, it is not required that every member of that society be a "combatant." But if he accepts his identification with that group, and is not seeking to subvert it, then he is complicit.

Those Christians in our culture who do not understand the inescapability of ridicule, and who have accepted the assurances that neutrality is possible, are constantly complaining about the

injustices that are regularly perpetrated against them. In other words, since fair play between all groups is thought to be *possible*, then the lack of “fair play” is seen as an instance of the other team breaking the rules, rather than as a simple necessity given the nature of the case.

To illustrate this, in our culture today it is common to divide society into two groups—victims and oppressors. If someone falls into the category of an “oppressor,” then he is fair game. If someone is a “victim,” then to strike against him verbally is a hate crime. This is not a novelty; the only thing that is different (at any time) is how the two groups are defined. Every society has an orthodoxy (which is invisible to most adherents of it), and every society has its heretics, those who challenge that orthodoxy. The heretics may be taunted and assaulted verbally (and at times, physically). In times of transition, when one orthodoxy is being supplanted by another, there is usually a pretence of neutrality until the new orthodoxy consolidates its forces—and its abilities to enforce the new codes.

Christians who do not understand what is going on see themselves as victims of foul play within this new order. But according to the definitions of the new orthodoxy, biblical Christianity is in the oppressor category—the tyrant which must be overthrown. “Why won’t you let us be the victims?” Christians complain. “Because you are *not*,” comes the reply. By definition.

Older forms of insult (which presupposed an out-of-date orthodoxy) are highly offensive to us today. But recently minted forms of insult (which reflect the reigning orthodoxy) are not seen as such at all. In our culture today, protection of authorized victim status is the reigning orthodoxy. Again, it is not *whether* there is an orthodoxy, it is which orthodoxy there is.