

Review: The Wit and Humour of Life



How do you review a book from 1886? Do you review it on its own terms or do you consider it as an indirect commentary on its own era? Perhaps you have to do both.

I read this book for an “easy read” during the summer and out of mild curiosity. Designed to be a “familiar talk with young Christians” (presupposing that young Christians know latin and greek of course!) it is not intended to be substantial.

The topic is the use of “wit” and “humour” by Christians, and, in particular, Christian orators and writers. Both terms – “wit” and “humour” – are extensively defined in a manner that would give endless enjoyment to the semantically pedantic. Interestingly, the common device of puns (much used and abused in my familial banter) is considered to be such a worthless device as to not fit in either category:

...everyone is ashamed of a pun: when convicted of having just made one, he is apt to look like a convict; and when one takes him by surprise, he thinks it is just like its impertinence – it hurts his dignity, and though he may laugh, he laughs under protest... To pun is to pound, or beat with a pestle. Can pun mean an empty sound, like that of a mortar beaten, as clench, the old word for pun, seems only a corruption of clink?” (page 19,20)

The main thesis of the book is that wit and humour can and should be used by Christians, although they can also be abused

by Christians. Much is made of an evangelical tendency to avoid humour as worldly frivolity (“evangelical Christians have all something better to think of” (page 39), although the author can find an example of humour in the writings of our friend Mc’Cheyne:

“A camel once provoked our beloved McCheyne to the only approach to a smile in print of which he has been convicted, when, speaking of how a pilgrim feels as he mounts a camel, and as the great thing slowly rises, the good man remarked – I quote from memory – ‘As he goes up, with you on his back, you feel as if you were bidding farewell to all sublunary things; but when he begins to move, you are again strongly reminded of your terrestrial affinities.’” (page 46)

With more profundity, however, the connection is made between the use of humour and the consequence of freedom that is inherent to the gospel.

“Why tell the Creator that in it [humour] He has created within you a sinful energy, which you must fight against directly you become a follower of His Son? Believe me, Christ will not destroy that, nor anything else that helps to make a complete, symmetrical man. He came not to destroy, but to save.” (page 58)

And elsewhere he derides those who have a “gloomy religion” and exhorts, “Levity! brothers, distinguish between light-headed and light-hearted” (page 69).

Stanford does not avoid the *abuse* of humour. An entire section is devoted to speaking against scoffing and mockery and self-centred speaking. He speaks of what he calls “counterfeits” – devices such as hoaxes that mimic humour but are vacuous rather than substantial. Of particular interest, and personal anachronistic amusement was his reference to the device of a “Bull” which gives me insight into our contemporary phrase, “a

load of bull”!

“A bull has nothing to do with wit : it is not even a poor relation... The pleasure arising from with proceeds frm our surprise at suddenly discovering two things to be similar in which we expected no similarity; the pleasure arising from bulls proceeds from our discovering two things to be dissimilar, in which a resemblance might have been suspected.. practical bulls originate from an apparent relation between two actions, which more correct understandings immediately perceive to have no relation at all.” (page 148-149)

Such linguistic curiosities also extended to the use of the adjective “electric” (pages 48, 86) and the noun “parachute” (page 43) which I had always assumed would have been 20th Century additions to the English language.

The book ends with an entire chapter devoted to a presentation of the gospel and what it means to be a true Christian – an evangelistic message at the end of a curiosity. Perhaps this book is the 19th Century’s equivalent of “rock band and altar call” youth ministry!

