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Leading with laughter

All work and no play makes work life dull for everyone. Replace the Protestant work ethic with the “play ethic” expressed in the Bible, and see what happens.

by [John Morreall](#)



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In our workaholic culture, we often glorify work as if it were spiritually meritorious. For many people, the idea that Christian leaders should use humor might seem suspect, even dangerous. Humor is a kind of playfulness, and wouldn't playfulness interfere with serious work?

In my career as a humor consultant, I teach leaders of companies and government agencies how important it is to use humor in the workplace. As a professor of religious studies, I can say this lesson applies to Christian leaders as well.

If we look at the Bible, we can see how off-base our own workaholic prejudices are. In Christian life, the most important day of the week is when we don't work, but instead gather to worship and share a festive meal. As Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School showed in “The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy,” many Christians have been misled by their Protestant work ethic to suppress the “play ethic” found in Psalm 150: “Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the

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Lord! Praise the Lord!"

Beyond religious celebration, playfulness has a place in life generally. It serves as a social lubricant. Messages that would otherwise be threatening, for example, are more effective when presented humorously. Consider this from a debt-collection letter: "We appreciate your business, but, please, give us a break. Your account is overdue 10 months. That means we've carried you longer than your mother did."

Humor is especially important to leaders, as Southwest Airlines' former CEO Herb Kelleher has shown. Fortune magazine once did a story on how Kelleher made playfulness part of the corporate culture at Southwest. On the cover he was flying through the air wearing a leather WWI pilot's helmet. The caption: "Is Herb Kelleher America's Best CEO? He's wild, he's crazy, he's in a tough business -- and he has built the most successful airline in the U.S."

When used properly, humor grabs people's attention and creates instant rapport so they're receptive to your message. It's a great stress-buster, and, according to one study, a funny message is remembered eight times better than the same message without humor.

The most effective kind of humor for leaders is self-deprecating. It threatens no one and shows that while you take your work seriously, you don't take yourself too seriously. In Barack Obama's first press conference as president-elect, for instance, he answered questions about potential crises. Then a reporter asked about what kind of puppy Obama's family was going to get. In a mock-serious tone, he answered: "We have two criteria that have to be reconciled. One is that Malia is allergic, so it has to be hypoallergenic. There are a number of breeds that are hypoallergenic. On the other hand, our preference would be to get a shelter dog, but, obviously, a lot of shelter dogs are mutts, like me."

With those few playful words, Obama situated himself squarely among -- rather than above -- the people he will lead. As he has said, "Some of my relatives look like Bernie Mac, some of my relatives look like Margaret Thatcher." This egalitarianism, of course, is at the heart of Jesus' message.

Of course, as any comedian knows, timing is key. In oral presentations, it's important to integrate the humor -- don't prepare the talk and then tack on an irrelevant joke. In general, true stories work better than jokes. While almost everyone can get a laugh with a funny story, only about five percent of us rate ourselves as good at joke-telling. (If you count yourself among the other 95 percent, I recommend ["The Joyful Noiseletter: Epistle of the Fellowship of Merry Christians."](#))

As with everything else we do, Jesus provides the model. Elton Trueblood argues in "The Humor of Christ" that there are many sayings in the Gospels "which are practically incomprehensible when regarded as sober prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the gratuitous assumption that Christ never joked." Jesus' favorite kind of humor seemed to be ludicrous hyperbole. Think, for example, of those listening to him when he said it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Or when he warned against nitpicking: "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" Those are ridiculous images that made Jesus' points perfectly. His audience must have laughed -- and remembered the lessons.

One of the most important lessons Jesus had for Christian leaders is that they should not be overcome by stress. At the end of Matthew 6, after saying how God takes care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, he concludes, "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

If there's one way to follow that advice, it's by cultivating your sense of humor.

