



Martin Luther's Humor

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LAUGHTER INCORPORATED

Martin Luther (1483–1546) is the only “church father” who incorporated humor into his life and work. He did so by posing as a court jester (an advertised self-image¹), a quick wit, a facetious wag, and a sit-down comedian with humorous comments in more than five thousand “table talks.”² His humor has to be taken seriously as an integral part of his literary legacy in the still-incomplete Weimar Edition of more than a hundred oversized volumes, published since 1883. Though known for many proverbial witticisms (“No one can become an expert among ignoramuses”³), Luther made humor an integral part of his extensive theological reflections: he neutralized the devil with witty scatological language (“It is with a fart that I chase him away”⁴); he described a spiritual breakthrough while sitting on the toilet (“The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in the tower”⁵);

¹“I shall for the time being become a court jester,” wrote Luther in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 44:123. Hereafter cited *LW*. This essay uses materials from Eric W. Gritsch, *The Wit of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

²Some of which are included in *Table Talk*, *LW* 54.

³*On the Councils and the Church* (1539), in *LW* 41:76.

⁴*Table Talk* No. 122 (1531), in *LW* 54:16. Such language was common among monks in their struggle with the devil.

⁵*Table Talk* No. 3232c (1532), in *LW* 54:194.

Martin Luther incorporated humor into his life and work, using it to enhance his biblical witness, to ridicule those in power, and to mock death and the devil. In Christ, everything is turned upside down. “When we should cry because of our sin, we laugh,” Luther preached, late in life. “When we should laugh because of our rejoicing in Christ, who died for us so that we have eternal life, we cry.”

and he faced death with satirical wit (“I’m done for, except for tweaking the pope’s nose a little now and then”⁶). The promise of Christ’s imminent return made Luther serene and saved him from being dead serious about his own self, pressured by enduring mandates of the medieval church to pay, pray, and obey.

This is the reason why our theology is certain: *it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves*, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works *but depend on that which is outside ourselves*, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.⁷

Luther’s *Anfechtung* (his German designation for severe spiritual struggle and temptation) was eased by outside intervention, exemplified in his “911” call to St. Anna (the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus) in a life-threatening thunderstorm on July 2, 1505, ultimately driving him into the monastery. There, he profited from the outside advice of his superior in the Order of the Augustinian Hermits, Johann von Staupitz, who sent him to graduate school for biblical studies, which offered decisive relief from *Anfechtung*. Pondering over the Scriptures made Luther a Christ-centered “theologian of the cross” and a “theologian of freedom.” He became convinced that Christians live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love.⁸ This stance is linked to a humorous view of life after the resurrection.

When we are brought to life on the last day we shall spit on ourselves and say, “Fie on you for not having been bolder in believing on Christ, since the glory is so great!”⁹

Eschatological humor created a liberating serenity in Luther. Commenting on the only biblical passage where God laughs (Ps 2:4), Luther told his readers, “Let us laugh at raging Satan and the world (yes, even at sin and our conscience in us).”¹⁰ Such humor prevents self-righteous temptation to speculate about the “hidden” God and instead to rely only on the “revealed” God, “the Father of Jesus Christ.” Modern students of humor stress its power to guard against any presumed superiority; it “leads human self-knowledge back again from its imagined height to the right track.”¹¹

BIBLICAL WIT AND WITNESS

Luther’s intensive and extensive biblical studies concentrated on Genesis in the Old Testament and on Galatians in the New Testament.¹² In the lives of the bib-

⁶Table Talk No. 4465 (1539), in *LW* 54:343.

⁷*Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *LW* 26:387 (italics added for emphasis).

⁸*The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:371.

⁹Table Talk No. 203 (1532), in *LW* 54:27.

¹⁰*Selected Psalms* (1532), in *LW* 12:25.

¹¹Kuno Fischer, *Über den Witz: Ein philosophischer Essay* (Tübingen: Klöpfer und Meyer, 1998) 113 (author’s translation).

¹²*LW* 1–8 on Genesis; *LW* 26–27 on Galatians. Galatians was as dear to Luther as his wife: “It is my Katy von Bora,” he said in *Table Talk* No. 146 (1531 or 1532), in *LW* 54:20.

lical patriarchs and their families Luther saw divine mummery, history as the mask of God under which he creates the political ups and downs in the world.¹³ Luther told students that Moses transmitted an unclear account of the creation of heaven (“sky”) as “a dome in the midst of the waters” (Gen 1:6); and that famous interpreters like Ambrose (340–397) and Augustine (354–430) offered “childish ideas.” Only Jerome (348–420) can be recommended because he “maintains complete silence on these topics.”¹⁴ The creation of whales (“great sea monsters” in Gen 1:21) led Luther to the peculiar judgment that a small animal like the mouse is “of a watery nature and, as it were, a land bird...such pretty feet and such delicate hair...

the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac must have lost a fragment of an emotional dialogue between father and son, with Isaac saying, “Let’s talk this over”

created by the Word of God.”¹⁵ Adam was a kind of superman before the Fall: tall, handsome, and intelligent, surpassing all other creatures with eyes as sharp as a those of a lynx and the eagle; he lived in a “golden” age, while “our age hardly deserves to be called an age of mud.”¹⁶ Satan was jealous and tempted Eve, “perhaps at noon,” to desire more than God had provided. Adam and Eve were the first church members who ignored the divine admonition about “the tree of knowledge.” Had Adam not fallen, then the tree would have produced the best theologians, lawyers, and physicians.¹⁷ The worst feature of Noah’s ark was its “great and pestilential stench.”¹⁸ The strife between Abraham and Lot (Gen 13) symbolizes German proverbial wisdom about vocational claims made by haughty young men; a physician who needs a new cemetery; a jurist who initiates new quarrels; and a theologian who fills hell with souls.¹⁹ The story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22) must have lost a fragment of an emotional dialogue between father and son, with Isaac saying, “Let’s talk this over.”²⁰ Isaac’s fondling of Rebecca (Gen 26:8) prompted Luther to comment, “We are permitted to laugh and have fun with, and embrace, our wives, whether they are naked or clothed.”²¹

Galatians was for Luther the principal biblical source and example of the Christ-centered faith that “justifies” the sinner. But Galatians also exemplified how Satan tries to pervert such faith by making it more “reasonable” through “good

¹³*Exposition of Psalm 127* (1524), in *LW* 45:331.

¹⁴*LW* 1:28.

¹⁵*LW* 1:52.

¹⁶*LW* 1:62, 342.

¹⁷*LW* 1:105.

¹⁸*LW* 2:69.

¹⁹*LW* 2:340.

²⁰*LW* 4:113.

²¹*LW* 5:37.

works,” the law. Luther used a humorous analogy to describe the clever temptation: “as soon as reason and the Law are joined, faith immediately loses its virginity.”²² Living only by the law means to fall for the devil, whom Luther came to know quite well in his monastic spiritual struggles. So one should say:

Mr. Devil, do not rage so. Just take it easy! For there is One who is called Christ. In Him I believe. He has abrogated the Law, damned sin, abolished death, and destroyed hell. And He is your devil, you devil, because he has captured and conquered you.²³

Luther used the Christ-centered theology in Galatians in his preaching. A sermon on the birth of Jesus in the manger (Luke 2:1–20) is a gem of such preaching, laced with wit. The renowned Luther biographer Roland Bainton performed it at Yale Divinity School before students went on Christmas vacation, and the laughing hardly ever stopped.²⁴ Luther portrayed the attitude of the Wittenberg congregation: they would claim to take better care of the baby Jesus than did the people of Bethlehem. They do so because they know that the baby is Christ.

Childish and silly thoughts these are! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.²⁵

Luther's description of the birth stressed the lack of customary assistance: no light, much noise, and carousing in the inn. Mary and Joseph probably wished to have gone back to their home in Nazareth.

And now think what she could use for swaddling clothes—some garment she could spare, perhaps her veil—certainly not Joseph's breeches which are now on exhibition in Aachen [Germany].²⁶

FACETIOUS ADVICE AND COUNSELING

Luther commented or offered spiritual advice on almost anything, guided by the conviction that nothing is ultimate in the light of the imminent Last Day. Consequently, any changes are to improve the conditions for communicating the good news of a never-changing future with God through Christ. His marriage at age forty-two to a twenty-six-year old apostate nun is a case in point: he married in the midst of the dangerous peasant uprising in 1525; he was a man condemned by church and state; and his best friends advised against it. Still, he said, “If I can still manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie to spite the devil, should I hear that the peasants continue. I trust they will not steal my courage and joy.”²⁷ The

²²LW 26:113.

²³LW 26:162.

²⁴See a summary of the sermon, *The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2 [1–14]* (1522), in LW 52:7–31.

²⁵Martin Luther, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, trans. Roland H. Bainton (1948; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997) 38.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Letter to John Rühel (May 4, 1525), in LW 49:111.

Luther dog “Klutz” (*Tölpel* in German) became an example of spiritual concentration: “Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope.”²⁸ Luther tried to take care of finances as the head of a large household (five children, farm animals, student boarders, and many dinner guests) but left Katie with the “amazing accounting,” addressing her with “dear lord” in letters.²⁹ He remarked, “If I had to take care of building, brewing, and cooking, I’d soon die.”³⁰

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The sensitive issue of public worship is treated with the hammer of humor. When a Lutheran territorial prince ordered his young Court Chaplain to continue using the old Catholic liturgy with its vestments and processions, the chaplain asked Luther for advice. Luther gave it in two letters, one to the prince and the other to the chaplain. He chided the prince for introducing devilish customs,³¹ and Luther told the chaplain to use any liturgy of word and sacrament that stimulated parishioners to be faithful, as long as consciences are not burdened.

Why don’t you, for heavens’ sake, march around wearing a silver or gold cross, as well as a skull cap and a chasuble made of velvet silk or cotton? If your superior [the prince] thinks that one cap or one chasuble is not enough, then put on two or three, like Aaron, the High Priest, who wore three coats, one on top of the other, and they all looked wonderful [Lev 8:7].

The chaplain should stack the liturgical features with singing, bells, marching, and shouting like the children of Israel did at Jericho (Josh 6:4–7), indeed ask the prince to jump around and dance in front of the assembly with its harps and bells, just as King David did (2 Sam 6:14–15). Before the Last Day, “worship is a free thing and not a divine mandate.”³²

Luther liked to watch birds as examples of beauty and order, reflecting God’s good creation to be renewed on the Last Day. One of Luther’s servants, Wolfgang, became the target of facetious satire when he trapped birds for sale. Luther chose a special way to tell him to quit his abuse of birds. He sent him an official complaint of the birds, threatening legal action for depriving them of their liberty.³³ Written

²⁸Table Talk No. 274 (1532), in *LW* 54:38.

²⁹Letter to Mrs. Martin Luther (October 4, 1529), in *LW* 49:236.

³⁰Table Talk No. 2803 (1531), in *Tischreden*, vol. 3 (Weimar: Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1914) 1 (author’s translation).

³¹Letter to Elector Joachim II (December 4, 1539), in *Briefwechsel*, vol. 8 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1938) 622–623. *Briefwechsel* hereafter cited WA, Br.

³²Letter to George Buchholzer (December 4, 1539), in WA Br, 8:625–626 (author’s translation).

³³A *Complaint of the Birds. Addressed to Dr. Martin Luther Concerning His Servant Wolfgang Sieberger* (1535), in WA, Br 7:307 (author’s translation).

in formal legalese (“We, the plaintiffs—blackbirds, thrushes, finches, linnets, and other good and honorable birds”), the complaint accuses Wolfgang of a “vagrant crime,” namely, an attack on the right to fly and collect grain from the fields around Wittenberg. Should Wolfgang not comply, the birds would ask God to make him catch frogs, grasshoppers, and gnats by day and cover him with lice, fleas, and bedbugs by night. The bottom of the complaint listed the official place of issue: “In our heavenly seat under the trees with our usual seal of feathers.” Needless to say, Wolfgang stopped trapping birds.

When the terrible bubonic plague struck Wittenberg in 1535, Luther asked the Saxon authorities to be exempt from mandatory evacuation so that he could continue to offer pastoral care. He said that he would stay as long as the District Governor who directed the emergency services.

My weathervane is the District Governor who has so far had a real buzzard-nose concerning the plague. Even if his nose were five ells [the length of a human forearm] under the earth, he would still smell it. But since he is staying, I can't believe that the plague will come.

Luther added a satirical note about the students who enjoyed the forced vacation: their bags were swollen; their books were colicky; their pens suffered from a rash; and the ink had become moldy.³⁴

Luther's wife Katie once became exposed to her husband's facetious pastoral care. Worried about an old, ill, and weak Luther travelling to native Eisleben in the winter of 1546 in response to a call for help in a family feud between two noblemen, Katie sent a number of worrying messages. Luther finally responded:

Since the date that you [started to] worry about me, the fire in my quarters, right outside the door of my room, tried to devour me; and yesterday, no doubt because of the strength of your worries, a stone almost fell on my head and nearly squashed me as in a mouse trap. For in our secret chamber [the toilet] mortar has been falling down for about two days....The stone was as big as a long pillow and as wide as a large hand; it intended to repay you for your holy worries, had the dear angels not protected [me]. [Now] I worry that if you do not stop worrying, the earth will finally swallow us up....Is this the way you learned your *Catechism* and the faith? Pray, and let God worry.³⁵

In the hot debate about the papacy, Luther linked the pope with the devil as the leader of all confusion before the Last Day. But humor always reared its head, revealed in the title of a reaction to an attack by a defender of the pope, “Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyper-Learned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig—Including Some Thoughts on His Companion, the Fool Murner.”³⁶ An attack on the papacy is entitled *Theses Against the Whole School of Satan and all the*

³⁴Letter to John Frederick (July 9, 1535), in WA, Br 7:207 (author's translation).

³⁵Letter to Mrs. Martin Luther (February 10, 1546), in LW 50:305–306.

³⁶*To the Goat in Leipzig* (1521), in LW 39:137.

Gates of Hell.³⁷ In a final blast, “Against the Papacy, an Institution of the Devil,” Luther addressed the pope as “Hellish Father,” “dearest little ass-pope,” and a little donkey dancing on ice, scared of falling and breaking wind.³⁸ Luther confessed that attacks and condemnation by the pope made him a theologian: “I myself (if you permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists....[T]hey have made a fairly good theologian of me.”³⁹

Luther had a personal feud with the archbishop of Mainz after the publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 against the sale of indulgences (certificates of redemption from purgatory). The archbishop had them sold by the monks in his territory to raise money for “buying” the office of cardinal from the pope—a grave abuse of the Sacrament of Penance. Although the cardinal stopped the sale of indulgences after Luther’s protest, he continued collecting money through exhibits of relics (body parts of “saints”). In 1542, Luther reacted with one of his best literary jokes, titled *New Pamphlet from the Rhine*, advertising sensational relics.⁴⁰ The money earned from the exhibit would be used to provide wrappings for the old relics to keep them warm and protect them from freezing. The new relics would earn a special indulgence granted by the pope. Luther revealed himself as the author only after the pamphlet had been widely distributed. The relics included

- a nice section from Moses’ left horn [Exod 34:9, Vulgate Bible: “his face was horned from the conversation with the Lord”]
- three flames from the burning bush on Mount Sinai [Exod 3:3]
- two feathers and an egg from the Holy Spirit
- one half of the archangel Gabriel’s wing
- a whole pound of the wind that roared by Elijah in the cave on Mount Horeb [1 Kings 19:11]
- a large heavy piece of the shout with which the children of Israel tumbled the walls of Jericho [Josh 6:20]
- five nice strings from the harp of David, and three beautiful locks of Absalom’s hair, which got caught in the oak and left him hanging [2 Sam 18:9]

The author shared a tip received from a friend in high places: Archbishop Albrecht had willed a trifle of his pious, loyal heart and a whole section of his truthful tongue to the existing collection and whoever paid one guilder at the exhibit would receive a papal indulgence remitting all sins committed up to the time of payment and for ten more years.

³⁷See LW 40:332, n. 3.

³⁸*Against the Roman Papacy, a Tool of the Devil* (1545), in LW 41:280.

³⁹*Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings* (1539), in LW 34:287.

⁴⁰Now in *D. Martin Luthers Werke [Schriften]* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–), 53:404–405. Hereafter cited WA.

GALLOWS HUMOR

Serenity in the face of earthly *Anfechtung* and the imminent end of the world generated Luther's gallows humor. It was anchored in an unconditional loyalty to Jesus Christ who had promised to overcome sin, evil, and death. That is why Luther could joke about his illnesses, especially headaches and kidney stones. They were the agents of the devil, attempting to destroy Christian discipleship and its discipline. The devil created headaches by riding through the brain looking for a spa.⁴¹ Kidney stones are deadly torture:

I'm obliged to be stoned to death like Stephen and to give the pope an occasion for pleasure, but I hope he won't laugh very long. My epitaph shall remain true: "While alive I was your plague, when dead I'll be your death, O pope."⁴²

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Luther envisaged himself as a prescription for the devil: "If he devours me, he shall devour a laxative (God willing) which will make his bowels and anus too tight for him."⁴³ Tired from an earthly busy life, he complained, but with a humorous twist:

Thus I remind myself of the forgiveness of sin and of Christ and I remind Satan of the abomination of the pope. The abomination is so great that I am of good cheer and rejoice, and I confess that the abomination of the papacy after the time of Christ is a great consolation to me.⁴⁴

Luther felt like Job, rotting with worms (Job 17:14), but clung to the promise of a future life: "All these things are done in a hidden manner, and so the wonderful concealment of God must be borne and endured....With our God this is as if it had already taken place."⁴⁵

Gallows humor is evidence of Christian freedom. The worst and best times are overshadowed by God's power over time and speculation. "I'm like a ripe stool," Luther told Katie shortly before his death, "and the world's like a gigantic anus, and so we're about to let go of each other."⁴⁶ When a student asked where God was before the creation of the world, Luther replied (quoting his favorite church father, Augustine), "God was making hell for those who are inquisitive."⁴⁷

⁴¹Letter to John Frederick (March 28, 1532), in WA Br 6:277.

⁴²Table Talk No. 3543A (1537), in LW 54:227.

⁴³Letter to Philip Melancthon (June 20, 1530), in LW 49:329.

⁴⁴Table Talk No. 122 (1531), in LW 54:16.

⁴⁵Lectures on Genesis (1543), in LW 6:401.

⁴⁶Table Talk No. 5537 (1542–1543), in LW 54:448.

⁴⁷Table Talk No. 5010 (1540), in LW 54:377.

In the meantime, between birth and death and between the first and second advent of Christ, one must trust the promise of Holy Scripture that all will be well after the final hour of earthly time. The final hour, like the crucifixion at Golgotha (Matt 27:33–36), ends the earthly struggle between sad crying and joyful laughter.

When we should cry because of our sin, we laugh. When we should laugh because of our rejoicing in Christ, who died for us so that we have eternal life, we cry. For we do not value such joy higher than other worldly joys which we cherish. But when sin and divine wrath strike our heart we neither want nor are able to be consoled.⁴⁸ ⊕

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⁴⁸*Sermon on Matt. 27:33–56* (1545), in WA 52:800 (author's translation).