

David Schmitt. Schmitt notes the changes in our culture have resulted in changes in the way the preachers and the hearers view sermons.

The Scriptures become a collection of stories of various people who have sinned and been forgiven rather than a coherent revelation of the story of God. . . . Suddenly, preachers are taking God and making him relevant, fitting him into our small human stories, having him meet our fragile needs, rather than proclaiming how God makes us relevant, taking us into his kingdom and giving our lives purpose in his world that lies beyond our fallen imagination and is yet to be revealed.¹⁰

What needs recovering, in short, is a better understanding of what preaching is and what it is not. It is a holy activity; it is a *divine* activity. It is not a mere motivational speech. And just as we say that we are saved by grace alone, so ought we to say that preaching is made holy when it is the Word of God alone on our lips.

So, on behalf of all the faithful hearers who really do want and need to hear the Word of God from the preacher, but who maybe don't have the heart to tell him that he's been wasting their time with his little vignettes, however clever they may be, I'll say this: We really didn't come to church to hear your personal stories. What we came to hear is the Gospel. What we need is the Word of God. Just give us that. I could as well say this with the words of a rather simplistic Sunday School hymn I learned at about eight years of age:

*Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear;
Things I would ask him to tell me If He were here:
Scenes by the wayside, Tales of the sea,
Stories of Jesus, Tell them to me.*

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1, (1988), 11.

² See my "The Leaven of 1517" in the Michaelmas 2023 issue of *Gottesdienst*, or online at <https://www.gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2023/10/12/the-leaven-of-1517>.

³ "Smart Brevity: Saying More by Saying Less," 1517.org/articles/the-preachers-toolbox-smart-brevity-saying-more-by-saying-less.

⁴ "Seeding the Sermon," 1517.org/articles/the-preachers-toolbox-seeding-the-sermon.

⁵ "The Value of Stories," 1517.org/articles/the-preachers-toolbox-the-value-of-stories-2023.

⁶ "Finding Gold-Sources of Stories," 1517.org/articles/the-preachers-toolbox-finding-gold-sources-of-stories-2023.

⁷ Romans 15:4.

⁸ "Guaranteed not to Turn Pink," Gottesblog, January 9, 2024 (gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2024/1/8/guaranteed-not-to-turn-pink).

⁹ John 20:31.

¹⁰ "Richard Caemmerer's Goal, Malady, Means: A Retrospective Glance," (CTQ 74 [2010] 23–38), 36.

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

Playfulness

David H. Petersen



God is playful. He delights in creation. As His image bearers, we are to delight in Him, His Word, and creation. We are to be playful with praise and even with confession and theology. We are to search for and find Him in the Scriptures like children searching for their dear father in a game of hide and seek, eager for His laughter and tickles.

Catherine Price wrote a book about fun that can help us rediscover this.¹ Her thesis, based upon scientific research and personal experience, is that humans were built for fun and that many modern mental and social ills stem from a lack of fun that technology has stripped away from us. She sees fun as essential and important, not frivolity or simply a lack of work. We tend, however, to use the word lightly. We also use it for things that aren't fun but which we think should be. She calls what she is talking about "euphoria" in one place but eventually settles for "true fun." She defines this as "the confluence of playfulness, connection, and flow."² The book is a fun read but also a healthy one. It is mostly about how to let go of the fear of looking foolish and learning to play again, but the prologue and first three chapters are a good study of the idea.

I. Poetry and Playfulness

I had Price's idea in my head already, but a post on the *Gottesdienst* blog in January by Rev. Scott Adle entitled "Poetry Matters" helped it really coalesce.³ Adle links a longer article from the *Paris Review* entitled "The Bible and Poetry" that makes a good case for learning to see more poetry in the Scriptures than we usually do.⁴

Along the way, Adle makes the following comment, which I find key. He writes:

Verse is intentionally artful in a way that prose often is not. God is intentionally artful when He speaks to us, as we see with the quantity of verse, and as even the parables evidence—which are certainly more playful and deeper than they look for their size.

You won't find this in many scholarly or popular definitions of poetry, but I think it is critical: poetry, at its essence, is playful. English poetry tends to exhibit this with concision, but biblical poetry, and particularly Wisdom Literature, tends to go the other way. The Bible tends to issue poems that state the same thing multiple

times. This is done, in part, so that we would slow down, spend more time thinking about it, and not rush over it too quickly. Take for example Moses' redundant announcement that God has made man:

God created man in his image,
In the image of God he created him,
Man and woman he created them. (Gen 1:26⁵)

Adam's first words are similarly redundant and evocative:

Here at last the bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for she was drawn forth from man." (Gen 2:23)

St. Luke gets in on the act as well. To proclaim the ignorance of the disciples after the third Passion prediction, he issues a three-fold, redundant statement:

But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken. (Luke 18:34)

Part of Adle's point is that once you start seeing these things, you can't stop. I would add that neither do they grow old. There seem to always be new instances, and they never fail to spark delight in me.

II. God's Playfulness

God is Himself playful. Perhaps the best example of this is His delight in the Leviathan playing in the ocean.

O LORD, how manifold are Your works!
In wisdom You have made them all.
The earth is full of Your possessions—
This great and wide sea,
In which are innumerable teeming things,
Living things both small and great.
There the ships sail about;
There is that Leviathan
Which You have made to play there. (Ps 104:24–26)

Equally important is the way in which the Second Person of the Holy Trinity speaks about being the delight of His Father even as He is delighting in humanity in Proverbs 8:

When [the LORD] established the clouds above,
When He strengthened the fountains of the deep,
When He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command,
When He marked out the foundations of the earth,
Then I [Wisdom] was beside Him as a master craftsman;
And I was daily His delight,
Rejoicing always before Him,
Rejoicing in His inhabited world,
And my delight was with the sons of men.
(Prov 8:28–31)

C. S. Lewis must have this in mind as he describes Aslan as playful as a kitten while being as strong and beautiful as a thunderstorm. He had just come back to life after being sacrificed on the stone altar and surprised the girls. It was a happy moment, but the White Witch was not yet defeated. Narnia was at war. Aslan's people were dying or being turned to stone. There was serious work to be done, but before it is, Aslan, full of life, takes a break to play with the girls. He says: "Oh children, I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh children, catch me if you can!" He leaps over them, and a mad, delightful chase begins wherein Aslan lets them catch his tail and then catches them in soft paws. It ends with all three of them "in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs." "It was such a romp," Lewis writes, "as no one had ever had except in Narnia." That play also took away their hunger, thirst, and weariness. It refreshed them.

We don't have to resort to fiction. There are examples in the Bible that, viewed through the right lens, show a deep playfulness in God. Here are a few from the Gospels. There are more in the Old Testament and a few in Acts and Revelation:

- ✦ God has John the Baptist dress up like Elijah. (Matt 3:4)
- ✦ St. Matthew tells us that after Jesus fasted for forty days, He was hungry. (Matt 4:2)
- ✦ Jesus makes wine for people already well-drunk. (John 2:6–10)
- ✦ Jesus "correcting" Moses in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43)
- ✦ Jesus calling damnation a "reward." (Matt 5:16)
- ✦ Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralytic and waiting to heal him. (Matt 9:2)
- ✦ Jesus walks on the water and pretends to be simply walking by. (Mark 6:48)
- ✦ Jesus pulls a coin out of a fish. (Matt 17:27)
- ✦ St. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus is short. (Luke 19:3)
- ✦ Jesus makes the soldiers fall down before His arrest. (John 18:4–5)
- ✦ The angel sits on the stone at the resurrection. (Matt 28:2)
- ✦ St. John tells us three times that he outraced Peter. (John 20:3–28)
- ✦ Jesus pretends to be going further than Emmaus. (Luke 24:31)
- ✦ The stupid excuses in the parable of the banquet—especially the wife. (Luke 14:20)
- ✦ The prodigal son wanting to eat pods and being jealous of pigs. (Luke 15:15–16)

Like learning to see poetry in the Bible, when one starts to see God's playfulness or humor, he starts seeing it everywhere. And like poetry in the Bible, especially when it is unexpected, it always delights me.

III. Our Playfulness

Theologically, we can relate what Price called “true fun” to what Jesus calls joy. He pointedly uses the word “joy” to describe the state of a woman when a child has been safely delivered to her. This is not frivolity, nor did it come about without effort and sacrifice. When a mother holds a newborn baby in her arms for the first time, she is moved outside of herself. She forgets the passage of time. That is flow. She also feels a deep, spiritual intimacy with that child. That is connection. She also delights in the child, examining mundane things like his toes and fingers and eyelashes, begging him to open his eyes so that she can look at him. That is playfulness. Jesus calls it “joy,” but it meets the criteria that Price establishes for “true fun.”

It is not that everything we ever learned we learned in kindergarten. Rather, it is that everything we might ever know about humanity is taught to us by kindergarteners. Children are the most important humans on the planet. This is because they are more essentially human than adults. They are more essentially human because they have been less corrupted by actual sin, less jaundiced by life in this fallen world, and thus are more accurate reflections of the image of God. So also in their more obvious subordination, humility, and need, they better reflect our relationship to God. To enter into the kingdom, we must become like them.

Chesterton famously explains something important about how it is that children are more like God than adults are:

Children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.⁶

Playfulness or “true fun” are not simply amusement or passive activities that aren’t work, nor are they profitable or beneficial in the way we usually think of those things. Football players in the Super Bowl are playing football, but they aren’t playful. They aren’t engaging in true fun. Exercise for exercise’s sake or training for an event or enjoying a mindless escape is not true fun either. True fun is magical, joyous, beautiful, and communal. No mother walks away from holding her baby for the first

time and regrets it or thinks there might have been a better way to spend her time.

All this to say that we were made for that sort of joy, for true fun, for delight in daisies and the rising sun and the laughter of children. God gave us a Sabbath for our good. He created time and opportunity for rest and recreation. We should not squander it on activities that spoil the soul.

This is related to Adle’s point about the Bible and poetry. If the Bible is full of poetry, it is because God wants to play with us and there is no higher form of true joy than taking delight in His Word. We should not approach the Scriptures as though we were searching for proof that we are right and wielding it as a weapon of war. Nor is it simply a source of information. We should come to the Word as children chasing Aslan, playing with God, knowing that play is good for us, what we are meant for. In playing with God in His Word, we discover Him and ourselves, we feed and drink and are refreshed.

Thus writes David:

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
(Ps 1:1–2)

Notes

¹ *The Power of Fun: How to Feel Alive Again* (2021).

² Price, 26, 32.

³ gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2024/1/16/poetry-matters

⁴ theparisreview.org/blog/2023/06/12/the-bible-and-poetry/

⁵ The NKJV is used throughout this column.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908/2020), 61.

Aurora Borealis

Rotten Fruits of Women’s Ordination

John R. Stephenson

This paper is an edited version of a presentation delivered in six locations in Australia between November 22 and December 2, 2023.¹



during the generation between the end of the Second World War and around the year 1970, it seemed that the Lutheran churches of North America were drawing closer together and that even if they would not come together in a single church body, they would at least be in communion with one another. The Missouri Synod had “loosened up” while the other Lutherans still seemed