
INTERVIEW

SATIRE AND THE GOOD NEWS

A Conversation with Mike Yaconelli

Mike Yaconelli is editor of The Wittenburg Door, an evangelical Christian satire magazine, and president of Youth Specialties, a resource organization for youth ministries. Portions of this interview are taken from his presentation at the 1987 Sunstone Symposium IX.

WHAT QUALIFIES YOU TO PRODUCE THE CHRISTIAN EQUIVALENT OF MAD MAGAZINE?

I've always wondered what my spiritual gift is. I looked and I couldn't find it in Corinthians. I couldn't find it anywhere until I heard a statement by Ernest Hemingway when he was asked what makes a great writer. He said it's somebody with a built-in crap detector. Suddenly I discovered my spiritual gift. I also discovered why I couldn't find it in the New Testament. I think that's what good satire is. It's just crap detecting. It's just looking at something and saying, "What?! You've got to be kidding me. This can't be true. They don't really believe this. They're not really sitting there going along with this, are they?" That is what the role of the satirist is all about.

WHAT ELSE PRODUCES GOOD RELIGIOUS SATIRE?

First, the ability to laugh at something when you really feel like crying. Some of us just naturally laugh instead of cry when we see something bad. But it's not really laughter, it's really crying inside. We make fun of it because it hurts so much that we figure if we laugh about it maybe that will make it okay.

Every so often in our magazine, we give an award called the Theologian of the Year. A few years ago Tammy Faye Bakker, won the honors. Now, all we did was excerpt a little bit of her book—which sold 60,000 copies, by the way—without saying anything else. And when

people read it they had no choice but to laugh. In *I Got To Be Me*, which is an incredibly profound statement to begin with, Tammy deals with the difficult theological issues of our day: death, grief, God's healing, God's will—all in one remarkable story of Chi Chi the dog. One day Chi Chi dies unexpectedly and Tammy has the dog kept around for a few days, hoping for God to resurrect it. She can't accept Chi Chi's death until she finally comes to understand that God took the dog to keep it from wetting on her drapes! It breaks my heart to realize that Tammy had no idea what she was writing. She had no idea how ridiculous that sounded. And there were 60,000 people who bought that book and never once wrote in to say, "What?!" I have to laugh at stuff like that.

CAN YOU ALWAYS LAUGH? DON'T YOU SOMETIMES FEEL OUTRAGE?

There are some things that the church does which make me angry. I wish I didn't get angry, but I can't help it. You know why I can't help it? Because we should get angry. We have every right to get angry. When what is happening is absolutely contradictory to everything we believe, we have to speak out somehow. If we didn't, the stones would speak out.

I'm thinking about something that's going on right now in the Protestant church. There are thousands of huge churches of three, four, five thousand members that have instituted a new kind of tithing program. It's called "God's Guarantee Plan." Here is how it works: You get a little

pledge card at the beginning of the year. It says "I will give ten percent of my money to the church for the next 90 days." The second part of the deal is this: at the end of the 90 days, if you are not completely satisfied with the results, the church will give you the money back. Now, I don't understand, when the pastor, in his great pastoral tones, announces this program, why the entire congregation doesn't stand up and go, "What?! Are you nuts?" I don't ever remember Jesus saying, "take up your cross and follow me, and if at the end of 90 days you are not completely satisfied..." You have to get mad at stuff like that.

WON'T YOU HINDER GOD'S WORK BY THROWING STONES AT THE PEOPLE WHO ARE TRYING TO LEAD ACCORDING TO HIS WILL?

Good satire militates against what people do, not against the people themselves. Take Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker—they're real easy targets. But I don't want to make fun of *them*. I want to make fun of what they're *doing*. It's what they're *doing* that worries me. Them, I can love. Them, I can even forgive. But what they're doing is another issue.

Bishop Steven Neal (I have no idea what he was bishop of, but it sounds really good) once said, "Criticism is the manure in which the servants of the Lord grow best." Satire is not an argument; it is a mirror. You don't try to argue through satire. You simply try to reflect what's happening, and you hope that people will see what the problem is and take a look at themselves and others. That is the purpose of satire. It always slips in a little pin that pops the balloon.

I've met a lot of so-called important people in our magazine's history as we've interviewed religious leaders. Most of them are a bunch of pompous egotistic maniacs—I'm trying to be kind. They need their balloon popped. But they have all these people around them who are trying to protect them. The "yes people." And the "yes people" are trying to keep everybody from getting to their boss. Those people are very, very destructive. Nobody needs to be protected from anybody.

ARE THERE PEOPLE, THOSE WHO GOD HAS PUT IN AUTHORITY OVER US, WHO WE SHOULD NOT CRITICIZE PUBLICLY?

I don't think so. Everybody is open to criticism. I think you go to them privately first. That's the good way to do it. But public people require public criticism. The problem is that

public people can't be counted on. I go in privately and they give me the B.S. like, "Thank you for coming, and I really appreciate your bringing that up and I can promise you that we're going to do something about it," and then, you know, that's it. They continue to do what they do. It's a very cynical view, but it happens to be one that I hold. So I think that sometimes public figures require public statements.

Now, again, why am I doing it? Is it to nail them? Is it to make fun of them? Or is it to make them deal with what they're doing? When Robert Schuller spent \$15 million on his Crystal Cathedral, we listed a complete page of things you could do with \$15 million. The list was unbelievable: You could build ten seminaries in Africa; feed so many people for a year... and on and on. (We researched every one of those things to find out how much money it would take.) Or you could build one glass church! He was furious. Absolutely furious. He said that we had totally misstated reality. That, in fact, they give a lot of money away, and blah, blah. Well, I think he was wrong.

HOW CAN YOU SATIRIZE WITHOUT BEING DISLOYAL?

Effective satire must come from within, not from without. Those who criticize effectively must also love what they criticize. As a Mormon, there may be a lot of things about the Mormon church you feel unhappy with. Because of those feelings, you are told, "You're not really a Mormon. You're not really part of the Church. You're on the fringe. You're a trouble maker. You're disruptive. There's something wrong with you." Deep in your heart you're going, "What are you talking about? I love this church. I love these people. That's why I'm criticizing it. I have the right to because I'm part of it. It's me that I'm criticizing. I'm not standing outside looking in. I'm inside looking around and saying, 'Hey! There are some things here we've got to deal with because we care about them.'" And that's the tough part, because after sitting in the same churches and the same meetings you walk away thinking, "What?!" while all your friends are saying, "Wasn't that wonderful!"

ISN'T SATIRICAL COMMENTARY A BIT ARROGANT?

We have a section of the magazine called "Truth is Stranger than Fiction" where we reproduce newspaper advertisements and flyers from churches promoting the worst publicity gimmicks imaginable—things like animal acts and freak shows for Christ. You're right, there is

probably a little bit of arrogance in that. All we're doing is reprinting them but, obviously, we're doing it because they're so totally unbelievable.

A friend of mine at a radio station took a bunch of these advertisements and checked them out. One was for a little midget gal, 2'3" or something, called Little Phyllis, billed as "the shortest woman in the world." "Come see this midget speak at our church," and so on. My friend called her and said, "What do you think about people advertising you being a midget, and making you into a sideshow at a church? Doesn't that bother you?" "Oh, no," she said, "I just think it's wonderful that I am able to go to these churches and talk to people about Jesus. They come and they want to see me and it just really is a neat thing." He's going, "Now, wait a minute!" Then she says, "You know what's the best ministry I have above anything else?" He said, "What's that?" "It's when I go back to the pastor's home where I'm staying. I get to minister to these preachers' wives. They're all really in bad shape." And then she said, "I'm with these real fundamentalist churches and so here I am, this midget, and I'm staying at this house, and I get into these incredible conversations with the wife, and I have this wonderful ministry."

After I heard that, I felt terrible. I thought, here is this dear gal just kind of doing her thing. But I still defend what we were doing, which was to say that it's wrong to make a spectacle of it. Sideshows at church are wrong and they shouldn't do it. On the other hand, even though they are wrong and even though all that terrible stuff is going on, here's this little gal, her bones are all disintegrating and she has to lie down most of the time, and she's just so excited every time somebody asks her to speak. That ruins it. I've learned that once you know people, it's harder to make fun of them. So I use this strategy: Don't get to know anybody.

PEOPLE REALLY RESPOND TO SAPPY, SENTIMENTAL FLUFF. CAN'T IT DO SOME GOOD?

Sure there's good in it. God can make good out of anything, even things that are horrible, but we still have to speak to the specific problem that's there. If we're doing sappy, sentimental things, we need to say so. That doesn't mean God can't use it. That doesn't mean people don't respond. But, unfortunately, millions of people are responding to Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Now, God is actually using them—you can see the strong feelings their supporters have—but it's still wrong. It's still wrong. I'm not going to back down and say,

"Well, but look at all the people that are helped by it." I don't care. It's wrong. It takes a certain temperament to be a critic. If you find yourself always equivocating, you probably ought not to do satire because you don't have the gumption for it. In a sense, a satirist is able to focus on something and not be riddled by, "But what about this, but maybe there's a good part over here."

WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

There's always the risk that you're going too far. That is the risk of satire. Conversely, the risk of being positive all the time is that you never address any problems. You just kind of let things flow. Yes, we screw up. On the other hand, so do the other people who are running around being positive all the time and saying, "Let's just say we're saying the same thing and let's not get anyone upset; let's just keep everything going." Well, that's malarkey. Problems need to be addressed, but it shouldn't be a personal attack.

Neither do I think you satirize God. I think that's off limits. We've been accused of blasphemy and I want to listen to that criticism because I don't think everything is up for grabs. That's what has happened to *National Lampoon*. Years ago, *National Lampoon* was wonderful. Now, all they do is make fun of women's breasts and the trashiest, ugliest, the most despicable, untasteful things they can come up with, and call it satire. That's not satire. That's cheap nonsense. With good satire, you think; it's clean; it's clear; it's subtle.

HOW CAN WE TAKE OUR RELIGION SERIOUSLY WITHOUT TAKING OURSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY?

So many adults are so serious all the time. We're so uptight. Then, of course, you add to that the church and religion and God and Jesus and spiritual stuff, and now it's this incredible burden. Have you ever been in church when someone burped and it almost blows out everybody's sinuses because you're all sitting there trying not to laugh? Wouldn't it be great if the speaker could just go "Okay, who did it?" What is wrong with admitting something is funny?

I grew up in a very conservative church and we would love to ask our Sunday school teacher tough questions. We'd say, "Uh, what does the Bible say about French kissing?" Our teacher would stumble around for a while and then she would come up with the one statement that wiped out all of us: "Mike, I can't find a specific verse, but when you're in a dilemma like that ask yourself this question: If Jesus were there

with you, would you do it?" As a result, I was constipated for three days. I kept on kissing, but no way was I going to the bathroom. The attitude was sort of like if Jesus were here nobody would laugh. Nobody would do anything. We'd all just kind of sit around. That's malarkey. I think one of the ways we communicate the reality of our faith to this world is by knowing how to laugh.

DOES THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH REALLY NEED SATIRE?

The reason we have satirists and the reason we do satire is because the world out here is going to hell on a roller skate. People are struggling and lonely and looking for something that will give their life meaning and significance, and the church is running around talking and philosophizing—intellectualizing when in fact people have desperate needs that aren't being met. That's why I do satire. I do it because I care about people and their needs, and the loneliness and the desperation that goes on in our culture today.

My guess is that most of SUNSTONE's authors raise issues about your church *not* because they want to make their point, and show how smart they are, but rather because they're trying to say to the Church, "Would you please listen to the real world out there? Would you get out of your ivory tower, go out there where people really live and hear what it is that they are struggling with and dealing with and understand that? Take all your structures and all that stuff and say, 'We will forget all that right now. Let's see if we can try to communicate to this world, to the people we're living with.'" I think the Mormon church would triple its evangelistic effort if it would shut up long enough to listen to people. Forget the doctrine, forget all the rest of it. Imagine two guys riding up to your door on their bikes. Knock, knock, knock. "Yes, hello." "Hi, we just wanted to come in and listen." "What? No books, no tapes, no slide projector?" "No, we just want to listen to you. We just want to hear what it is you're feeling."

Nobody listens to us anymore. Everybody is preaching. Aren't you sick of it? I'm sick of TV specials. I'm sick of cassettes. I'm sick of seminars. Everybody running around with "Eight ways to Overcome Depression," "Nine Ways to Have a Happy Marriage," "Six Ways to Know the Will of God." They didn't read the New Testament, did they? Jesus would get up there and say, "Blessed are the poor," and when he got done they'd go, "Huh?" And he'd say, "Let me explain what I mean. One time there was a guy. And the rains came. And he built his house on

the sand..." And he'd get done and they'd go, "What?" And he'd say, "Goodnight guys, I'll see you." And they'd go, "What the heck was that?" He didn't explain anything. He just left them there struggling with the thing. I honestly think that people today are sick and tired of sermons. They just would like somebody to shut up long enough to listen to them.

A good friend of mine had three of his kids die of cancer. When the third boy died, all these people came into the hospital room with tapes and books and advice and prayers. He says he could hardly wait for them to get out of the room. Then, he says, "A friend walked in who'd lost his own kid in a tragic car accident, grabbed a chair, slid it up next to me, reached up and held my hand and never said a word. I never wanted the man to leave."

Jesus said when people weep, you weep with them; when they laugh, you laugh with them. Now, when people get depressed we go, "Hey, listen to this tape." Doesn't that make you mad when you're depressed and people go, "What's the matter?" "I'm depressed." "Hey, don't get depressed." It's like you're stupid. It's like, "Oh, I forgot. Okay, no problem." The Bible says if you really want to help people who are depressed, get depressed with them. When they weep, you weep. And when they laugh, you laugh—not give them a sermon; not give them a tape; not give them "Eight ways to overcome that." You just listen and care and empathize with them.

YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT WHAT THE CHURCHES SHOULDN'T DO. HOW SHOULD THEY PRESENT THEIR MESSAGE?

People are afraid. They are scared to death of God. There is this deep sense of fear in all of us. It's not AIDS, it's not nuclear war. It's not all this other stuff. It's that something is desperately wrong with everything. It's like we all have this deep down fear that the whole ground beneath us is going to crumble. And then we try to say to people, "Well, you need to come to God. You need to know what Christ's love is like. You need to respond to the Gospel." And we see people backing off and saying, "No way. We're scared to death." People are afraid of God. Isn't that odd? Part of our trouble is that we're trying to communicate to people the love of a God who they're afraid of.

I believe that the message of the church should not be, "You're only acceptable if you do this and this." The message of the church needs to be, "God loves you. The doors are open. He loves you with everything. You have nothing to be afraid of. God is your papa, your daddy." That's what it means in Romans 8:15 "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba." We're the apple of his eye. He loves us with everything. And when we communicate that to this world, they are no longer afraid of God. They embrace him. They throw their arms around him and say, "Oh thank you for the good news."



"HECK IF I KNOW WHAT THIS STUFF SAYS... WHO DO YOU THINK I AM, HUGH NIBLEY?"

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