

Jacob D. Myers. *Stand-Up Preaching: Homiletical Insights from Contemporary Comedians*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022. 228 pages. \$35.

Stand-Up Preaching is “not about helping you write and deliver funnier sermons” (23). There are undeniable similarities between preaching and stand-up, however, and preachers cannot help but marvel at the latter’s impact (2). Stand-up comedy is risky; it is incredibly contextual and easily misunderstood. Still, Jacob Myers is convinced it is worthy of preachers’ attention. It is “1) speech that invites participation amid cultural difference and 2) speech that challenges ideologies and structures of inequity without completely alienating audience members” (3). Myers invites readers to learn how stand-up comedians use humor to make people think in new ways with an interest in “how their methods might serve our homiletical goals” (28). Between each chapter, Myers analyzes a particular comedian and suggests what preachers might learn from them.

In chapter 2, after reviewing arguments for and against humor in the pulpit throughout history, Myers turns to theories of why humans laugh to help preachers discern for themselves whether and how humor is appropriate in the pulpit. These include a theory of humor that casts others “in a predominantly negative light” (63) and a theory pointing to humor that creates “cognitive dissonance” in the way it “violates our mental patterns and expectations” (65). He notes the latter as supported by Karl Barth for how it can manifest the upside-down nature of the gospel.

Chapter 3 examines stand-up comedians’ use of language with an interest in how they interrogate listeners’ assumptions and invite them to think about an issue from a different vantage point while simultaneously fostering community through laughter. A brief history of American stand-up reveals the path that has led to the current emphasis on the seemingly authentic personal identity of the speaker, telling the truth, and cultivating a sense of intimacy with the audience. All of this influences both the content and form of the language.

Chapter 4 speaks to the power of narrative to invite listeners into a meaningful experience not their own that transforms their view of the world. Myers describes the “elements of effective narration” (e.g., a cohesive structure that moves from tension worthy of our emotional investment to a correspondingly cathartic resolution) while pointing to specific examples of these elements in stand-up (117). We are also shown examples that move from tension to “a kind of prophetic indictment” rather than the release of laughter (124).

Chapter 5 focuses on the persona that a comedian cultivates in relationship with their perceived authenticity. The latter is vital in the contemporary scene. It is closely connected to the comedian’s ability to create a sense of intimacy with the audience and believably portray a correspondence between “personality, embodiment, point of view, comedy material, and performance” (141). Myers posits ways preachers might learn from comedians for whom these aspects of identity have collided in recognition that we navigate similar tensions with the added challenge of always performing for the same audience.

Chapter 6 names that bodies communicate before a word is spoken and highlights how this impacts those who do not fit society’s standards of size, race, gender, sexuality, and space (which bodies belong on a stage). Rather than hiding their bodies (as preachers often do behind robes and pulpits), comedians tend to acknowledge and engage them as a part of their set (165). Myers points to various ways comedians do this and encourages preachers to “employ our bodies and voices in ways that arise from our unique personalities and experiences” (176).

Chapter 7 reviews reasons to be cautious about bringing comedy into the pulpit, including concerns about “punching down,” making light of serious topics, and manipulating others by condemning and laughing at “those who disagree with us” (195-96). Myers also acknowledges arguments that comedy makes no tangible difference and can even prohibit social change. Still, Myers is convinced of its potential to transform minds through the space levity creates, which can lead to action. The final comedian he analyzes is John Oliver, whose comedy has made a clear difference in the world.

In this book, readers are shown numerous close readings of stand-up. Myers does what he sets out to do and helps preachers thoughtfully consider what we can learn from this genre. I was left wishing I had been shown a few close readings of stand-up preachers doing this well or more nitty-gritty tips on how to get started to help me leap over the vast differences in content and tone. Comedians do not tend to speak compassionately about those who disagree with them or evince love for their enemies, which is fundamental for preachers. I look forward to seeing people translate these insightful learnings into embodied speech “worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called” (Eph 4:1).

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