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BOOK REVIEW

Stand-up preaching: Homiletical insights from contemporary comedians

Myers, J.D., (Cascade Book, 2022), 263 pp. Price: \$35 (paperback); \$50 (hardcover) \$9 (Kindle). ISBN: 978-1-6667-0280-4 (paperback) | 978-1-6667-0281-1 (hardcover) | 978-1-6667-0282-8 (ebook).

Stand-Up Preaching, as per the subject line, promises homiletic insights from contemporary comedians. I must admit that Myers engages with contemporary comedians and the theory of comedy, as far as I can discern, in the most thorough manner possible in a single book. The list of comedians he contemplates is exceptionally comprehensive, and it seems that every well-known comedian who has set foot on American soil has at least been mentioned. I found myself, throughout the book, researching the comedians he introduced for further context on these personalities and backgrounds. In that respect, this is a brilliantly researched work by Myers.

As promised, Myers showcases the implications for homiletic thought throughout this engagement with comedians. *Stand-Up Preaching* is an impressively comprehensive engagement with important topics such as the possibility of humour in preaching, the history of the relationship between theology and humour, rhetoric insights, the power of vivid narration of lived experience, the authenticity of personality and identity, the importance of the whole body, and the prophetic *raison d'être* of both comedy and preaching.



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The most intriguing theological argument for comedy in preaching comes from a realised eschatology rather than a future eschatology. Thus, in the theological understanding that “God in Jesus Christ has *already* turned the world upside down” (p. 52), preaching is liberated from a stern and serious posture towards the possibility of – especially for the preacher – play, comedy, and humour which transcends one’s ego.

This, however, is not the heart of Myers’ endeavour. Although the list of comedians Myers has engaged is as extensive as possible, he has a clearcut preference for comedians who are inherently social activist:

As with others I’ve already spotlighted, Gadsby helps us think about our identities and the sociopolitical ideologies that simultaneously make us subjects and subject us (p. 132).

Throughout *Stand-Up Preaching*, Myers refers to these comedians as critical thinkers on structural racism, sexism, white supremacy, androcentrism, (western) hegemonic epistemology, and neoliberal capitalism. In essence, Myers reiterates a very central view of American and global society, that the reality of life is that of the duality of oppressor and oppressed. If you agree with this sentiment, you will find yourself giving a nod of approval on every page of this book.

However, there are three points of contention. Firstly, understanding society as merely a duality between oppressor and oppressed inevitably leads to forms of tribalism. Today, this reality of tribal thinking is further underscored by algorithmic enclaves on social media, which weakens cooperation between oneself and the other, and the ability to engage critically with and negotiate between different perspectives on a specific issue.

Secondly, there is a glaring inconsistency between activist comedy and the lived experience of the ordinary citizen. For example, Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* is indeed critically acclaimed, and the critics have given it a score of 100% on Rotten Tomatoes. The audience score, however, is 26%. On the other side of the spectrum, Dave Chappelle’s *The Closer* has a 40% from the critics and a 95% from the audience. Like the critics, Myers proposes Gadsby as an excellent example of stand-up preaching and cautions against emulating Chappelle because he does not – contrary to the other comedians spotlighted – address systemic injustice (p. 108). Two possibilities exist here. Firstly, comedic social activism is necessary because ordinary citizens are the problem underscoring structural injustice. Secondly, and I think this more likely, critics, established comedians (and all that comes with that – money, fame, power), and possibly academics are so out of touch with the daily lives of ordinary citizens that relatability is scarce or non-existent.

Thirdly, reading *Stand-Up Preaching* in South Africa requires much translation between the contextual differences. One might easily assume that the structural injustices highlighted in *Stand-Up Preaching* are true for the South African context as much as they are for the American one. However, unless some mental gymnastics are at play, it is pretty problematic to claim that structural racism abounds under the government of the ANC. Or that Black Lives are under attack by the police. The injustices in South Africa are much more practical – power outages underscored by years of incompetence and corruption, crime and violence, unemployment, and a general sense of meaninglessness. There is undoubtedly a place for comedy within the framework of realised eschatology also in South Africa. Still, meaningful activism, if one so understands the task of the prophetic, is different where chaos reigns supreme.

Irrelevant to my critique, *Stand-Up Preaching* is an essential and exciting homiletic endeavour and ought to be seriously considered as part of the repertoire of the upstanding preacher.