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HEADLINE: Who says Christians aren't funny?

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BODY:

If God has a sense of humor, He's got a lot more to laugh at now. Taking a page from the secular world, Christians are getting more involved in the comedy business, opening their own clubs and honing their values-inspired standup routines.

Their "clean" entertainment is offering an option to audiences who prefer G-rated humor, and challenging the comedy world to be more creative by moving beyond two of its staples: sex and swearing. Even now, a few mainstream clubs are featuring Christian comedy nights.

Mixing punch lines and religion is easier these days, as churches are more accepting of humor as a way to provide hope and express God. Experienced comedians are also more frequently identifying themselves as Christian and are gaining exposure.

"For some reason it's been late in coming but it is happening now," says Mark Anderson, owner of the Skyline Theater in Oklahoma City, which debuted a Christian show, "A Time to Laugh," in August. "The talent in the Christian comedy world has improved to such an extent that these shows stand on their own now."

Those in the business say the community is small but growing. In the past 2-1/2 years, membership of the Christian Comedy Association has grown from 40 to 300, with CCA president Dan Ruppel estimating about 60 of those are top-notch.

"We're seeing that the Christian community [is] exploring and embracing comedy as a great way to communicate their values or their worldview," says Mr. Ruppel, a comedy writer in Los Angeles.

Only a handful of comics are currently considered strong enough to be headliners, many having first worked in secular clubs where the audiences are less forgiving than those who sit in pews. But newcomers are getting more opportunity to strengthen their material in sacred as well as secular venues from California to the Bible Belt to Washington.

A few good men

In the past year, several Christian venues, including the Skyline in Oklahoma City and Synergy in Beltsville, Md., have opened, occasionally drawing big crowds. "We just want to provide an outlet for performers who are using their talent for Him, and to provide an alternative for college-area young adults," says Erik Sellin, director of Synergy, an 80-seat club that opened in July.

What frequently categorizes the humor in Christian shows is its avoidance of racist and sexist jokes, vulgarity, and making fun of people in the crowd. "It's just as funny," says Mr. Sellin, "and there's an edifying message underlying all of it."

Several Christian comedy TV programs are also in the works, including a deal Mr. Anderson is trying to arrange with PAX TV to give national exposure to a show highlighting performances at his 225-seat theater. Last Saturday, the first installment debuted on a local PAX station in Oklahoma City.

In Los Angeles, Jefflyn Dangerfield - no relation to Rodney - is working to get a TV show featuring comedy routines on one of the faith-based networks by early 2005. Last week she put out a call for Christian comics.

"I had no idea there were so many Christian comedians out there who were wanting to express themselves in this way," says Dangerfield, owner of Missing Link Consulting & Management, who received more than 200 responses within two days of announcing the project.

The inspiration for the show came after she saw a performance by Atlanta-based Christian comedian Vyck Cooley. She thought to herself, "Man, this guy is not only funny, but he really loves God ... there's got to be more people out there like him," she says.

Christian comedians have been around at least since the 1970s, but their material and where they perform varies greatly. Some are regulars at churches or at church-related events, and may work only part time. They might be humorists, ventriloquists, or members of comedy groups. Others make a living doing stand-up gigs for higher-paying groups such as the Promise Keepers, a men's ministry, or for corporate clients.

"I'm not a preacher, I'm not an evangelist, I'm not a prophet or anything. I'm just a comic," says Brad Stine, a stand-up comedian recently profiled in *The New Yorker* magazine. His frenetic routine, he explains, is more along the lines of social commentary. "It's more of a philosophical exploration than it is a dogmatic sort of trying-to-convert-people thing."

Stine doesn't repeatedly invoke Jesus' name or repeat Bible verses. He has his own approach. In his 2004 DVD, "A Conservative Unleashed," he announces to the audience

that he lives by a motto: "Nothing matters but God."

Amid discussions about airport security and American pride, he does a bit about how the job of naming all the animals got to be too much for Adam: He started with "hippopotamus" and eventually could only come up with "fly." Stine teases people who have "God is my co-pilot" bumper stickers, suggesting that if God is in the car, you should probably let him drive.

Stine - who prefers to be called a comedian who is Christian, not a Christian comedian - is conscious of his presentation. He makes it clear in his routine that he disagrees with gay marriage, for example, but he spends more time ribbing heterosexuals about divorce rates. "I've always tried to put more emphasis on my own people ... and where we have fallen short," he explains.

The lighter side of Christianity

One advantage of spotlighting Christian comedy, says Anderson, the theater owner, is that it provides an opportunity for people to see Christians' joyful side. The comedians in his shows often make fun of how they don't live up to all their Christian goals, which he says also makes Christians look less hypocritical.

He hopes that the audience leaves with something else, too: "I would love it if [people's] faith was strengthened by the shows."

Houston comic Joe Gautier, who performs at Skyline but whose background is in secular comedy, says Christian comedy still has a way to go before it's consistently funny. But he sees a need for making people laugh in a time of terror alerts. His song, "God Makes Even the Bad Things Good," is one of the only times he refers to the Bible; he prefers to let his comedy reach people wherever they are in terms of faith.

Anderson agrees with that approach. "That [song is] an example of a performer using humor and using his own experience to present gospel without ... proselytizing really, or trying to actively convert anyone," he says. "We don't want to attract only a Christian audience."

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