

# Paul Kerensa

## So A Comedian Walks Into a Church...

Confessions of a  
Kneel-Down Stand-Up

'Paul Kerensa's writing never fails to be  
uniquely funny and interesting.' **MIRANDA HART**



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# **SO A COMEDIAN WALKS INTO A CHURCH**

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Stand-Up

**Paul Kerensa**



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For Zoë,  
who has lovingly proofread the entire book except this page,  
so let's hope there are no mistakes.

# A Little Foreword

Excuse me for being a little foreword.

Good, now that's out of the way. Welcome to the book. If you're still in the shop, I'd just buy the thing if I were you - it's a real page-turner. If you're browsing for free on the internet - it's a real page-swiper. I'd still buy the print copy. E-readers are all very well, but you can't slam a fly in it, can you?

My name's Paul. What's your name? Why not write it here?

Excellent, now you have to buy it. So now we're introduced. I'm a stand-up comedian, and I'm also a Christian. No, come back ...

I'm on the road a lot. Every Saturday night I'm at another far-flung comedy club. I have never seen this show they call Strictly Come Dancing. Ours is the path less travelled, except it's travelled a lot, because it's normally the M1.

The next day, I'll wake up in a yet another spare room or soulless budget hotel; Sunday isn't Sunday unless I can see a tiny kettle. If I want to go to church - and I do - I just find a building with a cross on top and wander in. I've only mistakenly picked a pharmacy on one or two occasions.

So this is a tale of two circuits: of comedy clubs and churches. That, in a nutshell, is what follows.

I've had heckles in Eccles and stage deaths in Caithness; we'll visit the lot. We'll be cheered and booed, and encounter loudmouths and dodgy promoters. We'll do a lot of driving, face a bunch of onstage dilemmas and maybe even appear on telly. And the morning after the night before, we'll meet vicars and pastors, Methodists and Catholics, Baptists, Quakers, candlestick-makers ...

I realise that the likelihood of you, dear reader, being interested in punchlines and praise is highly unlikely, but that's okay. All you need to know is that I bestride both. If you're a comedy fan, there's plenty for you here about the world of stand-up and the reality of



life on permanent tour. If you're more church-inclined, there's an ecclesiastical smorgasbord.

When at home on a Sunday, the 'norm' for me is a growing Anglican church: traditional in some ways, trying new things in others, and offering a bunch of things to the community - and that's how I like it. On the road, I like to cast the net wide and find something different.

I can only write what I know, so if you're hoping to read about a side of comedy or Christianity that I've left out, apologies. I simply haven't been to an Eastern Orthodox or a New Monastic community. Equally I can't tell you about doing Live At The Apollo or a corporate for MI5 - although I can't tell you about that for different reasons.

I've written for TV, radio and stage, but this is the first time of book writing. If any of you know any reason why any of the words should not be joined together, you are not to declare it, please. If you're a churchgoer and anything feels a little close to home, I hope I'm fair to you. If you're a comedian and you think you recognise yourself, it's probably someone else. Some names have been changed and occasion- ally I've contracted time or altered a placename - please forgive this.

A big thank you to David Moloney and all at DLT, and Nick Ranceford-Hadley and all at Noel Gay, for literally making this happen - without you, this book wouldn't be a book, but scrawled on a toilet wall somewhere. (There are a lot of stories about toilets in this book - I'm sorry for that and don't really know why.)

Gigantic thanks to my parents Di & Rog, and to Mark & Katie, John & Sue and James & Tabitha - your support in countless ways has made this possible.

Kudos too to the many friends who've read a chapter or talked it over: Liz Robinson, Henry Martin, Mark Woodward, Jon Sandys, Jon Holloway, Nick S, Eileen Collins, Tony Vino, Andy Kind, Russ Anderson, Iszi Lawrence, Jez and Jude Gibson, Andrew, David and Jenny Kember ... and anyone else that knows me. A big thank you

too if you completed my online survey about churches - your help was invaluable.

Thanks too to the hundreds of comics, comedy-goers and congregants that feature in this book. Without you, I'd be alone in a big room. That happens in at least one chapter and it's awful.

And to Zoë and Joseph and someone I won't name for practical reasons: you're stars, and the reason it's a joy to hit 'Home' on the satnav.

I'll also thank God, because He's my co-writer, and so far hasn't asked for a penny in royalties.



# Scot Free

## Chortling with the Church of Scotland

‘Excuse me? Where’s the nearest Church of England church?’

‘England,’ the Scottish woman inevitably replied.

The tourist information helper was an elderly lady who looked like she could be anyone’s grandmother, yet also handy in a fight. You could tell that her grey was formally ginger, in common with so many other locals.

As a fellow Celt (Cornish) and redhead (strawberry brunette), I feel a kinsmanship with the Scots, whether they like it or not. Even as I boarded the flight at ‘London’ Stansted, I could tell I was among friends. I say ‘friends’ - there were surly looks from a couple of ginger giants certainly, and maybe I spent too long staring at one redhead family.

I say ‘London’ Stansted too, because it really should be in inverted commas. Living between Gatwick and Heathrow, either ‘London’ airport would have been ideal, but no, the gig promoter booked me into Stansted, a mere hundred miles away from my house. I wouldn’t mind (well, I would) but at the other end I landed in ‘Glasgow’ Prestwick, an airport that also suffers from Stansted syndrome, being a good hour from the city it represents. Door to door, it would have been about as quick to drive, cycle or pogo stick. The entire trip involved 150 road miles and 250 air miles.

Given the choice, I’d have taken the train. It’s better for the environment, and my sanity. Of course my false impression of a rail journey to Scotland is of an old-fashioned smoky platform, where I take the overnight sleeper, sharing my cabin with a wistful world traveller and raconteur. We compare Panama hats and make bets that we can’t circumvent the globe in a hot air balloon, until we

join a Belgian detective for cocktails and arsenic in the dining car. In truth, it involves four changes and a traipse across the London Underground with luggage before I even board the train. This is followed by a six-hour journey panicking that I'm sitting in someone else's seat because there's a big bloke in the one I've booked, all for a mere two hundred pounds.

The choice was out of my hands - I was furnished with an e-ticket for the plane as soon as the gig was diarised, so I easily jetted from Cambridge Stansted to Ayr Prestwick for a weekend of entertaining stags, hens and a few couples who'd misbooked. Friday and Saturday were planned out; I just had Sunday morning to plan.

Yes, I'm the one person who reads those guides in hotels and flicks to the back for the list of local churches. Typically, my hotel didn't have one, but I thought the tourist information centre might help get me my God fix. I rephrased the question of course - asking for any kind of fix in Glasgow city centre can introduce you to some unsavoury characters. I was already in danger of crossing this good woman by forgetting that Church of England may not be so common when not in England.

'You'll be wanting Church of Scotland,' she said kindly. It didn't sound that kind, but given the idiocy of my previous two questions, anything but a head-butt could be considered kind.<sup>1</sup>

I'm not clued up on the difference between Churches of England and Scotland, so presumed it just meant shortbread and Irn Bru for communion.

'And I'd find one ...?'

'Right on Renfrew Street, left on Renfield Street, right on Renferren Street ...'

I needed to retain this information till Sunday morning. It lasted all of three seconds before exiting my brain. I thought to ask her again but she gave me a look that said, 'Get lost'. So I headed back to the hotel and got lost.

This venue could be a tough gig, often with large parties and big celebrations. I love a party blower as much as the next man, but the

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[1] My irrational fear of Scottish head-butts can be blamed on Russ Abbot c.1987.

bigger the group, the higher the ratio of ‘people who haven’t really come along for the comedy’ versus ‘the person who booked it’. They can be tricky.<sup>2</sup>

Friday night was lovely though - the stags and hens were on good form, and there were a few work parties who all seemed to have achieved the impossible: leaving the office joker at home, or telling him the event was somewhere else.<sup>3</sup> The other comics were a joy to be with, everyone had a nice gig, and we all patted each other on the back on a job well done, and by ‘job’ I mean, ‘twenty minutes of talking at people’.

Saturday’s show was different: full of large single-sex parties and a big footie match that meant drinking from noon.

Call-time came, as did stag do after stag do after hen do,<sup>4</sup> in all their shapes and sizes ...

### **A rough guide to rough stag and hen parties**

- **The Shameless Fancy-Dress Brigade:** Six foot six and bold as brass, dressed as Scooby Doo, marching through the streets of Glasgow. They’ve been drinking since Thursday and they lost the groom-to-be about a day ago.
- **The Geeky Stag Do:** The cutest of pre-marriage revellers. Most wear glasses, and the ones who don’t keep bumping into things.
- **The Underattended Hen Do:** Four of them, still in work clothes. Someone has planned this particularly badly.
- **The Learner Plates:** Found attached to any hen. Sometimes if they’re having a post-wedding hen party, they’re P-plates. In either case, their behaviour normally means they need their licence revoked.
- **Angels and Demons:** If more than one hen party is gathered, the odds are that you’ll see one lot with angel wings and the other with devil horns, as if the dress code was ‘spiritual

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[2] Especially if you start talking about ratios.

[3] It’s always a ‘him’.

[4] i.e. There were two stag dos after one hen do.



warfare'. It's a glimpse of the end days, only with more high heels and sambuca.

- **Overweight Superheroes:** Always a favourite with men of a certain age. If at the same event as the tottering angels and devils, it's a glimpse of Armageddon with a chubby Bananaman come to save the day.

As the audience passed us on the way to falling into their seats, even the non-religious comedians started praying for a show like last night's. We paced the floor, and we paced the Red Bulls.

Bombastic intro music blared out of the speakers and woke up two drunk Spider-Men. The compère walked out to the baying mob, and spent a few minutes trying to get them to notice he was there. As I was the first act on, I keenly watched both compère and audience for any hint as to how to play this: any glints of fun folks in the audience we could chat to or lightly rib. Any chance they might warm to a one-liner or two, or a rant, or a spot of wry satire about the government's attitude to public sector pensions.

After ten minutes of making them cheer, the compère put the microphone back in the stand: amber light to a comedian. Any second now he'd say my name and 'The Power of Love' by Huey Lewis and the News would play (my choice of intro - it gives the audience a sense that they're about to get upbeat, cheesy, middle-class nonsense).

'... Please welcome Paul Kerensa!' and 'Gold Digger' by Kanye West played.

Now, I'm not blaming the entire stage death on that one technical hiccup, but perhaps if their expectations had been more in-line with what I was going to do, the show might have gone better. I don't do any jokes about life in the hood. I live in Guildford. We haven't got a ghetto. We occasionally have a gateau, but Waitrose runs out of stock so quickly.

It wasn't a death - just a minor injury. Some jokes were hitting home, but so were some audience heckles. Generally the set consisted of me trying to get them onside by playing the ginger card. 'I'm one

of you!’ was the theme, even if my accent gave away that I very much was not, and as we’ve already established, I’m strawberry brunette.

The crucial rule for lairy gigs is to never leave too long a pause. I did once (to breathe) and a loud heckle came from nowhere - well not nowhere, right at the back near the toilets. Because it was right at the back, and the general hubbub of four hundred people wasn’t too quiet, I couldn’t pick out any of what was said. It didn’t help that it was in strong and slurring Glaswegian.

‘What’s that?’ I asked to get a second hearing.

The sentence was repeated, which is more than I can do here. It’s in no way intended as a slight on the people of Glasgow - it’s my soft Cornish ears that are at fault. I’m from the other end of this land mass. We’re not meant to be able to communicate. The Tower of Babel: it’s in the Bible. So no offence to the many lovely and often quite compre- hensible Glaswegians, but if this man sounded drunk and aggressive to me, it may have been because he was drunk and aggressive.

I panicked. What joke did I have in my arsenal ready for this? I needed a putdown, and fast. Show who’s boss, which I think was meant to be me, although all evidence indicated otherwise. So - and I’m not proud of this - my response to his heckle was an unrepeatable sentence that implied I knew of his mum.

The whole room fell silent. I had silenced him! It had worked! But I had silenced everyone. Especially my conscience, who just gave an internal, ‘uh oh’, followed by the sound of a closing door and a flushing noise.

‘All he said,’ came a soft Edinburgh voice from the front row, ‘was that he’s ginger too.’

Whoops. I’d just started a fight for no real reason. He was merely commenting on the fact that as a ginger man, I wanted to feel connected to this audience, and he was reaching out - one redhead to another reddishhead. I had shunned his metaphorical outreached hand, and instead upped the ante.



‘You’re ginger too?’ I blustered. ‘Ah. Well, what I just said about your... I’m sure very lovely mother ... At least it would explain why you’re ginger too.’

I’d nearly got away with it, until a different heckler pointed out, ‘You’re not even that ginger,’ followed by the audience breaking into small groups to discuss just how not ginger I was, as well as drinks orders and how bad the football was today.

I made it to the end, using the compère’s technique of making them cheer to ensure I left the stage to applause (‘A round of applause for our fine ginger friend at the back! ... Bye!’), and made my way to the green room, red in face if not in hair. The other comedians were a mix of supportive and brazen about the fact that they hadn’t seen the act because their food had arrived. The nagging thought remained that I’d stopped being me onstage tonight, albeit briefly. There’s no harm in dropping the script for some light banter, but when you stop doing what you want to do onstage - and what I want to do is tell jokes and make people have a nice time - then you start to question the act.

Annoyed with myself, and a little ashamed, I decided I deserved nothing more than to go back to the hotel room, via the bar, and maybe the cinema.

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I should have got a map. I’m walking through the streets of Glasgow looking for the church in Renfrew Road, or was it Renfield? My inability to listen has caused me to needlessly offend a well-meaning heckler with words I generally don’t use onstage, and has now caused me to become lost. I’d ask a stranger for directions, but there aren’t many about at ten o’clock on a Sunday morning, and even if there were, I’m afraid my ears will land me in hot water.

Last night’s gig is reverberating around my skull. Onstage you present a persona - it’s not necessarily you but it is a version of you. I’m not an aggressive man. I try to be nice. Yet last night was one of those gigs where I decided to play the audience at their own game,



and actually found the hecklers to be far nicer than I was. I don't like what this says about me. I'm hoping it just says, 'I misinterpreted a Glaswegian accent'. Yet I can't help but think of the Liverpudlian priest who once said to me post-show, 'It's nice to see a comedian who doesn't think you need to be vulgar to be funny.' If he had been at the gig last night, I'd have wondered what he'd make of it, and why he'd come all the way from Liverpool.

I walk, lost. I'm just about to give up and retrace my steps when I see a sign. Not a heavenly sign as such, but a street name: Renfrew Street. This was one of the names the tourist information lady mentioned! Probably! And look! There's a lovely family of five redheads all dressed up nice, turning left onto Renfield Street.

I follow them, and sure enough they walk right into the McDonald's next door to a small church. I leave them to it and wander into the Tardis-like building: traditional and wee on the outside, but ultra-modern white walls and funky chairs on the inside.

'You're most welcome. Do take a seat anywhere,' a sidesman says.<sup>5</sup>

There's a huge bookshop at the back. Not just a mobile trolley with a few dog-eared copies of *The Purpose Driven Life*. This is like a mini Waterstones. There are commentaries on every book in the Bible, sections on Mission, Church History, Hermeneutics, Epistemology, Semiotics and several other words that I've vaguely heard of. I always thought Hermeneutics was the session at our sports centre between Zumba and Bodypump.

The worship band strikes up, and sounds more like an orchestra. Not only drums, guitars and keyboard, but we also have a cellist and a fiddler. It means the opening music has a truly Celtic feel to it. I'm slow to sing along - it sounds that beautiful - but when we move into 'Amazing Grace', you can't help but get swept up in the moment. The strings section, the location, the fact that I can hear the Scottish accent in the congregation's singing, all make this the finest version of John Newton's great song that I've ever heard

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[5] If the old kids' game is to be believed, he should have said, 'Sidesman says take a seat,' before I obeyed him.

or had the joy of singing. I have visions of Welsh churches at the same moment belting out 'Bread of Heaven', Irish churches giving it 'Danny Boy' and English churches muttering something about an 'English Country Garden'.

The musical worship gives way to the welcome, and I half-want the cello and violin to continue under the whole service, like the backing for a Visit Scotland commercial. Instead the dulcet Hibernian tones of the minister greet us. This is an accent I could listen to for hours, and nearly do, as church news and banns of marriage alone last for fifteen minutes. But it's Glasgow city centre, and there's a lot going on. Fair play to them.

The reading is from Ephesians 5: 'Wives, be subordinate to your husbands as to the Lord.' Controversial, and not often preached upon. I presume we'll get a nice placatory explanation of how actually you can read it to mean we're all equal. I presume wrong. Most would focus on the later verse instructing husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Not this guy. We're not in a C of E now. This is C of S. There's no watering down of wine or sermons here.

Still intoning as the vocal equivalent of hot chocolate, the minister proceeds to tell us how women should promise to obey their husbands. No room for ambiguity here. My, does it get uncomfortable, especially for the couples who've just had their banns read. The minister marrying them may not give them the vow-flexibility they had hoped for.

The minister encourages that during our time of prayer, we consider the challenges of what's been said, only looking at women as he says so. Wow, they've been given homework.

As we bow our heads though, my focus is on last night's gig. It is challenging being a comedian who's a Christian,<sup>6</sup> and sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. I like to think I'm an example of human loveliness when I'm onstage. Last night I was an example of how to needlessly start a pub brawl.

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[6] ...as opposed to a 'Christian comedian', which implies putting on skits at parish away days.



Closing worship is a chance for me to reflect. As another holy concert plays, courtesy of the string section, I resolve to try and be more 'me' onstage and less what the audience expects from a comedian. I resolve to accept when a gig is getting out of hand and that, sometimes, I'm powerless to turn it. I resolve to put it behind me and just be glad that, for all I know, there were no priests there. And I resolve to listen to more folk music (it really is a lovely violin).

The inevitable invitation comes: 'Do stay for coffee.' It's practically part of the blessing in churches nowadays. You can roll it straight into, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ...'. I wouldn't be surprised to find that in the 1665 prayer book there's a section of alternative invitations:

*The minister says:*

Do join us for coffee.

or

You're welcome to stay for coffee.

*or on festival days*

Do stay for coffee and biscuits.

*The congregation may reply:*

**Thanks, but I've got to rush off.**

The coffee must be good here - there's a big queue. So while it dies down I browse the bookshop, run by an elderly lady so tiny she barely appears above the table of books. I hope she doesn't have the job of stacking the shelves.

'New here or just visiting?'

'Just passing through. I'm working here this weekend.'

'Oh, whereabouts?' she continues, sipping a coffee that she must have fetched during the closing blessing, the wily lass.

I'm not proud of last night's show so I consider lying, saying that I'm working at Prestwick Airport and taking a trip to far-off Glasgow. But I'm in a church branch of Waterstones, and there are rules against deceit.



‘The comedy club up the road.’

‘Oh, Matt and Emily went there last night,’ she says, and I gulp. I blink and she’s gone to fetch them.

Uh oh. Perhaps no priests there last night, but these guys were. As the jolly couple join us, I wonder if they’d be even jollier if last night’s opening comedy set had been better.

‘Hi!’ says Matt with a handshake. It’s the spectre from last night, but I make a conscious effort not to imply I’ve ever even met his mum.

The wee bookkeeper nudges Emily with her elbow, hitting slightly above her knee. ‘He was one of those turns in your show.’

‘Last night?’ checks Emily. Here it comes. The accusation. How as a Christian can I utter such twisted words? Then the half-hour compulsory prayer session. ‘Oh you weren’t on first, were you? The babysitter kept us waiting - we only got there in the interval. I’m so sorry.’

I’m saved! A sentence often uttered in churches (though perhaps not often enough) - only here I’m saved from social embarrassment and quiet grumbly judgment.

‘So you’re a Christian?’ Matt asks. ‘Typical we missed it. How great that you can stand up there and be a positive influence. The other acts on the bill were all smut and being rude to hecklers.’

I stay silent. It’s not the time or place to confess the truth (all right, I know it’s exactly the time and the place).

Our conversation ends when Matt tells Emily to finish her coffee and fetch their coats. She obeys, which implies to me they were probably married in this church by today’s minister.

So yes, I got away with it. Part of me feels cheated that the comeuppance I thought I’d get never came. For that brief moment, I knew I’d been caught out, until I wasn’t. I’m sure in that audience of four hundred last night, there must have been one or two Christians there - I’ve just avoided meeting them. I know I deserve to be found out though, so I decide that one day, if I ever get to write a book about experiences of life on the road as a Christian comic, I should confess my reckless run-in with a heckler in those pages. One day...

# Local Hero

## Uniting with the URC

I entered my third hour of being trapped in the unfamiliar bathroom.

The neighbourhood wasn't one I knew. If you'd have given me a hotline to the local police station, all I could've said was, 'I'm on the outskirts of Newcastle ... Well can you just try all the houses till you find me? I'm the one yelling through frosted glass with just a small travel towel for clothing. Yes, it is surprisingly compact for packing...'

Life on the road necessitates staying with friends, especially when the gig fee barely covers the petrol. I normally try and bring a bottle of plonk as rent, but sometimes even the cost of that pushes the gig into becoming a loss maker.

Sofa-hopping means gatecrashing a lot of people's Saturday mornings, when no one gets much done. That was exactly what I was doing right now, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one in the street still not dressed at midday. Judging by the response to my hoarse shouts though, perhaps I was the only one in the street.

I generally try and travel light, but not this light. I had just a towel and a toilet bag; my clothes were a room and a world away. I had no help, no hope and no one in the house for two full days. Forty-eight hours! Two thousand eight hundred and eighty minutes!<sup>7</sup>

Someone would miss me surely, and call for help. Well, no. I'd got a new girlfriend, Zoë, but when I said I was off to the north-east, she thought that meant Walthamstow. Besides, we were still at the stage where if I didn't call for five days, she'd just think I was playing 'hard to get'. In fact I was playing 'hard to get out'.

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[7] I had the gift of time, and sadly not the gift of a phone to calculate the seconds. Or call for help, which would have been more useful.



To be fair, I had been warned about this room. As soon as I'd arrived at Jo's on Friday afternoon, she'd said that the bathroom door was, 'a bit dodgy'. She'd reminded me too that she was leaving at dawn for a weekend away with friends, due to me mistiming my visit to the north-east. But I could come and go as I pleased till I left on Sunday morning. Fine in theory, but I couldn't come and go anywhere. She'd be back on Sunday night, which at the moment was looking like my best chance of escaping.

She'd explained very clearly that if I use the bathroom, don't, whatever I do, let the door completely shut. She was having some work done, the inside handle had been removed - and with it, all possibility of leaving, should the door close completely.

'Not a problem,' I'd said, and indeed early on Friday evening it was not a problem - my memory lasted the few minutes needed to apply this information.<sup>8</sup> Then came the gig: a pleasant arts centre show with two other acts. Except they were stuck in traffic and never arrived, so my twenty minute slot turned into an hour. The audience would never know the difference, until they looked at the poster on the way out and wondered where their twelve pounds had gone.<sup>9</sup>

So I'd dredged up old material and tried to remember new. I'd bantered with most of the audience, and after my poor brain had tried to hold a dozen or so audience names, as well as jokes from notebooks and from yesteryear, it's no wonder that when I arrived back, memory of the cursed bathroom door was all but gone.

Only tiredness meant I didn't slam it shut late that night, and I then took to my sofa bed and curled up with a Choose Your Own Adventure book I'd plucked from Jo's bookcase.<sup>10</sup>

Saturday morning was not so kind. Jo had left early for her weekend trip, which I'm sure was genuine, and not just booked at the last minute because I'd announced I was turning up. Bleary-

[8] You may remember my bad memory from chapter one. If you've forgotten already, congratulations: your memory is as bad as mine.

[9] It hadn't gone to me, though the kind promoter tipped me an extra thirty quid for doing three times as long as originally booked for.

[10] Let this be a lesson - always take a book to the bathroom.