Preaching is a serious matter

John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’.

(Matthew 3:1-2)

In 1956 courageous Hungarians rose in revolt against their Communist masters, and for several days, the city of Budapest was ablaze with resistance to Soviet tyranny. When the expected aid from the free world did not come, the Soviet Red Army crushed the freedom-fighters mercilessly, and about 200,000 freedom-loving Hungarians fled to the West. One of the refugees eventually became a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, having abandoned his position at the University of Budapest. Soon after beginning his teaching in Philadelphia, the Hungarian scholar asked a class of ministerial students, ‘Why do American pastors introduce their sermons with a joke?’ He indicated that Hungarians would not tolerate such frivolity in the pulpit, for there Christians take the Word of God seriously. In rebuke of American preachers the professor admonished his students to realise that the church is not a theatre, the pulpit is not a stage, and so the preacher ought not to be a performer. In other words, preaching is a serious matter.

John the Baptist is a biblical model of serious preaching. He began his proclamations about AD 26 at the River Jordan near Bethany, and in doing so he fulfilled an Old Testament prediction. Through the prophet Malachi, God had promised, ‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes’ (Malachi 4:5). Elijah was one of the most seriously committed preachers of all time. He did not introduce his sermons with a joke. He did not use preaching as a means to entertain the throng, for he spoke with the conviction that God had spoken to him.

In the New Testament, it is evident that John the Baptist resembled Elijah closely in the content of his message and in the manner of his presentation. He was a ‘man sent from God’ (John 1:6) to ‘testify concerning that light (Christ), so that through him all men might believe’ (John 1:6-7). John came in the power and spirit of Elijah to announce the imminent appearance of the Saviour. He announced that a new day of revelation was dawning for the people of God, a day of blessing and redemption, for the long-awaited Messiah was about to make his debut. That was a serious matter. It was not a time for joking and frivolity.

The coming of John the Baptist had been predicted by Isaiah, another mighty preacher. This Old Testament prophet had promised ‘a voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God”’ (Isaiah 40:3). John was the predicted forerunner of the Christ, one to prepare the way for the coming King.

In ancient times roads were often in a deplorable condition, but when the authorities knew that a royal personality would pass that way, they filled in the pot-holes and smoothed the ruts to make a fitting passage for the use of a king. After a monarch had used the road, it became known as ‘the king’s highway’.

John the Baptist prepared the way, not just for any king, but for the King of kings and the Lord of lords. This was a serious responsibility. It was not a time to entertain people with jokes. John had a serious mission to perform, and, in the discharge of his duty, he set an example of courage for all subsequent generations of preachers. He proclaimed the entire truth which God had revealed to him. He preached the truth, although it was not entertaining. He preached the truth when it disturbed his hearers deeply, but he preached the truth nevertheless.
Serious preaching often provokes antagonism, so John encountered severe opposition. Had he presented his sermons in a way that would have made people laugh, he would have antagonised nobody. John, however, was on a mission for God. Because he had to announce the advent of the Messiah, there was no time for silliness and frivolity. John, consequently, angered people by telling them the truth, unembellished by trivialities. Like his predecessor, Elijah, John was a true prophet, a spokesman for God.

Those today who aspire to preach should regard John as a model. That is, they should take their preaching seriously and not play the role of an ecclesiastical comedian. Pastors have no obligation to entertain anyone, neither by levity nor by autobiography. Biblical preaching is not comical or autobiographical in character. Preaching is not a vehicle for reciting one’s experiences. Consider Jonah. His experiences were extraordinary, to say the least, but when he went to Nineveh, he made no references to those experiences but rather proclaimed the Word of the Lord. There is no more serious responsibility in life than declaring God’s message. John the Baptist, like Jonah, knew that, and he committed himself to the task with gravity and resolution.

John the Baptist ‘came preaching ... “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”’ (Matthew 3:1-2). Wherever John found evil he attacked it, among ruling authorities, within religious bodies and in society at large. Although his message was rich with the promise of coming redemption, John announced a dire warning, as he launched his attacks against sin. Because he was a man sent by God, John could not offer people his finely-distilled opinions, and he did not seek to demonstrate great eloquence. In preaching a message from God, he became ‘a light to illumine evil, a voice to rebuke sin ... and a signpost to God.’ He did not focus attention upon himself by reciting biographical details. On the contrary, he sought to direct attention to Christ. When Jesus appeared in public, John hailed him as the Messiah and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). ‘He must become greater; I must become less’ (John 3:30). John drew no attention to himself, but he made every possible effort to attract attention to the Lamb of God.

Like John, all great Bible preachers were serious about their ministries.

The apostle Paul said, ‘We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.’

(2 Corinthians 4:5)

Paul was not a joker nor an autobiographer but a serious, committed preacher of Christ. Twentieth-century preachers and those who aspire to preach should note that carefully.

Preaching should be the faithful exposition and practical application of God’s Word. Such preaching requires extensive preparation, and one should not have the audacity to stand in the pulpit until one has spent many hours in preparation. Telling jokes and reciting autobiography require relatively little preparation, but one who wishes to be a truly biblical preacher must spend great amounts of time in study. Every sermon should reflect thorough exegesis of the scriptures, and until one has invested hours in preparation, one is not normally entitled to enter the pulpit.

The example of John the Baptist should convince all ministers that a genuine preacher will not be concerned with making a favourable impression upon his hearers. He must proclaim the whole truth, even when it disturbs his hearers and arouses their opposition. With the fervour of that conviction, John was entirely serious about his ministry. A preacher of the whole truth must declare the same message as that proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The pulpit is not the place for innovation and cleverness. The servant of God must neither add to nor subtract from the everlasting gospel. With total confidence in the Word of God, he must herald the message God has revealed, and he must do so by careful, prayerful, exposition of scripture and with all due application to contemporary needs.

Jesus’ message was, ‘Repent and believe the good news’ (Mark 1:14). John likewise cried, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’ (Matthew 3:2). His message had to harmonise perfectly with that of Christ. Because they demanded repentance, Jesus and John antagonised people. Such preaching is not at all entertaining. To tell people they must repent is to inform them that they
are sinners under the wrath of God, and that is not a pleasant task. Nobody enjoys being told he is a sinner, but that is what Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul and Jesus all proclaimed. Repentance involves a turning from evil and a turning toward God. As Isaiah put it in all seriousness:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

Repentance entails a radical change of mind which produces a change of life and behaviour. It is indispensable, and there can be no true preaching without a demand for it. 'God ... now commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30). That is apostolic preaching. Every human being must repent. Pastors do their congregations no favours when they entertain them with jokes and autobiographies. People do not need such 'attractions'; they need the Word of God, and their need is urgent. They need to know the ugly reality of their own sins. They need to be changed drastically, and repentance is essential for that change to occur.

Repentance involves a genuine sorrow for sin. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states it so well:

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.

When a person experiences grief and hatred for his sins, that is a serious matter. Jokes and autobiographies have no power to induce repentance, nor do the penitent welcome them.

Repentance demands the honest admission of one's guilt and responsibility for one's own sins. A true penitent concurs with the biblical declaration that 'the heart is deceitful above all things' (Jeremiah 17:9). He knows that that is the condition of his own heart. Wisecracks and witticisms from the pulpit will not lead one to that conviction. Serious, prophetic, and apostolic preaching is essential.

In prophetic fashion, John called for repentance. Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him for baptism, but we must note how John responded to their request. He refused their application! He said to them, 'You brood of vipers (pack of snakes) ! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance' (Matthew 3:7-8). No wonder John infuriated people and accumulated a growing number of enemies! He said that the best people in Israel were in desperate need of repentance. He was not like some modern preachers who go about telling people, 'Smile! God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.' John began his evangelism, not with a declaration about God's love, but with an affirmation of God's wrath. He established the fact of sin and warned of impending judgment. There was no reason for his hearers to smile. John knew they were under the wrath of God, and he was determined that they should know it too. This was not the time to amuse them. It was the time to confront them with reality. John the Baptist told Israel's most conspicuously religious people that they must repent. He warned them not to rely upon their heritage as descendants of Abraham, for, 'out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham' (Matthew 3:9). There was a bizarre strand in Jewish mythology which held that Abraham sat at the gates of hell and barred the way so that no Jew would ever enter it. But John made it clear that one's religious heritage and ancestry would avail nothing if he were not penitent. He gave his hearers two alternatives; either be baptised on the basis of true repentance or in the fires of divine judgment.

John Bunyan, in one of his books, asks the question, 'Will you leave your sins and go to heaven, or will you keep your sins and go to hell?' That is biblical preaching. That is prophetic and apostolic evangelism. Elijah, John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Jesus himself, John Bunyan and an innumerable host of other heralds of truth were entirely serious about preaching. They believed that the church is not a theatre, and the pulpit not a stage. Therefore the preacher must not be a performer. Well should preachers pray:
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer

(Psalm 19:14)

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1 All scripture citations are from the New International Version.
2 Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 87 (emphasis mine).