

*The Shape of the Sermon*

fewer than three heads you are a bad preacher; if you have more than three you are an equally bad preacher. This is quite ridiculous, of course, but it is amazing to notice how easily one falls into habits and becomes the slave of a tradition. I was certainly brought up in this tradition of 'always an introduction and three heads'. People looked for them; that was the almost invariable custom of the preachers.

That it had become the tradition in that particular Church—the Welsh Presbyterian—was unusually ridiculous because one of the greatest preachers of that denomination, indeed its greatest preacher, and one of its founders, Daniel Rowlands, often had as many as ten headings to a sermon. A contemporary writer said that listening to Rowlands was like watching an apothecary with a number of bottles containing wonderful perfumes. He would take the first bottle and pull out the stopper or the cork and release the wonderful aroma which was then wafted over the entire congregation. Then he would put that bottle down and take up the second one and do the same with that. And there were often as many as ten bottles. I tell that story in order to enforce the point that we must not become slaves in this matter.

However, let us turn to something more important. The important thing about these 'heads' is that they must be there in your text, and that they must arise naturally out of it. This is vital. The actual division into heads, as I am going to show you, is not as easy as it may sound. Some people seem to be gifted with an unusual facility in this respect. It used to be said of Alexander Maclaren—a Baptist preacher in England at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, and whose volumes of sermons are still being reprinted—that he seemed to have a kind of golden hammer in his hand with which he just tapped a text, and immediately it divided itself up into inevitable heads. However it is not given to many of us to have this golden hammer; but we must always make sure that these divisions arise naturally out of the text. Let me first put this negatively; because it is so important. Never force a division. And do not add to the number of divisions for the sake of some kind of completeness that you have

*Preaching and Preachers*

in your mind or in order to make it conform to your usual practice. The headings should be natural and appear to be inevitable.

Let me tell you a story in order to ridicule this notion that you must have three heads, and also at the same time to warn against false additions. There was a quaint old preacher whom I just remember—I cannot remember hearing him but I certainly remember seeing him and remember many stories concerning him. He was a true eccentric. There have been such men in the ministry at various times in the past; there may still be an occasional one. This man was preaching on one occasion on the text, ‘And Balaam arose early and saddled his ass’. After introducing the subject and reminding his hearers of the story, he came to the headings, the divisions. ‘First,’ he said, ‘we find a good trait in a bad character—“Balaam arose” early. Early rising is a good thing; so that is the first head. Secondly, The antiquity of saddlery—“he saddled his ass”. Saddlery is not something modern and new, it was an ancient craft.’ And then the inspiration seemed to have vanished and he could not think of another heading. Yet he felt that he must have three heads to the sermon, otherwise he would not be a great preacher. So the divisions of the sermon were eventually announced as—‘A good trait in a bad character.’ ‘The antiquity of sadlery.’ ‘Thirdly and lastly, a few remarks concerning the Woman of Samaria!’ Now that literally happened. From that let us learn not to force the text and not to add to it. Do not become a slave to these mechanical notions.

I hasten to add something equally important: Do not be too clever in your divisions, do not be too smart. This has been a real snare to many preachers. It may not be quite as true today, but certainly in the earlier part of this century there was probably nothing that did greater harm to preaching than this very thing. Clever headings. Slick and smart divisions in which the preacher displayed his cleverness. One of the great dangers always facing the preacher (I hope to deal with this later) is the terrible danger of professionalism. I have often found that ministers when they meet with one another, instead of ‘swapping jokes’ as the men of the world do, say to each other ‘What do you