

LESSON XXXI.

LECTURE XXXI.

THE DEVELOPMENT: CHARACTERISTICS.

(2) **THE** unity of a good development requires further consideration by observing a second class of errors by which it is sacrificed. These consist of intentional digressions. Every thing is intentional digression in which a speaker consciously dallies with the thing in hand. This error may take the form of discourse without construction. This is the ideal of a certain class of preachers. Religious talk, without connection, and without aim other than the general one of "pious remark," may be capped with a text, and dignified with a subject, when neither is more than a figure-head. Such a sermon is all digression. That is, it has no center of converging thought: its desultory materials have only the centrifugal power.

Again: digression may take the form of talking against time. A speaker in the United States Senate once spoke twenty-four hours continuously in order to compel the close of the session before a certain vote should be taken. It was said, that, in that time, he rambled over every political topic within the knowledge of man. Unity of impression requires intensity of aim; and an intense aim shuts out every thing but necessities. The arrow which strikes the mark goes straight and quick. The bullet which kills pauses for nothing

between. Much desultory remark in sermons springs from transient relaxation of mental intensity in composing. For the moment, the preacher speaks to fill time; and he knows that he does so. Necessary material does not crowd for utterance, and he consciously fills in with commonplaces. Commonplace is always the fruit of indifferent or of jaded thinking.

Again: digression may take the form of excessive illustration. The difficulties of composition must have already disclosed to you the temptation which a preacher experiences to illustrate for other purposes than to meet the necessities of the thing in hand. We are tempted to illustrate for the sake of the illustration, its beauty, its novelty, its eccentricity. We are tempted to illustrate for the sake of rhetorical display, display of ingenuity, of learning, of originality. We are tempted to illustrate for the entertainment of an audience. We are tempted to fill in with anecdote for the sake of the story, not because the thing in hand demands the anecdote. You all know a certain popular lecturer, whose passion for anecdote is so great as to have degenerated into what De Quincey calls "anecdoteage." Illustrative stories have so multiplied in number, that now the larger portion of the time spent in listening to him is devoted to laughter at his jocular coruscations. His hearers find that their digestion improves more than their culture. All these forms of illustrative digression are claptrap. That they can be linked logically to the subject does not save them from the charge. Every thing conceivable can be linked logically to every other thing by some sort of underground connections. Such illustrations do not advance the subject. They do not carry it: it carries them.

Further: digression may take the form of a deliberate

change of theme. In such a case the unity of the discussion, and all other qualities of intense discourse are sacrificed to the single purpose of pricking the ears of an audience. Rowland Hill used to practice and defend this as a legitimate expedient in the pulpit. He claimed the right to introduce any number of doctrines into a sermon, if he found the variety necessary to sustain the flagging interest of the hearers. With a delicacy of taste equaled only by the severity of his logic, he himself compared his homiletic policy to the process of milking cows. Said he, "The gospel is an excellent milch cow, which always gives plenty of milk, and of the best quality. I first pull at justification; then I give a plug at adoption, and afterwards a tit at sanctification; and so on, till I have filled my pail with gospel milk." "Gospel milk," indeed! We are told that the gospel is to be preached to babes; but are calves specified? The bovine theory of preaching is not Pauline.

2d, The second characteristic of a good development is pertinency. The Rev. William Jay relates that he once delivered a speech before the Bible Society in Bath, and, soon after, a committee of the society waited upon him to ask for the publication "of so much of the speech as related to the subject in hand."

The following points may be noted as things which will illustrate themselves in your practice.

(1) Strict unity will commonly secure pertinency of development. If discourse holds to one thing, it will probably be *the* one thing which the division proposes. Rarely will an educated preacher state one thing, and then at the very start discuss another thing. The arrow when on the string is usually aimed right. Guard unity by intense composing, and pertinency will probably follow.

(2) Irrelevancy of material often concerns only its location. Remarks are often relevant to a different division from that under which they occur. Not the choice of material, but its locality, is in fault. It is relevant to the subject, but belongs there, not here

(3) Irrelevancy of material is often limited to isolated remarks. It seldom covers whole pages consecutively. It blotches them over with single remarks in which the preacher has written with momentary languor; and the progress of thought is impeded accordingly. Is it necessary to correct such isolated examples of irrelevant remark? What harm do they do? I answer, They are to discourse what excessive friction is to machinery. Intense discourse does not tolerate these fragmentary impertinences, and intense impression is always impaired by them.

(4) The habit of precise and intense thinking will tend to adjust the details of a development as rigidly as it plans the outline of a sermon. Why should it not do so? Every sentence of a sermon is a subdivision of something. The same law of close thinking should govern the species as the genus. Yet just here occurs the collapse in the power of many sermons. Good plans are feebly executed. Many minds, as I have before remarked, think vigorously in outlines, but languidly in details. They become enervated when they pass from the work of the scholar to the work of the orator. Any one of us could have constructed what Milton calls "The Argument" of the "Paradise Lost;" but only Milton could produce the poem. Similar is the difference of which we are often sensible in passing from scholarship to oratory, from logic to rhetoric, from reasoning to persuasion.

What is the obvious remedy? Simply that sturdy

thinking should hold its own to the end. One reason that the Puritan preaching of the seventeenth century was so vivacious, in spite of its prolixity, was that its thinking was so vigorous. It could suspend argument to interweave illustration, anecdote, biography, history, any thing which would illumine the train of thought, without a break in that train, and without the creation of any sense of irrelevance. This was done with such unconscious adroitness, that the sense of consecutiveness was seldom lost. In no other way than by this intensity of thinking power could the prolix sermons of the Puritan divines have commanded the hearing they received from popular multitudes.

(5) Rhetorical pertinence often requires that a development shall receive a more vigorous treatment than is demanded by the mere connections of logic. Logical sequence may be indirect and yet unbroken. Rhetorical force may be so diluted by indirectness as to evaporate in commonplaces. Logic deals with the intellect pure and simple; rhetoric deals chiefly with the sensibilities. Intellect may thread the mazes of a languid development, provided that logic be kept unbroken; the sensibilities can not always do that. They do not readily obey threadlike and tortuous lines of connection. They require obvious continuity. They often demand close proximity to the object of their excitement. They are roused by boldness of representation. They are stimulated by high coloring. They sometimes need contrasts of coloring, in which the mind passes back and forth with unconscious speed. To preserve absolute pertinence of material in such a process is a far more difficult achievement than to forge the links of an argument. It requires more ~~narrow~~ thinking power.

3d, A third characteristic of a good development is completeness. The development is to the division in hand what the divisions collectively are to the proposition. The one should exhaust the other.

(1) Completeness of development, then, may be obviously sacrificed by the omission of a necessary link in the argument.

(2) It may also be sacrificed by an inadequate statement of the strong point in an argument. A development should not claim less than it really proves. A preacher who had Daniel Webster for a hearer once preached on the evidences of Christianity. One division of the discourse was devoted to the testimony of the sacred writers themselves. This was amplified so forcibly, that Mr. Webster saw the reach of it beyond the claim of the preacher. The preacher rested his case on this alternative: "Either Christianity is true, or the sacred writers were deluded men." — "No," said Mr. Webster, "the alternative is stronger than that, — either Christianity is true, or the Apostles were knaves. Their testimony is credible, or it is downright fraud." If candor forbids a preacher to claim more than he proves, fidelity forbids him to claim less.

(3) Completeness of development is impaired by a want of clearness of connection. Certain passages in every prolonged discourse have no other purpose than to make connections. Certain sentences, paragraphs, pages are to a discourse as a whole what certain words in every vocabulary are to the rest: they are simply connectives. By themselves they are forceless; yet without them discourse would be impossible. Without them, men could commune with each other only in ejaculations. They are joints, which make discourse continuous and flexible. These transitional passages

are often carelessly constructed; and the result is a sense of inconsequence in the progress of thought.

(4) Completeness of development is further sacrificed by a want of forcible presentation. Materials may be unified, pertinent, connected, and yet may fail for the want of vividness. Generally the defect is the want of illustration. Pure argument seldom does itself justice before the popular mind. The same is true of purely didactic explanation. No man can discourse orally upon pure mathematics. The illustrative element in popular discourse is necessary to completeness, because it is necessary to forcible impression. Frequently the only change which criticism can suggest in a development which fails of its object is not in the stock of it, nor in its frame-work, but in its temperature. It is constructed of good material, and is well jointed; but it wants glow. It needs to be recomposed to gain intensity. The excellences which it has will not come forth palpably to the popular eye without red heat.

(5) This suggests that completeness of development is often sacrificed by excessive qualifications of truth. Qualifications should never be the equivalents of retractions. The father of Samuel J. Mills was the pastor of a Congregational Church in Connecticut. He was a man of very positive opinions, which he never hesitated to proclaim. He once delivered a sermon on the text, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." At the close he uttered a fervent appeal to parents, exhorting them to fidelity in obedience to the text; and ended by saying, "After all, brethren, character depends very much on the blood." Such qualifications are practical contradictions: they expose secret convictions, which seem to be more honest than those which have been

avowed. A preacher has no right to have secret convictions on any thing which he professes to preach. Qualifications ought not to contain the most vivacious materials of a discourse. If they do, they will be remembered when the statements which they qualify are forgotten.

4th, A fourth characteristic of a good development is conciseness. The chief distinction of the eloquence of Demosthenes was its velocity of rhetorical movement. One critic says that he spoke "like a passionate man tormented by the truth." Such a man can not help speaking with quick advances. What he has to say he says, and has done with it. Thought, structure, style are all condensed. The chinks and crevices of discourse are packed full. The effect in utterance is a combination of weight and speed, and that combination is always power: it is like the power of a cannon-ball. We need much of this kind of discourse in the pulpit. The subjects of the pulpit invite it. The moral exigencies which have created the pulpit demand it. Those preachers whose sympathy with the work of the pulpit is the most profound practice it spontaneously.

(1) Yet it should be remarked that conciseness in preaching must be subordinated to completeness of discussion. Conciseness is a relative excellence: it must be adjusted to subject and to audience. Some themes in the pulpit, discussed before some audiences, will not bear extreme compactness: they need amplitude. Oral discourse in its very nature requires a certain bulk of expression. Proof, often, will not be taken in, if expressed in naked syllogism. Explanation may not be understood if given with mathematical brevity. Illustration is often needed, as much to gain time for the thinking power of a hearer to rally around a thought,

as for the direct purpose of making it luminous. A laconic development is fit only for self-evident truths.

Some of President Finney's discourses are defective in this respect. His twenty or thirty divisions, barely stated, with but one or two sentences exhaustive of each, sound like an inventory. Four or five divisions expanded to such length as to be rounded and full would be more effective, because more natural to the procedure of oratory. Milton speaks of the "close palm" of logic and of the "open palm" of rhetoric. The open palm is the symbol of homiletic development.

(2) Conciseness of development is promoted by cultivation of the condensing power. A condensed style is concise development. But I mean more than this. Every expedient which reduces circumlocutory expression promotes the power and the habit of condensed thinking. A taste for short words, for Saxon words, for unqualified substantives, for crisp sentences, helps the thinking power to work in close quarters. A writer who acquires a fondness for speaking brevities learns to think in brevities. Happy is the man whose habit it is to think laconically. There are few things in which the re-action of style on thought and on the thinking force is so obvious as in the growth of this condensing power.

(3) Conciseness of development depends chiefly on a wise retrenchment of materials. The work is mainly negative. Eliminate superfluous thoughts, say only necessary things, depend on selection, not on conglomeration of materials, and conciseness is inevitable. For example, avoid needless explanations. We observed the necessity of this in expository discourse. It is equally needful in all explanatory development. Assume all that can safely be assumed of the intelli-

gence of the hearer. On the same principle, avoid proof of things which can safely be assumed. A wise preacher studies when to argue, and when to dictate. Do not try to prove that men are sinners, that time is short, that death is certain, that eternity is important, that truth is right. The most stupendous truths, and sometimes the most bitterly contested, must generally be assumed in preaching. The being of God, the necessity of revelation, the authority of conscience, the truth of the Scriptures, the facts of heaven and of hell must commonly be proclaimed by assumption.

So of the countless minor threads of thought which make up the woof of sermons: speak by authority when there is no need of argument: assume as much as possible of existing belief in the hearer's mind. Avoid preaching to absent opponents. Some preachers are always in war-paint; all subjects open to them controversially. They find it difficult to develop a subject pacifically. A vast amount of needless expansion in sermons would be saved, if preachers would on some subjects instruct and illustrate more, and argue and contend less. For the same reason, avoid giving to infidelity an undue eminence in the labors of the pulpit. Specially if a preacher has been himself a skeptic, is he apt to exhibit an excessive sympathy with skeptics in his preaching by incessantly preaching to them or at them. A wise retrenchment of such materials would throw out from many sermons remarks which are relevant only to an absent audience.

Note here a brief *excursus* on the true relation of preaching to skeptics. The preaching of the Rev. Albert Barnes betrayed to the last his own early experience of infidelity. It was the chief defect in his otherwise masterly pulpit. Argument needed by infi-

dels only was poured out in profusion, often when, probably, not a hearer was present who could be directly benefited by it. It was done in a masterly way; the only difficulty was that it was addressed to an assembly of believers. It may be generally assumed that the hearers of the gospel are at least nominal Christians. As a rule, skeptics and infidels are not frequenters of churches. The abandonment of the house of God generally precedes the development of skepticism.

Moreover, skeptics are not so numerous in any Christian country as they are often imagined to be. Minorities have the gift of speech inordinately developed: they are very apt to vociferate, and are often estimated by the noise they make. Did you ever sit in the twilight in the autumn, when three or four crickets were serenading each other? They made the whole house ring: one would think that they were a thousand strong. So we exaggerate the numbers and the strength of infidelity, so far as the masses of the people are concerned. They are not unbelievers on any large scale, and never have been. Indifferentism is not infidelity. Skepticism is never popular: it is aristocratic, rather. We over-estimate it, if we judge it by the airs it puts on. Therefore be wary in preaching against infidelity. Do it thoroughly when it must be done, but do it rarely. Do not be for ever firing with a telescopic rifle at a foe invisible to the naked eye. Didactic preaching of the truth is a much more direct and brief process than the pursuit and overthrow of error. Very much of useless expansion in sermons would be avoided, if we should preach to believers more, and to unbelievers less.

For similar reasons, avoid illustration beyond the

necessities of the case. The common stock of thought in sermons contains much which needs no illustration, more which needs but momentary illustration, and but little which needs illustration piled on illustration. The true medium is variable: it varies with subject; it varies with audience. Even when excess of illustration does not amount to intentional digression, it may sacrifice that compact union of weight and bulk which is requisite to swift movement and effective stroke.

On the same principle, avoid useless repetitions. Some repetitions popular discourse must have. The one thought repeated with variations is the staple of many sermons. Dr. Chalmers's discourses are largely of this kind. They are revolving-lights. Admitting the necessity of such productions, we must offset it by a stringent check upon excess in the use of them. Repeat, if necessary for emphasis. Practice variations on one thought, if necessary to gain time for growth of interest; but, as soon as your point is gained, drop it, and pass on. By thus retrenching superfluous materials, and materials of secondary worth, depending on selection rather than on volume, and saying only necessary things, conciseness of development is achieved as a matter of course. A sermon then becomes massive and solid.

5th, A fifth characteristic of a good development is order. Dean Swift said that style is "the right words in the right places." A good development might be defined to be "the right thoughts in the right places." A reason always exists for the location of a thought: in other words, there is always a natural order of thought. The oratorical instinct goes far to determine this; but it may be assisted, and at the same time obeyed, by attention to four very simple things.

(1) Finish one thing at a time. Say connectedly all that is to be said on a given thought. Concentrate discourse long enough to carry the point; and, once carried, let it alone.

(2) Aim deliberately at continuity of thought. This is a matter of conscious design. Every thought in a good discourse is a link in a chain. Every thought looks before and behind. It is naturally preceded and naturally followed. To see this natural continuity, and to execute it, must be the voluntary aim of a speaker. Disorderly speech is, very largely, unthinking speech.

(3) Avoid capricious lines of association. It is the infirmity of an undisciplined mind that it brings together the oddest and most dissimilar materials. It works in tangents, and has no orbit. The instinct of logic, which is in every mind, is constantly overruled by hysteric impulses which begin with no aim, and end nowhere. It is the prerogative of mental discipline to keep down such anarchic thinking, and to follow lines of association which are laws, and not caprices.

(4) Aim at increase of intensity in the progress of the development. Every vigorous composition has more or less of climax in the arrangement of its materials. Its materials intrinsically are such as to be susceptible of climax. They have gradation in their power of interest either to the intellect, or to the sensibilities, or to both. There is a much and a more and a most in their resources of impression. The oratorical instinct, if unsophisticated, will follow the order of comparison. It is assisted, therefore, if a preacher asks and answers for himself the question, "What is the order of increase in point of intensity?" Follow that order, and you always have the natural arrangement, even to the location of a word.

6th, The sixth characteristic of a good development, and the last which I shall name, is proportion.

(1) The development of each division as a whole should be proportioned to that of every other division. In this respect, proportion should be governed by weight. Give the largest bulk to the weightiest thought. That which is most essential to the aim of the discourse is the weightiest: necessities take precedence of luxuries. Search out, therefore, the organic elements of the discourse, and see to it that they have ample room in which to expand. The heaviest arguments, the critical explanations, the most necessary and speaking illustrations, the most intense materials of persuasion,—give space to these, and so proportion the divisions which contain them, that they shall not be cramped. This is only saying, “Give the largest place to the best things.

(2) To do this, it is essential to begin with reserved force. Never expand a first division thriftlessly. Many sermons are spoiled by the undue bulk of their first divisions. Because a division is the first (and perhaps with a lurking fear of dearth of stock) the preacher inflates it beyond its relative worth; and all that which comes after suffers from over-crowding. Military men say that an army behaves through the battle as it is handled at first. So it is with the forces of speech. Begin warily. Hold strength in reserve; look to the end; and measure resources and time. Then concentrate at the vital points. Never fear poverty of thought. The best things will suggest thought when you come to them in the emergency of discussion. Never amplify, therefore, at great length, merely because amplification just then and there is easy. Reserve the most robust handling for the exigent materials.

(3) The development of each division by itself should be proportioned in all its parts. On a miniature scale, a single division is a discourse. It is a structure which has its beginning and middle and end, as an entire sermon has. A principle should not be so expanded as to cramp its application. An argument should not be so amplified as to crowd into a nutshell the thing which it proves. An illustration should not be so dilated as to narrow to a point the thing illustrated. Explanatory remarks should not be so extended as to impoverish the use to be made of them. Here, as before, begin warily. Handle the materials with reserve of force; look to the end; discover the focal point of exigency; and shape every thing so as to converge and concentrate at that point. Oratorical instinct will do all this, if you keep it clear of the encumbrance of languid thinking and heedless habits of composing. **Perfect discourse is mother-wit well trained, well instructed, and well used.**