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. Everything 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 centre 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 everything 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 "anecdotage." 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. Everything 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 practise 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 equalled 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 tug 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 per-