

John Bodine Thompson

THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

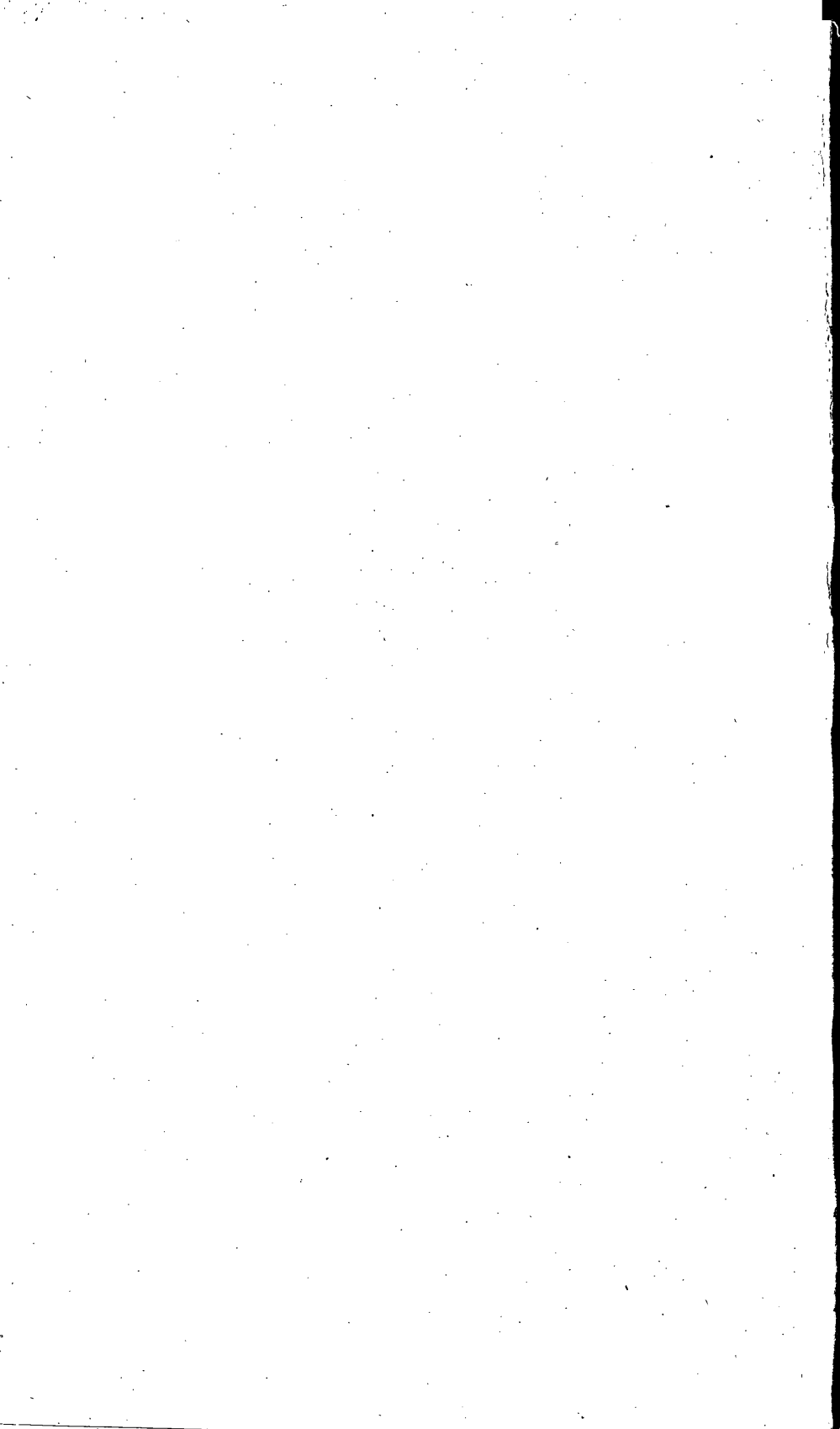
THE ADDRESS OF JOHN BODINE THOMP-
SON, DOCTOR OF DIVINITY, ON THE FIFTH¹⁷¹
DAY OF SEPTEMBER, IN THE YEAR OF OUR
LORD, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FIVE, AT
THE ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE DUTCH CHURCH
OF THE TOWN OF SAUGERTIES, NEW YORK.

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What's past is prologue.

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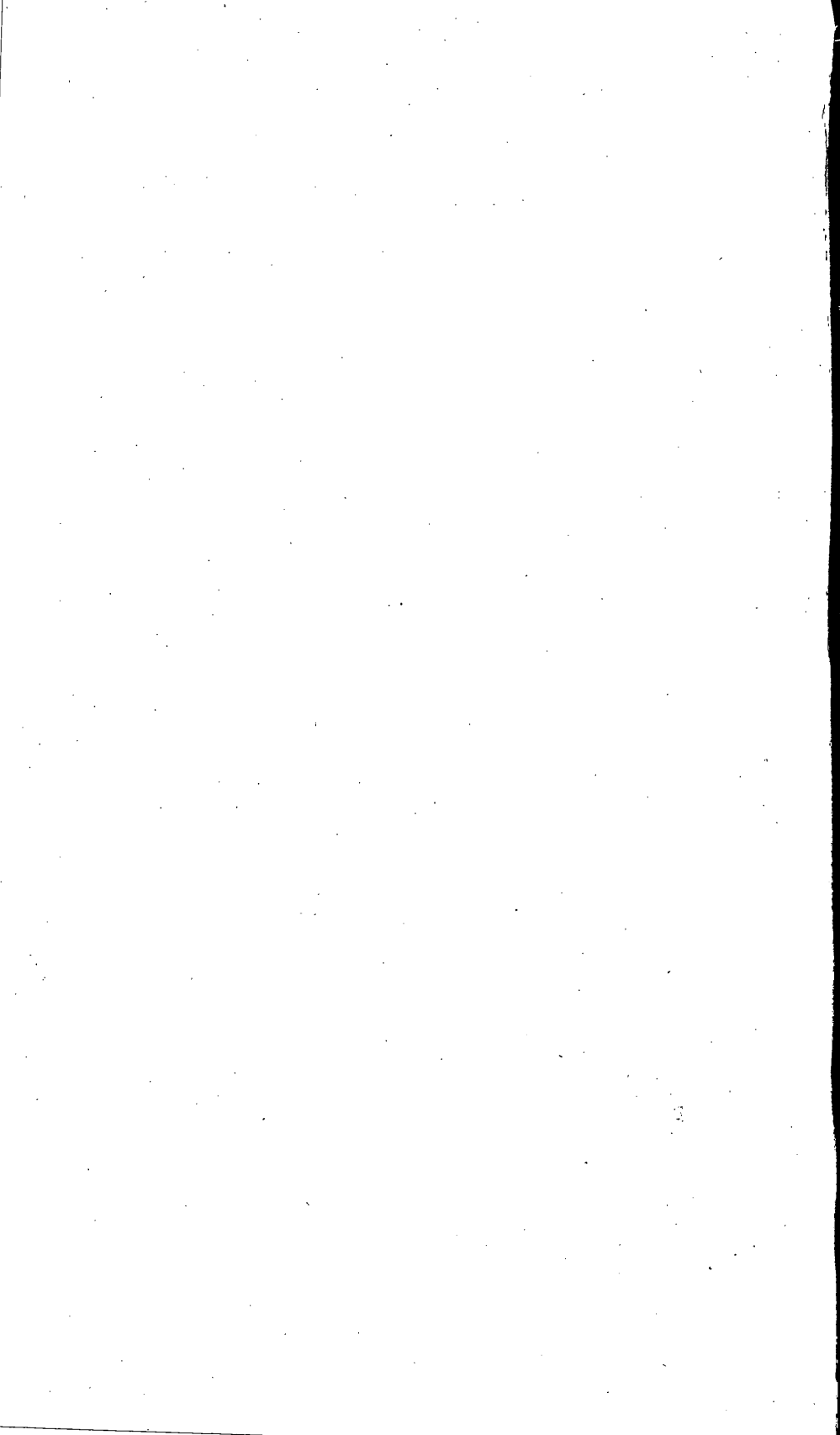
TO THE CHURCHES

to which it has been my privilege to minister : at Metuchen in New Jersey; Tarrytown, Saugerties, Peekskill, Montrose, and Catskill in New York; Berkeley in California, and Highland Park at New Brunswick in New Jersey.

I desire every member of these churches to receive this as my final message to each. See 2 Peter I : 10-15).

Hoping that the message may find a willing response in every heart, I write these lines at The Moroscot Farm in Readington, New Jersey, in the parish in which I was born, at the end of the seventy-fifth year of my life, on the Fourteenth day of October in the year of our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Five.

John Bodine Thompson



THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

The future works out great men's destinies.
The present is enough for common souls
Who—never looking forward—are, indeed,
Mere clay, wherein the footprints of their age
Are petrified forever.

The poet tells truth.
But, really, there is no present. The sentence which I
am speaking, when I begin it, is still in the future. When
I end it, it is in the past. And this is true also of each
word in the sentence; and of every sound in every word.

Time doth no present to our grasp allow.

The Hebrew language has no present tense. There is
only the past and the future.

And the past has made us what we are.

All that I was I am, and all the more
For being other than before.

And the past is for the future.

I have twenty minutes in which to show you this.

God sifted the peoples of the Old World to plant upon
these shores a Nation designed for duties of which its
founders never dreamed. And nowhere is this divine
plan more clearly illustrated than here in Saugerties.

Out of Asia, the hive of the nations, issued swarm
after swarm of the people who called themselves "Aryan,"
loyal. And the world has consented to their claim.

"Aryan" now means also *noble*. They were loyal to their convictions, especially to their religious convictions. And they had the courage of their convictions. They conquered Europe. They occupied each remotest nook and corner. In these they lived so long that their characters were moulded by their environment.

In the marshes at the mouth of the Rhine they struggled, first against the cruel waves which would have swallowed up their hollow land, and then against men more cruel than the waves, who would have slain them for their loyalty to their religious convictions.

By such ceaseless fighting for their lives they developed beyond all other peoples their characteristic *steadfastness of purpose*. By it they became prosperous. Their commerce surpassed that of every other nation. Their sails whitened every sea. They planted their colonies round the world.

New Netherland was chief. It included the present States of New York and New Jersey. Their bouweries flourished on the fertile soil. Their towns grew up at the water's edge. Their churches rose in every community. And their steadfastness developed with their developing prosperity. "As stubborn as a Dutchman" is still a proverb wherever a Dutchman's foot has trod.

And of all the Dutch the Sopus Dutch were the most Dutch, though the Albany Dutch were not far behind. From these two centres they crept out, slowly, but surely; unhasting, but unhalting. They drove out the wild beasts. They felled the forest. They tilled the soil. They built the saw-mill on the Saw-kill. They dominated the land from the river to the mountains. After the accession of their German brethren, they built their church on the ledge where no longer the wildcats walked

in the light of the moon. The solitary place was glad for them. The wilderness bloomed and blossomed as the rose. Unharméd, unmolested, undisturbed, uneventful, they lived *The Simple Life*.

Into this quiet community came a people of different character. They belonged to a later migration of Aryans. They had found the most fertile portions of Europe already occupied. They had settled down in the Western Highlands of Germany. There, in the course of centuries, they developed the intense *love of freedom* which mountain-peoples everywhere acquire. They became adherents of Luther and Calvin;—and suffered in consequence. Their lands were devastated. Their cities were burned. Their kindred were slain. They fled for their lives: to Holland, to England, to Ireland, to America. But they remained loyal alike to their religious convictions and their love of liberty.

The Lutherans among them built themselves a church near their West Camp. The Reformed cast in their lot with their Dutch brethren already on the ground. Equaling them in loyalty and exceeding them in numbers, they stood for religious liberty against the tyrannous tendency naturally inherent in steadfastness of purpose. They saved their church from the *Conferentie* conservatism which would have strangled it in its infancy. The son of their principal leader became "the Dutch Domine of the Catskills."

For him and for them the Revolutionary War was a war for religious, as well as for civil liberty. They represented the persistent attempts to impose upon a free people the tithing system, the appointment of pastors by secular authority, an unwelcome liturgy, and a still more unwelcome episcopacy. Two of even their own Palatine

preachers had yielded to pressure and submitted to re-ordination at the hands of British Bishops.

But the people would none of these things. They were as ready as Domine Schuneman himself to risk their lives for their liberties. And from that day to this they have been as determined for freedom in religious matters as their kindred in the fatherland, as independent of the tyranny of customs and usages as of that of kings and constables, and as indifferent to mere popular clamor as their fathers when they walked through London streets in mountain-garb with shovel hats and wooden shoes. They still live *The Free Life*.

These two peoples had been neighbors in the Rhineland. Those who do not know any better, even now, class them together under the generic designation "Dutch." They make even Rip Van Winkle speak German!

These two peoples were more nearly alike than the Dutch and the English. And the longer they lived in the same environment the more alike they became. Those who had so long lived *The Simple Life* became enamored also of *The Free Life*; and those who knew the happiness of *The Free Life* loved also *The Simple Life*. On the tombstone of every one we might write, "Et in Acadia ego," *I, too, lived in Arcady*. In Arcady they dwelt careless, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure.

A third immigration occurred. Remnants of the earlier Aryan migrations had been crowded off the continent of Europe into the British Isles. There, in insular seclusion, they developed an *energy and self-sufficiency* which, (whatever its attendant evils), made them in many respects superior to their fellows on the continent.

Crossing over to New England, two hundred years of contest with its inhospitable climate and unproductive soil developed still further their peculiar characteristics. They pushed on out of New England into New York. Joined by kindred from across the sea, they brought on the business boom in Saugerties. Equally zealous in civil and ecclesiastical affairs, they set an excellent example of *The Strenuous Life*.

It was high time for a church in this village. But the older residents feared danger to truth from any church not under their control. They saw the need, however, and moved their own organization down to the village, starting a new church at Caatsban. In both the native element was dominant.

The immigration continued. The village grew. More room was required; and this commodious edifice was erected;—not without controversy. But the spirit of progress triumphed, as it always does in the end, thanks to the conservatism which holds it back from rushing on self-destruction.

And now a strange thing happened. The most conservative of the conservatives united with the most progressive of the progressives and established the Congregational Church! Upon its steps more Dutch has been spoken than upon those of the Dutch Church! In both, however, the progressives and conservatives were well-balanced. Both have done good work for the Master; and we therein do rejoice; yea, and will rejoice.

There is in this community also a Huguenot element. But, at a very early day, it was so thoroughly consolidated with the Dutch as not to require separate consideration in this cursory view. Individuals from other sources, also, have been helpful; but their numbers have

not been so great as to demand further mention in a sketch which, though accurate, is designed to be not so much historical, as ethical.

In the crucible of Christian experience the Dutch, the German, and the New England elements fused into one homogeneous whole. Aryan loyalty triumphed over minor peculiarities. All had the same environment. Their children intermarried. Their children's children neither know nor care what proportion of the blood in their veins is Low Dutch, High Dutch, or Yankee! The Simple Life, The Free Life, The Strenuous Life combine in the nobler, better, higher Christian Life.

Of course there were reversions to type, in appearance, or in character, rarely in both. Mendel's law prevailed. Often have I noticed in these pews faces precisely like those to be seen to-day in Holland, in Germany, in New England. But the apparently typical Dutchman has often proved as independent in thought as a German Professor, or as energetic in action as a New England Puritan. Quite as often, also, the German face would be that of a man as conservative as a Dutchman, or as strenuous as a representative of the Pilgrim Fathers. In like manner the New England countenance has often been that of a man with a strong predilection for established usages, or for the utmost freedom of thought and action. Loyalty to Christ modifies adverse opinions, teaches tolerance, and unites in service for Him. If there have been exceptions, these have been so rare and evanescent as not to affect materially the final result.

For be it remembered, that the controlling element in character is not heredity, nor environment, but *will*. And this because of man's relation to His Maker: God is spirit. God is light: God is love. The essential quali-

ties of spirit are intelligence and will. The intelligence of the Infinite Being includes the perfect knowledge of Himself. His being is light throughout. He sees himself through and through just as He is. In so doing He forms the Image of Himself which is exact and accurate, the very counterpart of His essence, equal to Himself, having (since He is God and not man) real objective existence. It is this essential Word by means of whom He expresses Himself to Himself, as well as to His intelligent creatures. By conceiving of Himself thus precisely as He is He generates eternally His only-begotten Son. And the interchanges of love as acts of will between the Father and the Son constitute the procession of the Divine Spirit. This is a procession, not of mere emotion, but of essence, and as such is not a mere attribute, but a person. By this double procession the (apparent) duality in Deity is reduced again to unity. The infinite cycle of the divine life is ever closing, as well as ever closed, and this ceaseless return of the imperfect toward the perfect is the secret of both creation and providence. Not that the Divine Spirit acts as if He were the soul of each and every creature, but that, maintaining intact His own personal existence, from the infinite fulness of being in Him He distributes to each creature what is necessary for the discharge of the functions with which He has endowed it. It is as such supporter of all individual existence that He is called "the soul of the universe."

Ceaselessly He proceeds from the Son to the Father, as from the Father to the Son. And while He thus proceeds, and because He thus proceeds, the evolution of His universe goes on apace. It was His moving upon the face of the waters that made the chaos into the kosmos. Light, heat, gravitation, electricity, all natural

forces, are but ways in which He works. Every star, and stone, and plant, and animal, performs its proper functions because He is the actuating energy within.

I do not know the means He uses to roll the stars along, or to regulate the still more wonderful velocity of the ions. I can not even guess how he causes the mason-wasp to understand that her brood will need fresh food when hatched, and teaches her to provide it before her death, of precisely the right kind and in exactly the right quantity. How does He cause her to know that fourteen small spiders or twelve larger ones will be required? How does she learn that spiders, when paralyzed, will live without eating? How does she become so well acquainted with the physiology of the spider as to be aware that she can paralyze it by stinging it in its spinal cord? How does she become so familiar with its framework as to know exactly where its spinal cord is? How does He inform her that these paralyzed spiders can be kept secure by enclosing them in walls of clay until her children, needing food, shall open their mouths and find their victims before them, alive, but helpless?

Such inquiries no man can answer. Nor can any one tell *how* He operates in the human will to accomplish His purposes without destroying man's freedom and accountability. Our inability to understand His methods in no way affects the fact that He does thus work within both to will and to do of His good pleasure. We must learn, first of all, in our researches after truth that our ignorance is not its measure. We can not comprehend the Infinite. We can only apprehend it in measure and degree proportionate to our capability of apprehension. But this capability may be increased by exercise. Such ever-increasing knowledge of God and of His works and

ways must be the highest possible happiness of all intelligent beings; and let us never forget that "all the glories of the possible are ours."

What we now see are but "parts of His ways." We see "as through a glass, darkly." We know only "in part." But we *do* see. We *do* know. We believe and are sure that "in Him we live and move and have our being;" that He is constantly "upholding all things by His powerful word;" that He "upholdeth our souls in being;" and that by this upholding we are maintained in our freedom of choice and in our ability by his help to choose aright. This freedom of choice is of the essence of humanity. Because of it, the most important factor in evolution at this stage of the development of the divine plan for the world is the human will.

This is true, not only in the individual, but also in the community, the village, the town, the city, the state, the nation, the church. One of our greatest comforts in the darkest days of the Civil War was the knowledge that God had never yet raised up a great nation to destroy it before it had done something worthy of its greatness. We remembered how he chastised the Jews for claiming for themselves alone the blessings entrusted to them for the whole race. But even of them He had not made a full end. (When they repent and reform He will restore them as of old).

Taught by their unhappy example, as well as by our own unhappy experience, we learned our lesson. We no longer talked and acted as if we were independent of God and man. We began to say in our hearts,

Our wills are ours to make them Thine.

Since then we have more generally chosen to do what

He, in His infinite wisdom and love, wills for us to do. Chastised by the loss of nearly a million of lives and nearly six thousand millions of money, we have ceased to rob the Negro of his labor and the Indian of his land. We are beginning to recognize the duty and the privilege of living for others, (which is of the essence of Christianity). With shameful delays, and inexcusable shortcomings, and shocking exceptions, we are doing what we can for the welfare of the Negroes, the Indians, the Filipinos, the Porto Ricans, the Cubans, the San Domingans, the Venezuelans, the Panamans, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Russians,—all peoples.

We are beginning to realize that we are not mere individuals, but members of society, with obligations to this organism which enables us to enjoy health and wealth and comfort. Inheritance taxes and building laws, public parks and forest reservations, orphan asylums and kindergartens, schools and colleges and universities, public libraries and churches, are acknowledgements and part payments of the debt due from us to society in the future for obligations incurred in the past.

These obligations we are beginning to discharge. We begin to show our belief that "public office is a public trust" by choosing men of integrity for our rulers, and trying to enforce honesty in civic affairs. We are endeavoring to transmit to our children what we received from our fathers, not only unimpaired, but enlarged and improved, in order that they may transmit to their children better opportunities than they have had. We are increasing our contributions for the support of the gospel at home and abroad. More and more are we availing ourselves of occasions like this, at the end of days, to cancel pecuniary obligations (as you have just now done) to

rebuild or redecorate the House of God and make the place of His feet glorious, for the sake of those who shall fill our places at no distant day. More and more are we realizing that the Divine Life became human in Christ for us, and that it is imparted to us by His Spirit in exact proportion to our trust in Him for such impartation.

More and more are we endeavoring to conform our characters to that of the Ideal Man, Christ Jesus, in order that our example may be a help to our children in the future.

To aid in such endeavor was the motive of my ministry among you a generation ago, as it is of this address. Results show that this has been also the motive of my fellows in this pastorate. I congratulate them and you on the success which has crowned their labors.

Do you not see, as you glance over "the eternal landscape of the past," how everything has been for the future? How the past has made you what you are in order that you may make the future what it ought to be?

And the principles of progress in the Christian life are unchanging. Therefore it is that I can find no more suitable words to-night in which to express my gratitude for your progress in the past,—and my earnest wishes for still greater blessings for you in the future,—than those spoken from this pulpit on Christmas day in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and seventy:

I thank my God through Jesus Christ this day for you all, for the hearty zeal with which you have received instruction, and for the evidence in your lives that you count not yourselves to have apprehended or to be already perfect; but that you desire to press forward, doing

more and more for Jesus, and becoming more and more like Him.

With this purpose, during the past year you have increased the legal ground rent for your pews, for the support of your own church, seventy-five per cent. You have increased your benevolent contributions for Christ's cause elsewhere more than twenty-five per cent.

You have not forsaken the assembling of yourselves together, and have learned to know more of the blessedness of meeting specially to *worship* God in Christ. You have given heed to the preaching of the word that, being nourished up in sound doctrine, you might grow thereby.

Some of you are diligent students of the catechisms of the church, that you may be able to give to every one that asketh, a reason of the hope that is in you, as well as an intelligent statement of that hope. Some of you are earnest workers for Christ, in the church, in the Sunday-school, from house to house, or at home,—wherever in the vineyard the Master has appointed you. All of you, I trust, are longing more and more after that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord, and ready to avail yourselves of every proper suggestion to increase your Christ-likeness and your efficiency in His service.

Beloved in the Lord, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule. Let us mind the same things. Never be satisfied until filled with all the fulness of God. Never sit down in inaction until Christ reigns in every heart. Never attempt to confine the new wine of your developing Christly lives in the old bottles of stereotyped customs, but make for yourselves continually by God's grace new means and opportunities of holiness and usefulness; new methods for the expression of the grace that is given you; that you may all the more day by day give glory to Him *who worketh in us both to will and to do* the things that please God. O Beloved, *use your privileges*. Put forth in action the Christ-life you have received. Do not repress it by distrust. Do not dwarf it by inaction.

Do not tie it down and cramp it by the cords of conventionality and custom. *Thou shalt not kill.* Live the life!

Brethren, this will doubtless be my last message to you. I take you to witness that I have not hesitated to declare unto you the whole counsel of God. Always I have seemed to hear a voice saying unto me, "Speak unto the children of Israel that they *go forward.*" Will you heed the message? Will you go forward in the Christ-life in future, even more earnestly than in the past? Is it not for this that the blessed past has been granted unto you? In order that you may understand that always the past is for the future? And that you may make the future still more blessed and a blessing?

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. If ye do these things, ye shall never fall. So living, each of us may boldly say :

The Lord is my helper,
I will not fear:
What shall man do unto me!

So dying, each of us may boldly say,

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God, within my breast
Almighty, ever present Deity,
Life that in me has rest
As I (undying life) have power in Thee:
Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts—unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,—
To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thine infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of immortality.

With wide embracing love
 Thy Spirit animates eternal years,
 Pervades, and broods above,
 Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.

Though earth and sea were gone
 And suns and universes ceased to be,
 And Thou wert left alone,
 Every existence would exist in Thee.
 There is not room for death,
 Nor atom that his might could render void:
 Thou, Thou, art Being and Breath;
 And what Thou art can never be destroyed.

And what shall the harvest be?

These things shall be : a loftier race
 Than ere the world has known shall rise,
 With flame of freedom in their souls
 And light of science in their eyes.

They shall be simple in their homes,
 And noble in their public ways,
Living their lives in church and state
With loving zeal and joyous praise.

These things—they are no dreams—shall be
 For happier men when we are gone:
 Those golden days for them shall dawn,
 Transcending aught we gaze upon.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying,
 Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will
 dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God
 Himself shall be with them, and be their God; and God
 shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall
 be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither
 shall there be any more pain; for the former things are
 passed away.