

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THOSE GOOD OLD DAYS.

All of us have heard that the former times were better than these. We have been assured from pulpit and platform, and through the press, that in the good old days which are no more, children were better taught at home; that they more commonly attended church services; that religion had more power in the family and in the community; that the popular standard of integrity was higher; and that in many a line, if not in all lines, the Church of Christ had a stronger hold on the hearts and lives of the people in our land and in other Christian lands. But the difficulty is to find just when these good old times began and when they ended; when, in fact, was their palmy season. That there *were* such times, it is useless to deny until we know what period is claimed for them. It is said that a sad-hearted young man was once brooding gloomily over his situation and prospects, when he heard an organ-grinder strike up the tune, "There's a good time coming, boys." Being of a practical turn of mind, he started up and called out from the door to the peripatetic inspirer, "My friend, your tune is very encouraging; but will you be so good as to fix the date of that good time that's coming?" However unfair that question may have been in the sphere of prophecy, it is certainly a fair one in the realm of history. Will those persons who mourn over the good old times which are gone, be so good as to fix the date of those times? Then we can look at the record for the evidence.

One thing is very sure, the lament over those good old days is by no means of recent beginning. It was in 1812 that Dr. Lyman Beecher, who was very far from being a croaker, declared of New England, "The ancient discipline of the family has been extensively neglected. Children have neither been governed nor instructed in religion as they were in the days of their fathers." And this was before the Sunday-school could be charged with undermining family religion! Two years later, he told of the deliberate purpose of Christian parents to leave their children untaught in Bible truth so that they could be duly "converted" from a consciously lost condition; and of the results of this mode of action. "The specious argument of leaving children uninstructed in religion, that they might, at a ripe age, choose their own religion without bias, gave leisure for depravity to mature its alienating prejudices. . . . The result was a brood of infidels, and heretics, and profligates." That is not a very inviting picture for comparison. It is evident that the good old days were some distance back of seventy years ago.

Thirty years earlier, in 1783, the Rev. Samuel Torrey, in a sermon before the General Court of Massachusetts, moaned out, "How is religion dying in families! through the neglect of the religious service and worship of God, and of the religious education of children and youth in families. Truly, here and hereby religion received its death's wound." That evidently was not a good time, as good men viewed it, in comparison with former days. Let us push back into earlier times. Dr. Cotton Mather published a sermon in 1706 on "The Good Old Way," in which he said sweepingly of that day: "There is a general and a horrible decay of Christianity among the professors of it. . . . Ah! sinful nation. Ah! children that are corrupters. . . . The complaints of the corruptions in the lives of Christians little short of universal, are everywhere, every day, wounding our ears." It will never do to stop at 1706 to note the beginning of the decline from the good times of which we are in search. Dr. Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, had his say in 1678, in a treatise entitled "Prayer for the Rising Generation." He said: "Prayer is needful on this account, in that conversions are becoming rare in this age of the world. . . . The body of the rising generation is a poor, perishing, unconverted, . . . except the Lord pour down His Spirit, an undone generation." Then, as showing that he was not referring to a low spiritual standard merely, he went into particulars, declaring that, just now, there are "many that are profane, drunkards, lascivious, scoffers at the powers of godliness, despisers of those that are good, disobedient." This puts us back more than two centuries from to-day for the better days of New England; and certainly New England was not behind the rest of the

country, in the first century of its existence, in the matter of household religion, of education, and of morality.

The nearest attempt we can discover in the earlier New England writings to fix the date of the good old days, is in an election sermon by the Rev. Mr. Prince, of Boston, wherein it is affirmed that the "wonderful work of the grace of God, begun in England and brought over hither, was carried on while the greater part of the first generation lived, for about thirty years: and then the second generation rising up and growing thick on the stage; a little after 1660, there began to appear a decay; and this increased to 1670, when it grew very visible and threatening, and was generally complained of and bitterly bewailed by the pious among them; and yet much more to 1680, when but few of the first generation remained." It will be admitted, on all hands, that the average religious standard is likely to be higher in a community of religious refugees than in a miscellaneous business community; and that "while the greater part of the first generation" of Pilgrims and Puritans in New England remained alive, there was more attention to religious worship and Christian service than in our country as a whole to-day. But this is no proof that there has been a better day than our own in America within the last two hundred years.

It is just eighty years ago that William Wordsworth sung of England:

* Plain living and high thinking are no more.
The homely beauty of the good old cause
Is gone; our peace, our fearful innocence,
And pure religion breathing household laws.

Poor old England! When were her halcyon days of Christian living?

Of Scotland, Dr. Thomas Chalmers tells of the "woful degeneracy" which had been going on in the families of that land before the introduction of the Sunday-school, at the close of the eighteenth century. He insists that already, in his time, the question is "not whether the rising generation shall be trained to Christianity in schools, or trained to it under the roof of their fathers, but whether they shall be trained to it in schools, or not trained to it at all." And as long ago as the year 1700, a volume on the *Just Measures of the Pious Institution of Youth*, was published in Edinburgh, in the preface to which it is declared, that in Scotland personal religious characteristics "are scarcely discernible any more." While, as it is hopefully suggested, "there are still some good souls, . . . it is certain that the number of such is very small. . . . They are like precious jewels that lie hid under the rubbish and desolations of a state fabric, and cannot be found out by a long and laborious search." Scotland's best days seem to be as far in the past as New England's.

And so it would be found in every land, the history of which was searched for information on this point. Solomon insisted, in his day, that the persons who then wanted to know *why* the former days were better than their day, might save themselves the trouble of looking for the reasons of the decline; for it wasn't true that there had been any better day than theirs. The Israelites in the wilderness moaned over the good old days of Egypt, when cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic and fish were plenty; but when those good old days were the present time, those same people had wished and wished and wished for the better days of that other Pharaoh. After all, the only really good old days of the past were those in Eden before the Fall; and if those are the days that the croakers have in mind when they talk of the degeneracy of our times, they are right in their comparisons; but all talk of any better days than these since that time is—bosh!—S. S. Times.

BELIEVING AND LIVING.

There are many fallacies current on this subject. One is, "It makes no difference what a man believes, providing he is sincere. This, in so far as it relates to the influence of a man's belief on his eternal destiny, is a question beyond human knowledge. It has not been given us to know who will be saved. Our ignorance should deter us from sweeping assertions either way. Each one has only sufficient knowledge of duty to make his own calling and election sure. He cannot judge of the sincerity of others, or know on what principles the final judgment of benighted souls will proceed. We know that the Judge of all the earth will do right, and that His severest penalties are dic-

tated by infinite love. As related to this life, the statement under consideration is manifestly false. If true, it would justify the greatest crimes in history. Sincerity does not save men from the most fatal errors in conduct. Saul of Tarsus was sincere, "verily thought he was doing God's service," in persecuting the Church. The fanatic who not long since killed his child under the impression that he had a revelation from God to do so, was doubtless sincere. The more sincerely error is believed, the more dangerous it becomes.

Another common fallacy: "It makes no difference what a man believes, if he lives right," is simply a self contradiction. Men live right only in proportion as their beliefs are right. The life is the expression of the belief. If a man's beliefs are all wrong, his life will be all wrong. It is true that men under stress of temptation do wrong knowingly, and in spite of right beliefs. But no man ever lived a righteous, self-denying life with the conviction that he was doing wrong. Men may be worse than their creed, but are never better. The creed a man traverses in doing right is not an expression of his real belief. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he," is not true of those who act contrary to their convictions of duty. It is true only of two classes: Those who sincerely believe error, who have "changed the truth into a lie," and do wrong believing it to be right; and those who, having true and clear convictions of duty, live up to them.

The sincere belief of error can never be harmless. Error is, in its nature, a lie; and lies received into the mind can only have a bad effect upon it, and the life. For truth, especially religious truth, and falsehood, which is the negation of truth, are both related to life. Belief and obedience of the truth produces holy lives. Falsehood believed and acted upon produces corrupt lives. "The good tree bringeth forth good fruit," and the waters flowing from the bitter fountain are always bitter. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Truth and error may both be judged by their influence on conduct. No safer test can be applied to any dogma than its practical working. Live it, and that will prove its validity and worth. The same practical test shows the error of false and pernicious dogmas.

The place for emphasis, and for the greatest care, is the life, and for the reason that the tendency is to make intellectual loyalty to creeds a substitute for holy living. Practice does not keep pace with knowledge. Christianity seems to have much more perfectly accomplished its work upon the human intellect than upon human life. We all know much better than we do, and believe much more than we reduce to practice. How few approach in experience to the uprightness and nobleness of their convictions. Nothing can be more dangerous than this divorce of right beliefs from righteous living. It indicates moral paralysis. We deplore scepticism, but which is worse—to disbelieve, and to act consistently with unbelief; or to receive the most important truths with firm conviction, and straightway to live an infidel life? The inspired cautions against this course are most solemn: "Be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven." And in the parable, the servant that knew his lord's will and did it not was beaten with many stripes.

The value of sound doctrine is its tendency to produce sound lives. The object of right believing is right living. "The end of the commandment is," not that we may have an accurate creed, but, "love out of a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned;" that is heart belief, the sincerity of which is shown by its fruits in conduct and character. Our beliefs were intended to be motive-powers in the life, if they are not, they are barren and worthless. "Faith without works is dead." We need, then, most of all, to change our dead beliefs into a living, operative faith. Let our belief in Christ make us Christians. Let us live our beliefs like honest men, bind, by links of steel, every conviction to its execution, and be not hearers of the Word alone, nor believers of the Word alone, but be doers of the Word. —*Western Christian Advocate.*

LIFE, like the waters of the sea, freshens only when it ascends toward heaven.—*Richter.*