

50TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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A Half-Century of Change—for Better or Worse

By AL DIESTELKAMP

It is former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli whom is credited with coining the phrase, “Change is inevitable—change is constant.” I think we can all testify to the general truth of this statement; so it should not surprise us that there have been many changes over the past five decades.

In this issue I will share my perspective on changes I have witnessed over the years. It was sixty-five years ago that I was baptized into Christ which qualifies me as a witness to many changes in our world, in the home, and in the church.

Let me begin by stating emphatically that all change is not necessarily bad or necessarily good. However, change is often unsettling to those who do not consider it to be for the better.

One does not have to be very old to be aware of constant changes in the world and our culture. Every generation experiences changes which cause the elderly to look back with favor to “the good old days.” However, lately it seems that the rate of change has picked up speed.

Again, not all the change in the world around us is bad. Even many of us in the older generation would resist having our cell phones taken out of our hands. The ability to communicate with our children and grandchildren via social media and even visit using computer apps such as *FaceTime* is a real blessing. There have also been encouraging changes in some areas of morality. Though there still is room for more improvement, some progress has been made in race relations.

However, along with the good comes evil. The Internet is a voluminous source

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Readers may be happy to learn that when I revealed my intent to write about change, one of my children volunteered to run my articles through her “Fuddy-Duddy filter” before this issue went to press.

for Satan’s evil schemes. His false teachers, disguised as “ministers of righteousness” (2 Cor. 11:15), pervert the gospel of Christ and thus deceive the masses. If that’s not enough, the devil floods the Internet with every form of temptation in an effort to take captive the minds of millions.

While the negative changes in our culture have increased at break-neck speed of late, much of this is the result of subtle and gradual changes in past generations. Secular humanism, a philosophy of life which espouses ethical behavior and responsibility without belief in or guidance of deity, has had an adverse effect on our world and contributed to a rise in atheism. Many in the elite scientific and academic communities have embraced this philosophy and promoted it in every way possible.

With God “out of the way” and humanity viewed as the ultimate authority, there is no limit to the decline in societal values and morality. Without an unchangeable source of authority, “truth” and “morality” are as changeable as society itself. The result is a set of “standards” based on majority-rule or the current thoughts of people in positions of power or influence. The so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960’s and the accompanying “women’s liberation movement” paved the way for much of the moral decline in our nation.

Many of the negative changes we have witnessed in society have resulted from reliance on the thoughts of academia, legislators, the Supreme Court, or celebrities. I will not attempt to name all the specific negative changes in society over my lifetime or in just the past fifty years, but the following are some of the most significant:

Family breakdown: Displacement of the intact family of a married father and mother as the preferred and ideal home arrangement is one of the most disturbing changes. Materialism or the desire for “fulfillment” has taken mothers and fathers out of the home at critical times in the lives of children. Easy, no-fault divorce and so-called alternative lifestyles have left children without a father or a mother.

Moral decline: Social acceptance of fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and their public and pornographic portrayal has increased. The entertainment industry plays a significant part in “normalizing” these sins. The Bible and all who dare to speak against these sins are often maligned in the media and courts of public opinion.

Devalue of life: Induced abortion, which once was a crime in our nation, has since been declared a “constitutional right” by the U.S. Supreme Court, ignoring the clear statements in God’s Word declaring that those who “shed innocent blood” are an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 6:16-17).

Indeed, we live in a changing world. The only hope for reversing the negative changes is through the gospel of Christ. Let’s not sell the gospel short! It has the power to change hearts, lives, and nations, but any such changes must start with us.

In articles on the following pages, we will acknowledge changes we have witnessed among God’s people over the past half-century.

Changes in Our Assemblies—for Better or Worse

By AL DIESTELKAMP

The most dramatic changes in my memory among churches of Christ took place during my youth. Even though I was aware that division was beginning to rear its ugly head, I can still remember when there was cooperation and fellowship extended between almost all congregations.

However by 1969, when we began publishing this paper, the lines of demarcation had been pretty well defined. With few exceptions, there was little communication—much less fellowship—between those with opposing views regarding church support of human institutions and the accompanying “sponsoring church” arrangement.

The changes since then that we will be noting in this article will be those among brethren who claim the more conservative approach to Bible authority. Some of these changes are clearly good, while others may be unfortunate at best, and some are inconsequential. With still others only time will tell if they prove to be beneficial or detrimental.

Technological Changes

If people from fifty years ago could time-travel into today’s congregations, they would be in awe of the changes in visual aids employed in most places. Gone are the chalkboards and handmade charts on bed sheets, as well as the overhead projectors which were just being introduced at that time. In their place are computers and projection systems for use in teaching and preaching and, in some cases, for use in the song service.

Casual Dress

One of the most obvious changes in our assemblies has to do with how Christians dress for worship. The trend today, for better or worse, is toward more casual attire. Before some advocates of casual dress in worship jump to a conclusion, notice that I am not necessarily identifying this as a detrimental change. However, I do believe one can be too casual in this regard. This includes the way preachers dress. The “in” thing is to shed the suit and tie in favor of everyday attire. Just as some visitors may feel out of place if everyone is “dressed up,” others might be turned off if they are the *only* ones in their “Sunday best.”

Song Selections

There have been many “new” worship songs made available to us in recent years. Some of these are old songs which were never included in the hymnals typically used among us. Others are songs gleaned from contemporary writers, including some of our own brethren. Most of the new songs

are songs of praise. This is a good change as long as we don’t forget the old familiar hymns which may not seem as “worshipful” but do teach and admonish (Col. 3:16).

Assembly Times Adjustments

There was a time not too long ago when one could expect that every congregation among us would have Sunday morning Bible classes and worship, a Sunday evening worship, and a Wednesday night Bible study. An increasing number of churches have chosen to adjust their meeting times to better accommodate the local members.

Many local congregations have eliminated a Sunday evening service. The motivation for this change varies from one group to another. Some make the change due to the distances members have to travel. Others hope that it will encourage members to associate socially with one another more and become a closer-knit family of believers. This is one of those changes that I believe falls into the category of “time will tell” whether it is beneficial or not.

Racial Attitudes



A change that is clearly good and is absolutely necessary is regarding attitudes toward racial differences. Although some progress had already been seen among brethren fifty years ago, there were still pockets of resistance to mixing of the races. I am not saying that racism in the churches has been completely eradicated, but we have reason to praise the Lord that real progress has been made. While I believe it would be best if congregations couldn’t be identified in racial terms, I know of no churches made up primarily of white brethren who do not welcome people of other races, nor do I know of churches primarily populated with people of other races which would not welcome white persons into their midst.

Preacher Issues

During the 1960’s and for several years beyond, there was a preacher shortage among us. In reality, it was more of a *support* shortage. Back then it was almost unheard of for two preachers to work together in one congregation. Today it is still not the norm, but it is not uncommon. There is still the mindset among some that new or smaller congregations don’t need more than one preacher, but thankfully many have come to realize that such works have a greater need for two men than do large congregations with multiple elders.

Generally, there has been significant improvement in the support of preachers—both locally and in needy areas. As a result, preachers tend to stay longer in one location and are more likely to be able to purchase their own houses, thus benefiting from the equity that they build up.

Evangelism Methods

Years ago, almost all congregations would host a couple of gospel meetings each year. These meetings were originally used as evangelism tools. Though this was once a successful means of taking the gospel to the lost, the changes in our culture have rendered these efforts mostly unproductive in regard to evangelism. As a result, many churches have cut back on or quit having gospel meetings or have changed the focus to edification for the saints.

Fifty years ago most congregations produced and often mailed out church bulletins. A typewriter and mimeograph machine were the equipment needed for such. The preacher often had to spend a good amount of time typing and re-typing articles, manually justifying the columns in order to make it look attractive. Now a computer can accomplish this automatically, but the church bulletin has gone away because so few prospects are willing to read them.

Two of the “newer” methods of evangelism are via *Meetups* in public places and what I would call “coffee house evangelism” where one spends time studying his Bible in a place where people gather in hopes of initiating studies with strangers. These two methods have proven very successful in some areas and not as fruitful in other locations, but it is good to see new methods employed.

Appointment of Elders

It is God’s desire that there be “elders in every church” (Ac. 14:23). Though there are still too many congregations which are without elders, it is good to see that many more have been able to “set in order” what was once lacking (Tit.1:5). In order for this to happen, good men had to develop a desire for this good work and accept this role.

Conviction & Lifestyle Changes Among Brethren

By AL DIESTELKAMP

I think it's safe to say that our reliance on the Word of God without any man-made written creed will inevitably result in differences in our understandings and applications of biblical teaching. Any differences we have among ourselves are not the fault of the revealed Word but a result of our own interpretations of it.

We hold firmly to the principle that the Scriptures are inspired of God and "able to completely equip us for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Unlike many in the religious world, we reject the idea that the gospel message changes with the times. Therefore, any changes in doctrinal positions must be due only to our own previous misunderstandings of the Holy Spirit-inspired text.

The changes discussed in this article are some which I consider to be concerning. Some are subtle changes in long-standing doctrinal positions generally held by brethren, and some are less restrictive applications of moral and lifestyle matters.

Local Loyalty & Commitment

Of concern to me is what I view as a decline in personal loyalty and commitment to the local congregation. It doesn't seem to take much for some to excuse themselves from worship. What doesn't keep them away from work, school, or fun activities will often prevent them from being present for assemblies of the saints. Also, the Lord's day has become a convenient day for an impromptu family outing or for the beginning or end of a vacation. Some don't bother to seek out a faithful congregation when traveling away from home. In today's economy, most families' incomes don't vary significantly which means if members are giving "as prospered," the local church could expect its income from offerings to be consistent. Many brethren are good about making up their contributions after being away, but many others are not.

Instrumental Music in Worship

Churches of Christ are well known for insistence on a cappella music in worship. Yet now more than ever I hear brethren defending the use of musical instruments in worship. It's not that they want to add it to the assembled worship, but they don't see it as unscriptural. There have always been some among us who were unable to fully accept the opposition to this practice but were willing to keep silent on the matter for the sake of unity. I can respect this; but my fear is that if teaching on this subject is not done, we will raise a future generation who will actively advocate for it and force division once again.

One True Church

When some of our own leave our midst and join themselves to churches that fail to teach the pure gospel concerning salvation (besides many other digressions), some brethren are resistant to any disciplinary action as an attempt to win them back. Sometimes they will even say, "There are Christians in many churches" and defend the choice to have fellowship with error. It may be technically true that there are Christians in such churches, but that's not where they belong! There are many places where you may find Christians where they ought not be.

Baptism Into Christ vs. Faith Only

I hope I'm wrong, but I sense a toning down of emphasis on baptism being for the remission of sins and the point at which one comes "into Christ." There is even the suggestion that we may have misjudged the advocates of the "faith only" doctrine. However, when you read the statements of faith offered by denominations and evangelicals, they make it clear that they believe that "baptism has nothing to do with salvation."

Moderate Drinking

There was a time when Christians were known for abstinence from the social and recreational use of alcoholic beverages. While I think that most brethren abstain and even oppose such, there seem to be growing numbers who defend the practice. The argument offered is usually that the biblical prohibition is of drunkenness—not moderate drinking. Jesus' first "sign" in turning water into wine is offered as proof. What's interesting to me is that they use this argument to condone not only wine but beer and other intoxicating drinks. They seldom quote the various warnings of wisdom that paint all intoxicating drinks in a negative light (i.e., Prov. 20:1).

Modest Attire Issues

With the constant changes in dress and modesty in society in general, the issue of what is modest and what is not has long been an issue of debate among brethren. Generally, Christians tend to adjust their standards of modesty slightly behind the world. Most Christians don't dress in the most provocative manner but adopt a less

noticeable style. What is quite obvious to us "older" folk is that what now seems to be quite acceptable among Christians was once considered immodest. I recall once in my childhood that my family was invited to a picnic in a public park with Christians we didn't know personally. When one of us asked how we would know which group was "ours," my dad said, "by the way they're dressed." Today, in some cases this is not as clear an indicator.

The change in modesty standards among Christians is not limited to leisurewear. On Facebook, it is not unusual to see pictures of wedding attire that is quite revealing. Apparently, some Christians must think that special occasions are exempt from chaste attire.

Dancing

Another change that is evident is attitudes toward dancing. Now, I must make clear what most people already know: I'm not talking about all dancing (i.e., for joy, as in the Bible), but about men and women, boys and girls, who are not married to each other, engaging in the sexually provocative kind of dancing that is common at high school proms and formal events.

In the past concerned Christians often would plan wholesome social events for teenagers in their area as an alternative to the prom. In recent years, some have quit hosting such events after they realized that many of the young people were happy to attend the alternative event, but it didn't deter them from attending the prom.

In Conclusion

This is not just a rant to allow an old man to vent (although it *does* feel good). I have a genuine concern for the future of the church. It is imperative that we teach the next generation what the words "do not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2) imply. We must also impress upon them the uniqueness of the church which Christ built and the dangers of being "yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). Otherwise, we may awake someday to a church that is just another among many sectarian churches.

This article has merely highlighted what I believe are some negative changes of conviction voiced by a number of Christians and does not attempt to address possible objections. I am willing to hear scriptural arguments to the contrary. Also, I must not leave the impression that there haven't been any positive changes in the personal and spiritual lives of many Christians through the years. Due to space constraints, this requires a separate article, which can be found on the following page.

Voluntary Partners

Cost of past issue:

Printing & supplies	\$ 342.00
Postage	380.81
Website Renewal Fees	77.31
TOTAL COSTS	\$ 800.12
Funds available for past issue	1,172.90
Surplus	\$ 372.78

Donations: (as of 9/22)

Bobby & Karen Graham, AL	\$ 100.00
Patsy Johnson, TX	200.00
Anonymous, IL	300.00
Anonymous, WV	50.00
Darren & Shannon Taylor, WI	100.00
Fred Garza, IL	15.00
TOTAL DONATIONS	\$ 765.00
Surplus from past issue	372.78
Funds available for this issue	\$ 1,137.78

Thanks and praise to God for our Voluntary Partners, past and present, who make this labor of love possible and a joy. Because the Annual Mailing Permit fee is now due, this issue is expected to cost about \$950, which should leave a surplus of about \$188 for future use.

**“Do not say,
‘Why were the former days better than these?’
For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.”**

~ Ecclesiastes 7:10 ~

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Some Positive Personal Changes Among Brethren

By AL DIESTELKAMP

I regret that the space available on this page will permit me to enumerate only a few of the positive changes that I have observed over the past fifty years in the personal and spiritual lives of brethren.

Let me preface this by pointing out that, just as my list of negative changes cannot be attributed to all Christians, we cannot claim that the positive changes have been universally adopted.

Many of the positive changes evident in the churches would not have happened without some changes in the attitudes and personal lives of the brethren.

We've already noted improvement in local churches with regard to racial issues. This could only have happened as a result of misguided Christians coming to their senses and changing their attitudes toward those of different races and ethnic groups.

The progress regarding the appointment of elders has required positive changes in the personal lives of men who desire the work and set out to prepare for it. It also has required the wives and children of these men to be supportive of their desire to serve.

We noted that churches are doing better now in providing adequate financial support of preachers than they did in earlier times. This improvement is mostly due to members recognizing the preacher as a co-worker who is "worthy of his wages" (1 Tim. 5:18) rather than as an employee.

There have been positive changes in "one-another" relationships. I see many Christians who are ready, willing, and able to lend a hand to brothers and sisters who have needs. There seems to be a greater concern for the welfare of others and a desire to spend time together. Additionally, many brethren are ready to help beyond the needs of fellow Christians when there are misfortunes in the lives of their neighbors and of strangers (Gal. 6:10).

It seems to me that there has been an important improvement among fathers of younger generations. Many of them are more personally involved with their children, both socially and spiritually, producing a brighter future for the cause of Christ.

Many parents are taking a more hands-on approach to the education of their children by either home schooling them or closely monitoring what is being taught in their schools. Parents are also appropriately

limiting and filtering what is accessed on the Internet and television.

Our young people, especially those of high school and college ages, seem more interested in additional spiritual activities outside the church assemblies. They are more likely to plan or attend devotions than they were years ago. They also are more likely to invite their non-Christian friends to these events or offer to have personal Bible studies with them.

The younger generations are also less likely to believe something simply because their parents do. Parents might find this somewhat frightening, but it is necessary for their children to develop their own faith. After all, no one will stand in the final judgment before their parents, and no one will successfully appeal to the Lord on the basis of his or her parent's faith.

I believe it is good that today's brethren are less likely to be tradition bound and, therefore, more willing to accept beneficial changes in how things are accomplished as long as the "new" ways are within God's authority.

Finally, perhaps there is even justification for giving a "high five" to us older folk for not *always* being "old fuddy-duddies."