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).

***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.

***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.

***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.

***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 was absolutely necessary, is regarding attitudes toward racial differences. Though fifty years ago some progress had already been seen among brethren, there were still pockets of resistance to mixing of the races. I am not saying that racism in the church has been completely eradicated, but we have reason to praise the Lord that *real* *progress* has been made. While I believe it would be even better 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 that would not welcome white persons into their midst.