

12-6-1898

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Recommended Citation

Browne, Sidi H., "Some Changes Within the Last Fifty Years, With Observations" (1898). *Historical Society Addresses*. Paper 1. <http://digitalcommons.wofford.edu/histaddresses/1>

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Some Changes Within the Last Fifty Years, With Observations

By REV. SIDI H. BROWNE

An Address Delivered Before the Historical Society of
the South Carolina Conference, Methodist Epis-
copal Church, South, at Greenwood,
S. C., December 6, 1898.

The present age, like all past ages of the world have been, is one of *change*. Doubtless some changes have been for the betterment of humanity, while others have been for the hurt of the human race. The optimist may magnify the better and minify the worse; while the pessimist may magnify the worse and make little of the better. Both classes are liable to extremeness in their respective views. It is desirable, yet difficult, to judge of the good and of the evil with impartiality—to judge with a level head. Whether the world, on the whole, is getting better or growing worse is an open question, and can be truly answered only by the Judge of all the earth. While violence in the earth may prevail and other iniquities may abound, it is the divinely imposed duty of all friends of Jesus and of the human race to do what they can to make the world better. We, beloved brethren, are enlisted under Jesus, the captain of our salvation, that we may “war a good warfare,” “fight the good fight of faith,” that we may lay hold on eternal life. Though my classmate, Brother P. F. Kistler, and I, the remaining ones of the class of 1845, and other beloved superannuates are not in the active ranks, we cannot say that we are wholly ineffective; for we can and do pray for you, preach occasionally, and join you in shouting victory on your own behalf, or, rather, on behalf of Christ, in every successful battle against the powers of darkness—the good fight that does good and no harm to others.

Not only is this age marked by changes, but it is one of progress. The discoveries, inventions and improvements in the realm of matter

are many. The railway, the telegraph, the telephone and other graphs, 'phones, etc., with all the other achievements of science and art, are simply *powers* under the control and in the service of man. But while these things increase the pace of progress and contribute to the welfare of human lives, there is no religion or morality in any of these powers. They may be and are used by men to work wickedness, or by men to advance righteousness. They may be used in pandering to "the works of the flesh" or in fostering "the fruit of the spirit"—for the Devil or for Christ. "Let us not be deceived with a non-discriminating idea of progress, but let us, as far as practicable, use these powers in wisdom, being careful, however, to "walk by the same rule and mind the same thing" in the essentials of Christianity and of Methodism.

A brief sketch of some of the changes of Methodism within the last fifty or sixty years may not be inappropriate on this occasion. While changes in the circumstantial or accidents of Methodism may not affect its fundamentals of doctrine, of practice and polity, those changes affect more or less the conceptions of Methodism by outside observers and by the later generation of Methodists as well.

With some exceptions, the preachers of fifty or sixty years ago wore the shad-belly coats, white cravats, some of which were rather enormous in size, and they shaved clean, and that before Sunday. At the Charleston Conference, January, 1847, beards were seen to be sprouting out and springing up here and there with some of the brethren. The venerable Rev. Lewis Myers, of Georgia, was a visitor at that Conference. In closing a fraternal talk to the body, he drew his hand down one cheek and then on the other side, and, suiting words to the action, said with emphasis: "*Brethren, shave clean.*" They have not all obeyed. During the reign of the razor there was one thing I did not like to do, and that was to lend my razor to Rev. Thomas, Richard and Harry to shave their shaggy beards on a Saturday evening at a camp meeting. During a camp meeting at Mount Vernon, Edgefield Circuit, in 1851, somebody pasted a clipping from, I think, the *Southern Christian Advocate*, on the outside of the front of the pulpit. The meeting house was the preachers' tent. Among other things, the extract said something about razors and shaving. I remember one sentence; it was this: "As Paul said, let every man have his own wife, so let every preacher have his own razor." One brother would read it and laugh, and say, "Who *did* stick this up here?" Another, after reading it, would say, "Good." Another would read it and walk off and say nothing. We had a good meeting.

Why have camp meetings been so nearly given up, and why do those that hold on seldom result in the amount of good which would seemingly justify the labor and sacrifice involved in the support of the meeting. Reform in certain particulars would likely restore camp meetings to their original simplicity and effectiveness—the salvation of sinners and the revival of believers.

The examination of character by the Annual Conference with open *versus* closed doors is another change which some of us believe is not the better for the preachers or the Church. Why not devote the first two or three hours of every morning to the examination of character, and then open the doors that our friends may come in and see how we transact other business; and on so, every day, until the examination is disposed of.

Away back, yet within the knowledge of the older inhabitants, a Methodist preacher on the highways could be known almost as far as he could be seen, astride his horse on his way to fill possibly a week-day appointment, with saddlebags containing some linen or cotton apparel, with Bible, hymn-book and discipline, and filled out with good books for sale. The change from saddlebags to gigs and sulkyes and from these to buggies and these to railroads, have been to the advantage of the preachers, if not always to the Churches. Whether the former days were worse or better than these, let the saddlebag preachers have due honor for carrying the Gospel into nooks, corners and byways which were unapproachable on wheels. To the poor the gospel was preached by those devoted pioneers of the saddlebags dispensation. Circuits were circuits in their days and time. Gradually, as God prospered the work of their hands and the hands of their sons and their grandsons, the circuits have been divided and subdivided until now the preacher can, if necessary, get home nearly every night after serving any one of his three, four or five Churches. This multiplication and reduction in size of charges gives opportunity for better pastoral work than when the charges were larger. Yet it deprives the young preachers of the advantages of working in junior and double harness a year or more with older and experienced preachers in charge, and often necessitates the placing of the young brethren in charge which, in connection with their required studies, gives them more to do than can be reasonably expected.

Another result of this multiplication and reduction, in connection with the existence of the District Conference, is the decrease of the size, the business and importance of the Quarterly Conference, which is, or was, next in importance to the Annual Conference, and needs to be magnified rather than minified.

The War Between the States was the occasion of a great change, *viz.*: the organization of the negroes into Churches by themselves, which was and is better for both whites and colored. With some few of the present membership of the Conference I had many a good time in worshipping with the colored brethren and sisters. In fact, I think I preached better when they made up my congregation. Anyhow, it improved me as a preacher. It is not improbable that some big preachers of the present day could preach better than they do if they had had similar advantages.

In 1850, after preaching to a colored congregation in the open air not many miles from this town, I "opened the door of the Church."

We all sang, but no one came forward until singing another, the last verse, when an elderly woman came forward and gave me her hand. She was followed by seven or eight others in quick succession. In taking their names I asked the same elderly one her name. She said, "I is already a member of de Church." I said, "Why, then, did you come forward and join again today?" She looked up at me with rather a meek and pitiful countenance, and replied, "I jist wanted to give you custom." Dear old soul, she meant and did well. I learned afterward that she was a true blue, or rather a true black Methodist.

Passing over the decline in fasting, congregational singing and singing in family worship, and an occasional amen, and, perchance, a shout in meeting, I may mention some of the improvements in Methodism in the last fifty years.

Nearly every preacher has a wife, and a good wife she is. Many preachers nowadays bring their wives with themselves into the Conference. This saves the preacher the trouble or the pleasure of hunting a wife, without waiting four years and consulting with some older brother about getting married, as was the custom in former days. Preachers ought to think much of their wives, for they know not what help they are in hundreds of ways. Methodist wives, mothers and daughters in general, are, it is believed, better Christians than Methodist husbands, fathers and sons, and there are more of them in the Church, and it is very probable that more women than men will enter the heavenly kingdom, notwithstanding many of them while on earth take feathers or wings to their heads and fly away beyond the boundaries of plain old Methodism. But it is presumed that they leave their hearts in the Church.

In these years nearly every preacher with a family lives in a parsonage. This change is a great and good one, far more common than in former days.

There are probably more Church buildings now than formerly; certainly far superior ones, some of them may be a little too superior. Those log houses, often with backless slab seats, were called Meeting Houses. As they successively gave way to improved buildings the people began more than before to call them *Churches*. Possibly it might grate on the ears of the worshippers at a model, modern Church to call their house of worship a "meeting house." Of late years there has been a great and commendable change in improved Church building within the bounds of the South Carolina Conference. May the people called Methodists strive for a corresponding improvement in Christian living.

The increased attention which in the last fifty years has been given to education under Christian auspices; and the establishment of institutions of learning within the same time, have been progressive and gratifying. Wofford College, with her two recently established Fitting Schools, Columbia Female College, and Williamston Female College, with many high schools and schools of a more private character, have

all come into successful existence within the last fifty years. Cokesbury School, which has recently taken on new life, was established several years before any of the others. Then eminently worthy of mention is the Historical Society of the South Carolina Conference, organized forty-three years ago. The Epworth Orphanage is the latest hopeful enterprise of the progressive spirit of our preachers and people. The concern of our teachers as to the moral and religious welfare of students is commendable. Blessing divine attend the efforts of our teachers to lead youthful minds to Christ, as well as to a well earned graduation. Education has made inroads among our preachers, or, rather, the preachers, catching the pace of progress, have made and are making their way up the ladder of fame—not the world's crazy, head-swimming ladder, but the ladder Jacob saw that connected earth with heaven. Do you know, Mr. President, that we have in the membership of our Conference an even dozen doctors of divinity? and others coming along not knowing where the lightning may strike next. Render to all their dues. Let our D. D. brothers be duly honored. They appear to wear their honors with becoming modesty.

The greatest visible change in connection with Methodism since 1845 is that found in the membership of the Conference. Not counting those who located, withdrew or were transferred to other Conferences, one hundred and forty-four have died, including the six who have fallen since our last meeting. But if the entire present membership of the Conference, including those on trial, were standing before and with me in place of our departed and glorified fathers and brethren, the number would reach two hundred and thirty-seven—a brotherhood in Christ and Methodism. It is on this wise that "God buries His workmen and carries on His work."

May we all so live and so labor and, if need be, so suffer that, in the close of life we, severally, may *feel*, if not able to speak it: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing."