

*Are Methodists
Willing
to
Face the Facts?*



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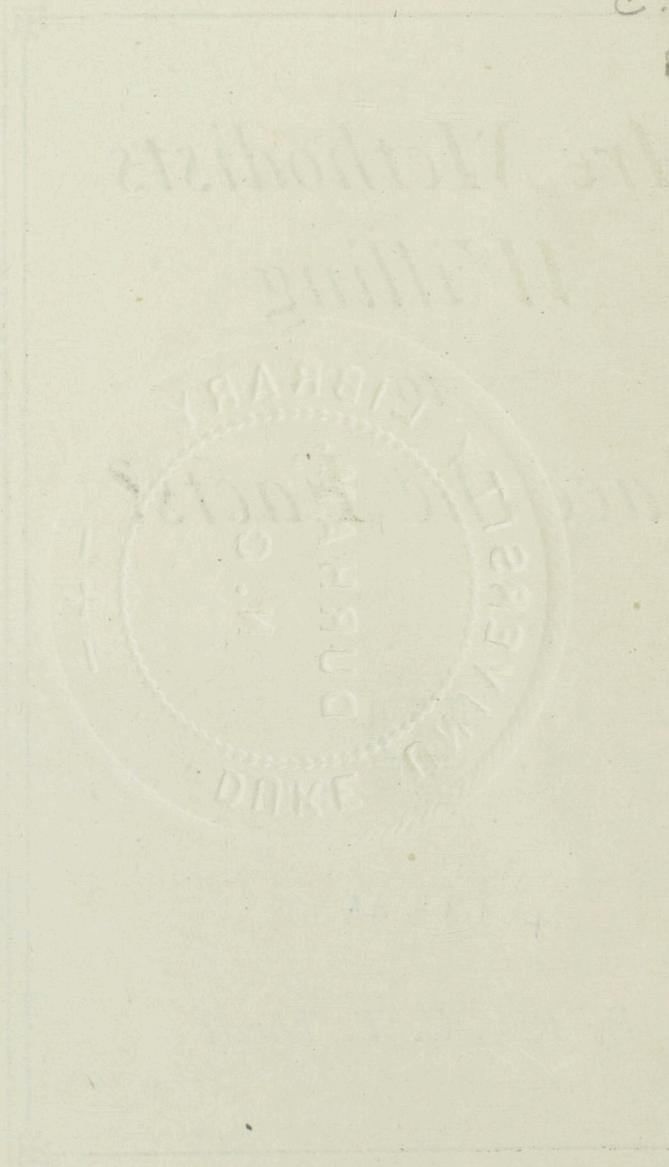
By Rev. C. T. Thrift

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ARE METHODISTS WILLING TO FACE THE FACTS?

By Rev. C. T. Thrift.

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"Brethren, as the man who wrote that report is absent, it will cause no embarrassment for me to ask this question, What do we mean when we say that our charges are in good condition?" The question was asked by one of our bishops who was presiding in a district conference. The pastor had stated in his report that his work was in good condition. It set me to thinking. Now, I have just read the message of our bishops in which I find this statement: "Your general superintendents, after carefully reviewing the work of our beloved church during the year just passed and taking minute account of the conditions prevalent throughout its borders, rejoice to inform you that its prosperity is very marked and its program most cheering." That has set me to thinking again. I rise to ask, What is meant by the marked prosperity of the church?

We must have some standard by which to judge. What was the purpose of Methodism? What was her goal? None other than to spread Scriptural holiness all over these lands. Then the question is, What measure of success has crowned our efforts? Is there any fairer way to try this out than to measure the life of our members by the General Rules

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of our church? Their significance is two-fold to us. In the first place, we say concerning them: "All of which we are taught by God to observe, even in his written word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts." In the second place, they are specific obligations which we have assumed.

The first rule is: "Doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced," such as:

1. "The taking of the name of God in vain." Is it not a sad fact that there is a great deal of profanity today among men and even women of the church? If statements from those who are in a position to know can be relied on, it is not an uncommon practice even among stewards in the church. A preacher hears less of it than other men, so his information is secondhand.

2. "The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling." There are church members who run their places of business on Sunday, selling gasoline, soft drinks, and other things. Look at the church members who patronize those places on Sunday. Go to the golf links and the bathing resorts and see whether there are any church members there or not. Is it possible that those men and women and

girls who are almost naked are members of the church? Many of them are.

3. "Drunkenness, or drinking spirituous liquors, unless in cases of necessity." The Methodist church has always stood for temperance. Now the nation is dry. Today, therefore, intemperance is not only a sign of a poor church member but also of a bad citizen. Are there not members of the church who are conniving at the smuggling, manufacture, and selling of spirituous liquors and drinking the stuff? How many stewards are fond of their "little toddy?"

4. "Fighting, quarreling, brawling; brother going to law with brother, returning evil for evil, railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling." How many church members are in lawsuits against their brethren? Let us hope not very many. But there is quarreling and bitter enmity in many places.

5. "The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty." What about tax dodging, especially on the part of those who are rich? Ask the tax assessor.

6. "The giving or taking things on usury—i. e., unlawful interest." This would apply not only to those who lend money at exorbitant rates of interest but to the one who profiteers in rents and other things.

7. "Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation."

Measure the gossip, the smutty jokes and the silly twaddle by that standard.

8. "Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us."

9. "Doing what we know is not for the glory of God," as:

(1) "The putting on of gold and costly apparel." Listen to what the Apostle Paul says about the matter: "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works." (1 Tim. ii. 9-10.) It receives attention also at the hands of the Apostle Peter: "Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price." (1 Pet. iii. 3-4.) Now measure the way the women of the church have been dressing by that standard. Look at them at the bathing beaches, on the ballroom floor, on the street, and even at church. Their immodest dressing has made them the cynosure of all eyes. Only the blind did not see it. The costly dresses worn by some have kept many poor people away from God's house.

Who could hazard a guess at the market value of the diamonds worn by our Southern Methodist women? Only the other day I heard a Methodist preacher's wife spoken of as "a walking jewelry store." There are Methodist women today who paint more than did the street women of a generation ago.

(2) "The taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus." Dancing has always had a bad odor in Methodist circles. This has been affirmed over and over again. The word "revelings" in Galatians v. 21 puts dancing as much under the ban as murder and drunkenness. But look in yonder ballroom where the most indecent and vulgar dances are to be seen. Among the chaperones and patrons are some of the "leading members" of some of our "leading churches." It will not be surprising if we find a steward and his wife or perhaps the president of the missionary society among them. Among the dancers we will find not only members of the church, but even the sons and daughters of stewards and perhaps of the preacher too, and many of the members of the choir and not a few of the teachers of the Sunday school. Think of the drinking that is connected with the dance! Many a girl has been carried home drunk from such places. Think of the immorality and the shame that has followed in the wake of these dances!

Card playing has never been looked upon with favor by Methodists. "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness." (Eph. v. 11.) But go in any town today and just look at the number of Methodist women who are organizing bridge clubs and who play by the hour for prizes. Anywhere else it is called common gambling.

What about the indecent pictures that are being put on the screen, the product in the main of the most corrupt gang that can be found anywhere? Look at the vast number of church members—men, women and children—who devour this filth and offscouring of the world.

(3) "The singing those songs or reading those books which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God." It was at a church meeting some time ago. The opening song was not one of the old hymns that our fathers loved to sing, but instead "We are here." Of the making of books there is no end. But the quantity does not guarantee the quality. What are our people reading? In a meeting of a book club, composed largely, if not entirely, of church members, reviews were given of books which had been read. They were the "latest." The general verdict was: "This book is not fit to read." But I wonder if that will make the other members look elsewhere for something to read.

(4) "Softness or needless self-indulgence." Now,

our church has never legislated on the tobacco question except a few years ago when it forbade the use of it to the preachers joining the conference after that time. But it seems to me that this clause on "needless self-indulgence" covers the tobacco question pretty well. The use of tobacco is a dirty habit; it is an enslaving habit; it is an injurious habit, for the textbooks that the children are studying set forth very clearly; it is a costly habit. Now, the logic of the situation seems to me to be this: If it is wrong for a young preacher to use tobacco, it is wrong for an older one to use it. He is setting a bad example for his younger brother. If it is wrong for the pastor to use it, then it is wrong for the presiding elder to use it. I knew a layman who asked to be excused from entertaining the presiding elder because the elder used tobacco, and the layman did not want to have such an example before his boys. If it is wrong for the young preachers to use tobacco, it seems to me that it is wrong and a poor example for a bishop to use it. It seems to me that for the sake of consistency and the value of example every preacher should have given up the use of tobacco when the general conference passed that law. If it has no hold upon him, it would be easy; if he has been enslaved by it, he certainly ought to be set free from the habit. I think some of the western conferences have made

a rule that no user of tobacco can serve on any board or committee of the conference. At some of the conferences the Sunday school room has looked filthy before Saturday night because of tobacco. At others I have seen the ground around the church nearly covered with cigar stumps and tobacco quids. But if it is wrong for the preacher to use tobacco, then it is wrong for the layman to use it. If it is wrong to use it, then it follows that it is wrong to raise it. I am no fanatic on the tobacco question. But stern logic drives to that conclusion after the general conference made that law. Yet the use of tobacco is on the increase, and even girls are becoming cigarette fiends. But will the use of tobacco stand the test of "needless self-indulgence?"

(5) "Laying up treasures upon earth." According to the teaching of the Master, there are some "rich fools" today. Sometimes they have not been very careful about how they made money, but they are exceedingly careful about holding on to it.

(6) "Borrowing without a probability of paying or taking up goods without the probability of paying for them." Ask the merchants how church members stand on the matter of paying their obligations for provisions and clothes.

Does this measured by the General Rules indicate "prosperity?" But we are not yet done. Look

at the divorced people; look at the "dope fiends"; look at those who are gambling in "futures"; look at the gambling on baseball and football even at our church institutions; look at the homes without any children or with only one child (the occupants practice what the landlord preaches, "No children wanted"). Ask any doctor about suicide and infanticide. These things confront us on every side.

We have not time to measure with the second rule. But here it is: "Doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men." What about our sins of omission?

Here is the third rule: "Attending upon all the ordinances of God." Such are:

1. "The public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded." Look at the small congregations which worship on Sunday or Wednesday night. The leaders of the church tell us that forty per cent of the members never darken the door of the church.
2. "The Supper of the Lord." Of those who attend church, many seldom or never commune.
3. "Family and private prayer." Very few families have family prayer. Many stewards will not lead in prayer.
4. "Searching the Scriptures." There is a woe-

ful ignorance of the Bible even among those who have been in the church a long time.

5. "Fasting or abstinence." Do we ever hear anything about "fasting" in this "fast" age?

If our sins of omission were less, our sins of commission would also be less. But the results of this measuring will prepare the way for another statement. A large per cent of our membership say they have not been converted or know nothing about conversion. As for baptism of the Holy Spirit, they "have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Spirit." One of the leading pastors in one of our leading conferences is quoted as saying that the enforcement of the General Rules would not leave a single member in his church. A preacher of large experience told me that in his judgment three-fourths of our membership would fall before a moderate application of the General Rules.

Now if these things are so, and I am convinced that I speak forth the words of truth and soberness, what do we mean when we say that "our charge is in good condition" or that "the church is in a prosperous condition?" We cannot measure prosperity by handsome churches built and large salaries paid and money raised for missionary, educational and charitable enterprises. Are our people right here at home being saved from their sins and adorning

the gospel by holy living? That is the true test.

Now let no man think that I am belittling the Methodist church. I believe that it will not suffer by comparison with any other branch of the church with which I am acquainted. Preachers of other denominations confess privately that the moral and spiritual condition with them is just as deplorable as I have described.

But what can we do about it? I do not believe that we will ever get out of the wilderness until we confess that we are in the wilderness. What we need is a leader with clear vision and sublime courage, who has a big heart and a strong mind, who hates sin in all its forms and does not fear even the devil himself. Any man who can awaken Methodism in this hour will deserve to rank with Wesley himself.

As a guide to holy living according to Methodist standards, I do not believe that anything better will be found than the General Rules. They are not out of date. If we could get the Methodist church to measure up to the standard, that in itself would be a great revival. I believe that it would be followed by the greatest ingathering of souls that the church has ever witnessed. If the standards of Methodism are good for the outer life, the standard doctrines of Methodism are good for the inner life. Suppose we could have a campaign of

preaching on the universality of sin and the depravity of the human heart, the universality of the atonement and the marvelous love of God, repentance, justification by faith only, conversion or regeneration as a matter of experience and a force for life, the witness of the Spirit, the baptism of the Holy Ghost, holiness, or sanctification; suppose we had this in every church in Methodism; suppose every bishop, every presiding elder, and every pastor should preach these things for six months or a year; suppose that every church paper should ring the changes on these things likewise. I believe that we should see a mighty change in the standard of living among our people. What a glorious opportunity for our bishops to do some mighty preaching in the annual conferences and to challenge the pastors to follow their leadership to the awakening of Methodism throughout its borders! The condition is grave; the opportunity for great achievements is sublime. The call is for mighty leadership in spiritual things. God grant that a leader may not fail us in these times. But one of the most essential things is for every preacher and every layman to face the facts as to our real condition.



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