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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## (2) CHILD REARING\*

1. Background and History of Childhood

There has been renewed interest in the history of childhood in recent years. The book mostly cited as 'holy writ' in this is *Centuries of Childhood* by Phillippe Aries. He traces the development of childhood with extensive references from France and England. This has been taken up by many others.<sup>1</sup> Payne examines infanticide and child brutality. Taylor's book is an extensively researched investigation into childhood from the point of view of psychoanalysis. Hunt, like Aries, is concerned mainly with that very detailed account of the childhood of Louis XIII written by his doctor, Heroard, but with a major section on the idealisation of childhood, which was one of the major consequences of extreme views of childhood innocence. He attempts also to relate the psychoanalytic theory of de Mause to the view of Aries. George Boas also refers extensively to the idealisation of infancy with an examination of childhood wisdom and reference in particular to Pestalozzi. Martin Hoyle's work, brought out to coincide with International Year of the Child, is a collection of essays, articles and poems, including a fascinating 'pictorial' essay on developing childhood as depicted in art.

It would be fair to say that early Anabaptist child rearing practices were generally more humane than those which obtained in society around them. In sixteenth century society in general the family was a moral and social reality but it had less claim on the child's emotions and was less important than the status and trade of the father, the land owned by the father, or even the village, or township in which the family lived. Amongst the upper and middle classes the practice of handing the newborn over to a nurse was common. 'Wet nursing' was widespread, such nurses being hired by the father. The child would be cared for by the wet nurse until it was weaned and in some instances this would last for a number of years. The classic 'Nurture v. Nature' is raised here. Many feared that the child would have transferred to him the physical and emotional and mental traits of the nurse, such as sloth, promiscuity, impiety. In rejecting godparents and baptismal sponsors, the Anabaptists certainly were fearful of the immoral behaviours and bad example of such people being passed on to the child.

It was a woman's world as far as the child was concerned. (Is this reflected in the stress in those early Anabaptist child consecration ceremonies where the mother brings the baby, and no mention is made of the father?) By twentieth century standards Anabaptist parents seemed to lack closeness towards their children, yet by prevailing practices of their day, they were humane and aware of the significance of the closeness of mother and baby, and more than that, conscious that once nurture is taken seriously, then the child is seen as more significant in society generally.

Along with wet nursing went the practice of *swaddling babies*, a practice which was near universal and common amongst the

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\* *Continuing the series begun in Baptist Quarterly July and October 1982*

Anabaptists in the child's early years. The binding of the child in bands was considered necessary because the child was so full of evil and dangerous projections, that if it were left free, then it would scratch its eyes out, or grow crooked or twisted, destroy its bones, or break its limbs. Swaddling consisted of depriving the child of the use of its limbs by enveloping in endless bandages. It was a complicated business; taking a long time to do.

There was no *toilet training* in this period which makes all the more remarkable the careful advice of the Anabaptist Peter Walpot on this matter in his 'School Discipline', which will be examined later.

The history of *sex* in childhood is difficult to chart. In the ancient world children lived in an atmosphere of sexual abuse. Modern readers are horrified by the diary of Louis XIII's physician and the liberties taken by people towards sex with children, and by coarse jokes, indecent gestures. Yet all were regarded as perfectly natural.

In the Renaissance period campaigns were launched against the sexual abuse of children because of their innocence in these matters. It developed into a state of almost complete antithesis to the ancient period. Children were to be protected from all sex. There was a taboo on nakedness, a suppression of masturbation, even changes in the tone of voice of the mother when she mentioned these things. Thus by the Victorian period there was a complete taboo on any talk of sex amongst children at all.

Baptism was associated with innocence, in the sense that the baptismal act in the Middle Ages Roman church put right the effects of the inherited sin of Adam and gave the child a new start. Again there were sexual overtones in this, the biblical story speaking of the Fall and its consequences, amongst which was Adam and Eve's awareness of their nudity, which was then covered up. William Saffady remarks on the fear that the abandonment of established religious rituals like infant baptism would result in unrestrained violence and sexual licentiousness.<sup>2</sup> He refers to a draft in the 1535 royal proclamation of Henry VIII in which is written in Henry's own hand reference to

sundry persons called Anabaptists and Sacramentaries

who were spreading Protestant views in sixteenth century England. The fear was that such opponents of traditional religious practices were 'full of wild liberty', a phrase (comments Saffady) denoting an absence of all sexual inhibitions. However, he does add 'these ideas bore little relationship to reality'. Yet it shows the link between sex, innocence and the sacramental activity of the church, and the popular views that in rejecting the sacramental system that prevailed, the Anabaptists Reformers were therefore guilty of permissive attitudes to sex.

Other changes are evident too. As the decline in *apprenticeship* came about and the consequent decline in numbers of children moving away to other homes to live in because of work, so children were placed more firmly with parents and parental control became more crucial. As *schooling* emerged and children were as

a consequence separated from adulthood, so childhood becomes a preparatory stage for adult life, a stage when the child is withheld from adult responsibilities, by contrast with the Mediaeval Ages.

As far as *discipline and punishment* were concerned, references in the Middle Ages are difficult to find. Beatings seem to have been common, but by the time of the Renaissance, advice to temper beatings begins in earnest. However, this is accompanied by approval for just beatings. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' was the principle. The Anabaptists believed quite firmly in obedience, with the necessary disciplining and punishing of the disobedient. They believed in beating, yet with a compassion and a fairness as will be shown later in the 'School Discipline' of Peter Walpot and the writings of Menno Simons.

Some of these trends correspond with Anabaptist attitudes to childhood. Parental control was important for Anabaptists. Education becomes important, although it is more a communal socialisation process than education in intellectual development and freedom, or even manners, as developed elsewhere around this time and after. Again for the Anabaptists maturity was a matter of great significance and children needed preparation for this, though for the Anabaptists maturity was a matter of personal faith in Christ, of which baptism was the sign.

The Anabaptists made a remarkable contribution to this process of the emergence of childhood as a separate state. The shaping and moulding of children was important and discipline and obedience to parents and to school were part of this process of shaping and moulding. Later this developed into a socialisation of Anabaptist children into those established ways and practices, developed in the formative period.

## 2. Upbringing

A word of caution is necessary here. As with other Anabaptist doctrines, their writings on the nature of childhood are often scanty and unsystematic and the practical outworkings of their views often not documented at all. Only the Hutterites described what they did and these will be examined closely. Further, there survive hymns and one or two references to instructions to parents, but by and large the judgement of Hillel Schwartz is salutary:

... one can hope to describe sixteenth century perceptions of child nature and ideas about child rearing.<sup>3</sup>

We have seen that the view of childhood amongst the Anabaptists was that childhood was a state of innocency. Children were to grow until they reached the stage in life when they could distinguish between good and evil; be responsible for their own actions, and, on hearing the Gospel for themselves from the Word, accept it and on profession of repentance and faith be baptised as believers. For most of the other Reformers infant baptism was a useful start to the beginning of the process of growth.

In Calvinism the doctrine of election on the grounds of the covenant was the basis for careful Christian nurture of the child. Indeed, with Horace Bushnell infant baptism begins a process whereby:

... the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

There is thus no imperative to be 'born again', for the child in the covenant is nurtured to take his place naturally in the life of the church. The position of the Reformers is summarised by Hillel Schwartz:

While neither Luther nor Zwingli assumed that a six-day old infant understood the significance of baptism, both men (Zwingli with some hesitation) thought that infant baptism predisposed the baptised infant toward faith, either as a public commitment by parents or godparents to raise the child as a good Christian, or as a communal commitment that Christian social influences and the faith of others would prevail in the formation of individual character.<sup>5</sup>

All early Anabaptists had one thing in common, namely that they refused to baptise infants. But infant baptism was also a social and educational act, whereby a process was initiated involving parents and community in the upbringing of the child. The Anabaptists, in rejecting infant baptism in such an uncompromising way, thus rejected an act which had educational and child rearing significance. Baptism, for the Anabaptists, required a certain kind of personal standing with God, and was not for them a part of any mechanical theory of grace, covenant, election or whatever. Hubmaier, that most systematic of Anabaptist writers on baptism, argued against the social and educational value of baptism with strong words:

(The priest) mumbles over the infant in Latin (it could well be German for infants know one as well as the other; it is an error either way). Then the priest asks: 'Credis in deum patrem omnipotentem, creatorum celi et terre? Say "I believe"'. Now if it is in the Word of God that the godparents are to answer for the infant, 'I believe', prove it with clear scripture. But if it were in Scripture, why would the priest not say to the godmother and godfather, 'You godparents say "we believe"?... What they say should be said by the infant.'<sup>6</sup>

He claimed that baptising the infant does that child a positive injustice and again rejects the practice as a social and educational initiation.

Menno Simons also rejected all belief in infant baptism as a social and educational initiation. Conscious of the immorality of his day and equally conscious of the significance of the sponsors in infant baptism, whose promise is to care and to bring up the child in the Faith, Menno railed against the superstitious use of infant baptism by the godless. Infants baptised and brought up by immoral sponsors could expect only to repeat the

pattern of conduct and copy the example they had been given. This would be a positive obstacle to them ever coming to Faith for themselves:

Yet not withstanding all this, these same persons carry the children who are thus illegitimately born of such seducers, such immoral rascals and abandoned women to the baptism, that they may be called Christians and be trained in the same works and fruits as their unchristian, adulterous parents, in whom and by whom they are conceived, and begotten in accursed and damnable adultery.<sup>7</sup>

Faith was the gift of God through the Holy Spirit, at a time when the child was able to distinguish between good and evil. Baptism must wait until the person chose it for himself on his freely professed personal faith. This suggested a state of innocence in childhood but also inferred that there was a stage when the child passed out of childhood and entered a phase of life when moral responsibility was real. This was the state of adulthood, measured by personal faith and willingness to take responsibility for, and all the consequences of, a chosen faith. As a result 'coming of age' was important, that time when innocence ended and all the potential of original sin could be actual and therefore personal relationship with God and imitation of Christ became significant.

### 3. Child Consecration

In the history of human society significant moments in human development have been marked by ceremony and ritual, e.g.: birth, marriage, puberty, monastic vows, and vocation, ordination, death.

The rejection of infant baptism says important things about Faith and the Church. But, whilst a right distinction is made between the gathered church and the community at large, clearly there is a special relationship for children of believers to the church and the Gospel. There is a process beginning at birth for those who are in a relationship with the church through their parents, and who are through parental influence and discipline, under the sound of the Gospel.

It is the view of Neville Clarke, speaking of the English Baptists (but this would be true of all Baptists including the Anabaptists), that:

So whilst on strictly biblical and theological grounds no ceremony for infants is needed, experience shows that where no ceremony is to be found it is necessary to invent one.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the Anabaptists invented a 'child birth ceremony', though claiming some scriptural basis for it. This ceremony was a consecration of the child and to some extent a recognition of the role of the community in his upbringing. It was a kind of social initiation replacing infant baptism. Its origins are not clear, but seems to be amongst those Anabaptist groups which became more socially and communally organised such as the Mennonites and Hutterites. Schwartz, in an important footnote in his

article, page 105, says:

Balthasar Hubmaier and others felt the need for some social initiation to replace infant baptism and inaugurated the ceremony of consecration.<sup>9</sup>

The ceremony is based on scripture Matthew 19.13-15, Mark 10. 13-16 and Luke 18.15-17.

First mention of a Consecration of infants are in Balthasar Hubmaier (in the letter written to Oecolampadius in Basel on 16th January 1525), and in Dirk Philips:

Instead of baptism I have the congregation assemble, introduce the child, and in German explain Matthew 19.13-15. Then the child is named; the entire church prays with bent knees for it and commends it to Christ that He may be gracious to it and intercede for it.<sup>10</sup>

But we have no command or example in all the Scripture to pray that children shall be baptised on the faith of the church or the fathers; but we do have in the scripture another example of how we are to pray for children, namely, that the believing parents brought their children to Christ, desiring that their children might be blessed by his laying his hands on them (Matthew 19.13-15). Thus also we must consecrate our children unto Christ with firm faith and confidence that in him they have already as in the promised seed, obtained the blessing of eternal life.<sup>11</sup>

The elements involved in this childhood ceremony are significant. 'The whole congregation assemble', clearly the ceremony was in, and for, the Church as much as the child. The 'entire church prays' suggests a recognition of a process of growth beginning with birth. One can only guess the content of the prayer but it would seem reasonable to assume that it was for grace and faith at such a time as faith was possible, the assumption being that stage of life when knowledge of good and evil was real and moral responsibility was evident. The 'child is named' suggests that at least the child was recognised as a person. The reference to the German language is significant. In the Hutterite branch of Anabaptism, the preservation of their language and the place it had in the instruction given to children in their later Sunday Schools as part of the socialisation process, suggests the importance of community identity and social cohesion. At this stage we note the absence of mention of *parents*. This is significant for two reasons: firstly there is evidence to be examined later that the instruction given to children and the disciplining of children was a parental responsibility (Menno Simons in particular, Peter Walpot's 'School Discipline' 1578, and Peter Ridemann 'Confession of Faith'). But secondly, in the English development of child dedication, which would correspond with the Anabaptist service of child consecration, the stress is as much on parental dedication.

There are other references to the Child Consecration ceremony, e.g.:

In Ottius, *Annales Anabaptistici*, page 35, the statement is made that in Norlimgen in Swabia some of those who left the Catholic Church favoured infant baptism, while others opposed it. They reached an agreement by which those who believed in adult baptism should bring their infants to church, where they would be commended to Christ our Mediator and Redeemer, by the laying of hands and prayer.<sup>12</sup>

Christ is seen as intercessor and mediator for the child being consecrated, presumably with the end result in mind of the day when the child will profess his personal faith in Christ as his Redeemer. This service explicitly refers to the laying on of hands upon the infant based no doubt on the example of Jesus blessing the children. Remembering the stress on 'sola scriptura' amongst the Anabaptists, it is not surprising that the ceremony for infants should be modelled as closely as possible on the action of Jesus. Thus in the account of child consecration found in the 'Christliches Handbuchlein' (1661), written in German and then translated into Dutch, Jeremias Felbinger wrote that infants should be brought to church, that the preacher should take the child and pray for it and lay his hands on in blessing, but also:

... the preacher, after a brief address to the congregation on the love of Christ to children, on the obligation of believers to live in a child-like life, etc...<sup>13</sup>

The basis of the address of the preacher is once again thoroughly biblical, with the example of Jesus and the plea for the faithful to become as little children. Johannes Deknatel, a Dutch Mennonite preacher, in a book entitled 'Menno Simons in't Kleine' (1953, page 196) refers explicitly to the mother:

My brethren, since we do not baptize our infants, because Jesus did not do it or command it and because they do not have the necessary qualifications, would it not be good to bless them by the laying on of hands as Jesus taught us by his example? For we do nothing for our infants. If we truly believe these words of Jesus, would it not be good to do as Jesus did? Or if we do not do this would it not be right, when the mother comes back to church with her new-born child, to present the child with her to the Lord and bless them with believing prayer by the preacher and the church?<sup>14</sup>

No mention is made, however, of any response or commitment on the part of the mother. There was then some significance in birth and some status to infancy, both in terms of the infant's own personhood and also in the potential of that child in his participation in the community. Individual and community, man and society, are indissolubly bound.

Just as the grain of wheat loses its identity in the loaf of bread and the grape is lost in the wine, so also the individual must lose his identity in one corporate body.<sup>15</sup>



It is suggested in the Mennonite Encyclopaedia that child consecration was on the one hand not universal, as some felt it smacked of infant baptism. On the other hand, in some churches children were blessed frequently on several occasions during the year, in the context of normal church services. Parents brought their children to the front for the minister to bless them.

The most we can say is that early in their development the Anabaptists recognised the need for some childhood ceremony. The basis was biblical and seemed to be largely the blessing of children by Jesus, with the laying on of hands accompanying that blessing, prayer for them, and naming. The ceremony was linked with the church, who as a corporate body would join in prayer for the child. The setting might be in the home, but mostly the church, with the assembled congregation in worship. The parents had a minimal part in the service, though later developments suggest that the mother be present and she be blessed also.

#### 4. Childhood Innocence

The idea of Childhood Innocence suggests that the Radical Reformers had 'caught' something of the significant change in attitudes to childhood brought about with the shift from the Mediaeval ideal of children as 'little men' to a view of childhood as a distinct and special stage of life. Aries speaks of childhood innocence in the context of changing attitudes to sex in the presence of children.<sup>16</sup> The child under the age of puberty was believed to be unaware or indifferent to sex. Gestures and allusions had no meaning to him and would not spoil his childhood innocence simply because he had no childhood innocence. Aries suggests that changes came about with the arousing of a sense of guilt in the penitent, at the age of about 10 or 12 years of age, in respect of sex and sexual feelings. He concludes:

(by the seventeenth century)...a new concept had won acceptance: that of the innocence of childhood.<sup>17</sup>

This led to a view of innocence as a true reflection of divine purity. It paved the way for child idealisation and a concentration on the divine childhood of Jesus. But equally, education becomes important. This was a reaction against the use of children as playthings for adults, and also the beginning of the establishment of the significance of childhood as an important stage in human development. Aries shows that two kinds of attitude to childhood emerge: the one safeguarding the child against pollution by life itself, especially by common sexuality, and secondly, the strengthening of childhood by the development of character and reason through education, the cultivation of manners and discipline.

At first sight there appears to be a conflict between innocence and original sin. If human nature is corrupt and if all new born infants inherit the sin of Adam, then what price innocence? The answer of course was the effectiveness and necessity of infant baptism.

The Anabaptists had a distinctive view of *childhood innocence*. As it was later in life that Adam and Eve fell from grace, at the stage in their growth when the capacity for good and evil was at its height, when conscience was active, and when the ability to choose between alternatives was developed, so the young child is a copy of Adam before the Fall. His natural growth from childhood through to adulthood corresponds with Adam. Sin does not begin to be active until he reaches the point of the choice between good and evil. At first sight this appears to be Pelagian, yet the Anabaptists were so strong on sin and grace and the need for repentance and faith that to condemn them for Pelagianism was unfair. But they were conscious that such a view of growth could, if left unchecked, mean that the child grows up in a state of degeneration unless instruction and careful control are exercised.

This led them to be serious about parental responsibility and schooling. Further, whilst at first sight this notion of childhood innocence appears to be a rather unrealistic romantic view of childhood, closer enquiry into the Anabaptist theology of grace and salvation reveals that nothing could be further from the truth.

Sin is a matter of the Will and was operative only at that stage when the potential becomes actual. Children are in a state of unselfwilled innocency. Ulrich Stadler, the Hutterite leader:

The child cannot set his heart upon a goal nor reflect, throughout childhood.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly all Anabaptists consider children to be of pure and innocent blood.<sup>19</sup>

The Anabaptists rejected all romantic views of childhood and did not allow the doctrine of childhood innocence to develop that way. It may appear that innocence can be equated with purity, or even with wisdom and thereby idealise or romanticise childhood. The Anabaptist view of sin was so strong that all idealisation of childhood is rejected. They recognised there was still in childhood a tendency to the carnal which needed control and discipline. Innocence then could be naivety? Rather for the Anabaptists, *innocence is a lack of knowledge and awareness*.

Until they (children) have developed understanding of the will or conscience, they know as much about religion as did a GOOSE.<sup>20</sup>

In the Martyr's Mirror there is an examination of Reytse Aysess before the priests and bishops in 1574 at Leewaerden, in which the case of baptising infants is under question. In the course of the interrogation reference is made to an innocency identified with ignorance:

*Reytse*: Children are in the grace of God as long as they are in their ignorance and they are washed through the blood of Christ; hence baptism in their case is vain and to no purpose...<sup>21</sup>

The view is made clear in 'The Account of our Religion' by Peter Ridemann:

... we permit them (children) not to carry out their headstrong will and carnal practice ... we have schools in which we bring up our children in the divine discipline and teach them from the beginning to know God. But we permit them not to go to other schools, since there they teach but the wisdom, art and practices of the world, and are silent about divine things. Our practice is as follows ... as soon as they can speak, they lay the Word of God testimony in their mouths and teach them to speak with or from the same, tell them of prayer and such things as children can understand...<sup>22</sup>

The passages illustrate the point that innocent though childhood may be it is a long way from child idealisation, but equally a long way from the critical, open-ended, evaluative education of modern times. Childhood prepares a person for adulthood, in which baptism upon repentance of sin and profession of faith, with desire to imitate Christ, are the marks. For this a child needs training and rearing.

The innocence of childhood then was for the Anabaptists a state of ignorance and lack of understanding. John A. Hostetler indicates that the child is innocent until he begins to hit back or tries to comb his hair,

at which time his level of *comprehension* is believed to be sufficiently developed for the application of discipline.<sup>23</sup>

The way to treat innocence was to rear the child firmly and strictly. Discipline was a positively good thing, and in this parents and school had their mutually supportive parts to play. The tendencies to desire the carnal and material were innate and needed to be controlled.

A child in his innocence was not a Christian, but was 'in preparation'. Christianity 'is no child's play' (Hans Schlatter) rather an 'adult' matter.

##### 5. From Childhood to Youth

It has been made clear already that 'coming of age', the time of spiritual independence marked by baptism, was a crucial stage in growth for the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists established a number of criteria by which to recognise the movement from one stage of development to another. Three stages seem to be significant - *childhood*, *youth* and *adulthood*. Childhood was a stage of innocence, a state of unselfwilled development. Thus, the development of the will, the point at which potential sin became actual, is the first criterion by which to judge when the child moved from childhood into youth. Hillel Schwartz quotes Ulrich Stadler, the Hutterite leader:

The child cannot set his heart upon a goal nor reflect throughout childhood; youth is not childhood...<sup>24</sup>

Again, in reply to a critic claiming that sin and evil were with man from youth, he retorted:

In short he is talking about youth and not about childhood. Youth and childhood are two different things.<sup>25</sup>

We have already indicated the importance of the relationship between the individual and the community in Anabaptism. It was a mark of the Christian man that he would sacrifice self-will for the Will of God and the Community. Hostetler suggests this means:

Self surrender, not self development, is the divine order. The individual must at all times be submissive to the will of God, which is explicitly manifested in the believing community.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the child must be educated, disciplined and brought up in such a way that the knowledge of the fear of God and the will of God may be implanted in him. Then at that point when self will is developed and youth begins, he may be trained to submit to the will of God in self surrender and become a Christian and an adult. Again John Hostetler, in his account of modern Hutterite practices:

The individual will is broken primarily during the kindergarten years. The child is taught self denial, humility and submissiveness. After approximately twenty years of rigorous indoctrination the individual is expected to accept the teaching of the colony voluntarily. When he is able to express remorse, abasement and the loathing associated with the sinful self he will receive baptism.<sup>27</sup>

The first instances of action based on self will signalled the beginning of youth. Self will is linked closely with the development of a good conscience, the second criterion of transition from childhood to youth. The conscience is developed internalisation of authority. It begins in early childhood as the child learns to behave and conduct himself. It has to do with rewards and punishments for behaviour. In children it is generally undeveloped, but later in life it produces guilt at the violation of the internalised code, and can result in self punishment, or a denial that the action took place, or even projection of guilt onto others. Much of the development and action of the conscience in this sense is unconscious and comes from the upbringing given to the child.

Conscience is a product of socialisation and culturalisation. For the Anabaptists, the conscience was equated with an exhibition in personal conduct of 'the fear of God'. Thus children were to be taught the Word of God from early days and brought up to fear God.

... Behold, worthy readers, thus it behoves true Christians... to rear them (children) in the fear of the Lord...<sup>28</sup>

So significant was this recognition of the fear of the Lord,

that devout parents would desire it more than anything else for their children, and pray that their lives be commensurate with it. There are many examples of this in the 'Martyr's Mirror'.

In his article on 'Anabaptist ideas about the Nature of Children', Schwartz says:

The ability to understand paternal admonition, hinted at the beginning of a conscience, at a naive realisation of the connection between self will and reason.<sup>29</sup>

The question of obedience to authority was an essential in the development of a good conscience. Obedience and the good conscience, with a proper regard for the fear of the Lord, were seen by Anabaptists to be signs of faithfulness. It is important to recognise that although we now recognise the internalisation of authority in conscience as *self* discipline and *self* knowledge, the Anabaptists' view was not quite so liberal or permissive. With them external discipline was vital, viz parents, community and of course the Bible. The child's actions must be directed through others. This leads to the whole idea of obedience.

The third criterion of the move from childhood to youth was the ability to choose between alternatives. Education and religious instruction could not begin until this time. Clearly this does not mean that no instruction of any kind was given to children before youth. Rather they were engaged through home and kindergarten in a process of religious socialisation until that time when understanding had developed and the ability to choose was evident. Menno Simons wrote:

It is plain that they cannot be taught, admonished or instructed. And many have less sense at birth than do irrational creatures so without rationality that they cannot be taught anything about carnal things until their hearing, comprehension, and understanding have begun to develop. If they cannot be made to understand anything visible, how can they prematurely, that is before they can comprehend things, be taught and instructed in invisible, celestial matters of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

In a letter from one, Joost de Tollenaer, imprisoned at Ghent in 1589, there is the strong and emotionally charged reference to what is thought best and most desirable for children:

But the best treasure which can be left to children is this: to instruct them from their youth to fear God; to present to them the Word of the Lord, as far as their understanding can comprehend it, and as the forefathers taught their children, to fear God, to shun sin, and do good...<sup>31</sup>

Much depended on understanding. Understanding is a key element in Baptist childhood theology and a vital element in considering the place of the child in the church. A child is

judged not ready for many of the aspects of church life and worship because he will not understand them.

Menno Simons has very serious and demanding things to say about the kind of instruction and training that needs to be given to a child when he reaches youth. He too makes explicit reference to their 'understanding' and the need for stringency and strict discipline:

... instruct your child thus from youth up and daily admonish them with the Word of the Lord, setting them a good example. Teach and admonish them to the extent of their understanding... do not spare the rod... a child unrestrained becomes headstrong as an untamed horse... give him no liberty in his youth and wink not at his follies. Bow down his neck while he is young...<sup>32</sup>

Inherent here is the view that man has two natures. He is in a fallen state because after their period of innocency Adam and Eve fell from grace. God gave each person a conscience by which he can recognise sin and feel guilt. Such a recognition comes only after hearing the Word of the Gospel, after repentance toward God and personal profession of faith in Christ and baptism as a believer. Baptism was a pledge 'of a good conscience toward God'. Thus to please God, man should be spiritually minded, should separate himself from the world of carnal nature. Such a separation is ordained of God, as Peter Ridemann makes clear:

Many tribes call themselves Christian but they do not wish for the Kingdom of God and Christ. The Kingdom of God is the cross, tribulation, suffering and persecution, to drink the bitter wine of suffering and to help Him carry his cross. They (other professing Christians) neglect such suffering. They do not like to be hated by the world.<sup>33</sup>

This separation is clearly a matter of adult perception and understanding and demands a personal choice. It is not for children. However, when the child begins to show rationality and understanding, then he shows signs of moving out of childhood into youth. Then at that point, because he can understand 'visible things' (as Menno puts it), he can be instructed in spiritual things and admonished for his sins. This is the ability to choose between alternatives.

So the Anabaptists established three criteria by which to judge the transition of the child from childhood to youth. Youth would be reached: (i) at the stage of the development of the self will, and the disciplining of that will by a free and voluntary surrender to the will of God and the will of the community of believers; (ii) at the development of the conscience, (iii) at that stage when the ability to choose between alternatives of good and evil was evident.

However, having established these three criteria, Anabaptists hesitated to specify the age at which childhood ended and youth emerged. Some made passing references but 'offhandedly to be sure'.<sup>34</sup> The 'Sermon before the Princes' by Thomas Muntzer, at Allstedt, 13th July 1524:

The word is not far from thee, behold it is in the heart, etc... Now you may ask, How does it then come unto the heart? Answer: It comes down from God above in exalted and terrifying astonishment, which I shall let stand as it is (to be discussed) another time. And this astonishment as to whether it be God's word or not, commences when a child is six or seven years old as is signified in Numbers Chapter 19...<sup>35</sup>

The Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier thought that the will developed around the age of seven.

Menno did not acknowledge the possibility of faith before the age of five, which suggests that understanding began about that time, and this might be the age when childhood becomes youth. Thus, somewhere around the ages of five or seven a child was judged to have begun to develop his reason and understanding, the ability to know right and wrong, and the development of conscience and will. Then he was ready for an education and an instruction, for he had reached 'youth'.

John A. Hostetler, who has researched extensively into the educational and child rearing processes of the Hutterites and the Old Order Amish,<sup>36</sup> concludes that with the twentieth century Anabaptist descendants there is a very careful age division between the various stages of human development, and at each stage careful education, socialisation and instruction. For as much as childhood prepares the infant for initiation into adult life through careful rearing in the years of youth, and adult life prepares the person for death, and since there is 'right order' for everything, then human life can be divided into distinctive sets. He comments:

Age determines both the group to which an individual belongs and generally his place within the group. Cultural conceptions of the human life cycle are thus imposed upon the natural biological rhythm...<sup>37</sup>

The age sets for the Hutterites for example are:<sup>38</sup>

*House Children* - birth to 3 years  
*Kindergarteners* - 3 to 5 years  
*School Children* - 6 to 14 years  
*Casual Years* - 15 to Baptism  
*Baptism* - about 20 years  
*Marriage and Adulthood* - eligible for leadership  
*Aged* - older men retire from leadership.

Of great significance is the meaning of baptism, in this analysis:

Baptism signifies religious adulthood, but marriage and the birth of the first child brings social adulthood.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly the context of this is two fold: first, these Communal Anabaptists who took with great seriousness the call of God to separate from the world and to build a community where sharing and communalisation are distinct marks of being Christian. Secondly, it is also an indication of the significance of communalisation, that children are to be cared for, admonished, instructed and socialised for that day when they are baptised and thereby take their place in the community, marry and thus continue the process. The main activity during adulthood is rearing children and this is the social significance of baptism. Equally so, on retirement the older people have the responsibility of admonishing and instructing the young and so contribute by wisdom and experience to the ongoing process.

How much did the Anabaptists change over the years? True, they resisted all moves into child idealisation making a virtue out of child wisdom etc... Yet there were certain changes in their views in later centuries. In this context Hostetler, in his examination of the Old Order Amish, suggests that there was some development in the later periods which seem to reflect some awareness of changing ideas and moods. Four additional postulates emerge:<sup>40</sup> First, although they have an inherited sinful nature and a tendency to the carnal, yet children:

are loving and teachable, and with proper environment are capable of assuming responsibility to God and man for their actions by the time they become adults.

Does this notion of the loveableness of children reflect the general mood of the 'discovery of childhood'?

Secondly, whilst the Anabaptists have not moved to such radical educational notions of complete independence, freedom of enquiry, open-ended and critical education, yet they did

encourage independent thinking and inquiry so long as such thinking does not challenge the basic religious values of the culture. How children learn is of less direct interest than what is learned.

The process, however, is not education as we now know it, more socialisation. Yet there is more freedom now reflecting a little liberalisation in the teaching of children.

Thirdly, it was believed important that a child must have the right relationship to parents, schools, siblings, and community, and these right relationships would be learned within the family and the school. There is no suggestion of the individualism we now recognise in contemporary society yet

limited individualism is encouraged within the concept of faithful adult behaviour as the model for the child.

Fourthly, education in certain basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ability to function productively within the community are seen as the rightful prerogative of the school, but the home is the place of religious influence. The development in



home life, the emergence of the family, the placing of the child at home with his parents for longer periods of time, was clearly felt by the later Anabaptists:

an environment where values taught in the home are continuous and function throughout life.

Thus some allowance was made for changing views and moods. Yet the context is still that basic view of early Anabaptism that childhood is innocence. The fear of God, a good conscience, obedience to parents and ultimately to God, repentance of sin and profession of faith, and finally acceptance of mature responsibility within the community and the church, with separation from the world and its values and standards, and probably a willingness to suffer and to die for the Faith, are the marks of the move into youth and ultimately from youth into adulthood. Fears about infants dying in infancy were allayed by the firm belief that original sin is not imputed to them. They die in the salvation won by Christ for all through his universal grace. Obedience to God and the exercise of a personal faith were still the most important things in adulthood for which childhood and youth were preparations.

John A. Hostetler reports answers to questions asked of parents as to what they desire most for their children. The answer indicates not only how contemporary Anabaptist parents see their hopes for their children, but there is every reason to believe what their forefathers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also desired:

When the fathers and mothers in the colonies we studied were asked, 'What is the greatest or highest good you want your children to achieve in life?', typical answers were 'That they be honest and faithful Christians and learn to love God and the communal way', and 'We want our children to be good born-again Christians, strong supporters of the Hutterite Faith, not only to be able to talk about being a Christian but rather to show it in works and deeds by following the footsteps of our Dear Lord and Saviour, to give their time and their strength, and if need by their blood and very life.'<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTES

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