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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

THE JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME XXXII APRIL 1987 No. 2

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EDITORIAL: NURSERY OF THE CHURCH?

Baptists, of all people, need to have a special theology of childhood. For us that means a pre-baptismal childhood, whereas for the rest of Christendom baptism is the starting point for all thought about the nurture of children. But practice is developing all the time, sometimes ahead of theology. Rarely today are dedication services conducted as a private ceremony outside public worship, though the dedication service after morning worship was still common in the post-war years. The dedication service has come to be acknowledged as a proper part of the liturgy of the whole church assembled together, thus fortifying our responsibility for the children of the church.

More difficult is the issue of children's participation in communion, currently before the Baptist Union Council. As other Christian confessions, under a variety of theological, psychological and sociological pressures, move towards accepting child-communion, Baptists find themselves in a double bind. If they refuse children communion, they are told they are holding aloof from ecumenical consensus, if they allow children to participate fully they are accused of sloppy sacramental discipline in communicating the unbaptised. All too easily the debate can become absorbed with age-criteria (of those baptised, of those taking communion, of those entering church

membership). Even this may be a proper challenge to our reformed theology. Does solafideism allow for any age-criteria at all? 'Personal commitment' and to be 'at least 11 years of age' seem as much an infringement of 'faith alone', and the gospel of grace that undergirds it, as any other doctrine of 'faith and'. But there is a difference between admitting the child to the table because he/she is a believer, and simply as a child. That might be the place from which to define Baptist attitudes.

The debate ought to challenge us to ask whether, in our proper concern for a gospel response in terms of conversion and baptism, we have neglected to develop a proper theology of the catechumenate, of childhood and of Christian nurture. Much of that task has traditionally been assigned to the Sunday School, whose story is newly chronicled in Philip Cliff's *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England* (National Christian Education Council, Nutfield, Surrey, RH1 4HW, 1986, 400 pp, £24-95). This study contains a lot of useful material, especially on the movement's origins and its development in the twentieth century. The story is an important one, told here warts and all. Other authors, church growth scholars as well as historians, have lamented the failure of Sunday Schools as recruitment agencies for an adult church. Dr Cliff laments rather that the enterprise has taken religious education out of the home. He is less pessimistic about the contribution to church membership because he perceives a time-lag, imposed by a minimum age for the latter, between Sunday School graduation and entrance onto the church roll.

I find his account less than satisfactory: if I suggest that it is not always really history, Mr Cliff could rightly point out that the work was originally undertaken as a doctoral study in sociology. What I miss is a realistic evaluation of the development of the Sunday School movement in relation to the theological and educational attitudes of the time, rather than from the perspective of a certain school of Christian educators of the present day. This is Whigism resurrected in church history, with all the faults of the Whig in political history: the imposition of the view of 1986 sometimes hinders us in listening to the authentic voice of 1886 or 1786.

The handling of sources, language and concept lacks care, as when caption 12 says that this document illustrates the evangelical experience into which scholars were expected to enter between four and five years. The text reveals this to be exception rather than norm. Similar problems arise in the historiographical debates, though imprecise referencing (e.g. p.80, p.101) makes it difficult to disentangle the arguments. For example, T. W. Laqueur's thesis, that the Sunday Schools of the mid century were 'staffed largely by former students and their parents' (Laqueur p.xi), is contracted by Cliff to 'former scholars' (p.150-2). In that whole area I remain unconvinced that Cliff has said the last word on the Sunday Schools and the working classes and will still myself resort to Laqueur's *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture* (1976) as an impressive assessment of the work of Sunday Schools in the first half of the nineteenth century.