

# The Fraternal

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# Present Day Pressures in the Ministry

“... generalizations lead to over-simplifications” wrote my tutor in the margin of an essay during College days. At least, I think that was the burden of his criticism; the writing left a lot to be desired. Assuming the accuracy of my interpretation and the truth of his comment, this article will go to show that the passing of the years has not eradicated the weakness. My theme is that of demands and pressures being exerted upon Baptist ministers today. I believe our ministry is becoming more competitive. “I am among you as one who succeeds” is not what Jesus said, but it might well be what most of us have in mind. The criteria are those of the business world, a world I left many years ago, believing, perhaps naively, that the Christian ministry had more to do with quality of service than with success of policy. My tutor was right of course, and the general points that follow will over-simplify. Still, this is probably what we do every time we preach a sermon so here goes!

The first area of pressure is that of **teaching**. James chapter 3 opens with the words:-

“Let not many of you become teachers my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness”.

We have decided that this does not count any more. We are beset by teachers behind and before. The people are in danger of spending their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. We are being deluged by tapes, books, videos, films, conferences, away-days, teach-ins, seminars, courses, magazines, conventions, workshops and the like. All have their supporters and devotees and it requires an exceptional minister to discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The context of much teaching is often very important and renders listeners more receptive to the content. Such an atmosphere is not easily reproduced in the familiar surroundings of the local church, and the patient weekly diet of teaching seems to some a pale shadow of the exciting truths emanating from a more inspiring prophet. There is pressure here also, in that it is the minister who should, in my view, take final responsibility for the content of what is taught in the local fellowship. The right balance of open-ness to new truth, and a steady adherence to accepted convictions is not easy to find. Paul Fiddes, in the last issue of **Fraternal** reminded us that the call to *episkope* involves a measure of responsibility in this respect. The teaching office may be shared, but the call of the church to the minister carries with it the implication that he or she will test and sift the various emphases being pressed upon the churches from many quarters. Now, as always, ministers need to know their Bibles; not just parts of the revelation, and they also need to maintain their theological reading. Otherwise they will be at the mercy of the persuasive and articulate enthusiast commending the latest wind of doctrine.

The second area of pressure to which I wish to draw attention lies in the **pastoral** sphere of our ministry. There are more people coming into our

churches bringing with them deep-seated and complex problems. This is thoroughly understandable, but it constitutes another aspect wherein the demands are unrelenting and energy-sapping. We have tried to renew the "family" emphasis in our churches, and have encouraged people to share their experiences in small groups and classes. Incidentally, I heard the "family" concept challenged recently as not being at all prominent in the New Testament. The speaker did not elaborate, but we might bear it in mind. The "household" is a wider and more all-embracing idea; it more accurately reflects the social composition of the early church. Be that as it may, our determination to promote true fellowship is taking place against a background of increasing fragmentation in society. We are all aware of the havoc caused by the breakdown of community often giving rise to rootlessness, insecurity and a desperate search, on the part of many, for stable relationships. Religion, for some, only becomes relevant at a time of anxiety, and in offering the right hand of fellowship we are often taking on board another acute and time-consuming personal crisis situation. There is a strong temptation in ministry to think that we can actually solve people's problems. This leads some of us, especially in the early years, to spend almost endless hours with just a few people. Our own family relationships may become strained; the rest of the fellowship may feel neglected, and the people upon whom attention is lavished may feel triumphant rather than grateful. Yet whosoever will may come, and given the current state of society it is certain that we shall be ministering increasingly to the addict, the inadequate, the lonely, the frustrated, the insecure, the suicidal and the casualties of unfulfilled expectations.

Some of us, (many fewer, I suspect, than we think) can counsel effectively. Helpful insights can be garnered from a variety of sources, but here most certainly, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Over the years there has been a tendency for the couch to replace the confessional. We may be tempted to set up as instantly available psychiatrists, and we must try to resist the glow that comes from feeling needed. Most of us would probably do best to major on being ministers of the word and sacrament, and as such offer dependable friendship and practical help to those who are in need. The work must be shared, but there will be times when supportive care and love will be the extent of our involvement. A loving, caring, accepting group may be the best arrangement for long-term support. Ministers can be broken and sometimes well-nigh ruined, by well-intentioned work in a field that contains many hidden dangers.

In this connection, those of us who remember the 1960's will recall the role identity crisis that afflicted many ministers. Almost everyone else working in the area of human relationships seemed to be doing something more useful than preachers and pastors. Many found fulfilment in different forms of ministry, although some of them, I believe, cast a wistful glance over their shoulder now and again. The reason for mentioning this here is that whilst the 1960's saw many struggling to justify their role, the 1980's present us with an embarrassing choice of specialist identities. The Civil Service has always to live with the tension arising from the roles of generalist and specialist, and it looks as though this is happening to the

ministry. Shall I major in counselling, or become a minister of music? Perhaps teaching is my forte or evangelism or youth work or social affairs or administration? In a way it is all quite exciting, but we must remember the wise rejoinder of the apostles, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore .... pick out from among you.." If I started all over again in the ministry, knowing what I know now (and that is little enough!) I would concentrate more preaching along the lines of meeting personal needs. I hope I would not sit lightly to doctrine or to gospel appeal, but the one-to-one situation is not the only way of helping people to face up to their problems. It has its place, but the old-fashioned sermon can also be of immense help provided that it is the outcome of preparation that seeks to relate biblical truth to human situations sensitively understood. Such sermons take time to prepare, but whilst others may be meeting need within the fellowship, the minister is best equipped to fulfil the role to which Jesus referred in Luke 4 verse 18. You may be able to recall something memorable said within a discussion group, if so, thank God. I cannot, but on many unforgettable occasions when I came with my need, I found that need met through the preaching of God's word. Perhaps we are all different in this respect; I am trying to say that preaching and pastoral care must not be divorced, and that some of us can best help people by spending longer in the study whilst others use their gifts on a more intimately personal basis of relationship.

I began by saying that our ministry was becoming increasingly **competitive**, and I must refer, again in general terms to this statement. First, there are simply more ministers now available to the churches, and the flow of applications shows no sign of diminishing. For this we can and should thank God. The situation is much healthier than it was, but increased numbers do bring their own problems. When I began serving as a Superintendent there were usually 80 to 100 more pastorates than there were ministers to fill them. That gap has now disappeared. We ought, I believe, to be entering a phase where pastoral oversight extends to many more of our churches than hitherto, but that is another matter. Suffice it to say that the churches, for the most part, have a wide variety of choice when the pastorate is to be filled. This has had the effect, for instance, of penalising some older ministers, and we have had to make special financial arrangements to facilitate the settlement of some of our senior people.

But it is not just the ministerial numbers game. Attitudes have changed. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the formal Church Growth movement, the idea is abroad that there is something radically wrong if numbers are not increasing. This puts what I call the "priestly" ministry at a disadvantage. There have always been among us, ministers particularly gifted who have been used of God to renew the life of churches and to see large increases in membership and general support. Thank God for them, but they have always been accompanied by a host of lesser luminaries, often serving in communities culturally less responsive to the gospel. These are people who have not hit the denominational headlines, but whose quiet work has caused countless numbers to rise up and call them blessed. We

need our prophets and we need our priests. I am well aware of the dangers of the latter term, but you know what I mean. Some of our larger churches are now able to afford both, but most are not in this happy position. I cannot cite chapter and verse for this assertion, but I would suspect that, looking back over the years, our people are more likely to remember us as pastors than they are as preachers or in a general way as religious leaders. It is the friend alongside in the hour of crisis that they remember, and we must not lose this unsung, private, and in some contexts today, old-fashioned part of ministry.

The trouble here is that our selection procedures tend to operate under different pressures. The Anglicans will ask "Has he the qualities to make a good parish priest?". We are more likely to ask whether the candidate "comes over well", or "has sparkle", or is one who will "do well" in the Baptist ministry. There is nothing specifically religious about any of these. Of course, we look for a sense of "call", but I fear lest our denominational ethos penalises the thoughtful, quiet and reflective person, in favour of one whose gifts are more readily recognisable. When our forefathers became Dissenters they consigned their successors to a competitive situation. Our motives for evangelism are higher than the desire to increase the membership, but the fact that we keep a weekly league table of baptisms indicates the importance that we place on making recruits for the churches as well as converts for the kingdom. We construe "blessing" largely in terms of attendances and statistics (a dangerous exercise in view of the increase of the sects) and thus foster the competitive spirit that finds little support in the New Testament we so ardently defend.

I have known instances of Baptist ministers making plans to leave their church, when they knew that another highly gifted minister was coming to the same town. We all know how easily some of our people seek to transfer their affections to another local church when the sweet smell of success reaches their nostrils. When these pressures come upon us, the danger is that we lose faith in the core values of our calling, and move toward the latest methods advocated by some whose success we admire and whose churches we envy. Most certainly we would be wise to look, listen and learn, but it is tantalisingly attractive to take what looks like the short cut to success. This may involve continuing to preach, pray care and believe, whilst secretly relying on the introduction and application of techniques to produce the goods. Some of my recent reading has been in the field of Public Administration and has involved comparisons of the British and American systems. There are striking similarities between secular management techniques emanating from big business, and what is being offered to churches and Christian leaders in a suitably religious garb. I have an uneasy feeling that the principles advocated would produce the same results wherever they were applied and whatever the organization. If this is true, where does it leave us in terms of faith, prayer, belief in the power of the gospel and indeed of any religious idea of dependence?

It has been urged that we should seek out and embrace any method whereby the work of the Kingdom can be forwarded, but is this so? Surely not! Only those methods (and we all use them) consonant with the life and

example of Jesus Christ. We may be urged to accept truth from any quarter and use it for the sake of the gospel, but again, any truths? The test is surely that applied to Jesus during the temptations, namely, to act independently of the Father. We must not be led down the road of social engineering or the manipulation of persons however justified it seems to be as the latest revealed wisdom.

I am trying to argue for a resolute refusal on the part of ministers, to use questionable methods in order to cope with the competitive pressures of today. We must not try to invert Matthew 6 and verse 33, and do all these things in order that the kingdom of heaven might be added unto us. I do appreciate the deep desire of sisters and brethren in the ministry to see their service confirmed by God, but we all need to recognise that we are part of a society that has become more ruthlessly competitive, and that the general political and economic theories holding the field at present encourage us to move in this direction.

C.S. Lewis makes a helpful point here about the nature of rewards. Devotees of CSL will forgive me for not remembering the source. He points out that some rewards are natural and some artificial. The gambler's reward, for example, is artificial. To receive a huge amount of money as a result of making a small wager is to receive a contrived windfall and not a natural reward. On the other hand, the appropriate outcome of courtship is marriage. The relationship between the two is an honourable one. Bearing in mind the present societal pressures we ought not to let the world squeeze us into its own mould. It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation, and our methods ought to bear the imprint of that self-denying, disciplined dependence upon the Father supremely seen in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

I can well imagine senior and retired ministers in any discussion about parsonical pressures wondering what all the fuss is about. In many ways Baptist ministers serving at present have never had it so good. Stipends and expenses are more realistic. In-service training and sabbaticals were unknown to our predecessors. There are better arrangements for housing brethren and sisters after their retirement. The problems they faced were of a different order, but they too will recognise that pressure and stress attend the ministry in every generation. Within the context of these demands I have been privileged to serve my fellow Baptist ministers and hope to continue to do so in a different capacity. I honour them for their works sake and hope that we all may be able to say with the apostle Paul:-

“Therefore, having received this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart .... but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God”.

In the long run that is the best way of coping with the competition and responding to the pressures.

**Bill Hancock**



# WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION

York House 409 Barking Road,  
Plaistow. E13 8AL

Patron: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

Dear Fellow Ministers

“I suppose it’s a matter of balance”, as the Minister reflected as he toppled into the Baptistry.

I have recently been reading John White’s book “The Golden Cow”. This is a biblical and often very uncomfortable examination of the tendency towards materialism in the Church of Christ. In the light of the recent experience of the Mission, I “sat up and took notice” when he was dealing with the way in which the buildings owned by the Church can sometimes all but dominate its life. Think back over the last few Deacons and Church Meetings, and see how much time was devoted to the “fabric” and how much to the proclamation of the gospel! Of course buildings are important, and can be used to the glory of God. Sometimes, however, it seems that the tail is wagging the dog. It’s all a matter of balance, I suppose.

Over recent months, we at the Mission have spent a tremendous amount of time dealing with the registration of Greenwoods, our country centre, under the Residential Homes Act 1984. Whilst we are totally in agreement with any effort to raise standards in residential care, we have had to deal with bureaucratic demands which have seriously threatened the survival of the work at Greenwoods. At the time of writing (early September), we are not yet quite out of the wood. Your prayers would be appreciated.

The Mission has been blessed with first class premises in which to do its work. We have a real responsibility to maintain them and to use them for the glory of God. Please pray, as we are praying, though, that we may never lose sight of our true calling, namely to work together with God for the healing and blessing of every one of His children. Pray that we at the Mission may be enabled, by the grace of God, to “keep our balance”.

May the Lord bless you in your service for Him throughout the coming busy months.

Yours sincerely,  
**Trevor W. Davis,**  
Superintendent Minister.

# Christology And Religious Pluralism — Clearing The Site

“Any fool can see that Christianity is the best!” Thus pronounced the educated headmaster, public school and Cambridge, of the Grammar School I once attended. It was his answer to the problematical issue that has dogged me ever since. At the time, in the mid fifties and to a fundamentalistic youth, I was grateful for his dictum; it served to confirm and reinforce my own naive confessionism. Now, not only does it lodge in my mind but it sticks in my throat. It seems to symbolise that confusion of religious conviction and cultural prejudice that was one legacy of his generation to mine. Not that I blame him especially; he only transmitted what he also received. But he transmitted it crudely, proudly, with neither discernment nor compassion.

Ever since that time, like an underground railway that surfaces intermittently, the issue of christian attitude and responsibility toward other faiths and belief-systems has persistently and recurrently disturbed me. It is not a theme I have chosen so much as one I have become incapable of ignoring. Perhaps it is partly philosophical: the problem of the one and the many; partly social: the fearful alternatives of community or chaos; but chiefly it is theological: the issue — as it is frequently put — of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. Not that I have lived or ministered in notably religiously plural areas. But our situation is always broader than our parish — and my concern springs from the belief that we can no longer do Christian theology in ignorance or avoidance of the fact of non-Christian religious communities and truth-claims. New knowledge always brings new theological responsibilities.

My concern in this article is a limited one: to argue the toss — in anticipation of theological engagement with interpreters of other faiths (doctrinal discussion, shared worship, social action) — for the need to subject our attitudes to Christology to radical theological and cultural scrutiny. I am encouraged by the way in which this vital process has been begun and, I hope, sensitive to those whose reaction to it is one of fear or suspicion. But I am also anxious about those, perhaps with vested interests in “safe” positions, who seem to want to turn the clock back or call the whole thing off — as if we could! Perhaps what I am writing may serve to reassure the timid and perhaps give pause to those who are in danger of wrongly identifying the immutable with the variable, reality with verbal testimony to it, or by whatever other means misrepresenting the Christological action of our unique and universal God

## **Baptist awareness of other religions**

In the past, and I generalise, this awareness seems to have been largely a product of missionary report-back from experience in other lands. It has been most prominently interpreted, moreover, by that particular Evangelical missionary theology which, notwithstanding (and indeed, informing)

medical, educational and agricultural concerns, sees the primary missionary goal as the conversion of individuals to faith in Jesus Christ as the universal and sole basis of salvation. It was precisely this, as I recall from my own "Baptist" childhood, that constituted both the urgency of the missionary task and the cutting edge of the missionary message. It took many years before I had the spiritual security and the theological will to query and test it. But why query it at all? Has it not motivated (and does it not still motivate) the compassionate personal sacrifice of many young people who answer "the call" and does it not sustain them for long years of service in hard and sometimes dangerous places? Why should Baptist attitudes to other faiths today need to be overhauled or reconceived? Let me suggest three inter-related reasons.

1. All theology, it seems to me, emerges from a particular experience, culture and history and is unavoidably and necessarily shaped by them. It is therefore always relative (related) both to personal circumstances and cultural vision of its architects as well as to that which, beyond or beneath experience and culture, it bears reflective witness. If it is true, therefore, (and to the extent that it is true) that Baptist attitudes to non-Christian religions have been strongly conditioned by a particular set of historical and theological circumstances prevalent in British Nonconformity at the turn and early part of the nineteenth century, can we transmit these "conditioners" in our own day without at least accepting their relative character and examining their validity? While it would be grossly overstated, and indeed blatantly inaccurate, to contend that this missionary movement **in toto** represented an ideological validation of British subjugationist expansionism, we can, perhaps, see now that testimony to Jesus Christ, both in missionary life-style and presentation of message, was seasoned with the nuances of Western cultural self-assurance. This is now widely recognised, of course, as having been ultimately prejudicial to the missionary task and instrumental, for better or worse, in the reactive upsurge of nationalism and "native" religious self-consciousness. But if missionary understandings then were so imbued by what we now see as dubious or even objectionable cultural assumptions, can we still approve the theology that was at least shaped by them (and perhaps more determinatively than we would be happy to admit? What have we learned over the past two hundred years?)

2. Today, the religions can no longer be addressed from a distant, confident, purportedly Christian and monolithic Western culture. We are becoming aware, rather, on home ground and within a very different, fragmented, secularised and perhaps ethically-discredited culture, of large numbers of adherents of other faiths setting up their communities and confidently proclaiming their own gospels. As we reflect upon their presence and our Christian missionary mandate — our communicational imperative — is it adequate to attempt a quick cosmetic job on cultural innuendo? The challenge, surely, goes far more deeply than this. Are we not required, rather, to re-think the very grounds upon which, and the meaning of the terms within which, we are making our own proclamation of Jesus as the Christ? Have we the right or the means to assess the truth-claims of

other religions unless we have the courage and the criteria to test the truth-claims of our own? My own feeling is that real progress toward a Christian theology of other religions will be made only by those who are both willing and able to subject their own theological and cultural traditions to radical criticism. And this is a difficult and dangerous business.

3. It seems clear to me that for Baptists as, indeed, for most Christians, the principle difficulty for openness to other religions is our understanding of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. Thus, on the one hand, how can we legitimately combat our own deeply ingrained fear of disloyalty to Jesus that consideration of "alternative" truth-claims may evoke (as David Tracy says, "haunting (our) dreams like a guilty romance")? On the other hand, of course, **not** to admit the possibility of at least inceptive salvation "apart from" Christ (i.e. theologically B.C.) leaves us with a theodicy problem of unbearable proportions: what sort of a God is he who reveals himself christologically as one who loves and suffers for all humankind with special concern for the humanly poor, rejected and marginalised but who "at the end of the day" limits salvation opportunity to the privileged few who have and have had access to the Christian proclamation of the Gospel? I'm not surprised that an Indian theologian, O.V. Jathanna (**The Decisiveness of the Christ-Event**, 1981), should have suggested a Christian doctrine of re-incarnation to cope with the problem!

The nerve of the issue, it seems to me, is that in much of our theology we assume that Christ is the constitutor of salvation: a tacit Christo-centrism. While there is no space here to examine the intricate and complex Biblical and doctrinal considerations involved in this question (see, for example, D.G.A. Calvert, **From Christ to God**, 1983), a new openness to the God-centred and future-oriented character of Jesus' Kingdom-salvation proclamation can, I think, redeem our perspectives. Because, as I read it, the New Testament — in line with the Old — always proclaims God as the constitutor of salvation and Jesus as the Christ of God, i.e. the eschatologically normative mediator. Such a "special" and "finely-tuned" relationship can easily be obscured or distorted by an unbiblical trinitarianism (rather than a biblical one) or the misconceived loyalty of a Jesus cult. Nor is it that Christ saves "objectively" (Barth?) or "anonymously" (Rahner) those who cannot respond to the Gospel; rather, it is only through Christ that we can know that God saves, the basis, content and aim of salvation being declared by Christological enactment, wherever and whenever men and women respond to his manifold disclosures. Saving faith, therefore, must be a universal possibility.

Allowing, therefore, for a christological characterisation of God and the penultimate and thus provisional character of our response to him, we must avoid formulating our claims for Jesus in inappropriately Christo-centric terms. Jesus' apparent reluctance to make claims for himself provides an important and salutary corrective for his disciples at this point.

The intending missionary, moreover, relieved of the impossible and unbiblical burden of believing that grace cannot operate unto salvation in non-christian society and religion can now be free to proclaim Christ as the one through whom God is seeking to fulfil all provisional responses to him.

It is Christianity's particular vocation, as Moltmann has said, to prepare the messianic age among the nations, directing the religions towards the coming Kingdom (**The church in the Power of the Spirit**, 1977, pp. 150-163)

### **The Importance of Method**

Both Alan Race (**Christians and Religious Pluralism**, 1983) and Paul Knitter (**No Other Name?** 1985) have identified, analysed and interpreted the spectrum of christologically determined or validated attitudes which recent and contemporary Christians have adopted towards adherents of other faiths — under Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist groupings. Themselves Pluralists, they have noted and approve a trend from ecclesiocentrism to christocentrism and now to theocentrism. But the question emerges: Does a Biblical theocentrism such as I commended above, require a Pluralist stance and a Non-Normative Christology? I do not think so.

To the Exclusivist, of course, non-Christian truth claims are disqualified since the only permissible basis for theological truth is the self-revelation of God in Christ. To the Inclusivist, non-Christian truth-claims are true to the extent that they manifest, albeit unknowingly, the insights and values of Christian faith. Whereas the former relies on a total discontinuity between nature and grace, the latter allows for a “natural” knowledge of God which grace, through revelation, confirms, clarifies and directs. Both “test” non-Christian religious claims on criteria limited to Christianity and their judgements would be rejected, **ipso facto**, by any except Christians. The Pluralist, alternatively, refuses to make judgements about or between truth-claims on the grounds that since God has revealed himself diversely and universally, all traditions have equal access to truth and it would thus be presumptuous and indeed pointless to do so. Thus, on the one hand, Christ is seen as both the truth and the criterion of truth; on the other, God is the truth and Christ one criterion among others. As I see them, each of these approaches leads to an impasse: either truth-claims can be assessed only by Christians or all assessment of truth-claims outside one's own religion is inadmissible.

Let me suggest a further alternative which I will call the Normative. It is logically distinct from the other three, affirming a christologically characterised theocentrism which allows both for the provisional soteriological activity of God world-wide and history-long and for its eschatological completion by Christ. Normativism, therefore, while not retracting or suspending its truth-claim for Christ's uniqueness and universality (as Pluralists do), denies that the **content** of truth (for Christians, God's self-revelation in Christ) and the criteria of truth (the means by which that content is approved) can be identical (as Exclusivists infer).

Normativists, on the other hand, approve a method, both delicate and demanding, by which judgements can be made about and even between religious claims. This involves the scientific analysis of particular theological and religious phenomena by the use of universal, public criteria — rational, moral, pragmatic — by which access to meaningfulness, validity and truth may be gained. Such a discipline, compatible with procedures

already well established in Catholic "fundamental theology", commends itself for multi-faith theological use since it is not entrenched in unassailable dogmatic, philosophical or confessional bunkers nor does it require the suspension of, but rather the examination of, universal claims. It is appropriate, moreover, by truth-seekers of all faiths and none and although it has its own commitments (to the complementarity of reason and "revelation", to the "secularising values" of open enquiry and critical analysis, to theological language as "re-presentative" of universal possibility) it does not "tip the scales" in favour of any one truth system. In fact, it probably owes more to Athens than to Jerusalem! Broad illustration of such a method may be found in Cantwell Smith's "corporate critical self-consciousness" (**Towards a World Theology**, 1983, pp. 56-80) or, better, in Hugo Meynell's "comprehensive critical viewpoint" ("Towards a New Dialectic of Religions", **Religious Studies** 18, 1982, pp. 417-431)

I would not overestimate the appeal of such a method, however, in view of what seem to me to be the preponderantly Exclusivist or Inclusive stances of the religions. But they are beginning, slowly and painfully, to subject their own traditions to that critical sifting which, as Hans Kung suggests, may need to await the further freedoms and enlightenments of secularisation for real progress to be made (**On being a Christian**, 1974, pp. 104-116)

### **The Question of Loyalty**

If loyalty, in theology, must ultimately be to that authentic (and authenticable) action of God to which it reflective witness, then the question of loyalty is rivetted to the identification and scale of the divine action. It is this, in turn, which determines the resources of past and present as sources for theology: primitive testimony, cumulative tradition, historical experience; contemporary testimony, current world-view, shared human experience. But who can identify the action of God for us?

Clearly there is need here for some hermeneutical key and theology bids us select a Christological one. but which one? Do we select according to preference? George Rupp has shown how what he calls Nominalist, Realist, Transactional and Processive world-views have functioned in differing combinations during the history of Western Christology to produce a broad selection of Christological types — each shaped by the cultural vision and experiential limitations of the theologian or authorising church (**Christologies and Cultures**, 1974), Jean Milet, similarly, has observed from the standpoint of social psychology how Christology has followed what we might call "patrist" and "matrist" social interests and oscillated between theocentrism and christocentrism accordingly (**God or Christ?** 1981). Indeed, it is because of the ever-present danger of Christology falling victim to psychological or cultural projection that, however problematic, we need some way of discriminating between reductionist distortions and illuminating applications — and for that I return to fundamental theology and to that positive historical evaluation of Jesus' ministry that has recently emerged from the scientific study of the New Testament (see W. Pannenberg, **Jesus — God and Man**, 1964, pp. 21-37).

It is because of this vital accountability of Christology to originating revelation that legitimately new, creative and disturbing aspects of the

Gospel can be discovered as new situations evoke new insights. Initially, of course, moving out of its Jewish nursery, it was Greek categories through which the Church came to reinterpret its message and define its orthodoxy — validated as “God’s covenant with the Greeks”. Now if Greek intellectual resources could be harnessed for such a purpose, why not, as Langdon Gilkey has suggested, “a covenant with modernity” — hardly more pagan than the Hellenists (**Message and Existence**, 1980, p. 62). And if God is truly the Father of all mankind who never leaves himself without witness, then other covenants become possible too — with Marxism, Buddhism, Islam. This in no way **reduces** the *skandalon* of the Gospel either; in fact, recognising the universal action of God, the Gospel is sharpened — or at least our understandings of it — as we examine our “Western” formulations (in all their Latin captivity) in the light of other traditions. In this way “the religions” can themselves become a liberating resource for theology. The problem of loyalty, therefore, in our religiously plural society distils itself into loyalty to the depth, breadth, height and length of the action of our Christologically revealed God.

### **Clearing the Site**

“Any fool can see that Christianity is the best!” I began by utterly rejecting the spirit and intention of my old headmaster’s words. and yet ... **If** assessment of religious claims is possible on universal criteria, and **if** in part or degree Christianity is faithfully heralding Jesus as the Christ of God, then in one sense, far, **far** removed from his intentions, there may yet be truth in what he said: truth which the “wise” may be unwilling to concede but which the fools of all faiths or none may be able to recognise. That anyone open to the folly of God’s wisdom may experience Jesus as “Man of Universal Destiny”, offering the most comprehensive access to Ultimate Reality, the deepest fulfilment of what it means to be truly human, and the decisive disclosure of the cosmic, and therefore unique, divine purpose (Eph 1.9-11).

Reaction against this purpose, alas, will be vehement and vicious — as Jesus well knew — coming most brutally from the religious hierarchy itself and from that “theology” which seeks to protect differentials and buttress its power with claims to divine right. Anyone who spends his life bursting bubbles of racial and religious illusion is in for a tough time. But this is the style of the Master and the cost of discipleship; the intellectual struggle is part of it. To quote an editorial on Paul Tillich (ET 64, p. 322):

There is no such thing as a “safe” theology.  
all theology which is earnest is also dangerous  
It is an act of adoration fraught with the  
risk of blasphemy.

### **John F. Bayes**

Have you heard of the JOPPA GROUP — a Baptist Group for Christian Witness in a Multi-Faith Society? If not, or you would like information, your contact person is:—

Rev. Graham Routley, 187 Yorkshire Street, Rochdale, Lancs OL12 0DS.

# The House Church in Britain ... a cursory glance

*(Caveat: This article does not pretend to be definitive in any way. The writer seeks the mind of God in the furthering of Christ's Church. What follows is merely an attempt to open up a subject upon which feelings run high within our denomination at present)*

I asked a colleague recently how things were going in his fellowship. He gave me the side-of-mouth reply, "Oh fine thanks, we carry on feeding the house churches!"

The Revd Rachel Poolman has written a paper this year for the B.U. dealing with "The pattern and nature of Baptist work with students" She comments:

"It is noticeable that whilst many students whose names are commended to our Baptist chaplains never darken the doors of a Baptist church after their first term, Methodist and Roman Catholic students are likely to be faithful members of their original denomination throughout their time away. Where are we going wrong? Why do Baptist young people seem to feel little or no denominational allegiance?"

It was whilst trying to find an answer to exactly that which first opened my eyes to the different kinds of Christian group at work in Liverpool. My work as a chaplain encouraged me to take a long, cool look at the movement we loosely term the 'House Churches'. I wanted to see what made some of them so terribly attractive to young people and why they seemed to represent every possible kind of Christian extremism. In fact, what I sought was a *real* picture of something which I, as a minister, didn't really understand. Yet I feared it.

Whenever we talk about 'House Churches' we use a broad generic term which includes any non-denominational, evangelical or neo-pentecostal group which might gather for worship in a suburban front room, hired church hall or even in a proper church building which has been bought up and renovated. To describe them with the simple term 'Charismatic' is, increasingly, to use the boo-terminology of the ill-informed or hostile outsider. I am in good company with recent writers on the subject if I simply refer to 'HCs' for the sake of this article but with the understanding that there are many different groupings or 'streams'. I have to say also that I do not write from a cynical angle. I have seen much that I admire as well as much that I deplore. I have found myself exploring a phenomenon within Christendom which is saying something salutary to the denominational churches and which, like Luther's influence in the 16th century or Wesley's in the 18th, cannot be ignored.

'The Times' (April 15 1985) carried an article by Dr Andrew Walker which began thus:

"For those who enjoy the sight of sociologists with egg on their faces, Britain's new Pentecostal movements should give them cause for hilarity: for while the conventional wisdom of social science has condemned Pentecostalism to the nether regions of the socially disinherited — white and black working class — charismatic activity has been alive and well for some twenty years in deepest middle-class England."

And there is no doubt that the suburban or 'middle class' HC groups are a social phenomenon well worth study. but they are not the whole story. We can safely say that the spectrum of HC activity is as broad as the church itself in the U.K. It might also be worth commenting that this is a peculiarly British movement. The only other country where there is anything broadly comparable is, so I understand, China.

I have recently left Liverpool, but it is there that I was in a position to observe the HCs. What follows is a fearfully general account of the major groups in evidence there — as far as can be determined.

.....

By the mid-sixties, what was generally known as 'The Charismatic movement' was making itself felt in the evangelical churches of Britain. The late fifties had seen the emergence of isolated neo-pentecostal trends or movements (such as 'The body life' in the Home counties). These had no organisational links apart from the 'Fountain Trust', an inter-denominational body led by established charismatic teachers committed, in the main, to the life of their main-line denominations (Michael Harper, for example, and Tom Smail). There can be no doubt that the existing Pentecostal movement was having an impact at the same time and it is true that today there is more than one HC stream having its roots in (particularly) the Elim church.

To continue on a general note it has been said that although these independent non-denominational groups were gaining ground in the 60s, the winding-up of the Fountain Trust gave an impetus to the formation of new HCs. The Trust had provided a charismatic 'boost' (as well as extra-curricular teaching on the Holy Spirit) while encouraging its associates in their involvement with the local church. When, in the late 70s, the Trust took what is generally thought to have been the brave step of winding up its operations, it did so because it believed that it no longer served a valid purpose. This was true, from the perspective of the bigger and established charismatic churches from which many of the leaders came (by dint of their own input, in most cases), but it left many individuals or small groups isolated within churches which 'held back'. Thus the ground was ripe for the formation of new HCs, solving the problem of spiritual frustration with one deft, often rather loveless, blow. It was at about this time that the 'Restoration' churches began to make an impact with the establishment of their regular summer 'Bible weeks'. But of them, more later.

In Liverpool we can say that the first of the modern HCs — as far as it is possible to plot — was formed in Devonshire Road, Toxteth, in the mid sixties by break-away groups from two existing churches: one a church in the B.U. and the other an independent Calvinistic Baptist fellowship. Other folk joined from Anglican churches in the city but the fellowship rapidly established its identity as an evangelistic agency within the inner city. This group became part of what is known variously as the 'Pastor North Group' or the 'New Covenant' group or the 'North Circuit' and was much influenced by Pastor G.W. North. Churches thus influenced have an identifiably 'Wesleyan' flavour. Pastor North himself was a minister, so I understand, within the Church of the Nazarene.

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**To the Readers of the Fraternal.**

Dear Friends,

**“W” is for Water**

I had no difficulty in selecting my alphabetical subject for this letter. The abnormally low temperatures in the early part of this year resulted in burst pipes, boilers, radiators, water tanks and the like throughout the country with resultant damage to ceilings, decorations and the fabric of buildings. We have been very busy dealing with claims and there are still a number outstanding where we are awaiting the accounts from the Churches and householders to enable us to settle.

Damage to the insured property caused by bursting and overflowing of water pipes etc is a standard extension we offer to the Fire Policy covering church property. Unlike a few insurers who take a restricted view, we regard the pipes, boilers, etc as being part of the building damaged by the bursting and pay for their replacement or repair in addition to the other damage caused by the escape of water. Of course if a water tank or boiler fails because it has corroded or worn out through old age, this is a maintenance matter and we cannot meet the cost of replacement.

Many Churches and householders have been glad they insured against burst pipes, but insurance cannot make up for the discomfort and inconvenience caused. Pipes and tanks should be well lagged and minimum heating provided whenever there is a risk of freezing conditions.

Yours sincerely,

**M.E. PURVER  
General Manager**

Worship at Devonshire Road is much affected by 'Holiness' or 'Christian Perfection' teaching and there is a curious sense of the 18th century evangelical revival. The colleague who gave me this information tells me cheerfully that he once sang, with a Pastor North Fellowship, all 28 verses of 'O come thou traveller unknown' at one sitting.

Hot on the heels of Devonshire Road came two other major HCs, both representative of the major U.K. streams. The 'Harvestime' Group at Anfield. This is a member of the 'Restoration' group based on Church House, Bradford. Churches in this stream are often called 'Community churches' and they may often be named simply 'Christian Fellowship'. Ours in Liverpool humbly adopted the title "Merseyside Christian Fellowship" leaving all the rest of us rather out in the cold.

'Harvestime' teaching has a strong emphasis on authority and submission. But that is not the total picture. The Harvestime movement began with a doctrinal basis identical to that of the original (1924) I.V.F. constitution. The modern U.C.C.F., however, discussing with leaders such as Bryn Jones and Ron Tempest has been confirmed in its belief that the Harvestime position demands, in fact, the necessity of accepting a 'package' which consists of the following: The foundational elements of a full Biblical Gospel; repentance and faith; baptism — in water and in the Holy Spirit; the Lordship of Christ and entry into the church.

The Harvestime churches are 'believers' churches in true Anabaptist style and each local community is led by those whose calling and gifts as leaders have become evident. They lead 'in relationship' with their members and fellow leaders. The early Baptist picture is further paralleled by the fact that each local church is linked with others through spiritual leaders in relationship and mutual submission.

On paper there appears to be little to find threatening in the Harvestime movement apart from the clear implication of a fairly unbending biblicism. It has been said, however, that problems have arisen in these fellowships where the emerging generation of leaders and elders has become 'more Bradford than Bradford'.

To return to Liverpool: the 'Harvestime' or 'Restoration' church has grown up parallel to a fellowship planted under the auspices of the "South Chard Group" (personalities in this group including Sid Purse, Ian Andrews and Vic Dunning). The Kingsway Fellowship in Liverpool. This group is also known as the 'Full Gospel Fellowship' and its roots extend back to 1956. There are emphases on 'Body ministry', healing, deliverance and rebaptism 'in the name of Jesus only'. This group is the sponsor of a travel business: 'Fellowship Tours'.

Thus Liverpool has representative groups from three of the four main 'streams'. The fourth does not appear to have a particular fellowship focus in the city although its influence is important in other smaller HCs. This is the style of HC centred on the ministry of Gerald Coates (Cobham Fellowship). Gerald Coates has a much less exclusive ministry than the leaders named above or, say, some of the personalities of the Restoration (Harvestime) groups: Dave Matthew, Peter Parris or Keri Jones.

But having said this, Liverpool exhibits other HC trends which are well worth examination, for parallel to what might be considered the 'planting' of particular neo-pentecostal HCs runs, for example, the story of Wavertree Christian Fellowship. This was an offshoot of the Liverpool City Mission in 1972, following the dynamic ministry of Alec Buchanan. He was, and still is, a notable prophet to charismatic congregations. Wavertree Fellowship developed on its own with its own group of elders who are now under the pastoral oversight of Peter Fenwick who has what is usually considered to be an 'Apostolic' ministry to a very large 'HC' group in Sheffield. The Wavertree Fellowship is now in two carefully-placed sections with two sets of elders and it is a growing church. It has a straightforward U.C.C.F. doctrinal basis but with the addition of teaching on the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. It thus has much in common with mainline Pentecostalism and it enjoys very happy relationships with neighbouring Baptist Churches as well as the other HCs in the city with whom it makes every effort to share its vision.

Making a noise, also, on Merseyside, from the late 70s was a true HC teaching neo-pentecostalism in its rawest form (the presence of the Holy Spirit in a believer is only attested by the gift of tongues) but linked with something that looks very much akin to North American 'faith and prosperity' teaching as propagated by men like Morris Cerullo or Kenneth Hagin. Indeed, the leadership have strong American (Rhema Bible School) influence and this has proved very attractive to some young people in Liverpool's somewhat desolate social environment. It is a message having punch and directness, appearing to offer simple answers to life, the universe and everything, at least, as long as its converts are fit and healthy ....

Within the U.R.C. there has been a move to create a H.C. atmosphere at the instigation of Revd David Cave of Anfield. He is not a man in the usual cast of his denomination (if there is one!) and he has recently published a paperback about inner city ministry entitled "Jesus is my best mate". The work he has pioneered in Anfield, Liverpool, is based in a large Victorian house near to the football ground in what is a desolate working-class area of high unemployment. This is a work amongst really needy people and it deserves greater attention as it sets out to preach the Gospel in a non-threatening (ie: very informal) environment.

This particular group, of course, highlights the importance of particular personalities in the emergence of HCs. Often used as a point of criticism, those of us in the denominational scene need to remember from whence we came. There were dominant personalities in Baptist History as well as in the histories of all other mainline denominations. Names like Thomas Helwys and John Wesley would have been cited in articles like this written during the 17th or 18th centuries, respectively!

To draw my short review of Liverpool's HCs to a close I have to add that there are many other small groups in operation all over the city. They are not all linked but they do occasionally join together for leaders' gatherings. One of Liverpool's colourful Victorian characters was the Baptist minister, Hugh Stowell Brown, who, in a personal jotting (made probably a long time before he became president of the B.U.!) said the following, worth quoting almost in full: (ca. 1880)

*"what I should like to do best would be this: – to hire a hall by the year, for Sundays, and such other times as might be agreed upon. Then there would be no bother about building, trust deed, trustees, building committees &c. And this would also be apostolical. The primitive Christians met in such places and had no buildings of their own. Then I would ask some seven men of honest report to join me and act as a committee, and the only committee, as in the Acts of the Apostles I find only one committee, consisting of seven, commonly called deacons; and I have no objection to calling my seven by this name. I would have no Church. I would simply have a congregation (an Ecclesia) consisting of all who chose to come and join in worship. I would celebrate the supper of our Lord every Lord's day, morning and evening, alternately inviting all Christian friends to join, leaving it to themselves, to their own consciences, to determine their fitness, and so avoiding the arrogance and presumption and inquisitorial curiosity of a Church in regard to admissions. I would baptize in the profession of their faith all who wished to be baptized, and who satisfied me and my seven men as to character; and when baptized, they should be just as they were, members of the congregation I would have a meeting of the congregation once a year to give an account of moneys &c.*

*I would leave it to each member of the congregation to decide what sum he would contribute, and would supply him with accommodation as far as possible ... I should feel much more free to speak the Word of God without fear, and could be far more honest than those cramping churches allow a man to be ... I think that in as large a place as Liverpool there is scope for a free and liberal institution of this kind. There are believers, as well as unbelievers, who are heartily sick of denominationalism and church and chapel tyranny."*

Brown's thoughts always leave me wondering whether or not he was a man of prophetic vision or simply frustrated. Certainly his aspirations amount to something very close indeed to a modern H.C.

.....

### **General Appraisal of The House Church Movement**

I began these jottings with a comment about denominational identity and loyalty. There can be no doubt that the denomination *is* losing particularly its younger folk to HCs. This is partly because of a failure of Baptist Churches to be distinctive in their teaching and more accepting of that which is good in today's folk culture.

Alan Munden, writing in the Anglican publication 'Anvil' gives some statistics which give what I suspect is a reasonably accurate picture of the HCs in Britain:

*" ... it is impossible to give precise membership figures – but a reasonable estimate is between 60,000 in 2000 communities. This means that in relative numerical strength it has about the same membership as the Christian Brethren; it is considerably larger than the episcopal church in Scotland, and is about the same strength as the Baptists in Wales."*

He also provides perspective with the following:

*"Outside the main network of travelling apostles, and the 'covering' of one house church by another, are numerous independent fellowships, which are, in all but name, 'Charismatic Exclusive Brethren'. In addition there are a*

*number of denominational churches which have adopted H.C. teaching which stress 'restoration' principles, 'kingdom' teaching and authoritarian leadership."*

We do not have to spend too long looking for examples of this kind of thing and, sadly, where these emphases have emerged within the teaching of a Baptist Church we tend to find an inevitable friction between that community of Christians and the B.U. **status quo**.

To consider the HCs in however shallow a manner means to raise certain questions to do with *Separation, Ecclesiology and Authority*.

Harvestime's Bryn Jones, in an interview published in 'Word to the World' has said the following, pertinent to the theme of *Separation*:

*"I think constant effort to build bridges and dispel misunderstanding results only in continued frustration. Tony Ling best summed it when he said 'You don't build bridges in a direction you yourself are not travelling in, because those are diversions. You build bridges in the direction you are going, because that is progress'".*

Because of the Believers' Church understanding of the body of Christ there will always be a fundamental separation between Harvestime HCs and B.U. churches who keep 'Open Table'. This need not necessarily be the case, however, for other groups. London's noteworthy 'Icthus' fellowship, for example, sitting as it does on the fringes of both denominationalism and the HCM has no such separatist ethos.

Harvestime's 'packaged' Gospel with its obligatory neo-pentecostalism is so much of a unity that mainline evangelicalism can only sound watery to those who have been influenced by it.

Harvestime is further separated from the mainline churches by its use of Scripture: (hear Alan Munden again)

*"The Bible is the blueprint for practice and doctrine in the church, not history or tradition. It is surely arrogant to claim that we can learn nothing from the past, and from only a particular interpretation of Scripture. the new Testament Church was a diverse body. Tradition is valuable, not being equal to Scripture, but to illuminate the interpretation of Scripture."*

This comment was made concerning the Harvestime groups: it is, however, applicable to most of the other streams of H.C. Theological discourse with such groups is doomed to being a non-starter because, quite simply, there can be no argument with Scripture.

*Ecclesiology*: There has long been a tendency within evangelicalism to simplify Church history to the point of re-writing it. It seems that the most usual historical conception of the Church consists of a picture of Decline, since Pentecost, until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. From that point onwards came "development and fulness". Alan Munden ....

*"The development of the HC movement is away from the denominational 'professing' church. 'Restoration speaks of recovery' and with a particular focus on Acts 3.21 'He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets'."*

The desire to return to the 'purity' of the early Church is dominant in the minds of those who have reached out to the HCs. but their vision, unsullied by serious reading and study is doomed, I fear, to being a mere idyll. We have to say, though, that the idealised picture of the Reformation is shared by many outside the H.C. movement.

The strong “believers’ Church” concept makes the Harvestime or Restoration groups attractive to Baptists because what they hold and actually practice is not often seen amongst those of us whose tradition is based on such doctrines. We forsake this concept, or sit light to it, at our peril.

Much else could be said about Ecclesiology, but perhaps many of our fears on this score can be subsumed under the heading *Authority*.

Restorationism is essentially an ‘end time’ movement. These are the last days and God’s Church must be ordered if it is to be brought to its predestined glory when Christ can return. Hence Harvestime’s structures of authority which those outside would see much more in terms of *authoritarianism*.

Rosemary Hartill presented a programme on Radio 4 in March 1985 in which she comments:

*“Clearly there are dangers within the H.C. movement. For a movement which talks so much about the importance of grace rather than law, nevertheless legalistic attitudes seem to flourish in places. Clear authority, clear teaching and clear structures sometimes seem attractive irrespective of truth, and in insensitive hands the discipling system could make congregations more dependent on their leaders rather than more responsible as individual Christians. People are encouraged to hear God, but one former member of a fellowship told me he believed that certainly in the group he joined, the hearing was carefully controlled within a particular framework of assumptions”.*

That is true, of course, of much Christian experience, but becomes dangerous when those assumptions embrace a developed demonology as well as an essentially 20th century middle-class suburban ethic. Those assumptions become the lenses through which Scripture is (infallibly) interpreted ....

.....

## **To Conclude**

Whether we like it or not the H.C. movement is having a major impact on contemporary Church life. Its hymnody (a mixture of the uplifting and the facile — just like that of any other Christian movement) is now more or less generally adopted by the church at large. Many of the Charismatic behavioural conventions (such as “slaying in the Spirit”) are widely accepted by members of Baptist congregations and their ministers. Of the many thousands who attend the various ‘Bible Weeks’ held by Harvestime it is reckoned that at least a tenth of them will be folk from denominational churches.

In many cities, and Liverpool is one of them, it is true that the H.C.s are power-houses of evangelism although it is said that some of the groups mistake evangelism for *proselytism*. Since Anglicans I have met often say the same things about Baptists I wonder whether or not if we took greater care to communicate with groups to whom our members abscond we might find less mutual suspicion!

The H.C.s, interestingly, are not merely working for God’s Kingdom in our own land. Many have extensive missionary links, often sending abroad their own folk and supporting them fully from the tithed offerings of members.

Indeed, the finances of Harvestime and other groups are impressive, allowing for rapid expansion and much hi-tech organisation. It is true that much of the giving within our own denomination is casual, having no roots in the discipline and joy of the Lord.

For me, the H.C.s are salutary. They highlight those areas of identity and practice where Baptists are at their most weak. Yet, with our forebears and our Anabaptist links, that should not be the case. I don't particularly want to be a 'Radical Christian' in the Arthur Wallis mould, but I do want to be part of a denomination that has regained a sharp sense of its place within the Kingdom which has both come and is yet to come, enjoying both the delights of contemporary worship and that which is good from history. As my ministry goes on into the future I will continue to appreciate those many Godly folk whom I have already met within the H.Cs, but I will continue also, to appraise what I see and hear, through the eyes of Scripture and what has been learnt through the centuries.

**Mark Rudall**

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# YOUTH AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

At the BWA Festival of Education and Evangelism held in Los Angeles this summer I was asked to lead a workshop on 'Youth and Spiritual Growth'. Rather than present a lecture, I produced a draft statement for the participants to fill out and make relevant to their particular cultural situation. I now offer it to the readers of **The Fraternal** in the hope that they might be able to use it with their youth leaders and Sunday School workers, encouraging them in their turn to flesh it out as they apply it to their own situation.

In many ways adolescence is a modern "problem". Indeed, the very term "adolescence" was first used only in 1904. The reason for this is that in "primitive" societies there is a quick transition via "rites of passage" from childhood to adulthood. However, the more "advanced" society becomes, the longer the period of transition extends. Adolescence then becomes the bridge between childhood and adulthood. It is the time of change from dependent childhood to the finding of a unique personal identity which is acceptable to the peer group and to oneself. It is, as its very etymology suggests, the period of growing into full maturity ("Adolescence" comes from a latin verb, *adolescere*, to grow up). All this being so, it is not surprising that the Bible appears to have nothing to say about adolescence as such. "The Boy Jesus in the Temple", as the Good News Bible heads the passage in Luke 2.41-52, although only twelve years old, was already an adult in religious terms — for Jesus would have already become a "son-of-the-law" (a "bar-mitzwah"). Yet interestingly that very story may in fact contain God's blueprint for adolescence. Thus in Luke 2.52 we read: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man". Here surely we may see reference to perfectly co-ordinated growth in mind ("wisdom"), body ("stature"), spirit ("in favour with God"), and in relationships ("in favour with men"). Adolescence in Christian terms involves growth in all four areas.

## I THE NATURE OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence describes an ill-defined period of life which begins prior to the teenage years and extends into the late teens or early twenties. Infancy apart, it is the period of greatest growth and development in the life of an individual.

Adolescence is commonly divided into three stages.

(1) **Early adolescence.** This stage lasts for about three years, from the age of 11 or 12 to 14 or 15. It is the period of puberty, when sexually the girl or boy becomes a woman or a man. This stage is characterised by the awakening interest in sex and by an emotional withdrawal from parents.

(2) **Mid-adolescence.** This stage lasts for another three years, from the age of 14 or 15 to 17 or 18. It is the period of identification, when the teenager begins to discover his own unique identity. This stage is often characterised by

rebellion when authority figures and structures are questioned. In christian terms this questioning often leads to a full commitment to Christ, or alternatively to a rejection of Christ.

(3) **Late adolescence.** This stage lasts from the age of 17 or 18 to the early twenties. It is the period of coping, when the young person comes to terms with his new found responsibilities at work and maybe in marriage. Where, however, the young person goes on to further education, this period of adolescence can be extended.

## II THE NEEDS OF ADOLESCENCE

The teenage years can be the happiest years of one's life — but they can also be some of the most difficult years of one's life. For growth involves change and change can often provoke crisis. To help an adolescent pass through his teenage years with relative calm, the following needs must be met:—

(1) **Parents who understand.** In one sense all parents should be able to understand, since they too have been young. But the youth scene of today is not the youth scene of yesterday. There is a totally new youth culture. Parents need to be sensitive and aware of what is going on in their children. They must find the right balance between discipline and giving their child room to develop into an independent person.

(2) **Parent-substitutes to whom teenagers can turn.** Adolescents need to meet "significant adults" outside the home, however good that home may be. As part of the process of self-identity young people need to be able to air their doubts and share their feelings with adults who are not part of the family.

(3) **A supportive peer-group.** The peer-group plays a vital role in the development of adolescents. The peer-group enables them to build relationships with the opposite sex. It also offers a stabilising influence when everything else seems to be in turmoil. How important it is that the values such a group holds are healthy and wholesome!

(4) **A place to talk things through.** This need is closely linked with (2) and (3). Young people in this formative stage of intellectual and spiritual development need opportunities to talk through issues, both global and personal, and thus develop an understanding of identity, sexuality, and faith, to name but a few.

## III THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN MEETING THESE NEEDS

(1) **Parents.** The church has a duty to help parents cope with the growing pains of their children. There is much to be said for occasional parents evenings when the pastor and his youth leaders can talk about what is going on in the minds and lives of their young people. Books and films can help too in this process.

(2) **Parent-substitutes.** This surely is the role youth leaders can play. It means that youth leaders themselves should not be too young. Indeed, some of the best youth leaders are married couples who have themselves "survived" teenage children! Where the youth leader is young, then he (or she) must be

able to act as an elder brother (or sister), one who is able to identify, and yet not still in the mess him (her) self! Hopefully some, if not all, of the leaders will be able to operate an "open house", where young people feel free to drop in.

(3) **Peergroups.** The youth group clearly acts as a peer-group. In view of the three fairly distinct stages in adolescence, it is helpful to have different groups meeting the different needs of the three different stages. Such groups will want to offer not just fellowship on a spiritual level, but also friendship on a social level. The adolescent is more than a soul! Barbecues, long phone calls, coffee sessions will characterise their life together. Unfortunately, however, the youth group is not the only peer group to which a young person will belong. He will also belong to another peer group at school or at work, which may have anything but Christian values. It may well be that he belongs to even a third peer group (e.g. sports club). All this introduces tension. It may encourage the adolescent to adopt different roles at different times, roles which in fact may be mutually incompatible. In such situations the Christian youth leader will need to stress the Lordship of Christ over the world.

(4) **A place to talk.** In formal terms this will be offered by the various meetings of the youth group. Clearly the programme will need to be related to the needs and interests of the teenagers concerned. Along with Bible study and opportunities to talk through some of the basics of the Christian faith, time will have to be spent on answering such questions as "Where do I come from?", "Who am I?", "Where am I going?". Teaching will need to be given on lifestyle, ranging from sex to drug-abuse, from relationships at home to attitudes at school or at work. Openness, not repression, should characterize the atmosphere: questions, however radical, should be taken seriously, even if the very structure of the church seems threatened!

(5) **Participation in church life.** The worth of young people should be acknowledged by encouraging them to participate in the wider life of the church. They are not merely the church of tomorrow, they are part of today's church. Young people have a valuable contribution to make to the worship, life, and service of the local church. Participation therefore is vital, not just for them but for the church as a whole.

(6) **Prayer.** Last but not least, the church has a duty to pray for its young people. Youth leaders (better still: young people) need to bring the concerns of the youth group and of individual young people to the church's prayer-meeting, so that they and not just the sick are prayed for. As prayer played a vital role in the ministry of Jesus, so too must it in ours.

#### **IV ENCOURAGING THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF ADOLESCENTS**

Some of the young people in the youth group will come from christian homes. From an early age they will have known of God's love for them. The task of the youth leader here will be to continue the process of nurturing them in their faith, helping them to relate the Bible not just to their own circumstances but also to the more critical spirit around. He will seek to enable such young people to grow up into a real faith of their own, rather than to maintain a faith which is but a shadow of their parents.

Hopefully there will be other young people who will have come into the youth group from totally pagan backgrounds. The task of the youth leader here will be less a matter of nurturing an incipient faith as introducing them to some of the basics of the Gospel. (Once they are converted, the youth leader has another task: to encourage the enthusiasm, which first generation Christians often have, to rub off on to the young people from Christian homes!).

However, whatever the background, at some stage in their adolescent development young people need to be challenged with the claims of Jesus Christ. This will be true even of those who say that they already love the Lord Jesus. For although it is possible for a child to love the Lord Jesus as his saviour, it is questionable whether a child can truly accept him as his Lord. This latter stage involves a rejection of what in oneself is displeasing to God together with some kind of preparedness for what it will cost to serve Christ—a process of which a child is surely scarcely capable. This being so, we question the practice of pre-adolescent baptism: for baptism involves “repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord” (Acts 20.21).

At what stage should young people be directly challenged with the claims of Jesus? Surely mid-adolescence, the period when a young person is groping with questions of identity, is the ideal moment. It is only then that they can truly die to self and live for Christ. Conversions amongst those in early adolescence are, of course, possible, though should perhaps be regarded as more the exception rather than the norm, experienced by those from Christian homes rather than from a pagan background.

Baptism, of course, is not the end of the road, but rather simply the end of the beginning. the baptized need further nurture, as they establish their own personal spiritual discipline and seek to relate their faith to all the challenges of the world around them.

**Paul Beasley-Murray**

## **“BENEFITS”**

Members will now have received the autumn copy of the “Benefits” Home gift brochure. Please note that there is not an autumn copy of the Office and Business Brochure. The offers in the Spring Edition of this section will remain valid until next Spring.



**Baptist  
Housing  
Association LTD.**

### **Portslade, Sussex — “Lindfield”**

Lindfield is a most attractive cottage-style development erected on land previously owned by and immediately adjacent to the Portslade Baptist Church. It is situated with shops in the near vicinity of the site and with frequent bus services traversing the main road immediately in front of the church adjoining the flats.

This scheme comprises fourteen units in all, which consist of eleven flats for two persons and two flats for single persons, with the provision of a Warden's maisonette on two floors.

The Official Opening of this scheme is planned for the 14th of September, 1985 (at the time of going to print), it is hoped that this will be a truly joyous and happy occasion as are so many of the Association's Official dedication ceremonies, revealing the hand of the Lord upon the work in which the Baptist Housing Association have been engaged for nearly twenty years. The Reverend E. G. Rudman, who retired some years ago from a twenty-five year ministry of the Holland Road Baptist Church in Hove, will be formally dedicating the building on this day. Mr. Rudman was responsible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for the formation of the Sussex Missionary Week, which resulted in the training and valediction of the vast number of young candidates to the Mission Field. The Portslade Baptist Church is a growing community and the provision of these flats and the care of the occupants, will undoubtedly prove an extended area within its ministry.

**General Manager  
Baptist Housing Association Limited  
Baptist Church House  
4 Southampton row  
London WC1B 4AB**

#### **NOTE**

It is with much regret that we report the home-call of the Rev. E. G. Rudman just a few days prior to the Official Dedication ceremony. Mrs. Starling, the widow of the late Rev. Kearsley Starling, officiated in Mr. Rudman's place. Mr. Starling was largely instrumental in the acquisition of this site for the church manse and subsequently, these new flats.