

CAN OUR CHILDREN BE SAVED?

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time it was assumed that children couldn't have been luckier than to grow up in the blessed land of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Amongst others, Lesley Max has shattered the myth by exposing the reality of children's lives in our fair land¹. In a similar way it has been assumed that children in our (Protestant) churches couldn't be luckier than to be out of worship services and in a specially designed Sunday-school programme. There have always been some who have questioned this age-based segregation of the church family, the issue being whether this is really detrimental to the long-term spiritual health of children. Xanthe Bollen raised the issue again in an article in the *N.Z. Baptist* in November 1995. Outlined more fully in her probationary thesis, Bollen's concern is that segregating children from adults into Sunday School actually socialises them out of faith in the long term. "We bring children through our creches, our Sunday schools, our youth groups, but they never make the transition to our churches."²

Can the issue, though, be confined to that of the presence or absence of children from our 'adult' worship services? The debate in fact needs to be widened to address the issue of how children in our Baptist churches come to experience salvation.

This issue can be addressed via the question: **Can our children be saved?** It is stated in this ambiguous way because, in the Baptist view, it is not always clear whether children can be saved (ie

are they old enough to be recognised as sufficiently accountable and responsible to make the required 'decision' to be a follower of Jesus). The question also asks whether or not the structures we have in place to lead them to an appropriate place of decision are in fact adequate. To facilitate this exploration, perspectives on the salvation of children in Baptist thought will be examined. This will be followed by an examination of the relationship between salvation and Fowler's "stages of faith".³ In the light of these factors, the role of the children's Sunday school will be considered, before turning to the issue of children participating in 'adult' worship. A way forward will then be discussed.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE SALVATION OF CHILDREN IN BAPTIST THOUGHT

It would be untrue to say that Baptists have been unconcerned with the issue of the salvation of children, and yet that impression could easily be gained on reading Baptist histories. Apart from the involvement of certain Baptist notables in the establishment or promulgation of Sunday-schools, children are rarely mentioned

Theological works by Baptists are somewhat more forthcoming. Millard Erickson discusses the status of infants and children in relation to the human problem of original sin.⁴ He poses the question as to whether death and condemnation is the lot of the children who "die before making a conscious decision to receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness". Reflecting then on Matthew 18:3 and 19:14, he reasons that there is no condemnation until one reaches the age of responsibility. R.E.O. White, in a discussion entitled 'The Child and the Kingdom' states that while the child is definitely *within the love of Christ*, reception into the church and spiritual life is a more difficult matter.⁵ He concludes that "responsibility comes with rational and moral apprehension: until by its own attitude it shall place itself outside that sheltered sphere, *the*

child is safe within the love that saves".⁶ This leaves open the question, however, of how are we to determine the age of responsibility? Is it in fact possible to give a standard answer?

In Baptist circles this debate is usually carried on in relation to the issue of baptism. But as all books on Baptist thought and practice point out, "the distinctive feature about Baptists is their doctrine of the church,"⁷ this being the wider context in which the debate about baptism occurs. Crucial to the Baptist understanding of the church is that membership of the church is for the regenerate. Regeneration, the divine side of that change of heart which, viewed from the human side we call conversion,⁸ is demonstrated either through a verbal confession of faith, or believers' baptism functioning as a physically enacted confession of faith.⁹ Baptists do not insist on adulthood for baptism though, but that baptism is for 'believers only'.¹⁰ Thus, in relation to children, the issue becomes: when are children capable of grasping sufficient of the faith that they can demonstrate both that they have attained an awareness of responsibility, and are capable of responding to the call of Christ for a life of discipleship age are children able to make a meaningful confession of faith?

One suspects that culture influences the response given to this question. Wheeler Robinson recounts the moving story of the baptism of 12 year old Caleb Vernon, dying of TB in the mid 1600s.¹¹ His family was disposed not to baptise him on health grounds only. The boy, described as being able to read the Bible at four, apt in doctrine and practice at six, and at 10 adding Greek and Hebrew to his Latin,¹² was also clearly adept at fencing with Scripture. He was duly baptised, admitted to membership and thus considered to be a recipient of salvation. Wayne Clark recounts his conversion and baptism in the US at age twelve, and quotes for justification Dr George Truett (past president of the Baptist Alliance): "Most of the people who belong to the churches were converted when they were children just entering adolescence. At that time there is a turning to God which is as natural

as the opening of fresh, budding flowers to the morning sun.”¹³ Strong is somewhat more circumspect. He posits the age of minority as composed of three septennates: 1. From years 1 to 7, the age of complete irresponsibility, in which the child cannot commit a crime; 2. From 7 to 14, the age of partial responsibility, in which intelligent consciousness of the consequences of actions is not assumed to exist, but may be proved in individual instances; 3. From the 14th to 21st year, the age of discretion.¹⁴ But he advises the church not to be bound by these hard and fast rules. Even for those of tender age, he suggests the church admit them if it has evidence of conversion and Christian character. To Cook’s concern that such an admittance of children to membership and thus to communion is dangerous because of a probable lack of understanding,¹⁵ Clark suggests that we in fact understand some things better as children than we do as adults.¹⁶ These suggestions and examples notwithstanding, current New Zealand church practice appears to be rather more conservative, influenced by the large drop-out in late-teen years from the worshipping community of those baptised earlier in their teens, or by expressions from this same baptised group that they wish they had delayed baptism until they understood better what the act meant.¹⁷ The feeling seems to be that our society is so corrosive towards faith that a meaningful decision can only be made from late teenage years at the earliest. But in the meantime, many children have already been lost from the church scene after finishing Sunday-school. This is not, though, a recent problem for New Zealand Baptist churches. G.T. Beilby comments that this ‘leakage’ was already substantial in the 1920s.¹⁸

A further factor to consider is the role of the home environment. Robinson describes the normal convert as one who has grown up under the influence of the Christian home, the Sunday-school and the services of the church.¹⁹ This tends to confirm Brian Hill’s assertion that any educative efforts “which seek to foster

attitudes, beliefs and values appear to succeed only when they are broadly reflecting the home background and social class of the student, while attempts to change students' values in directions not endorsed by these influences generally seem to make little difference."²⁰ Further, Hill quotes studies that show that for adolescents, the relative influence of various influential environments can be given by an index of significance as: home = 100, peers = 75, school = 67, while church = 50.²¹

The above discussion suggests that Baptists have somehow been caught between a 'Damascus Road' conversion model and a faith-nurture model, with only some scholars and theologians attempting to grapple with the complexity of the issues. But these issues are thrown more clearly into relief when considered in the light of models of faith development.

SALVATION AND STAGES OF FAITH

Religious faith is not an object that a person either possesses or doesn't. As James Fowler notes in his important book 'Stages of Faith : The Psychology of Human Development and the Quiet for Meaning', faith is a universal human concern. As Wolfhart Pannenberg shows,²² this view has been in development from the start of the modern period, with Schleiermacher one of the main contributors. Seen from this perspective, conversion to the Christian faith is not the acquiring of a religious perspective where none was existent before; all are essentially 'religious' (including those scholars who, with their faith vested in the scientific method, assume their 'scientific' study of religion with its so-called detached objective stance places them outside of those defined as 'religious'). Rather, conversion is choosing to take salvation history as revealed in the Bible, and especially the Christ event, as that center of power and value which gives unity and meaning to life as opposed to (say) the Muslim or Buddhist or

secular-Humanist stories. Unavoidably, then, conversion must occur in the context of a sufficient knowledge of the Christian faith, with a life-style that eschews competing faith claims.

Against this backdrop of universal faith, Fowler attempts to present a model of faith development that he believes to be applicable to any belief system, drawing on Jean Piaget's theory of Cognitive development, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral stages, and the psycho-social developmental theory of Eric Erikson.

Fowler's six stage model (actually there are 7 stages, but the initial stage is not labelled as such) is as follows:²³

- Primal Faith. Age: 0 -4 years approximately. This is not so much a stage as a pre-stage which is not really open to empirical investigation. Faith begins with a disposition to trust through competent parenting.
- Stage 1. Intuitive-Projective Faith. Age: 3-4 à 7-8 years approximately. At this stage the child's relatively uncontrolled imagination yields a chaos of powerful images. Thinking is likely to be intuitive rather than reasoned, and faith is essentially what is picked up from parents. Thus dependable, structured parenting is essential, and faith nurture in the home environment crucial. Also important is that the child is stimulated by appropriate images derived from the Bible, hymns and songs, and ritualised elements of worship.
- Stage 2. Mythic-Literal Faith. Age: 6-7 à 11-12 years, and some adults. At this stage real thinking skills develop. Story telling is important in developing faith (although some are not yet capable of abstract reflection or assessment). Stories, but not the appended 'moral', go down well. Symbols and images (including that of God) are treated rather woodenly. Moral thinking is largely based on an ethic of reciprocal fairness and justice. Churches are often intensely successful with children of this age where success is measured by affiliative activity such as belonging to a club or Sunday school.

- Stage 3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Age: 11-12 à 17-18 years, and many adults. Here, interpersonal relationships dominate. An ability to think abstractly has developed. However, this is the great conforming period of life as far as self-image and faith is concerned. This peer-pressure means that it is a time of going with a particular faith-current or faith-crowd. Moral thinking is based on 'law and order' morality. People in this stage provide exciting opportunities for the Christian educator; theological debate is now possible. An awareness of self-identity is developing. In fact, Fowler states that this is what makes teenagers so open to conversion: "Much of the extensive literature about adolescent conversion can be illumined, I believe, by the recognition that the adolescent's religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts, and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith."²⁴

- Stage 4. Individuative - Reflective Faith. Age: From approx. 17-18 years onwards, or from the 30s or 40s onwards. At this stage, one must find one's own meaning and create one's own world. There is a more critical, reflective way of thinking, and a new skill of perspective taking. There can be a loss of faith in the face of intellectual challenge before a new way of faith can be entered. [NB. Stage 3 and 4 people do not tend to entertain the possibility of any position but their own as possessing validity.] Here one takes seriously the burden of responsibility for one's own commitments, life-style, beliefs and attitudes.²⁵

- Stage 5. Conjunctive Faith. Age: Rare before 30. At this stage, one's individuative-reflective faith is reworked. The viewpoints of others are respected. One becomes capable of keeping in tension the paradoxes and polarities of life and faith, of living with ambiguity. There is a new willingness to let symbol, myth and story speak to us again. Recognised is the task of integrating the conscious and unconscious. There is a 'second naivete' in which the conjunctive

faith experiences a post-critical desire to resubmit to the initiative of the symbolic.²⁶ Seemingly, only at this stage is there a real confidence in the reality mediated by one's tradition, thrown into relief by an openness to the truth claims of others.²⁷

- Stage 6. Universalising Faith. Age: Rare, but usually only in later life. At this stage, a faith is demonstrated which is characterised by a relinquishing of the self. Here one finds oneself by losing oneself. The circle of love for people at this stage has widened to include the whole human race.

Fowler's 7 stage model is by no means the only model of faith development. Gerard Hughes proposes three broad categories arrived at after considering human spirituality. These stages are infancy, adolescence and adulthood. In **infancy** (which includes our primary-school age children), Hughes suggests that our knowledge of God is developed through our senses. Art is important, as is church architecture and furnishings. Paramount is the story of the Christian family (including its history, moral and doctrinal teaching) which is passed on through the stories of the Bible and the saints.²⁸ The **adolescent** phase is characterised by a critical examination of the faith, in which there is a search for meaning and unity in experience.²⁹ Of real importance here is that the teaching of the church should not only exhibit an internal coherence, but also a coherence with life as we experience it. **Adulthood** is characterised by the discovery of the mystical side of the faith. M. Scott peck's four stages of faith parallel those of Fowler, but are claimed to have been developed from experience rather than what Peck rather dismissively calls 'book learning'.³⁰

According to Peck, the stages are as follows:

- Chaotic/Antisocial In this stage Peck groups all children up to the age of 5, but also around 20% of the general population. People who would fit in this category are described as

absent spiritually, because utterly unprincipled. "They have no mechanism that might govern them other than their own will."³¹

- Formal/Institutional In this stage people depend for their governance on an institution, which may be the church. God is envisaged as almost entirely an external being. While many adults inhabit this stage, entry is by 'conversion' at earliest between the ages of 5 and 12.

- Sceptic/Individual Those in this stage (including, according to Peck, many adolescents) are supposedly not religious in the ordinary sense of the word. They are truth seekers, motivated by internalised principles.

- Mystical/Communal Post-adolescents who speak in terms of unity, community and paradox. [Peck asserts that all great religions have the capacity to speak to people at both levels 2 and 4.]

Assessment of the various stage theories

Common to the different faith development models described is the idea of a process of maturation in belief structure with age. The models of Peck and Hughes are, for the purposes of this essay, probably too coarse to give clues as to how churches could orient their education function so as to facilitate 'conversion' within such a developmental framework. Further, one cannot help but be cynical about the critical inquiry of adolescent years proposed by Hughes and Peck. Can adolescents who, according to Fowler, are heavily conformist in their thinking, really examine their faith objectively? Recognising that we are all socially conditioned, William Willimon states that we must get questioners (including adolescents who are developing their thinking skills) to ask whether the society shaping us is true or false.³² Christians would assert that only from within the faith community is there a stable base from which to gain true knowledge.

But, as Willimon states, knowledge comes through the commitment engendered by conversion.³³ Of real benefit, though, from Peck's analysis is his contention that many adults get stuck at immature developmental stages. This maybe suggests to New Zealand Baptist churches that we be more discerning about our relatively unquestioning acceptance of all confessing adults as suitable candidates for baptism.

Fowler's stages are far more helpful for our investigation. It can be seen that the optimistic assessments of Clark and others that the faith can be sufficiently understood by those in the years of early adolescence to permit baptism and church membership is probably true, if the adolescent is integrated into a believing community which becomes the dominant peer group. In the corrosive spiritual environment of New Zealand, the teenage years may see a change of peer group from church or church youth group to anti-social gang, with seemingly an associated loss of faith. One suspects that many stage 3, supposedly Christian, adults who drop out may have succumbed to a similar process. But, rather than delay baptism until the risk of such movement diminishes to an acceptable level,³⁴ it would seem better to anticipate the critical, questioning period by facilitating this within the church environment. This in itself will be a radical challenge to many conformist churches. In reply, then, to the question posed in the Introduction: "Can our children be saved?" a tentative "yes" can be given. The answer assumes that children in our Baptist Churches can be nurtured through the developmental stages (even making "decisions" appropriate to their age), to make a decision deemed responsible as they enter Fowler's stage 3. However, acknowledging the corrosive environment operative in our society re the Christian faith, our Baptist Churches need to be both nurturing of those in the synthetic/conventional stage, and offering forums for the critical exploration of issues for those in stage 4.

It should be noted as well that Fowler suggests that many

churches are pitched at stage 3 faith persons, with another large group of churches oriented to stage 4 people. This would suggest that while children below the age of ten will benefit from lots of aspects of worship services, yet specific educative material aimed at their developmental stages may be more appropriately delivered in an alternative setting.

THE ROLE OF THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

There is no doubt that the Christian faith is largely responsible for the comprehensive education of children that is a feature of Western societies. Brian Hill³⁵ describes how in Europe the Reformers sowed the seeds for this education, stimulating a similar process in Catholic countries through counter-Reformation initiatives. While England lagged behind other European countries in the provision of education for the masses, the industrial revolution provided an impetus towards general education, and the Sunday school movement played an important role. The industrial revolution created a need for a workforce minimally competent in the 3-Rs, to which others believed the fourth R - religion - would fix in the labouring heart a proper sense of morality and a respect for the established authorities in society. Social reformers considered such an elementary education as one of the best remedies for tackling poverty and unemployment (and thus the burden on the local councils to provide poor relief would be alleviated.)³⁶ But, as well, Christians began to be shocked at the behaviour of urban labouring children on Sundays, the only days these children were released from employment (exploitation?).

[The ongoing impact of this Sunday school attendance has probably not been sufficiently appreciated. U.K. researcher Christie Davies (quoted by Martin Robinson)³⁷ asserts that in Britain there can be seen a long established inverse relationship between Sunday school attendance and crime. She concludes that Sunday school teaching of

Christian values produced a strong consensus as to what constitutes moral behaviour.]

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, a faith nurture objective began to overtake the original educational purposes of Sunday schools. In doing this, the church largely committed itself to a schooled approach to faith nurture, an approach that Hill suggests is too enamoured with the educational ideals of Greek culture (especially the highly questionable confidence that right reasoning leads to morality),³⁸ and failed to use the other educational avenues seen in the New Testament church such as the nurture within the home and the gathered congregation (where commitment to the Christian lifestyle was built on understanding).³⁹ Consequently, many of the elements noted above by the faith development models as important for faith maturation (eg appreciation of ritual in worship) have tended to be neglected.

While Hill (in the books mentioned above) critiques the Sunday school movement primarily from his secular position as a professional educationalist who is a concerned Christian second, John H. Westerhoff III arrives at very similar conclusions starting from his position as a theologian vitally concerned to see the faith passed on to new generations. In his landmark book *Will Our Children Have Faith?*,⁴⁰ he too accuses the modern Sunday school of being wedded to the Greek schooling model. He contends that despite attempted application of the most sophisticated pedagogical and psychological insights, the modern Sunday is failing because of this 'school' approach. Failure is attributed to the ignoring of intuition learning,⁴¹ vague undergirding theologies,⁴² and the very weight placed upon the Sunday school itself. With regards to this latter point, Westerhoff notes that in the past religious education relied on the concerted action of six institutions: a religiously homogenous community; the family; public schools (which taught aspects of Protestant Christianity); the church, popular religious periodicals, and the Sunday school. Now, he

comments, only the Sunday school really survives intact, but cannot carry the responsibility alone. New Zealand has probably never had all six institutions working effectively together as parts of the United States have had; certainly most children in New Zealand today are exposed to the Christian faith only through Religious Instruction in schools, or Sunday school. (But this exposure is constantly undermined by an aggressive public ridiculing of Christianity, especially by the media.) Consequently, these two are a totally inadequate base from which to expect large numbers of children to come to mature Christian commitment.

Further, the usual practice in New Zealand of holding Sunday school at the same time as the worship service deprives children (and their teachers) of learning the faith story in the intergenerational worship setting. This timing issue socialises children out of the faith: they conclude that worship is for adults only,⁴³ and therefore of no relevance to them once they reach the age that alternative peer groups reach out for their attention.

CHILDREN IN THE WORSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Some advantages of removing children from the worship service to an alternative Sunday school programme (as is currently practiced by most New Zealand churches) do exist, though. These include creating an opportunity to teach children material aimed at their developmental stage, and ensuring a less disruptive environment for adults to worship in. That be-as-it-may, added to the disadvantages of the traditional Sunday school mentioned above are the huge potential advantages from having children in the worship service.⁴⁴ Before these advantages can be listed, however, it is necessary to look more closely at conversion as a process or event. Faith, not a static phenomenon, is capable of changing in two ways.⁴⁵ First, there is an *evolutionary* development following the stages of faith. But there is also

possible a *revolutionary* change, wherein the 'centre' of faith changes. This process Fowler defines as conversion. In a Christian setting, this would correspond to a radical change from faith in one god (henotheism)⁴⁶ or several gods (polytheism) to faith and trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not an easy process. Indeed, William Willimon asserts that conversion is available only to those who submit to a process of dismantling and rebirth.⁴⁷ He goes on to say that most of modern Christianity insists instead that being a Christian involves holding certain beliefs that are helpful in making sense of our lives as they already are,⁴⁸ ie the self remains intact and in control. Implicit in the more radical concept of conversion is the idea that faith is more than belief. But in evangelical New Zealand churches, we have typically demanded intellectualised belief, rather than a radically changed life, as proof of regeneration. I suggest that what we should be looking for in our children is faith in God consequent to an informed decision rather than the ability to discuss one's belief. And, we should not expect 'adult behaviour' from our children; many confessing adults consistently fail to live up to our 'adult' behavioural expectations.

How, though, does faith arise? Faith, according to Fowler, is an imaginative process, awakened and shaped by our experiences with people, institutions and events, and the images, symbols and conceptual; representations associated with them.⁴⁹ It is this concern to involve intuitive right-brain thinking in our apprehension of spiritual truth that lead Walter Wink to write his *Transforming Bible Study*⁵⁰ in which he challenges the church's preoccupation with rationalistic belief. So powerful is the influence of story and song, that Eugene Peterson reckons that everything he knows about God was mediated to him in his impressionable childhood years through them.⁵¹ Now, it is precisely this imaginative process which can be stimulated for children in powerful ways by being involved in worship services. It is agreed that they may not understand intellectually all of what is happening,

but they are fed in their spirits by being in the presence of and maybe even assisting the gathered believers as they engage in singing, prayer, the preaching event (in which both delivery and listening apprehension is worship), celebrating baptisms and communion. Such events feed to young lives a store of rich images that are essential building blocks of later, mature faith. Involvement in these concrete circumstances is ideal for children who are not yet capable of abstract reasoning.⁵² This sort of intergenerational mixing seems more akin to the old-style American Sunday school of last century where emotions were important, stories were told, community experiences were shared, and adults provided children with faith role models.⁵³ In a context of rich and dynamic worship, then, evolutionary faith can occur and trigger conversion at an appropriate time for the individual concerned.

Of course, the feeding of children's minds with rich, faith-building images can be done elsewhere, particularly in the home. Reading to children Bible stories, and books such as Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' or C.S. Lewis' Narnia series are excellent in this regard.

A WAY FORWARD ?

In conclusion, then, a positive answer can be given to the question: **Can our children be saved?** In saying this, it is asserted both that children can be saved (ie they are old enough to be recognised as sufficiently accountable and responsible to make the required 'decision' to be a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ), and that this can be facilitated by our current structures, suitable modified. Particularly in relation to this latter point, there is a way forward.

The way forward is, however, a difficult option. It involves agreeing with those like Hill and Westerhoff who say the answer does not lie in attempting to modify the existing Sunday school model by

simply doing it better. It involves agreeing with those like Bollen who argue for a valid aspect of socialisation in seeing our children come to faith in Christ. The way forward involves rediscovering our identity as the body of Christ, the people of God;⁵⁴ we who know who we are because we participate together, regardless of age, in worship. As a number of scholars have noted, participation in the rituals of worship results in the learning of spiritual truth. This learning will be in part cognitive, left-brain learning. But much of it will be the intuitive, right-brain learning that Wink and Westerhoff stress is so important if one is to apprehend spiritual truth. Regular involvement in the worship service will supply the store of images noted by Fowler and others as being so important for the healthy development of faith, and would go a long way to avoiding the danger of children being socialised out of the faith due to their absence while in Sunday school.

However, for the participation of children in the worship service to work, the way worship is 'done' in New Zealand Baptist churches will have to change. This change will have to include improving preaching,⁵⁵ and a rediscovery of more liturgical worship; many of the symbolic aspects absent from Baptist worship are vital for the intuitive learning noted above. Good liturgical worship is essential not just in order to teach who we are, but also to shape how we behave.⁵⁶

A number of objections may be anticipated. To those children and youth who complain that worship is boring, it must be recognised that worship is strongly counter-cultural in an entertainment dominated society. Rather than give in on this point; the definition of boredom as 'the self being stuffed with itself'⁵⁷ compels the church to draw out stultified persons into the proper posture of worship. Neither must the temptation of making worship more entertaining be fallen into. This, comments Plantinga, is both a reflection of and a sell-out to popular culture; in short, sinful.⁵⁸ To those who object that the presence of children will make worship difficult for adults (a major personal

concern of the author), hard work to train children to worship without resorting to noisy entertainment must be undertaken. To those who object that children of non-Christian parents will no longer come, and we will thereby have lost an opportunity to influence these children for good, it must be noted that the role of the people of God is not to oil the wheels of our culture by producing well-behaved citizens. The task of the church is first and foremost to be a community that obeys the first commandment by giving God his due: worship. The production of civil-minded citizens who are 'moral' but, having done Sunday school are in no further need of God, renders the church liable to God's judgement even if it elicits the gratefulness of our society. Rather, the church must seek ways to involve community children along with the children of believing parents in worship, a process that will require patience and the teaching of concentration skills that are absent from many homes. To those adults who object that their children will be denied the opportunity to be taught the faith, their responsibility to take seriously their teaching the Christian faith at home to their children can be pointed out. Given the greater influence of the home vis-a-vis the church or Sunday school, churches probably need to assist parents in the fulfilment of this task.

In terms of Fowler's 'stages of faith', it is probably still appropriate to run a separate programme with good teaching geared to faith stages 1 and 2. However, as in a previous era of church life, this would be scheduled for a time other than that occupied by the worship service. This arrangement will of course complicate leisure activities planned for this time by church members who prefer to conflate their religious commitments to a single time-slot on Sundays; in itself no bad thing in its challenge to priorities. But a radical step I would like to suggest is that children of age 12 or 13 who make decisions to be followers of Jesus be baptised. At this age, Fowler notes that young people are entering into the stage of faith that is strongly conformist, a stage whereby their faith will be largely reflective of their dominant

peer group. This peer group must be the community of believers into whom they are baptised. (This avoids the erroneous notion that we are baptised because we understand enough to make an 'informed' choice.) As these youths begin to move from this stage into the individuating/reflective phase, the believing community must facilitate the wrestling with faith issues this transition entails. There will almost certainly be adults who will need to make this journey as well. This step will be a challenge to many churches, especially those which encourage a mindless conformity in order for the church to achieve dubious goals with the minimum of resistance.

Jeff Whittaker

NOTES:

1. Lesley Max, *Children: Endangered Species?* Auckland, Penguin, 1990.
2. See the Bulletin: *Christian Education: Serving the Churches* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1973 (Issued by the Board of Christian Education of the Baptist Union of New Zealand). See also Diane Bollen, "Is there a place for R-Rated Worship" *N.Z. Baptist*, Nov. 1995 and *Is there a Place for R-Rated Worship?* (Probationary Thesis for the New Zealand Baptist Union) 1994.
3. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco, Harper, 1981.
4. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983-5, pp 637f.
5. R.E.O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1960, pp 116f.
6. White p 122.
7. Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, London, Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947, p 17, quoting Dr Whitley from the latter's *History of British Baptists*.
8. Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, Philadelphia, Judson Press, 1907, p 809.
9. Stanley Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide To Baptist Belief*, Valley Forge, Pa., Judson Press, 1985, p 49.
10. Jack Hoad, *The Baptist*, London, Grace Publications, 1986, p 248.
11. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, London, Methuen, 1927, pp 20f.
12. Wheeler Robinson p 22.
13. Wayne Clark, *The Meaning of Church Membership*, Valley Forge, Judson Press,

1950, pp 7-8.

14. Strong p 953.

15. Cook p 51.

16. Clark p 8.

17. I personally think this latter is a flimsy reason to delay baptism. If people grow spiritually, there must be a growing appreciation of their baptism, even for those baptised as adults.

18. G.T. Beilby, *A Handful of Grain: The Centenary History of the Baptist Union of New Zealand Vol.3, 1914-1945*, Wellington, N.Z.Baptist Historical Society, 1984, p 70.

19. Robinson p 89.

20. Brian Hill, *That They May Learn: Towards a Christian View of Education*, Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1990, p 22.

21. Hill p 27, n 29.

22. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Volume 1), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991, Chapter 3 'The Reality of God and the Gods in the Experience of the Religions.'

23. For this synopsis I have drawn on Andrew Dunn's excellent summary of Fowler presented in the November 1995 *Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter*.

24. Fowler p 153.

25. Fowler p 182.

26. Fowler pp 187/88.

27. Fowler p 187.

28. Fowler pp 13/14.

29. Fowler p 16.

30. M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993, p 120.

31. Peck p 121.

32. William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptised*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1992, p 44.

33. Willimon p 45. Willimon (p 39) defines conversion as being a process of dismantling and rebirth.

34. The risk never disappears, as the erosion of converted, baptised adults from the faith in New Zealand seems to exceed, when viewed over the long term, the rate at which the church is built up by conversions.

35. Brian Hill, *The Greening of Christian Education*, Homebush West, NSW, Lancer, 1985, p 38ff.

36. The Business Round Table in New Zealand is an advocate of education in contemporary New Zealand for just this reason, although there are strong grounds to doubt the altruism of their motives in this.

37. Martin Robinson, *The Faith of the Unbeliever*, Crowborough, Monarch, 1994, p114f.

38. Hill, *The Greening*, p 27.

39. Hill, *The Greening*, p30.

40. John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, San Francisco, Harper, 1976.

41. Westerhoff pp 73f.
42. Westerhoff p 2.
43. Eleanor Kreider, in *Enter His Gates: Fitting Worship Together*, Scottdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1990, p 84, notes that children also reach this conclusion when involved for just the early part of the service, especially if this time involves a special children's talk. Such an arrangement poses special difficulties, she notes: it is easy for children to feel patronised.
44. However, as noted above, a token presence of the children in the service for a short period of time is not in view here, as this can reinforce the idea that 'adult' worship is not for them. (Kreider p 84).
45. Fowler p 34.
46. Fowler p 20.
47. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, p 39.
48. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, p 40.
49. Fowler p 25.
50. Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Rev. Ed.), Nashville, Abingdon, 1989.
51. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1992, p 44.
52. Westerhoff p 85, quoting W.G.E. Cunyngham.
53. Westerhoff p 84.
54. These images are by no means exhaustive, or intended to be suggestive of a particular 'shape' of church as Stanley Hauerwas suggests is the view of some - "What Could it Mean For the Church to be Christ's Body? A Question Without a Clear Answer." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 1995, pp 1 - 21), p7.
55. The sermon, to my mind, must not be eliminated or devalued. Children too must be taught to 'sit under the word'.
56. This is the point made by Stanley Hauerwas in "The Liturgical Shape of the Christian Life: Teaching Christian Ethics as Worship" in D.F. Ford and D.L. Stamps (eds), *Essentials of Christian Community*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996, pp 35 - 48.
57. Walter Percy, quoted by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr, in *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Grand Rapids/Leicester, Eerdmans/Apollos, 1995, p2.
58. Plantinga p 70.