

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BAPTIST BIBLE CLASS MOVEMENT

For over sixty years the Bible Class Movement was the dominant youth activity among New Zealand Baptist churches. It influenced for good thousands of young people and produced a steady stream of missionaries, ministers, lay leaders and church members. The movement died in the 1960's. Despite many valiant attempts, no youth movement has since emerged to match its effectiveness.

Beginnings

In the latter half of the 19th century youth work in Baptist churches reflected the educational patterns of the day. Universal primary education began with the 1877 Education Act with its slogan "free, compulsory and secular". Post-Primary education, however, was neither universal nor free. High Schools and Colleges developed on a fee paying basis and, with the exception of scholarship assisted pupils, served a small well-to-do strata of the population. It was not until 1944, with the raising of the leaving age to fifteen, that secondary education became truly universal.¹

1 Turley & Martin, *Religion in Education* (1981) pp. 8-9.

The vast majority of young people, therefore, in the 1880's and 1890's, when they left primary school, went straight to work as apprentices, factory workers, shop assistants, labourers and other such occupations, Baptists such as J.J. North followed this pattern. The future College Principal went straight from primary school to work as a junior in a drapery firm.² This was the general pattern in most Baptist circles.

The churches responded to the situation by providing Sunday Schools which paralleled the primary schools. But how did they meet the needs of working young people, the teenagers of those days?³

They developed a variety of youth activities on Sundays and on week nights. The Young Christians Band, held weekly meetings focussing on the quickening of personal faith, helping one another and reaching out to non-christians, Churches at Hanover Street, Dunedin; Oxford Terrace, Christchurch; and Mt Eden, Auckland had such Christian Bands in the 1880's.⁴

Mutual Improvement Societies were another attempt to meet youth needs. These were a kind of further education programme with a christian basis. At the weekly meetings working lads and girls could hear lectures, engage in debates, and study the Bible and other books. Societies like this met at Hanover Street, Dunedin, Sydenham, Christchurch, Wellesley Street, Auckland and in other churches. The Society in Sydenham, in a report in the N.Z. Baptist, described its programme:

2 Batts & MacLeod, *J.J. North, the story of a great New Zealander*, (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1965) pp. 14-15.

3 "Teenager" entered the English language in 1941. As an adjective, "teen-age" has been around since the 1920s but was not much used.

4 J.A. Clifford, *A Handful of Grain*, (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1982) Vol. 2, p. 88.

This class is open to both sexes and meets weekly, various subjects being taken up and papers given by different members. The debate last week was of a particularly lively kind, the subject being 'smoking'. We are glad to say the lovers of the weed got considerably the worst of it, the meeting deciding it was a dirty and unnecessary habit and resolving to do its utmost to discourage its use.⁵

The Christian Endeavour movement provided a more permanent addition to youth work. It began in the U.S.A. in 1881 when Francis Clark developed a movement which challenged young people to christian commitment, and called its members to be present and "to take some part, aside from singing, at each meeting" unless hindered by some reason which could be conscientiously offered to God. Christian Endeavour Societies were established at Ponsonby and Vivian Street, Wellington in 1891 and by 1894 there were 22 societies in Baptist churches with a total of 886 members.⁶ The movement outstripped the Young Christian Bands and touched a chord in many churches with its committee system of small activity groups and its every-member participation at the weekly meetings.

The biggest impact on Baptist young people, however, came through the Bible Class Movement. In early church records 'Bible Class' usually referred to groups including both adults and young people which met with the pastor or lay leader for Bible study. But by the 1880's the term applied primarily to classes for young people such as those at Thames, Caversham and Ponsonby.

At these classes, following Victorian values, the young men and women were segregated into separate groups but Bible study was still the main objective. Usually the pastor or lay leader chose a passage to be studied or followed some locally

5 *N.Z. Baptist*, Oct. 1885.

6 Clifford p. 89.

chosen syllabus. The *N.Z. Baptist* in 1886 regularly provided "Studies for Senior Bible Classes".

What changed these scattered, disparate classes into a movement which was to inspire young people for over sixty years? The answer lies with George Troup, a youth leader at St John's Presbyterian Church in Wellington. He started a Young Men's Bible Class in his church which combined Bible study with social and sporting activities. The success of his work at St. John's was copied by others and in 1888 under Troup's enthusiastic leadership the Presbyterian Bible Class Union was formed. By 1904 there were 58 classes in the Union with a total membership of 1437. A travelling secretary was appointed (Rev, J.C. Jamieson) and the movement continued to grow.

The Presbyterian young women were not slow to recognize the effectiveness of the new movement and in 1904 formed the Presbyterian Young Women's Bible Class Union with 19 classes and a membership of over 600.⁷

News of the success of the Presbyterian Bible classes quickly spread to Baptist churches. At Vivian Street, Wellington, for example, the youth leader Arthur Hoby, impressed by the success story at the neighbouring St John's church began to adapt the Presbyterian model to his own youth group.⁸ The weekly classes on Sundays continued but in 1902 he began organising annual hockey (and later rugby) matches with the Wanganui Baptist Bible Class and from 1902 to 1905 organised Easter camps. The one at York Bay in 1905 involved the Vivian Street, Berhampore, Petone and Wanganui classes.⁹

7 Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 1987, p. 226.

8 Letter, 21 August 1948, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive 423. This letter gives details of the life of Arthur Hoby who died January 1947, aged 94.

9 R.P. Staples, mss "Reminiscences of Bible Class days", N.Z.B.H.S. Archive 423.

Such was the interest in the new style of youth programme that at the 1904 conference of the Baptist Union at Dunedin that preliminary discussions took place on the formation of a Baptist Young Men's Bible Class Union. A constitution was drafted but it was not until the following year that the Union was formally established. R.P. Staples, the first secretary of the Union, described what happened.

During the Conference of NZ Baptists in Christchurch, November 1905, several church delegates with representatives of Young Men's Bible Classes attended a meeting at Oxford Terrace Church to form a NZBYMBC Union and draw up a constitution. Those present included Messrs. A. Hoby (leader of Vivian St. Class); C. N. R. Mackie (Oxford Terrace), Rev. Guy Thornton (Sydenham), representatives of Wanganui, Auckland, Oxford Terrace, Hanover St., Spreydon and Sydenham Bible Classes as well as delegates from Dunedin and ChCh. Sunday Schools all of whom had previously been notified of this meeting before Conference at the instigation of Mr Hoby, who was really the prime mover in forming the Union, ably supported by enthusiastic members of Vivian St and Wanganui Bible Classes.¹⁰

As a result of this meeting Arthur Hoby was elected President and Staples, secretary. The first committee consisted of the Officers of the Baptist Union plus representatives from the four main centres: H.M. Smeeton (Auckland), C. Lambert (Wellington), C.R.N. Mackie (Christchurch) and J.J. Purdie (Dunedin). The objects of the Union were declared to be:

The furtherance of the BC movement throughout the colony (a) by promoting fellowship among classes (b) by assisting weak and struggling classes (c) by forming new classes (d) by endeavoring to arouse among young men a keener and deeper interest in spiritual things and secure their attachment to the church.¹¹

¹⁰ Staples mss.

¹¹ *N.Z. Baptist*, Dec. 1905, p. 188. See also the first constitution of the N.Z.Y.M.B.C.U..

Four years later, in 1909, the young women followed the men's example and formed their own Bible Class Union with Mrs Alfred North as president and Bessie Mill of Auckland as secretary.¹²

Development

Initially communication proved a difficulty. It was not easy keeping in touch with classes or organising camps when it took several days to travel from Auckland to Dunedin. Despite the difficulties the first Bible Class committee tried for six years to keep the movement going on a national basis. But in 1911 the decision was made to split into two parts and to form a North Island and a South Island Union. Each Union had its own committees and ran their own programmes until 1927 when a Dominion Council was formed. Initially the Council was located for one year in each of the four main centres. This period was extended later to two years in 1930 when the first Dominion Young Men's Bible Class Conference was held.

The Presbyterians developed an excellent Bible Class badge, The Baptists were allowed to use the same design but with different colours. The Baptist badge, costing a shilling each, was red, white and gold in colour and was first introduced in 1926. Its significance to the movement is easily seen in this comment in *Contact* in 1942.

It is a badge of honour,. it is universally recognized,. it opens up good fellowship and new friendships for it is worn by men and women of all denominations. It helps you nail your colours to the mast. It strengthens you when tempted lest you should bring it dishonour. It reinforces your witness.

If you don't wear a badge, why not? Are you ashamed to do so? Are you afraid? Then stand up like a man and show your backbone....

12 *N.Z. Baptist*, Nov. 1909, p. 452.

If you have one don't wear it on your Sunday suit - pin it on the one you wear each day. Better still buy two badges—one for your best suit, the other for your work day clothes.¹³

By the 1930's the BC movement in both the young men's and young women's Unions was like a well oiled machine. It had five main thrusts.

1. Sunday Classes

These were usually held on Sunday afternoons but the times varied to suit local conditions. The Baptist Young Women's Union first produced a study syllabus in 1924. The following year it became a joint production with the young men. The most effective syllabus, however, was developed in the 1937-61 era. It included regular Bible studies but added special lessons on topics like Baptism and church membership, missionary work and social issues like gambling and alcohol. Baptist ministers and lay leaders like E.M. Blaiklock, S.L. Edgar, R.J. Thompson and G.T. Beilby served as writers and editors.¹⁴

2. Easter Camps

In the first report of the B.C. movement Staples wrote: "If we could only manage to get one really good camp it would be the making of the Bible Class Union, as nothing is so catching as the enthusiasm of earnest young men in camp."¹⁵ His hope was quickly fulfilled. After the first camp a few miles up the Wanganui River in April 1906,¹⁶ annual Easter camps became a

13 *Contact*, Sept. 1942, p. 3.

14 R. Mardle, typed notes, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive 423. See also S.L. Edgar, *A Handful of Grain* (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1982) Vol. 4, p. 56.

15 *N.Z. Baptist*, Dec. 1905, p. 188.

16 *N.Z. Baptist*, June 1906, p. 298.

fixed feature of Baptist life. J.A. Clifford described them as a “heady mixture of hot gospel, Bible study, song, prayer, entertainment sport, fun and some horse play.”¹⁷

In 1923 there were 432 young men in two camps. In 1944, despite wartime difficulties, there were 18 camps with 1350 campers. An Oamaru camper described the Easter camp experience well.

What fun - travelling to Otago or Southland by slow train, changing trains at Dunedin, hugging our bed roll and suitcase. Finally meeting up with the others—crowds of them – at some public school or church hall, where we all bedded down on sacks filled with straw. We enjoyed chorus singing and hymns, study circles, sports and a picnic, found many lovely friends who have been our correspondents ever since.

With practically no sleep from Thursday till our return home on Monday or Tuesday of the next week we were expected to prepare a talk to be given in Bible Class or church on ‘What Easter camp meant to me’....Rather nerve racking, but over the years these experiences helped us as we grew older to adjust to youth in all its moods....¹⁸

The Easter camp tradition had a strong evangelistic emphasis. In recording camp statistics the number of “decisions for Christ” was always regarded as important and in “camp echo” services in the home church young converts were given the chance to testify. The strong evangelistic emphasis had its weaknesses. Impressionable teenagers could be manipulated to make superficial decisions. The emphasis on decisions for Christ as a separate and converting event tended to diminish the significance of baptism so that it became an optional extra. Back home, with so many away at Easter camps, the churches generally had poor attendances at what should have been the highlight of the Christian year.

17 Clifford p. 91.

18 *Oamaru Centenary Booklet*, 1983, p. 18

Despite such weaknesses, however, the growth of Baptist churches during the Bible class era was undoubtedly due in large measure to the evangelistic effectiveness of Easter camps.

3. Missionary Support

In 1909 the Young Men's Union pledged to raise at least 52 pounds per year for Home Mission enterprise. Later in that same year they organised a team to go to Ohakune to help erect a church building for the new cause there.¹⁹ Such support for Home Mission continued over the years. But it was the work of overseas mission which became the primary focus.

In 1920 at the North Island men's camp at Milford, F.W. Homer raised the question of support for foreign missions. No action was taken until 1923 when the North Island Union hoped "to support Mr Harry Jones a missionary actually on the field" in the sum of 100 pounds. When two Bible Class men, E.W Grigg and B.N. Eade, volunteered for missionary service this brought a personal touch and a challenge went out to the Bible Classes for 200 pounds. By 1928 the target was raised to 450 and later to 500 pounds.

The Young Women's classes were missionary minded before the men. They started raising money for missions in 1910 and thanks to the enthusiasm of Mrs H.H. Driver the annual target increased steadily.²⁰ Year by year classes vied with each other to raise funds for the NZ Baptist Missionary Society and, at the annual Bible Class weeks, the highlight was usually the presentation of the Bible Class offerings brought to the front by class representatives.

The focus on finance, however, was balanced by a steady stream of information from the mission field. Class members

19 *N.Z. Baptist*, Dec. 1909, p. 467; Aug. 1909, p. 393.

20 *Mardle*, p. 2.

developed a sense of responsibility for the Missionary Society and learned to pray as well as to give.

4. Training for service

The Bible Class movement was primarily a lay movement. Leaders provided role models. Young people learned administrative and organisational skills in committee work and at camps. They were given opportunities to participate in meetings and to discover their gifts. Competitions of many kinds became a popular feature at camps and rallies. Cups and shields were presented for Bible reading, sermonettes, prepared and impromptu speech, gospel solos, essays, posters and a variety of sports.

At the very first camp in 1906 a shield was given for competition at the annual camp sports. In 1910 at a South Island Camp at Mahena the president, J.A. Valentine of Timaru, took his fishing rod, caught a trout and presented it as a prize for the camp competition.²¹

The competitions gave young people a chance to exercise their gifts in a Christian context. Many future ministers discovered their preaching gifts as a result of sermonette competitions. In Canterbury for example, a silver cup for junior Bible class members was competed for at Easter camps from 1935-55. Among the winners are six lads who became well known Baptist ministers.²²

21 Thomas Hilliker, mss notes, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive 423.

22 A box of old Bible Class competition trophies was found under the platform at Oxford Terrace in 1965. The silver cups were dated from the 1920s to 1955. Why use of the trophies stopped in 1955 is something of a mystery. Perhaps someone put them under the platform for safe keeping and they were then forgotten.

5. Organisation and Publicity

The movement developed into a very efficient organisation. Both the men's and women's Unions had a national and district committee structure covering the whole country. The two Unions eventually amalgamated in 1955. Regular national conferences, usually at Labour weekend, enabled the work to be planned and co-ordinated. The movement became a kind of junior Baptist Union with able young leaders. Many of them became prominent in the Baptist Union as a whole. A large number of the lay presidents of the Baptist Union served their apprenticeship in the Bible Class movement.

The movement was backed up by good promotion and publicity. Reports appeared in the *NZ Baptist* with a regular column from 1925. Some of the larger classes produced their own magazines. The Berhampore class, for example, produced a magazine in 1923 edited by Ernest Nees with 150 subscribers. It was so popular that other classes began to buy copies. This led to a proposal for a District wide magazine and so *Christian Manhood* was published, with Ernest Nees and Maurice Tremewen as joint editors. In June 1927 this magazine had so expanded its circulation that it was adopted as a national publication with the Dominion Council accepting responsibility for it. Unfortunately circulation dropped and the magazine finally ceased publication in December 1929.²³

The most significant of the Bible Class magazines was *Contact*. Founded in October 1939 it was initially a Wellington publication of four pages. From an initial run of 400 copies, circulation grew and in 1941 Wellington was asked to continue publication but on a national basis. In 1944 the Dominion Council took over responsibility and the young women's Union joined in the production in 1947. By 1952, 2800 copies were being circulated six times a year, the highest circulation of any

23 Mardle p. 2.

Christian youth magazine in New Zealand at that time. *Contact* ceased publication in 1962.²⁴

Growth

The Baptist YMBC Union had begun in 1905 with 16 classes and about 300 members, By 1928 numbers had increased to 884. Growth continued despite the depression of the 1930's and the second world war (1939-45). The war brought new challenges. Large numbers of senior Bible Class members and leaders left to join the armed forces, many going overseas.

A report on "War Problems in Bible Classes" warned that the very existence of the movement was threatened. This may have been too extreme but there were difficulties with falling membership, the loss of leaders and weaker finances. The report goes on:

The importance of having classes in operation to which our young men can immediately re-attach themselves, without any time lag as they return in one's and two's from military service cannot be stressed too strongly all classes must retain close contact with members serving overseas. Correspondence should be regular and full of BC personalities and news. Letters in return should be read in class.²⁵

This appeal was taken up with enthusiasm. T.E. Dench, a Bible Class leader at Oxford Terrace, for example, was appointed official correspondent to keep in touch with those in the armed forces from his church and Bible Class. He sent out hundreds of letters during the war years and maintained a column in his church magazine giving news of those overseas. When the war ended, the grateful returned men and women put on a party for him in appreciation of his efforts.

24 Mardle p. 2.

25 Anon. mss entitled 'War Problems in Bible Classes', N.Z.B.H.S. Archives 423.

Bible Class members who were conscientious objectors had a difficult time. This was recognized in a *Contact* article which declared:

We trust that no Baptist will sneer at any who, because of religious convictions, is strong and courageous enough (and it needs courage) to refuse disobedience to his conscience, but will respect the attitude and views of his fellow members.²⁶

After the Second World War the Bible Classes recovered well and the 1950's saw the return of the whole panoply of B.C. activities. Numbers rose until, by 1960, there were 4469 on the rolls.²⁷ The movement, however, which had been so effective and which had become an accepted part of Baptist life, was nearly at its end.

The Fall

What brought the downfall of this highly successful, well organised movement which had been so much part of Baptist life for over 60 years?

One factor was the vast social changes that hit New Zealand in the 1960's. The last decade of the Bible Class movement coincided with the 'swinging sixties' when the Beatles and Elvis Presley were the pop heroes. Television began its powerful influence. Young people began to revolt against old traditions. Lads wore their hair long and girls wore mini-skirts. Stage shows like *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and *Hair* shocked many. In church circles John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) popularised what seemed to many Baptists to be dangerous, if not heretical, ideas. Pope John XXIII inaugurated Vatican II which brought radical changes to the Roman Catholic Church and in 1967 the Geering controversy aroused widespread debate.

26 *Contact*, Feb. 1942, p. 2.

27 Statistics from Baptist Union *Year Books*.

In all this turmoil it is not surprising that Baptist young people began to be caught up in the spirit of the age. The anti-establishment mood had its effect and the institution of the Bible Class with its established traditions began to be questioned as never before. Although the numbers attending Bible Class remained fairly constant, the movement as a national organisation began to lose its impact.

The main reason for this was the appeal of the All Age Sunday School. In 1958 Dr. W.L. Howse of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board visited New Zealand. He painted a glowing picture of the success of the All Age Sunday School in USA with its slogan "Reach, teach and win the people". The spectacular growth of the Southern Baptists, he stated, was largely due to the All Age Sunday School.

To many New Zealand Baptist churches struggling to come to terms with the turmoil of the 1960's, this seemed a heaven-sent answer. Here was a fresh and successful way to integrate evangelism, Bible study and church membership. By March 1960, 22 churches had taken on board the new concept. It spread steadily. Churches were restructured in buildings and organisation. Instead of Sunday School for primary school children and Bible classes for the teenagers, now churches began to create nursery, toddler, primary, junior, young people and adult departments. Christian education for the whole family undermined the autonomy and uniqueness of the Bible classes.

The Bible Class movement knew it had to come to terms with this new development. The traditional Bible Class syllabus could not compete with the free lesson materials provided by the Southern Baptists. By 1962 the name 'Bible Class' began to disappear, to be replaced by 'Young People's Department'. The report of the Bible Class Union in 1964 referred with sorrow to the demise of the name and of the Bible Class badge and added:

With the incorporation of the young people's Bible Classes in All Age Sunday Schools and the provision of lesson materials from another source, the Bible Class Movement does not now have the same impact on the lives of members of the local Bible Classes....The old Bible Class loyalties have been broken

down and in their place we have the conception of teaching for the whole family.²⁸

By 1967, when youth numbers in Baptist churches reached a peak of 4811, the Bible Class movement was all but dead. The last rites took place in May 1970. At a national Youth Forum the movement was formally wound up to be replaced by the Baptist Youth Movement of the Board of Christian Education.

Someone has said that any organisation begins as a movement, becomes a machine and ends as a monument. The Bible Class Movement is now regarded as a monument of the past. But it is a monument to an organisation which influenced the lives of generations of young people, trained leaders of the churches and produced church members with a solid knowledge of the Bible, a commitment to the NZ Baptist Missionary Society and an understanding of Baptist life and principles. It is an impressive legacy.

Angus MacLeod

28 Baptist Union *Year Book* 1962-3, p. 112; 1964-5, pp. 83-4.