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The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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Editorial

Question: "What is the Church?"

Answer: "The whole body of believers in Christ."

Question: "What is Church History?"

Answer: "The story of leading clergy, theologians, ecclesiastical assemblies and institutions."

LIKE all caricatures, this exchange is perhaps a little unfair. But it is the case that, as in so much else in the life of the Church, our historical interest tends to centre on the clerical and ecclesiastical-institutional, in a manner at odds with a professed theological understanding of the whole people of God called to service and witness. The major work by Stephen Neill and Hans-Ruedi Weber *The Layman in Christian History* (1963) provides a useful perspective on the twenty centuries of the Christian era. But, particularly as the story approaches modern times, much of that review

is concerned with the Church's *understanding* of the role of the laity, and the facilities (or lack of them) for equipping the laity for their tasks, rather than with concrete accounts of the work actually done by lay men and women. The need for such history is well put by Neill himself in his Introduction: "The Christian layman who takes his vocation seriously is unlikely to feel that he is faced by any easy task; he is much more likely to cry out with the apostle, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' It may encourage him to learn that he stands in a great apostolic succession, stretching from the days of the New Testament to our own time, of lay folk who have proved themselves courageous and effective witnesses for Christ."

Baptists have made a great deal of Luther's phrase "the priesthood of all believers" in their understanding of the Church. We shall not pursue here the question of how far this has been the ideal rather than the reality. The point is that those of us with any interest in our historical picture ought to ensure that the total priesthood is adequately portrayed on that picture. The majority of Baptists have not been ministers, famed or otherwise, or academic theologians and scholars, or leaders in denominational affairs. Yet they were those who maintained, carried forward and indeed often led the life of local congregations. Moreover, these were the people in whose lives and attitudes the nonconformist vision was embodied and imparted to the wider society of which they were part. There is a wealth of work still to be done on the ways in which, in the lives of lay people, spiritual perspectives have grappled with family life, education, commerce, industry, politics and culture.

Hopefully, these comments underline the significance of two of the articles in this issue. The first is Dr David Bebbington's paper on Baptist M.P.s 1847-1914, which was delivered at the Annual Meeting of our Society last year. We are of course already greatly in Dr Bebbington's debt, for his careful documentation of Baptists (and supposed Baptists) at Westminster in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, his concluding work on the subject, both places the latter period in broader perspective, and fills in much interesting (and at times entertaining) colour. The second is by Faith Bowers, on the part played by one family, the Benhams, at Bloomsbury Baptist Church in the last century, in particular the story of James Benham. There is an interesting link between these two essays, in the case of the gallant and somewhat ill-fated Sir Morton Peto. With Dr Bebbington, we see him as the public figure he was. With Mrs Bowers, we see him also as the member of Bloomsbury, the congregation which took counsel on the proper response to his failure. Do our churches today take with like seriousness the situations of their members in the "grey" areas of secular life?

This issue's article on a contemporary subject is by Christopher Ellis, and deals thoughtfully with the extremely important matter of "contextuality" in theology and Christian ethics today, particularly in the ecumenical and international context. It warrants much attention on these terms, and also because it relates to the discussion on baptism which has appeared in the *Quarterly* recently, and which will emerge again in our pages before long.