

Alive to Christian Education and Training.¹

SOME months ago, *The Guardian* carried a photograph of a business executive sitting at his desk, looking somewhat anxious and frustrated. Underneath, the caption read: "Sometimes I wonder whether anybody knows what the hell we are supposed to be doing." It's not the language of Zion, exactly, but it would have been interesting to look behind that picture and see precisely what he meant. To me, it suggested that there was a man whose staff constantly let him down because they had none of them fully understood what they were supposed to be doing.

And there must be many leaders in the Christian Church who have felt the same. Some, with an impish streak in their nature, would no doubt be tempted to stick that picture on the church notice-board, or on the front page of the religious press. Shaun Heron, were he still in charge of the *British Weekly*, would doubtless have found some way of using it.

It is not my purpose to spend half my time diagnosing this situation in detail, but a few odd comments will help us to appreciate the position in which we find ourselves.

Every preacher, for example, knows that the days have gone when he could assume that even his regular churchgoers would appreciate passing references to some of the most well-known incidents of the Bible. The Biblical knowledge of the generation that knew Spurgeon, Clifford and MacLaren has regrettably passed with these men to their tombs.

When you come, in your church meetings, to vote for the Vice-President of the Baptist Union, or to appoint delegates to Association meetings, or to nominate the Association Vice-President or Committee, how many intelligent questions are asked from the floor of the meeting? And how much more often is it left to the minister and one or two members who take an interest in these things?

Most of our young people are brought up with the usual "do's and don'ts" of Nonconformity: no betting, drinking, swearing and so on. But how many of them know why these things are frowned upon? And how many mature church members could tell them? Much less does the average church member know what the church teaches

¹ Presidential address given before the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, 1960, in the light of the second year of the Baptist Union's Ter-Jubilee programme.

about such matters as Christian marriage, education, politics, colour and industry.

Now it is for these and other reasons that the Baptist Union has seen fit, during this year, to summon us to be alive to Christian education and training, and that is in part why we are here this afternoon.

But it is important to understand that we are not doing this simply because the Baptist Union has asked us, but because such education and training is of the essence of our discipleship. When Jesus called the Twelve, he used the word *mathetes*, and a *mathetes* was one who learned by doing. In other words, he was not so much a university student as an apprentice—one who learned as he went along. And so the Christian disciple is one who, in his following of Jesus, must continually be learning and developing.

And I want now to cite three ways in which our churches of today need to pay attention to this subject.

First, the Church needs to be *alive to other forms of education*.

In some respects I think it was providential that last year the Free Churches lost the battle against increased grants for Church Schools. Had we won it, we should have sat back and felt proud; as it is, we are having to re-think our whole approach to education. And if we look back at some of the things that were said and done in that battle we begin to realize how much thought is necessary. What part can the Free Churches play in the modern educational system, when they have next to no schools of their own? The answer is to be found at two levels.

First, at the level of the Bishop's Committee. This is a new committee which is being set up under the aegis of the Bishop in each diocese with the distinct purpose of dealing with problems connected with Church Schools, and also of giving the churches a united approach to other schools. In this diocese of Peterborough the committee consists of eight Anglicans and eight Free Churchmen, one of whom is appointed by this Association.

The possibilities for such a committee are immense, but the important point to note is that any approach made by this body to a school or to a Local Authority is to be made in the name of *all* the churches, and that will do more than anything else to enable the church to regain something of the hold she has lost in the educational field. It is vital that the Free Churches are in at this level, and not only by appointing their representatives, but also by hearing reports and by showing a keen interest in what goes on.

Secondly, at the local level. For more years than one cares to mention, the schools and the churches have gone their separate ways. Both, in a way, have been concerned with education; both have dealt with the same children; both, in some instances, have been staffed by the same teachers, and managed by the same

officers or governors. Yet such has been the fear of causing religious controversy that they have studiously kept the two aspects of their work in water-tight compartments.

According to an official of the Institute of Christian Education, the days in which we live are more favourable to co-operation between schools and churches than ever before; but, he added, the climate may only be temporary. What, therefore, can Christian people do?

There is only time briefly to mention one or two things. A church may invite teachers in the local school to meet teachers in the Sunday School. The professionals could give simple help and advice to those who are but amateurs at the task. Together they could survey what the children were learning in the day school, and how the Sunday School could build on that teaching and avoid repetition.

Heads of schools could be invited to worship in the church on special occasions, and Christian teachers and governors could see to it that ministers were invited into the schools for their special occasions.

This kind of co-operation could not but prove fruitful in bringing together the church and the field of education, and such a marriage would be to the benefit of both.

The second thing the church needs to do is to pay attention to *Training in Responsible Membership*. And here we move into the realm of the church's domestic life.

In Lancashire, where I was brought up and had my training, Sunday Schools catered for everybody from seven to seventy. It is true that the training was restricted, and amounted to little more than Bible study, but at least the people had the idea that you went on learning for the whole of your life, and the set-up provided a wonderful field for educational activity.

Here in Northamptonshire custom is different and Sunday School life ends often at the age of twelve. So that we have to find other ways of training people over that age in responsible membership. There are many ways of tackling this, and I want to draw attention simply to three.

First, by a teaching ministry. Mr. J. E. T. Hough, in *A Charge to the Church*, has a whole chapter on this, in which he reminds us that for many church members the Sunday service is the only occasion on which they receive any kind of teaching or instruction in the Scriptures. There is, therefore, a great need for short series and courses of sermons, of no more than fifteen to twenty minutes each, on Biblical and doctrinal matters. Some of the courses may profitably be repeated after a year or two with due modernisation and application. Such teaching, over a period of years, cannot help but build up a congregation in the faith.

Secondly, there is need for a more imaginative use of the mid-week service. In most instances this is just a handful of the faithful gathering for Bible study and prayer, principally because they feel it ought to be done and there is nobody else to do it. Could it not be that years of struggle and failure in this regard is God's way of asking us to think again?

What about using this opportunity for short courses of instruction? There may be a course of three or four talks on matters of citizenship; or a short refresher course for people who have been members of the church for twenty years and not caught up with modern developments; or a course for deacons; or a course for youth leaders. In each case a specific appeal would be made to a limited number of people for a limited number of weeks, and then they would be given a break whilst attention was directed elsewhere. Again, after a lapse of time, many of these courses could be repeated. The end would inevitably be that members were the better trained for their responsible task of discipleship.

And thirdly, the church needs to make full use of courses of study arranged outside the local church, especially where it is possible to reach examination standard.

Westhill Training College offers short courses for Sunday School teachers, and in this modern age churches must be willing to pay the cost so that teachers—and not only young teachers—should be able to take advantage of them. The Baptist Union has recently started a Certificate course, and for those who want something more advanced there is the Diploma and the London University Certificate in Religious Knowledge. Information about all these should be available locally in every church, and members of all ages encouraged to participate in them.

During the years of Ter-Jubilee the Youth Department of the Baptist Union is issuing a call for 150 new qualified leaders, for 1,500 young people trained for service and for 15,000 trained church members. In each case there is a course of study to be undertaken, followed by some kind of test and recognition. And if church members took this kind of thing seriously, within a couple of decades, we could have an informed, educated and trained church membership.

But there is a third place where the church needs to be alive to these great issues, and that is a matter of *Training for Life*.

Like the field of secular education, this too is almost virgin soil. The church, in so far as she has been concerned with education at all, has rarely been concerned with giving more than tuition in the Bible and the broadest principles of Christian living. Yet we have a wide responsibility, for it is our job to train people for the whole of life, and it is a responsibility that we must discharge to the whole of the community and not simply to our own members.

In some instances, notably that of Christian marriage, this responsibility has been completely undertaken by a non-church body, like the Marriage Guidance Council. This need not perturb us, though it ought to challenge us to send Christian people into the Marriage Guidance movement, as well as to look round and find those fields where education is needed and nobody is doing it.

Take for example the field of industry. Think of a lad, an only child, who has been in the same school for many years, and that a comparatively small community. At fifteen, he is plunged into a factory of several thousand workers with few lads of his own age working near to him, and they are of a much rougher and tougher kind. Can you feel the shock that comes to that lad's system? It's like taking a tender plant out of a hot-house and trying to plant it in cold ground in the middle of January.

That is an extreme case, maybe, but that is how a good many youngsters feel, to varying degrees, when they start work, and any faith they have is put to the test before they are strong enough to bear it.

Have we not a responsibility to get these youngsters together in our churches at the age of fourteen and prepare them for what is coming? Where churches are small perhaps two or three could arrange to work together. The minister could often be left out of it, because there are very few ministers who know anything about this problem; but there are laymen who are experienced and who could put that experience at the disposal of the young.

The field is even wider than that. Many of the things that were once the responsibility of the church are now adequately handled by the State or by voluntary organizations. Most of our Women's Meetings have been ousted by the Townswomen's Guilds, the Women's Institutes or the Darby and Joan Clubs. Most of our Youth Clubs that count are run by the Local Education Authority, and the Community Centre is a new feature of modern life.

And much of this is very desirable, provided that church members are willing to go into these bodies and organizations and to exercise a Christian leaven there, and not to insist on running their own private show for the saints. But then if Christian people are to go into these things in order to bear a Christian witness they are going to need guidance and help as to the most effective way of doing it. Are we training our people for this kind of activity, or are we hoping that all these bodies are going to die, and then all the church organizations will come into their own again? Believe me when I say that a trained army in some of those spheres could do wonderfully effective work for the kingdom of God.

But you haven't understood the whole task of the *mathetes* when you have seen him as an apprentice to a craft. God forbid that the churches should ever become glorified schools or miniature univer-

sities with a Christian bias in everything they did. The disciple was also one who lived and worked with his master and through that intimacy of daily living he received the inspiration for his learning.

And so it is that the focal point for the church is never the classroom but the sanctuary, not the blackboard or the projector, but the cross and the table. In these days it is very right and proper that we should put this emphasis on education and training, but we must not forget that it is only as we live with Jesus, and bow down before him in worship, that we shall receive the inspiration for our learning.

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