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EDITORIAL

The Anabaptists continue to fascinate us. Several factors combine to promote this interest. For Baptists, obviously, there is a natural interest in a movement which historically precedes our own, and yet has such clear theological parallels; not to mention the vexed question of what, if any, degree of historical continuity exists between the Anabaptists and the Baptist tradition via the Mennonites. But the interest reaches wider. In an age when many see authentic Christianity as demanding a critical attitude towards present society and its structures of power, more and more serious attention is being paid to those who pioneered a radical discipleship in the sixteenth century, calling in question the commitment of even the "main" reformers to seek the kingdom of God before all else. As Dr Alan Kreider has so eloquently reminded us, the Anabaptists can always be relied upon to sharpen the edge of the Christian conscience whenever "realism" is drifting towards lazy compromise, and whenever acceptance of suffering begins to look embarrassing.

In this issue, the Anabaptist cause continues to be examined from yet another angle. In the first of a series of articles on Anabaptist attitudes towards childhood and education, David Tennant shows us the basic principles which certain of the Ana-

baptists held regarding infant baptism itself. His further articles will pursue not only this question, but such topics as the Anabaptist views on the upbringing and schooling of children. Those of us outside the specialised field of Anabaptist studies should find this series highly illuminating - as should all of us who are concerned today with the issue of the child in the Church and in the Christian family. That educationists in the last quarter of the twentieth century (when education has itself become a subject of such portentous academic status) should be interested in these radicals of four centuries ago, is revealing.

Whether or not the Baptists in the Black Country, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resented the title of "Anabaptists", we may not know. But that title appears to have been used of those meeting at Dudley. Sidney Hall's article on the General Baptists there, is an excellent example of how rich dividends can be paid when a local historian takes the trouble to work carefully through local church minute books, ecclesiastical returns and county archives, constantly referring and cross-checking from one to the other. A picture begins to emerge of a church membership in terms not only of religious practice, but of occupation, income, social standing, and civic responsibility. When will a novelist or dramatist see the rich potential of such material and its historical background?

Of course, some may consider C. H. Spurgeon to offer more promising possibilities, though others would argue that he needs no dramatisation, certainly not in the pulpit. But for historians of nineteenth century nonconformity, it is Spurgeon out of the pulpit who perhaps provides the most enduring interest. Dr Brian Stanley, in this issue, focusses on a controversy which Spurgeon had with certain of his fellow-Baptists long before the more (in)famous "Down Grade" dispute. That anyone of evangelical convictions should have wanted to quarrel with the policy of the Baptist Missionary Society might at first seem inexplicable. But what was taking place, as Dr Stanley makes clear, was the start of a bifurcation in attitudes towards financial support of overseas missionaries - a polarisation with theological overtones, and one which continues to the present day. Quite apart from its purely historical interest, this essay ought to receive the attention of all who are concerned for the support of the BMS and other missionary bodies, and who wish to understand more of the origins of the so-called "faith-mission" idea. It also, incidentally, adds a little more perspective to the complex nature of Spurgeon's personality, which tended to reveal a variety of emotions as he related respectively to individuals, committees, and larger, undefined groupings within and without the denomination.