

The Modern Peter-Pans

Mr. Andrew Clarke

There are many things we could say about the cultural revolution of the 1960's and its legacy today. However, there is one overarching characteristic that embraces its various expressions. Essentially, it is escapism. We are not just thinking about hippies in a cloud of hazy cannabis. We are thinking about a widespread attitude that tries to escape responsibility and authority. And while it is pervasive throughout all of society, it is most acute among young people. Indeed, to a large extent, it is responsible for the very concept of "young people." The teenager is a recent invention. The 60's popularised the concept of "youth culture," fuelled by the idea that young people are in opposition to the previous generation. Thus young people have their own music, TV channels, styles of dress, fashion and language, which are generally separate from, or opposed to the perceived standards of the previous or "adult" generation. Traditional values - the fossilized legacy of Christianity - are identified with a quaint past, and those out-of-date enough to identify with it. "Youth" stands for freedom and progress. The logical course of action is unavoidable: the revolution must be perpetual, youth cannot grow old, and young people cannot become adults.

In practical terms, this means postponing as best one can the responsibilities of adulthood. Young people realise they are not children and reject parental authority -though not, strangely, parental finance. At the same time they do not want to assume adult responsibilities. It is an attempt to have the best of both worlds: the independence of an adult and the individualism of a child. Close to 50% of young people now enter higher education. Is the motivation a pursuit of knowledge, or the pursuit of the "student experience?" Are students trying to enhance their careers, or delay the responsibilities of a working life? Partially in consequence, the average age of a first marriage grows later, and its duration shorter. Is this not partly because people are unwilling, and then incapa-

ble of undertaking, the responsibility of married life? Does the same not explain the declining birth rate? Children bring obligations, and obligations mean less time that can be spent on ME. The success of feminism is nothing other than men abdicating the authority they are obliged to exert. The tyrannical hand of the state into every area of life is not some evil conspiracy; rather, it is the church and family abandoning their responsibilities. The destruction of democracy by our submergence into Europe is because our citizens are unable and unwilling to give five minutes independent thought to the subject. Little Johnny does not like to stop playing in order to wash the dishes. Young people do not want to stop "playing" and devote the time and money necessary to raise children, make marriage a success, support the church (supposing they have some attachment), or take an interest in the political well-being of their country. In short, pagans and lazy Christians are creating a Never-Never land of Peter-Pans, flying in the face of reality, without the magic of Tinkerbell to make it work.

How then are we to evaluate the parallel explosion of assorted youth organisations, conferences and magazines within Christianity? That they are a recent development is obvious. *The Acts of the Apostles* fails to record the activities of the Antioch Teen Ministries, while we have lost all record of Calvin's contribution to the Geneva Youth Fellowship. This, however, should not lead us to assume that all youth work is wrong. We have Jesus' own command to "Feed my lambs," and the Scriptures contain much instruction addressed explicitly to young people, such as the books of Timothy and Titus, much of Proverbs, and many smaller passages scattered throughout the rest of the Bible. God's Word thereby teaches that youth face particular problems and that there is a need for the Word of God to be specifically applied to them. There is also a Scriptural precedent for the church to address herself to a particular group. The office of deacon was created in response to the need among a certain section of the church for particular help. Paul was devoted to missionary work among the Gentiles, Peter among the Jews. Reformed churches have traditionally given special attention to the education of young people, especially

through catechism. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, as the name suggests, is a simplified version of the *Larger Catechism*, explicitly written for those with limited abilities to learn.

The vital factor is that the work among youth is a response, and not a reflection of ungodly culture. Prefixing folly with the word "Christian" does not sanctify it. A recent example is a film produced by the *Youth For Christ* organisation.¹ Planned to be shown in secondary schools this autumn, it attempts to make the life of Christ relevant to contemporary youth culture. Jesus is a fifteen-year-old schoolboy; Mary Magdalene is a single mother who aborts her baby. Betrayed for a "hit" of cocaine, Christ dies in a stabbing by a school friend. It may be relevant, and in solitary confinement, it might be entertaining. But by ignoring Christ's divinity and the saving power of His death, it fails to present a way out of the lifestyles it depicts. The *Church of England*, is indulging in similar folly. The Birmingham diocese is running a series of poster campaigns with the hope of attracting young people to church.² One reads: "Body piercing? Jesus had his done 2,000 years ago." Another is aimed at drug users and says "Life gone to pot? Made a hash of things? Things not too E-asy? Love is the drug." A Church spokesperson defends these on the grounds "that we are only trying to talk to young people in their own language." Yet in doing so, it does not bring the joy and power of the gospel to such a way of life. Instead it is swamped by its own despair.

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¹*Daily Telegraph*, 4-9-01.

²*Daily Telegraph*, 31-8-01.

tian culture trains its youth for adulthood. The one is an attempt to escape *from* the responsibilities of maturity, the other a training *for* them. This is not to say that that youth work consists solely in a metaphorical rod of correction driving folly from the heart of a child (Prov. 22:15). There is also a sort of youthful wisdom that must be harnessed for the kingdom of God. Hopefully, with most issues of this magazine, we will try to do this by an article dealing with issues affecting young people. We will deal with some of the passages mentioned above, case studies of young heroes from Scripture and history, apologetics, education, relationships, and other pertinent topics. If you have anything you would like considered, we would be delighted to hear from you.

This article was authored by Andrew Clarke, a classics undergraduate at Cambridge University.

W. J. Seaton, on youth evangelism: “Surely, honesty itself should drive us to see that after all these years of youth evangelism in one form or another, the churches should be packed full of men and women of all ages, and especially the most vital of all age groups, the middle-aged and mature group of believing souls. But, this is far from being the case, and instead of youth work, in general, infusing continuous new life into the churches, it, in fact, appears to cut off the supply, for when many young people become men and women and begin to ‘put away childish things,’ they look on the childish interpretation of Christianity which they have received as one of the first things to go” (*Youthism in the Church*, p. 4).