

“The Nurture and Admonition of the Lord” : Nineteenth-Century Canadian Methodism’s Response to “Childhood”

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I

By the close of the nineteenth century, a variety of social institutions were focusing on children as a group especially vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation. Although the family remained central to any concerted effort at protection and advancement, it was not always either capable or willing to promote the child’s best interests. Too often the welfare of the child was sacrificed to the economic needs of the family unit. Furthermore, society in general began gradually to recognize that it had a vested interest in the welfare of its younger members. Hence, a broad spectrum of private and state-administered agencies accepted an increased responsibility for the advancement of the young.

A great deal has been written, and continues to be written, on secular institutions that attempted to control, educate and promote young people.¹ A major aspect of these writings centres on the changing perception of childhood and adolescence. To several authors, “childhood” emerged as a distinctive phase of life in response to a complex web of social, demographic and intellectual factors at the end of the eighteenth century. As the nineteenth century progressed, the child became, in fact, the primary focus of family life and, thus, a central commitment of society. This status and the responsibilities associated with it were heightened by pressures exerted by industrialization and urbanization.

Although most of these writers recognize the moral and spiritual underpinnings of social attitudes, they fail to appreciate the specific role of religious institutions in fostering the interests of the child. The religious denominations progressively acknowledged children’s worth and expanded their orientation to nurturing the young. The Church’s involvement was naturally couched in theological terms and dealt with the spiritual and

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¹ See for instance the recent works: Neil SUTHERLAND, *Children in English-Canadian Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); David MACLEOD, “A Live Vaccine. The YMCA and Male Adolescence in the United States and Canada, 1870-1920”, *Histoire Sociale — Social History*, XI (May 1978): 5-25.

moral nature of the child; it was, also, closely linked with the broader welfare of the denomination and society in general. But, once convinced of the unique status of the child, the Church provided critical respectability and support for concerted activities on his behalf. What follows, then, is a brief analysis of the moral nature of the child in Canadian Methodism and a general examination of its supervision of the young. In essence, the study attempts to clarify the expanded definition Methodism gave to the biblical injunction to bring up children in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord".

During the last half of the nineteenth century, Methodism was being transformed from a select body of converts into a far-reaching urban, social institution.² Reacting to the consolidating influence of urbanization and industrialization, the Church was now capable of adopting and integrating new perceptions of childhood into the Canadian community. Methodism aspired to help civilize and christianize the entire nation and much of the world beyond. At the same time, many Church leaders also acknowledged a greater obligation on the part of the Church to provide detailed pastoral care of its own members. It was vital, therefore, that all citizens be bound in religious fellowship. The greatest protection that society could offer to children was religion itself, just as the Church could be a powerful ally for the young in the secular world. Since children constituted an important source of renewed leadership and financial support for Methodist operations in the future, they had to be retained in the denomination and under preferred spiritual and moral discipline in order to sustain the prosperity of the Church and society, as well as for their own present benefit. The response of Methodism hinged on these twin imperatives.

Methodism was also well aware of the increased emphasis on childhood by society at large. Canada could not help but share the romantic insistence that children were the special objects of God's favour and, of necessity, the true recipients of parental affection. As Philippe Ariès points out in his study of family life in early modern Europe, with the increased survival rate of infants, greater affection could be more safely spent on the young.³ The character and development of childhood, therefore, could legitimately become of crucial significance to the entire community. The Church assisted in the recognition and expansion of children's status by attempting to reform manners, notions of child-rearing and education.⁴ "The result was the formation of that moral concept which insisted on the weakness of childhood ... but which associated its weakness with its innocence, the true reflection of divine purity."⁵

Other historians have also noted this symbiotic relationship between Church and secular society. Each gained sustenance from beliefs current in the other in magnifying the perception of childhood. More specifically,

² Neil SEMPLE, "The Impact of Urbanization on the Methodist Church in Central Canada, 1854-1884" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1979).

³ Philippe ARIÈS, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldick (London: Jonathon Cape, 1962), p. 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

authors such as Peter Slater, Philip Greven and Joseph Kett have detailed the growing appreciation of the moral nature of the young in America.⁶ By the nineteenth century, the inherent sinfulness and impurity of infants had ceased to be a viable theological tenet.⁷ Under pressure from romantic sentimentalism, popular belief would simply not tolerate the resulting eternal damnation for deceased infants. In fact, even the view that children were neutral, *tabula rasa* — blank surfaces upon which proper attributes could be etched — was giving way to the trust that children were both innocent and naturally moral creatures. Under such assurance, the Church could more logically protect and praise childhood.

Despite the apparent support for such positive notions, however, it must be remembered that Canadian society was by no means unanimous in its acceptance of the improved status of children. Old fears and assumptions, even when rarely articulated, continued to exert significant force, so that a person could retain a confusing array of contradictory beliefs. Even the influential educator Egerton Ryerson could act as if children were at once evil and dangerous, neutral and able to be moulded by society, and moral, needing only protection to prevent deviancy.⁸ The reaction often depended on the circumstances and the specific issue at stake.

Although the nineteenth century may have "discovered" the child, it would have to run its full course in Canada before his status was assured. This time was required for the implications of economic and social readjustment associated with industrialization and urbanization to establish childhood as a prolonged state of dependency and as a vital preparatory stage for proper adulthood.⁹ Nevertheless, by the end of the century, parental and institutional discipline and affection had commingled with the new economic and social assumptions in optimistically addressing childhood and in attempting to create a harmonious, orderly and prosperous community.

II

As alluded to earlier, underlying the shift in the Methodist Church's response to the young was a gradual re-evaluation of the theological assumptions as to the native spiritual condition of the child, the related

⁶ Peter SLATER, *Children in the New England Mind* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977); Philip GREVEN, *The Protestant Temperament* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Joseph KETT, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America", in *The Family in History; Interdisciplinary Essays*, eds: Theodore RABB & Robert ROTBERG (New York: M.I.T. Press, 1971; reprinted Octagon Books, 1976).

⁷ SLATER, *Children in the New England Mind*, p. 90.

⁸ Alison PRENTICE, *The School Promoters* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 33; Egerton RYERSON, *Scriptural Rights of the Members of Christ's Visible Church* (Toronto: Brewer & McPhail, 1854), pp. 10-12; Egerton RYERSON, *First Lessons in Christian Morals for Canadian families and schools*, (Toronto: Copp, 1871).

⁹ SUTHERLAND, *Children in English-Canadian Society*, p. 21.

dispensation granted by baptism, and a more substantial alliance with religious auxiliaries such as Sunday schools. Traditional Wesleyan doctrine declared that all mankind was heir to sin and death through Adam's fall from grace. Christ's own death and resurrection — His atonement for the sins of the whole world — was not a dissolution of this punishment; it rather permitted His advocacy for spiritual life on behalf of all those who truly confessed their faults. The New Covenant of God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, promised a dispensation from damnation to those who consciously, responsibly, and decisively rejected Satan and actively sought redemption.

The cornerstone of Methodism was justification by faith,¹⁰ and, in turn, that faith emphasized conversion as a conscious and responsible act. Irrespective of perceptions of stages of life, mankind was divided meaningfully only between the saved and the damned. By definition, the very young lacked the maturity, and its accompanying responsibility, to make a conscious decision for Christ. Little attempt was made to put an age limit on this irresponsible state, but it was generally assumed to have ended at about four or five when a child recognized the difference between right and wrong. Infants were in a state of irresponsibility and therefore were damned until at some later time they were able to be reborn as Christians.

These theological beliefs continued to retain staunch supporters in Canada until well into the second half of the nineteenth century. This group, led by John Marshall and Nathanael Burwash, supported the old-style, Wesleyan viewpoint that children shared man's fall with Adam.¹¹ In a pamphlet, *Scriptural Answer to a Pamphlet by A. Sutherland, on the Moral Status of Children*, Marshall quoted John iii, 3, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God", to substantiate his belief in the necessity of a positive act of spiritual rebirth in order to be redeemed from condemnation.¹² Christ's atonement, he repeated, did not regenerate man; it only made it possible for man, by his own submission to God, to be saved.¹³ Young children, because they lacked responsibility, did not commit sin, which was a conscious and wilful renunciation of Christ, but they possessed an evil nature which would lead them to sin when they matured.¹⁴ The first mature act must be sinful for nothing good could emerge from an evil, unregenerated spirit.¹⁵

Nathanael Burwash, the head of the faculty of theology at Victoria College, in *The Relation of Children to The Fall, The Atonement and The*

¹⁰ Thomas LANGFORD, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Justification by Faith", in *Papers*, Canadian Methodist Historical Society, 1978, pp. 1-3.

¹¹ See for instance: Nathanael BURWASH, *The Relation of Children to The Fall, The Atonement and The Church* (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1882); John MARSHALL, *Scriptural Answer to a Pamphlet by A. Sutherland, on The Moral Status of Children* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Co., 1877).

¹² MARSHALL, *Scriptural Answer*, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Christian Guardian*, 5 July 1882, p. 214.

Church, or, The Moral Condition of Childhood, agreed with Marshall. He also turned to the Bible to prove all men were born in sin.

In these various passages ... we have the fullest statements not only of the nature but also of the extent of this depravity, and all agree in presenting it as a state out of which no good thing can be brought by the power of our own will. And this is the moral state in which we are born, and from which we can be delivered only by the great change of the New Birth.¹⁶

According to Burwash, children were still inherently evil, but they were innocent because of their irresponsibility. Many contemporary Canadians who actively sought children's welfare, while still conscious of their depravity, stressed this innocence.¹⁷ Confusion was often the result; and this confusion has been transferred to modern students of the status of children. Infants were innocent of sin, not of depravity. This innocence was broken when they actively transgressed against God and broke Christ's covenant.¹⁸ Christ's atonement represented this new covenant with man and was a probation from original sin available to those who reunited with God.¹⁹ Although the new covenant was more merciful than that originally promised to the Israelites, it was not, according to Burwash, an open-ended repudiation of original depravity.

In spite of such arguments, however, both Burwash and Marshall found themselves in a serious dilemma. It was extremely difficult for them to suggest that a benevolent and merciful God would condemn innocent children, who died in infancy, to eternity in hell simply because they had not consciously rejected sin. The New Testament was full of examples that illustrated God was love and that He was particularly interested in protecting the innocent.

Furthermore, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the infant was too deeply ensconced at the heart of the family. Romantic sentimentalism favoured a more triumphant station for the dead infant. A minister preaching at a child's funeral, even if he could overcome his own sensitivities, found it both practically and emotionally difficult to infer natural depravity in the infant. Such theological precepts had little place in Victorian Canada or in the daily operations of a church attempting to fulfill a positive social and moral mandate in the community.

Burwash had no particular answer to such criticisms, but he did believe God would somehow look after the dead infant. Marshall went slightly further and suggested these children were actually regenerated through the special intercession of the Holy Spirit, "at or immediately before death; and this sanctifies and prepares the soul for the heavenly paradise".²⁰ Although he could discover no scriptural proof for this belief, he felt it was true since the Bible never actually denied it. Moreover, he

¹⁶ BURWASH, *The Relation of Children*, p. 8.

¹⁷ PRENTICE, *The School Promoters*, p. 28.

¹⁸ BURWASH, *The Relation of Children*, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

²⁰ MARSHALL, *Scriptural Answer*, p. 9.

could appreciate the arguments that God was mercy. In response to the question, Marshall concluded that it was part of the secret things that belonged to Christ and, therefore, beyond man's comprehension — a favourite argument for meeting challenges to popular beliefs.²¹ Thus, even the ardent supporters of infant depravity felt obliged, in light of popular sentiment, to soften the harshness and undermine the consistency of traditional theology.

By the 1870s, however, Canadian Methodism was searching for an even more positive recognition of childhood. This movement was led by a respected group of ministers including Henry Bland, Alexander Sutherland and Egerton Ryerson. Henry Bland, in his pamphlet, *Universal Childhood drawn to Christ*,²² staunchly disagreed with Marshall, Burwash and their supporters. All children could be and were drawn to Christ by His unique promise to them. They differed from adults in that they were not subjects of man's initial fall. Using Romans, v, 18, "Therefore as by the offence of one judgement came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life", Bland argued that conscious sin was necessary to destroy Christ's atonement and, therefore, children were part of an unconditional covenant.²³

And it is observable that the Apostle is here speaking, (Romans v) not of the conditional benefits of Atonement, those which come to man on repentance and faith, but of the unconditional, those which affect the race before accountability begins. His argument is, if infancy be dead through Adam, infancy receives the gift of grace through Jesus Christ.²⁴

Based on this scriptural account, and on his own perception of the logic and benevolence of religion, Bland declared:

During the years of accountability none are drawn to Christ savingly, but by the exercise of repentance and faith; but childhood, being unaccountable, and incapable of any active concurrence, is drawn absolutely into saving contact with the Atonement.²⁵

Alexander Sutherland also accepted this more optimistic view of the nature of childhood. In his booklet, *The Moral Status of Children*, he asserted:

Adopting this view we hold that all men are fallen in Adam, but redeemed by Christ; that the "free gift" has, through atonement, come upon all, and there-

²¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²² Henry Flesher BLAND, *Universal Childhood drawn to Christ* (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1882); the original lecture was presented in 1875.

²³ A later generation of preachers, including Henry Bland's son, Salem Bland, would expand this optimistic perception to all mankind. If sin were necessary for a breach in Christ's covenant, then many moral and devout adults might also share in this exalted condition since they never sinned. If some could be thus spared, then, it was the obligation of the Church to help create an environment that would expand the kingdom of God on earth and encompass all mankind. Under increased optimism and trust in present earthly progress, a significant stimulus was added to the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century in Canada.

²⁴ BLAND, *Universal Childhood*, p. 10.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

fore that every child born into the world is to be regarded as redeemed to God — an heir to the kingdom of heaven.²⁶

The child's proneness to evil emerged only with the age of accountability. As the century progressed, there developed a tendency to expand the period of safety and to increase the age at which accountability began. Moreover, the belief became more widespread that Christian nurture and moral upbringing could keep the child from sinning and, hence, from suffering the consequences of Adam's fall. Therefore, if a child proceeded directly to spiritual enlightenment under the influence of God, and never broke the initial covenant of Christ, this was as legitimate as a dramatic personal conversion and did not need to be preceded by a fall from grace. The necessity of rebirth and re-entry into the safety and innocence of childhood was abolished.²⁷

Isaac Brock Aylesworth, a respected leader of the Ontario Methodist connexion, later elaborated this theme; creation and redemption were performed to reveal God. Christ's death and resurrection, His propitiation for the sins of the whole world, gave real substance to the promise first made to Adam and extended its benefits to all mankind. In this sense, it was a uniquely powerful revelation.²⁸ Creation and atonement, in consequence, were both parts of the same act. As such, even with Adam's fall, the spark of God remaining from creation was multiplied by the intercession and sacrifice of His Son.

Each individual soul being the direct offspring of God, partakes of the very nature of God. As the atonement always exists each soul comes into existence under the blessings of its benefits ... If God is the author of any part of our being, that part of us must be sinless in its origin.²⁹

More especially, for all mankind, Christ's atonement was superior to Adam's sin.

If the first man, Adam who is dead, can communicate defilement or guilt to the generations born centuries after his death, how much more can the last Adam, who is the living Christ, and a quickening spirit, and even liveth to give life, how much more shall he save to the uttermost every child of Adam, unless He is wilfully rejected.³⁰

Through Christ's saving grace, that sinless part of man initially created by God was given dominion. It appeared unnatural and untenable that Adam's sin condemned mankind, and especially innocent children, to total and unrelenting destruction, while Christ's glory only indicated the possibility of salvation.³¹ According to a growing number of Canadian Methodists, neither the scriptures nor any understanding of the nature and wisdom of God could really be founded on such principles.

²⁶ Alexander SUTHERLAND, *The Moral Status of Children* (Toronto: Bell & Co., 1876), pp. 12-13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁸ Isaac Brock AYLESWORTH, "God's Eternal Purpose", in *Sermons by Ministers of the Guelph Conference*, ed.: David ROGERS (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1886), p. 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³¹ *Christian Guardian*, 5 July 1882, p. 214.

Furthermore, if the proponents of infant spirituality were correct, and children were already in a state of grace, the Holy Spirit did not have to intervene miraculously at death to regenerate an infant. Without depravity, regeneration and active repentance were not required. Marshall's contention that this intercession occurred actually demonstrated children were in a higher state of grace since they were worthy of this special consideration. Innocence from sin rather than from depravity was not a proper basis, in itself, for the Holy Spirit's involvement. If this proposition were true, why not suppose the infant rightfully proceeded to heaven through Christ's atonement? Such an approach appeared more logical and more in keeping with the mercy of God to a large proportion of Canadian Methodists.

The divergent opinions suggested by Burwash and Marshall, on the one hand, and by Bland and Sutherland, on the other, continued to be present in Canada throughout the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that both sides had clear scriptural support, Burwash and Marshall were arguing in a social vacuum. Their theological precision was irrelevant and overly harsh for Victorian Canada. Gradually, the community at large acknowledged the more optimistic and merciful interpretations of Bland and Sutherland, which seemed to be more appropriate for the experiences of the age. By the 1880s, urbane, middle-class Methodists found more appeal in the presence of at least a germ of salvation in their children.³² They had been raised in a moral environment by moral and spiritually strong parents and appeared eager and capable of achieving a union with Christ.

In trusting in the righteousness of the middle-class, Protestant environment, a profound obligation for social action was established and progressively expanded. Much of the deep-seated fear of chaos, social deviancy and loss of disciplined authority which characterized middle-class attitudes toward the poor, and especially the children of the poor, hinged on the perceived weakness of lower-class home and social life. While great trust could be placed in their own children's righteousness, assuming proper moral training had been instituted, an equally powerful paranoia existed with regard to those foreign to similar restraints. The obvious response was to attempt to shape society to the preconceived ideal and to trust in education as the most effective instrument in this process. Such attitudes were central to late nineteenth-century reform movements.

The pre-eminent belief was that children were the fragile and preferred subjects of Christ. With supervision, discipline and a sound environment, conversion would not be necessary and the safety of childhood could be extended for all children at least into adolescence. Thus, the Methodist Church came to locate a special trust in childhood and accepted a responsibility to nurture the young for the benefit and advancement of society.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

III

The Christian nurture of the child had two main elements in Canada. The Church endeavoured to bind the young into its institutional connexion and strove to regulate their training and social surroundings. Membership in the Methodist Church had been traditionally based on a "will-
ingness to flee from the wrath to come", or, in other words, the total subjugation of self to the will and love of God. It had been promoted and disciplined by meeting in a spiritually refreshing group called a "class-meeting". This assembly resembled a group confessional which supervised the spiritual and moral health of its members. Attendance was compulsory.³³

As early as the 1850s, however, many sincere Methodists recognized that the class-meeting had lost its spontaneity and acted as a hindrance to the expanding pastoral function of the Church.³⁴ This narrowness was especially damaging since the class-meeting discriminated against children. Since the young, even if technically at the age of responsibility, were considered too immature to comprehend the obligations of union with Christ, the Church had failed to integrate them into its fellowship. At the same time, it had also neglected their spiritual welfare and was satisfied to wait until they were more mature before attacking their deviant nature. With the increasing awareness of childhood, many Methodist leaders advocated a reappraisal of the basis of membership and an earlier commencement of Christian nurture.

Egerton Ryerson, among others, demanded that the Church adopt a membership based on baptism,³⁵ which was the scriptural foundation for sharing in the Church's benefits. He was unable to alter dramatically the Methodist polity during the 1850s,³⁶ because the general Church leadership feared that any alteration in the class-meeting or the obligations of membership would weaken the fervent enthusiasm of the connexion and lead to formality and spiritual decline.³⁷ It would not be until the positive moral status of childhood gained wide acceptance by the 1870s that Methodism would place greater reliance on this sacrament.

For those who believed children were totally depraved, baptism could not be a legitimate foundation for membership in the Church on Earth. For instance, they argued that baptism did not grant membership in the invisible or spiritual church and should not, therefore, initiate one into the

³³ John CARROLL, *My Boy Life* (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1882), p. 251; William Morley PUNSHON, *Tabor: or the Class Meeting* (Toronto: Sanderson, 1855), pp. 6-10; Jeremiah CHAPMAN, *The Class Meeting* (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, n.d.), p. 9.

³⁴ United Church Archives, Ryerson Correspondence, Egerton Ryerson to Enoch Wood, 2 January 1854, p. 3.

³⁵ Egerton RYERSON, *The Story of My Life*, ed.: J. G. HODGINS (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1883), p. 481; RYERSON, *Scriptural Rights of Members*, p. 12.

³⁶ United Church Archives, Ryerson Correspondence, Egerton Ryerson to J. G. Hodgins, 8 November 1855; WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1856, p. 359.

³⁷ Henry WILKINSON, *The Antidote to Dr. Ryerson's Scriptural Rights* (London: Henry Newcombe, 1855).

visible earthly church.³⁸ Baptism, to traditional Methodism, was only the new circumcision, the New Testament method of bringing individuals into the covenant of Christ.³⁹ It had no regenerative power and merely recognized God's promise of possible future salvation. John Marshall reinforced this view; repentance and regeneration were inseparable. No one could be regenerated without decisively repenting his faults.⁴⁰ As long as it was assumed that children were part of the corrupt world, no sacrament performed by man could undo the initial condemnation of God. In consequence, the Methodist Church was obliged to deny membership based on the sacrament of baptism and the young were to continue in a subordinate and peripheral relationship to the Church.

The denial of membership to the baptized was fervently attacked by supporters of childhood spiritual safety. Alexander Sutherland clearly denied notions of predestination or special election, and was especially critical of baptismal regeneration.⁴¹ Yet he grounded his opposition on the belief that children were already saved. In this condition, regeneration was not necessary; hence, baptism merely confirmed a pre-existing covenant relationship. It was "a beautiful and expressive symbol of the Holy Spirit's work, and the seal which attests the child's covenant relation with God".⁴²

By the 1870s, as well, E. Hartley Dewart, the editor of the *Christian Guardian*, added to the disagreement with Marshall and his colleagues and brought the full power of his newspaper to the cause; regeneration and repentance were two distinct acts.⁴³ The symbolic rejection of sin through baptism, was possible even when regeneration was unnecessary. Later, the *Christian Guardian* argued that it was impossible for the Church conscientiously to administer baptism to children with a depraved nature.⁴⁴ Rather, there was an initial justification present and children were not only entitled to the sacrament as a symbol of this spiritual promise, but also deserved the benefits and protection of full membership in the Methodist Church.⁴⁵ As Henry Bland declared, "The rite of Baptism admits to membership with the visible Church one whom Christ has already adopted and received".⁴⁶ As a result of the popularity and logic of these arguments, by the 1880s, most Canadian Methodists had adopted both an optimistic view of the moral status of childhood and had worked out the implications of baptism in order to elaborate and justify a direct control over the young.

³⁸ Stephen BOND, *Church Membership; or, the conditions of New Testament and Methodist Church membership examined and compared* (Toronto: Wm. Briggs, 1882), p. 14.

³⁹ John CARROLL, *Reasons for Methodist Belief and Practice relative to Water Baptism* (Toronto: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1870), p. 30; *The Wesleyan Sunday-School Magazine*, II (1858): 151.

⁴⁰ MARSHALL, *Scriptural Answer*, p. 5.

⁴¹ SUTHERLAND, *The Moral Status of Children*, p. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴³ *Christian Guardian*, 17 June 1874, p. 190.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 July 1882, p. 214.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 July 1883, p. 236.

⁴⁶ BLAND, *Universal Childhood*, p. 12.

Paralleling this justification, the denomination also established a direct involvement in protecting the child by inculcating sound moral and spiritual principles.

The last decade [1860s] has witnessed a remarkable growth of interest throughout the Christian world, in the religious welfare of the young. That they constitute, in an important sense, the hope of the Church and have a strong claim on her sympathy and help is now universally admitted; and coupled with this, there is a growing conviction that their relation to Christ and to his Church has not hitherto been fully appreciated or understood.⁴⁷

If the Church lost a child by its own neglect, then, it was open to severe and legitimate censure. Furthermore, as Egerton Ryerson had maintained since the 1850s:

It is the humiliating and most painful fact that the great majority of Methodist youth are lost to the Church ... The return of prodigals, and the accession of strangers and aliens to the body, are indeed causes of thankfulness and rejoicing; but prevention is better than reformation in manhood.⁴⁸

Ryerson carried this crusade into the secular reform field as well. He sincerely trusted in the value of education in restraining immorality and in strengthening authority, discipline and social progress. Direct supervision of children was an essential prerequisite of any meaningful social improvement.

Even Nathanael Burwash, who disagreed with Ryerson as to the moral status of children, joined him in the cause of a more dynamic mission to the young. As an educator as well as a preacher, he too believed:

Children are presented by Christ as candidates for the kingdom, with young hearts open to receive the truth, in that believing receptive state into which the seed of the kingdom may most easily enter, and bring forth the fruits of eternal life.⁴⁹

Burwash felt that the Church would lose a critical opportunity to fight Satan when he was most vulnerable if it failed to minister actively to the young. Canadian society would suffer the ultimate consequences in future degradation, while the child would be less likely ever to achieve a spiritual rebirth and a subsequent safety in heaven. In these beliefs, he was joined by Conrad VanDusen⁵⁰ and Hartley Dewart who both conscientiously demanded aid for the young in experimental religion. In this way, as Alexander Sutherland declared, “these buds of piety may open into flowers of paradise”.⁵¹

Gradually, Methodism came to agree that a religious decision should be encouraged as early as possible and the Church should maintain a watchful dedication to the young. Religion should provide a shield against the

⁴⁷ SUTHERLAND, *The Moral Status of Children*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ RYERSON, *Scriptural Rights*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ BURWASH, *The Relation of Children*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ CONRAD VANDUSEN, *The Successful Young Evangelist* (Toronto: Dredge, 1870), p. 78.

⁵¹ ALEXANDER SUTHERLAND, *Counsels to Young Converts* (Toronto: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1871), p. 78.

uncertainty and threats of adolescence and older childhood rather than a confirmation of maturity when the youth attained social and economic independence and entered the adult world. For Methodists, revival interest shifted from those in their early twenties to children entering their teenage years.⁵² It was both the most responsive and dangerous stage in life. Even children who might stray from religion would retain a spark of training that could more easily be rekindled at a later date. Hence, not only were the young perceived as clay to be moulded by society, they were most easily shaped into proper moral creatures. Virtue had an advantage over sin.

In striving to sustain children as direct subjects of its mission, Methodism laboured to make religion more comprehensible and appealing to the young. Religion was not to frighten, but to enliven. "True religion pulsates with joy and is radiant with smiles, and wins the heart of youth by its loveliness, while it cheers the heart of age by its sweetness."⁵³ The entire ministry was to be couched in terms the child could appreciate. Religion was to speak directly and unambiguously to the young. To most clergy, this did not imply condescending to the simple expression of the most youthful listener; rather, it demanded the formulation of the great central truths of religion in direct and unequivocal terms. Methodism, in fact, had gradually come to agree that a more optimistic trust in the saving power of the spirit, as opposed to a pessimistic emphasis on the natural depravity of man, was crucial for the nurture of both young and old and for the true progress of Victorian Canada.⁵⁴

IV

As the preceding indicates, the encouragement of strong denominational ties and the direct supervision of the young represented powerful priorities for late nineteenth-century Methodism. The Methodist Church, as well, reinforced other secular and moral agencies in protecting, disciplining and educating children. Spiritual concerns easily melded with the general reform of Victorian Canada and were especially vital in the emphasis on childhood and adolescence.

It must always be remembered, for instance, that Egerton Ryerson was a Methodist minister deeply interested in the moral and spiritual welfare of the young long before he became the father of the Ontario education system. The value of education in improving society was deeply indebted to notions of the ability of the young to be positively moulded. All reformers in Canada held a deep personal commitment to religion, attended to and were influenced by religion, and agreed with the intellectual milieu

⁵² KETT, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America", p. 110. In Canada, there was an increased interest in children at traditional revival services such as Camp Meetings. Payson Hammond and other prominent evangelists of the 1870s and 1880s built their reputations by carrying revival to children and adolescents.

⁵³ RYERSON, *First Lessons in Christian Morals*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Christian Guardian*, 7 March 1877, p. 76.

that the Christian Churches promulgated. Certainly, as Alison Prentice and Susan Houston have illustrated,⁵⁵ respectable morality was as central to education as the imparting of any specific knowledge. The increasing trust in a gradual evolution of personal morality also linked closely with the natural progression in the school training.⁵⁶ It was in these terms, as well, that higher education was considered the proper sphere of the Churches. Ultimately, education was a knowledge of and obedience to God's authority. Indeed, the various reform movements shared with Methodism a sincere trust in the role of institutions to supplement the individual and the family in shaping future society.

Moreover, the nature of the values imparted to the young were shared by both sacred and secular institutions; discipline, order and authority were essential prerequisites of all social harmony and progress. To Methodists, respect for the authority of God and His appointed institutions was critical to the subjugation of will and the achievement of inner sanctification.⁵⁷ In all areas of reform, as Susan Houston maintains:

the attraction of a disciplined environment ... was an extension of the implicit faith which intelligent and successful men placed in habits of industry and restraint for themselves and their own children as well as for someone else's. They believed that order and discipline lay at the foundation of good character.⁵⁸

The continuous and, at times, tiring repetition of these goals suggests that not all children were modest, self-effacing and obedient. Yet these were the attributes the community demanded. Depraved children had posed a serious challenge to social tranquillity and authority; the newly-emancipated child was only slightly less dangerous. Although the community might be safer initially, the obligation was expanded to prevent the child's fall into destructive habits. All reform institutions, therefore, were geared to bring "sanctity and order to human affairs".⁵⁹

In striving to attain these goals, Methodism also sought to banish evil from the world at large. It joined in the appreciation of the distinct phases of childhood and the problems associated with each. In addition to directing its revival at adolescents, it also recognized that, beginning with puberty and extending until economic and social independence occurred, the young person was in particular danger. Sexual maturity, at a time when declining parental controls had not been fully replaced by the self-restraints

⁵⁵ Susan HOUSTON, "The Impetus to Reform: urban crime, poverty and ignorance in Ontario, 1850-1875" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1974), p. 327; PRENTICE, *The School Promoters*, p. 30.

⁵⁶ KETT, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America", pp. 109-10.

⁵⁷ GREVEN, *The Protestant Temperament*, pp. 21, 64-65; SLATER, *Children in the New England Mind*, p. 131; John LAING, *The Family: God's Appointed Institution* (Dundas, Ont.: J. Somerville, 1878), p. 6; James GEORGE, *The Sabbath School of the Fireside* (Kingston: James Creighton, 1859), p. 1; BIBLE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1869, pp. 19-20; WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1868, p. 124.

⁵⁸ HOUSTON, "The Impetus to Reform", pp. 152-53; See also, *ibid.*, p. 327; PRENTICE, *The School Promoters*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

of adulthood, placed intolerable pressures on the adolescent. Furthermore, this phase of life was marked by psychological and intellectual upheaval.⁶⁰ As if to compensate, however, nature had endowed adolescence with a "moral idealism, chivalry and religious enthusiasm",⁶¹ that it was the duty of both secular and religious bodies to nurture and discipline.⁶² Thus, along with traditional involvement in temperance, sabbatarianism and moral conduct in the adult world, Canadian Methodism concentrated on reforming the young.

Clearly, then, the Methodist Church augmented the crucial obligations to the young demanded by the community at large. Most critically, however, it operated through the Sabbath or Sunday school both to bind the young to the Church's fellowship and to nurture and superintend their moral character. During the last half of the nineteenth century, the Sunday school emerged as an articulate, well-organized and extremely successful arm of the Churches.

The earliest Sabbath or "ragged" schools had been organized by Robert Raikes in England and quickly gained popularity during the last half of the eighteenth century.⁶³ Although many leading churchmen, including John Wesley, actively supported the Sabbath-school movement, it originally had no formal ties with any denomination. The first Sabbath schools provided an important opportunity for self-improvement among the poorer classes on the only day free from labour. Although the basic textbook was the Bible, the real purpose was general rather than religious instruction.⁶⁴ This secular emphasis was maintained in Britain, especially in the larger industrial centres, for a considerably longer time than in North America.⁶⁵

In Canada, the Sabbath school almost immediately adopted a more evangelical preoccupation. Training in reading and writing was really only retained for the youngest children. This change was probably caused by the different group dealt with by the schools; the poor and "ragged" products of early industrialization did not exist in Canada to any measurable degree. Usually the home and public schools could also be relied upon to provide at least the fundamentals of education. Later, although Sunday schools contributed to the mission to the urban poor, they were pre-eminently the moral institution for the children of the respectable classes.

The Churches quickly seized upon the assistance of the lay-controlled Sabbath-school movement in their evangelical mission. In the early nineteenth century, Methodism was especially responsive to this aid in bringing religious organization to the pioneer areas of the country. In many

⁶⁰ KETT, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America", pp. 99-103.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶² MACLEOD, "A Live Vaccine", p. 11.

⁶³ For more details on the early history of the Sabbath schools see, *The Encyclopaedia of Sunday Schools*, 3 vols (New York: T. Nelson, 1915), III: 858-60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I: 100.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, III: 856.

instances, the organization of children into a Sabbath school preceded and laid the foundations for the later creation of a congregation.⁶⁶ Although the schools were generally interdenominational, they taught the basics of religion and focused on the nurturing of proper moral values. In early Canada, however, Sunday schools had an organization and vitality of their own, were deeply jealous of denominational interference, and thus only vaguely associated with any church. By the 1850s, the increasing debate over the spiritual status of children and the nature of baptism, and the desire both to expand and consolidate the Church's operations, encouraged Methodism to integrate Sunday schools into the fabric of the connexion.⁶⁷

Once the Church had accepted the importance of these agencies, it attempted to expand their role as both nurseries of the Church and as instruments of Christian nurture. Conversion was the primary function of evangelical Sunday schools in preparing children for a meaningful role in the broad Church fellowship.⁶⁸

The ultimate object of the Sunday school teacher should be, in humble dependence upon divine grace, to impart that religious knowledge, to produce those religious impressions, and to form those religious habits in the minds of the children, which shall be crowned with the salvation of their immortal souls; or, in other words, to be instrumental in producing that conviction of sin, that repentance towards God, that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, that habitual subjection in heart and life to the authority of the Scriptures, which constitute at once the form and power of Genuine Godliness.⁶⁹

It was the easiest and most receptive time in the life of the individual.⁷⁰

In general, by the second half of the century, the Methodist Church was prepared to accept not only that children should be prepared for future conversion and, thus, Church membership, but that their immediate conversion was both possible and real. At the local level, many congregations actively celebrated the conversions occurring in their Sunday schools. They dismissed objections that young people were too inexperienced to be creditable.⁷¹ By the early 1860s, the entire denomination was alive to the possibilities of Sunday-school conversions. In 1862, for instance, the Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church listened intently to the report of the Sabbath School Committee:

Your committee would especially call attention to the fact, that in one of our Schools during the past year, fifty scholars were converted to God, while seventy-four scholars are returned from the same Circuit as meeting in class; and they would respectfully suggest whether similar or even more extensive success might not be universally obtained as the result of earnest, systematic effort prosecuted in the spirit of faith and prayer.⁷²

⁶⁶ WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1835, p. 95.

⁶⁷ METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, *Minutes of Bay of Quinte Conference*, 1852, p. 21.

⁶⁸ *Sunday School Banner*, 1869, p. 11.

⁶⁹ John JAMES, *The Sunday School Teachers' Guide* (London: Adams, 1841), p. 35.

⁷⁰ *The Wesleyan Sunday-School Magazine*, II (1858): 145; WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1868, p. 109.

⁷¹ METHODIST CHURCH OF CANADA, *Minutes of Toronto Conference*, 1881, p. 121.

⁷² WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1862, p. 68.

In fact, in the same year, that connexion listed over thirteen hundred converted scholars.⁷³ A decade later, over two thousand Wesleyan students were converted and almost fifty-five hundred were meeting in class.⁷⁴ By the 1870s, therefore, it was clear to the Church that Sabbath schools offered the most promising nursery for members. The simple realization of this fact hastened the evangelizing of this domain. Accordingly, along with the liberalization of theological attitudes toward children, the consequent internalization of recruitment helped the Church meet the expanding obligations to children of the late nineteenth century.

Moreover, Sunday schools offered a perfect forum for the operation of education as a proper means of achieving grace. The large number of children who were converted, and, especially, those who almost automatically joined the Methodist Church, provided ample proof of the wisdom of this support. In 1868 for instance, the Wesleyan Methodist Church declared:

One most cheering indication of improvement and progress is every year becoming more and more apparent. We refer to the delightful fact, that between two and three thousand of the children of our Sabbath Schools are members of the Church ... We cannot have a greater cause of joy than the increasing conviction prevailing among us, that childhood and youth are the most proper seasons for the commencement of a religious life; and the increasing endeavour to make Sabbath Schools, not only the nurseries of the church, but the means of present salvation to those who attend them.⁷⁵

Just as education to a gradual recognition of faith was receiving wider acceptance throughout the entire Church, so too were the advantages of reasoned, moral and spiritual development accepted as a natural outcome of Sunday-school training. All varieties of mature spiritual experience were equally valid, but "salvation by fire" had negative overtones for the dignified, middle-class Church and too often lacked the permanence of results associated with a gradual blossoming of faith.⁷⁶ Also, the so-called "uniform law of growth and gradual development"⁷⁷ played down dramatic change and fitted religious experience more clearly into accepted secular notions of progressive social reformation.

Although one of the primary objectives was to bind the young to the Church, Sunday schools also emphasized broad character-building. Sabbath-school publications continually impressed strong social and ethical values on their readers and, thereby, reinforced the Protestant, Victorian ideals of the community. Foremost, children had to learn and acknowledge moral conduct in order to retain the benefits Christ promised and to construct a healthy future.⁷⁸ In turn, moral children, while accepting parental authority

⁷³ Ibid., 1862, p. 68.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1873, p. 109.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1866, pp. 92-93.

⁷⁶ *Christian Guardian*, 22 August 1866, p. 133; *ibid.*, 24 June 1874, p. 197; *Canadian Methodist Magazine*, V (1877): 373.

⁷⁷ John THOMPSON, *The Relation of Children to the Church* (Montreal: Wm. Drysdale & Co., 1893), p. 31.

⁷⁸ *Sunday School Banner*, 1869, pp. 17-18, 45.

and avoiding precocity, were expected to help reform parents or neighbours who had strayed. The school papers were full of stories illustrating how the guileless child, well versed in Sabbath-school morality, and his saintly mother were able to save the dissolute father. Such attitudes struck to the heart of Victorian society.

Sabbath schools also warned of the numerous traps awaiting the unwatchful child. Evil companions were to be avoided like the plague. In 1857 for example, the *Wesleyan Sunday-School Magazine* charted man’s fall and the source of his renewal.

Degradation — steady employment — evil associates — profaning Sabbath — drink — stop prayer — loss of job — worse habits — prison.

Regeneration — prison — help of Sunday school teacher — discovering Bible — stop associations — stop drink — attend church and prayer — useful employment — salvation!⁷⁹

The lesson was clear — immoral associates and drink destroyed the work ethic and made crime the inevitable result.

Such evil habits might also be acquired from unedifying books. They were as harmful as bad friends and were more insidious because they often appeared cloaked in the respectability of literature. Only sound reading could teach the lessons needed for the young to grow into moral and respectable adults.

The best of books is the word of God ... With regard to other books, the best are those that relate to the lives of holy, benevolent, honest, trustful and worthy men and women; and which afford instances of faithfulness, disinterestedness, integrity, gentleness, meekness, and humility; those which teach industry, contentment, family-union, and other homely virtues; voyages and travels, containing narratives of enterprise, courage and perseverance, are also suitable for the young; books of natural history, that illustrate the wisdom, power and goodness of God; and books of science, which explain the laws by which the works of God are governed, and the application of these by man to the arts and comforts of life: these are all excellent for instruction.⁸⁰

As well as trusting the positive influence of education, such injunctions also illustrated that Methodists were equally aware of the blighting effect of immoral influence.

If these influences were avoided, the child would develop a strong character, healthy tastes, and responsible manners.⁸¹ He would also learn a proper resignation to his place in society and to the will of God. The obedient adherence to the preordained order of society strengthened dedication and prevented rebellion against parental and community standards. Lack of respect for parents and those in rightful authority was clearly the work of the devil operating on the “will” of the child or adolescent.⁸² The prevention of selfish willfulness was a central priority of the Sunday-school nurture.

⁷⁹ *The Wesleyan Sunday-School Magazine*, I (1857): 9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I (1857): 15.

⁸¹ *Sunday School Banner*, February 1873, p. 29; WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1869, p. 89.

⁸² *Sunday School Banner*, February 1869, p. 10.

Along with the belief in proper resignation to the will of God, the Sabbath school emphasized orderly behaviour, conscientious habits and, in general, the virtue of hard work. Laziness, or as the Bible defined it, sloth, was a sin as detrimental to human development as drunkenness and it led to a similar debility.

Lying late and long in bed impairs the health, generates diseases, and in the end destroys the lives of multitudes. It is an intemperance of the most pernicious kind, having nothing to recommend it; for to sleep when we ought to be up, is to be dead for the time. This tyrannical habit attacks life in its essential powers; makes the blood forget its way, and creep lazily along the veins; relaxes the fibres, unstrings the nerves, evaporates the animal spirits, dulls the fancy, and subdues and stupifies a man to such a degree that he hath no appetite for anything; he loathes labour, yawns for want of thought, trembles at the sight of a spider, and, in the absence of that, at the creatures of his own gloomy imagination.⁸³

This denunciation might sound comical today, but it shows how strongly the Methodist Church stressed moral discipline. Hard work and the larger benefits of an ordered, peaceful, sober community were imperative for a progressive future.⁸⁴

By the 1870s, it became especially clear that the focus of ethical reform must be the older child or adolescent. For instance, not only did the school itself provide a popular means of overcoming improper use of the Sabbath, but its lessons taught the youth not to profane the day with secular activity.⁸⁵ This support provided an important auxiliary for the Church in the drive to preserve the sanctity of Sunday. As older children and young adults were generally the worst offenders, it was critical that they be reformed. Further, the adolescent was constantly harangued by the Sunday school about his new-found sexuality. He was warned against extra-marital sex, prostitution, and the entire downward-leading labyrinth of improper sexual conduct. Restraint was not only necessary for health but for moral advancement. In general, these concerns were considered improper for direct discussion, but examples were plentifully used of the fall of young men and women who wandered from the true path. As well, Sunday-school attitudes were in tune with prevailing medical and secular views of human sexuality.

As for the most prominent of all reforms — temperance — little subtlety was required. Alcohol was the most perfidious and dangerous device of the devil. It undermined all the characteristics of a sound community. Temperance programmes, therefore, were early perceived as essential aspects of Sunday-school training. Abstinence was stressed in stories, tracts and books; at least four Sundays a year were specifically given to the temperance cause, and teachers were pledged to abstinence.⁸⁶

⁸³ *The Wesleyan Sunday-School Magazine*, I (1857): 11.

⁸⁴ For example: JAMES, *The Sunday School Teachers' Guide*, p. 34.

⁸⁵ WESLEYAN METHODIST CHURCH, *Minutes of Annual Conference*, 1836, p. 132; *ibid.*, 1861, p. 61.

⁸⁶ As might be expected, the miracle of turning water into wine was never introduced into the Methodist Sunday school.

In many schools, Bands of Hope were formed to fight alcohol, and abstinence pledges among older children were made a regular part of Sunday-school life.⁸⁷ The Sunday school, therefore, was recognized as the great auxiliary of the Church in nurturing the young. It allowed a more precise focusing of the Methodist mission and became a major element in a concerted effort to reform future society.

Clearly, then, the Methodist Church shared the general recognition of childhood and adolescence current in nineteenth-century Canada. A vital element in this recognition was the improved status children received in institutional religion. By mobilizing its own resources and integrating the power and influence of the Sunday-school movement, it fought to make the transition from childhood to adulthood as tranquil as possible. Since behind much of the late nineteenth-century concern for protecting the young and creating a moral, progressive society was the desire to prevent the fall of the child into the abyss of damnation, the Church provided a critical respectability and broad base of support for all movements of reformation of the period. This alliance between the secular and sacred in the community multiplied the effectiveness and optimism of all in acknowledging and improving the status of childhood.

RÉSUMÉ.

Dans leurs efforts d'adaptation à une société en voie d'urbanisation, les autorités de l'Église méthodiste canadienne se sont engagées en faveur des enfants et ont même amendé des notions théologiques fondamentales relatives à l'enfance. Dans la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle, la conception de «l'enfance» s'est transformée: d'un état de dépravation totale à un authentique état de salut sur le plan spirituel. Confortée dans cet optimisme, l'Église put prendre les commandes dans la protection, la surveillance et la promotion de l'enfant. Dès lors, les valeurs morales et spirituelles se fondirent aux priorités de la société victorienne; l'Église fournit à la fois une caution respectable et de puissants groupements à l'institutionnalisation de l'attention portée à l'enfant ou à l'adolescent et, en termes généraux, au développement de la collectivité toute entière.

⁸⁷ For example, see: Wm. L. BROWN, "The Sunday School Movement in the Methodist Church, 1875-1925" (M.Th. thesis, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, 1959), pp. 28, 36; Richmond Street Methodist Church, Minutes of Teacher's meeting, Toronto, 6 May 1859.