

Epilogue

God's Call to the Church

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Two young boys were in the principal's office—in trouble again. The principal called the first boy in and to impress him with the bigger issues of life asked in his most serious voice: “Where is God?” The boy's stare was blank even after a second attempt. Exasperated the principal called the other boy in. The first boy whispered as he passed his friend: “Apparently God is missing and they're trying to hang it on us.”

As we reflect on Canadian society the appropriate question is: “Where is God?” Our society has said it is okay for women to go topless in public. Pornography is accessible on cable TV, the corner store and the Internet. So where is God in our thinking, in our morals and in our values?

Canada is waiting for an answer. Is God relegated to being a back-bencher in the halls of government, a relic in the museum of education, a faded shadow in the corner of our homes?

When Charles Templeton published his “Farewell to God,” he expressed in open terms where many Canadians are headed in their thinking, God is either a distant memory or a

question that cannot be answered. Where is God? They don't know—or they don't care.

If *Vision Canada* accomplishes anything, let it be a call to the Church to try to answer that question. The fact is that society has replaced God with empty answers. Hedonism and narcissism, the philosophies of our day, are ringing hollow. So we try to escape the drudgery of life with sports, “suds” and the silver screen. But our emptiness shows itself in the rise of broken families and a mood of despair. The Church must ask the question, “Where is God?” And then it must try to provide answers that can be understood. If we don't, we will have nowhere to go but this abyss of agnosticism and hopelessness.

Where is the Church?

Instead of asking, “Where is God?” we should ask, “Where is the Church?” Where is the incarnate witness of who God is?

So many times we focus on the question, “Was Canada ever a Christian nation?” as if to legitimize our presence in society. The Church does not get its mandate from the history books, but from the book that claims to be the Word of God. As followers of Christ we are called to be light in a dark world. Where there is more darkness, we are to be there with more light. We enjoy being part of “light conventions,” but our calling is to find a dark place in this world and let our light shine.

Canada has a great heritage in Christian values. Sir Leonard Tilly called upon the framers of our nation to make its foundation a firm belief in God, and so our motto was taken from Psalm 72:8—*He shall have dominion from sea to sea*. The fact that the Fathers of Confederation used the term, “dominion of Canada,” was a direct inference taken from this

verse. William Westfall reminds us that the Psalmist is holding up values of justice and righteousness in “triumph over the selfishness and wickedness of men.” He states the motto was chosen to reflect “a new type of society on the earth when the wilderness of sin and injustice will become the dominion of the Lord.”

In 1905 Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier, spoke to the House of Commons about the need for Christian morals to be taught in our Canadian schools.

Against a backdrop of his description of American society, he said:

When I observe in this country of ours a total absence of lynchings and an almost total absence of divorces and murders, I thank heaven that we are living in a country where the young children of the land are taught Christian morals and Christian dogmas.

Many of the one million British Loyalists who headed north after the American War of Independence were devout Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists. Many of the settlers who came from Europe brought their Reformation and Pietist beliefs. Our leaders of the past, such as Wilfred Laurier, John Hamilton Craig, John Diefenbaker, Tommy Douglas and others, had their political beliefs shaped by strong Christian convictions.

In a sense, the Church has a political right to have its voice heard, but the Church must rise above the din of politics. The Church must speak in terms that are not confused with political opinions. The Church must speak to issues of truth and righteousness. The Church must bring a message of hope into the hopelessness of society.

So where is the Church at this point in our history? Is it growing or has it lost its vision? This book has detailed various

descriptions. On one hand we could say that religious conviction has lost its foothold in society at large. While 81% still claim religious affiliation, what that really means is a recognition of their religious roots rather than ownership of religious beliefs. In an Angus Reid poll only 58% consider religion an important part of life, and church attendance on a monthly basis (of all religious groups) now stands at 21%, which indicates the majority will only turn to the Church for weddings or funerals.

Where is the Church? If buildings of brick and mortar were to define the Church, then the largest number would be Mainline denominations such as United and Anglican. If it were responses to the pollster on “religious affiliation,” then the largest group would be Catholic. Yet if you were to measure it by actual church attendance in your community, most communities across Canada would have the largest numbers in evangelical churches on any given Sunday (about one of every ten Canadians would claim to be evangelical, the only number that has been growing). But is being evangelical enough? Is holding to the essentials of what the Bible claims as Biblical truth fulfilling the mandate of the Church? No! Christ also calls us not to be adherents but proclaimers of the truth. And where truth is not heard, then we should ask, “Where is the Church?”

What is truth?

Pilate tried to ask Jesus that same question, “What is truth?” Jesus had said, “for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth (literally *of the truth*) listens to me.” Pilate didn’t know how to respond, so he tried to sideline the issue with the question that we often hear today, “Yes, but what is truth? How can you claim to have ‘the truth?’” The answer came, not in a great apologetic, although the Bible gives a good basis for its truth claims, but

in a demonstration of the incarnate Christ. It came in a model of self-denial and self-giving love.

As Christians in this great nation called Canada, we may not be able to provide all the answers to society’s questions, but we cannot sit back and let society say farewell to God. We must incarnate a witness of who Jesus is in the middle of all the despair and hopelessness that society may feel.

Sociologist, Dr. Reginald Bibby, has said:

There is a tremendous need for what religion has to offer. We’re finding that Canadians are continuing to raise questions of meaning and purpose, and it seems to me that in this instance religion has an awful lot to say to Canadians.

Our history shows us leaders, such as Egerton Ryerson, who shaped Ontario’s system of public education and wrote the textbook, *First Lessons in Christian Morals*. He and his evangelical colleagues sparked a vision for building hospitals, libraries and homes for unwed mothers—all because of a belief that a commitment to God meant incarnating that message into the very being of society.

Making truth claims does not mean imposing religious institutions or creating a theocracy. The education system of today seems to fear this and has imposed a valueless system on our children. The warning of Dr. Bibby’s words may be the result. He says:

Religion in Canada is in serious trouble. Canadians are into religion a la carte. They’re into select beliefs and practices. They want professional services from the churches by way of weddings, funerals and baptisms, but they are not embracing religion as a way of life. It’s not something that is informing the everyday existence of the average Canadian.”

Rabbi Dennis Prager wrote:

Liberals (whom we have called secularists) are always talking about pluralism, but that is not what they mean. They mean “melting pot.” Pluralism (properly) means that Catholics are Catholics, Jews are Jews, Baptists are Baptists, etc. That’s what pluralism means—everyone affirms his values and we all live with civic equality and tolerance. That’s my dream. (But) in public school, Jews don’t meet Christians. Christians don’t meet Hindus. Everybody meets nothing. That is, as I explain to Jews all the time, why their children so easily inter-marry. Jews don’t marry Christians. Non-Jewish Jews marry non-Christian Christians. Jews for nothing marry Christians for nothing. They get along great because they both affirm nothing. They have everything in common—nothing. That’s not pluralism. But that is exactly what the liberal world wants. They want a bunch of secular universalists with ethnic surnames.

Paul Marshall uses this quote of Rabbi Prager to say our Constitution should:

...enhance the place of religion in Canadian society. Our religious values should provide an interpretive framework as we seek to develop and interpret the Constitution, especially the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

His point is not just political. It is not just because our social structure is “rooted in our religious inheritance,” but because the destruction of society results when we hold to nothing. It is the “nothingness” imposed on the youth of our nation that results in hopelessness.

I belabour this because it points to our mandate as the Church living in a pluralistic society. Christian values must

be upheld at a foundational level. The Church must speak to issues of truth and righteousness to a society that seems to be losing its memory of those values. Then it must go beyond that. It must incarnate Christ in society. It cannot impose a Christian religious system that everyone must adhere to, but it can demonstrate a Christian compassion to the hurts of society. It can be something they can see and something they can hear in terms that they can understand.

But they must hear. We may be one of many voices, but we must speak clearly the truth claims of Christ that are relevant to every person in our nation. We must speak in a strong voice that calls men and women, boys and girls, to become followers of Christ. But in the intimidation of losing our right to be a voice in society, have we lost our will to speak the good news of Christ?

What Should We Do?

Why do we find ourselves in this condition? Why is there a spiritual desert not only in our culture but also in our churches? Could it be the result of bringing “empty offerings” to God? Could we be like the Israelites in the Old Testament, who performed their religious duties but presented their offerings empty of devotion and whole-hearted commitment to God?

So then what should we do? The answer is not first or only in coming up with a new program of research and strategies for reaching our nation. While these have great value for calling God’s people to do what Christ calls us to do, we need to be careful that they do not become just another well meaning intention. Rather our reply should be like David’s in a similar situation. He had called for research that would shape strategies dependent on his own strength. It was at that point his motives were wrong and God called him into account for his empty offerings.

What did David do? What we should do, also, if we expect God to move in our nation. We see it in 1 Chronicles 21:8. Note that God responds because of his **repentance**. David did not try to hide his sin. We should not try to hide ours. Could our lack of effectiveness be a lack of commitment or lack of Christ-centredness to our lives? Could divisiveness in the Body of Christ, wrong priorities or the lack of integrity in our lives be the barrier to a move of God? God's call is still: "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The emphasis of His words is not on the greatness of a nation but on the heart of His people. God desires repentance so that He can revive—put life back into His people. It is for us to call out, "*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*" (Psalm 85:6).

But in the example of David, God also responded because of his **sacrifice**. In 1 Chronicles 21:24 he offers to buy everything from Araunah so as to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Araunah offers to give it to David. David replies: "*I will not (offer that which) costs me nothing.*" This was not an empty offering. He knew it had to cost him something! Are we willing to let our service to God cost us something?

We long for God to grow His Church through revival as He has done in China, Ethiopia or other places in the world today. When I tell accounts of the Wolayatta church in southern Ethiopia baptizing between 15,000 to 20,000 people each year, my Canadian listeners usually say wistfully: "If God would only do that here." Yet in those places the Church has grown through adversity and a sense of sacrifice on the part of believers. During my time in Ethiopia, I heard many stories of Christians being imprisoned during the Communist years, yet what shone through was the sense of their life being

expedient for Christ. I saw evangelists willing to leave their families for a year so as to go into some of the hard places and establish a church.

Would I be willing to do the same? To be honest, I'm not sure. I like the comforts of home, the sense of being cloistered in my family room by the warm glow of the electronic hearth. Am I really willing to be inconvenienced? Am I willing to give up something to have a witness, to get involved with people? What am I really willing to sacrifice for Christ? As we look at ourselves should we say, "No wonder the Canadian Church is losing its effectiveness in society?" Are we one of those bringing empty offerings in our prayers for revival?

Eva Barrows, of the Salvation Army, reminds us that great revivals never began in a big way but with one life given up. Sometimes it was with martyrdom. Other times with personal sacrifices. She pierces the issue by saying, "...and a cross-bearing Savior should not have cross-evading disciples." We might not be asked for a sacrifice of martyrdom, but we might be called to a sacrifice of personal convenience—to give up something or to do something that pushes us out of our comfort zone and gets us into His commission zone. As with the account of David, when there is true sacrifice, then God answers "with fire from heaven."

The Prophetic Message for the Year 2000

The prophetic voice of *Vision Canada* should echo the call for repentance and sacrifice if we want to see God move through our land. But it can also raise a prophetic message of what the Church could be if God were to respond to our prayers. It is not presuming on God, but giving us a challenge to believe God for something only He can do.

In 1990 we published the first edition of *Reclaiming a Nation*, in which I wrote:

Research should lead us to a “prophetic message.” It should not only describe our present condition and what has happened, but should suggest our future condition and what could happen. It should challenge us to ask: “What will we ask God to do through us?” and “What will we look like if we do?”

These could be the most important questions of the whole book. It is helpful to look at trends in our society to know how to contextualize our communication. It is wise to examine how the Holy Spirit is working today as we desire to become more effective. We need to understand our strengths and weaknesses if we seek to build vision. But the articulation of what we could become is really the apex of our work.

The point of saying “What could happen?,” is not an earthly kingdom building for those who call themselves “evangelicals.” Nor is it a triumphalism—“let’s go take the hill.” Rather this is holding out a vision of what could happen through God’s kingdom if we are true to His mandate.

If the harvest force is represented by 8 to 10% of our nation, or approximately 9,000 congregations, and if we were to grow through evangelism at just **3% per year**, then the harvest force would **double in the next 18 years**. Evangelicals worldwide are growing at a rate of 4.5% per year.

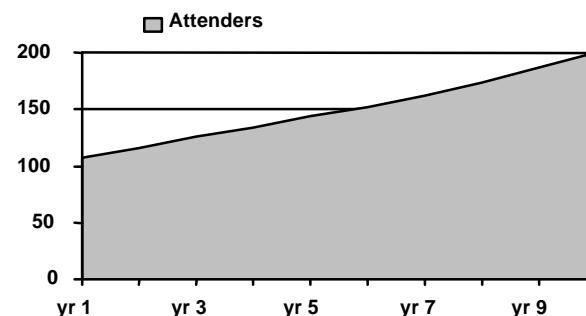
More specifically, one of the primary challenges of *Vision Canada* and this book is church planting, because it presents effective means of mobilizing for evangelism and ensuring the Gospel can be within reach of every person.

So let us focus the prophetic message of what we could become on church planting and say—If each denomination were to add 3% annually to their corporate number of congregations, this is what could happen to the Church in Canada. (see Table 22 in Chapter 4)

Could the Holy Spirit do more through us? What if each congregation were to plant or co-parent a daughter church each 3 to 5 years, simply as a commitment of its evangelism program along with Alpha and other purposeful evangelistic efforts? What if new churches were to build plans to daughter again into their philosophy of ministry DNA from the outset? What if new churches were birthed in every high-density housing complex, among every people group and by every congregation?

What if a majority of congregations in Canada were to grow—on campus and on new sites—by 7% per year? (Some are in fact growing well beyond that.) A church could double in a decade with a 7% growth rate—a rate combining on site evangelistic growth and church planting. Based on this rate, a church of 100 would have a net growth of seven people the first year, nine the next and thirteen the following year. Envision what could happen to that church in ten years.

Figure 32
Congregational Growth at 7% per Year



We asked before and we ask again—can it be done? Not without a renewed commitment to vision and a willingness to make sacrifices. But we must echo the words of D.L. Moody: “It can be done, it must be done!”

The fact is—the *Canadian Church Planting Congress '97* declaration is possible. And when we ask the question in terms of each congregation, we can see that this is a reasonable faith goal. Churches can plant churches which in turn will plant churches. Will every evangelical congregation accept this challenge? No, not every congregation—but does that change our own commitment to the task? The issue is not what others will do, but what will you do? What will your church do? God always holds the individual responsible first, and then the nation. Revival comes the same way.

Valley of Decision

In the film, *Valley of Decision*, a country church that is oblivious to the threat of a prairie fire becomes a metaphor for what could be happening to the Canadian Church today. We can act as if nothing is wrong and ignore signs of danger. The late Robert Thompson speaks in the film from his 18 years as a member of parliament and warns that Canada could become “another burned-over area of Christianity.” As a great Canadian statesman who gave his years of service not only in the hard places of Ethiopia but also in the halls of power in Canada, his voice needs to be heard. We cannot assume the future based on blessings of the past. Whatever place Christian values and the Christian message had in our nation in the past is no guarantee that it will continue in the future.

The preacher in the film uses the prophet Joel as a voice to us today. The nations were saying: “Where is their God?” To Canada it could be: “Where is God in a land that claims a Christian heritage or in the churches that claim to be His people? Where is Christ incarnate in a witness to all people?” In Joel’s day God withdrew His power because of the sin of His people. Could the same be true today? It is a hard question but one that must be asked.

The prophet called out: “Return to the Lord... weep.... Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn...Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” (Joel 2:13, 17).

The message of Joel is one of promise as well as warning. It is the promise that “I will pour out my Spirit on all people... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:28, 32). But then it ends with the picture of His people needing to decide their destiny... “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!” (Joel 3:14)

We too need to decide. If we take the challenge of, *the Gospel for every person and a church for every people*, will it be an empty offering? If we cross over into a new century or a new millennium, what will Canada become? When people ask: “Where is God...in our nation?” could we say, “He is being lived out in the lives of thousands of Christians across this land. His presence is being felt in the schools, hospitals, jails, homes and wherever people are hurting. His ‘Body’ is being multiplied in every part of Canada as His people respond to His commission with obedience and sacrifice.”

Where is God? Let Him be heard in every heart of this land, in every part of this dominion called Canada. Let us respond with witnessing congregations that incarnate the message of Christ to every person and to every people. Let us cry out from the depth of our hearts—“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6).

This is the question for the Church in Canada—the “multitudes in the valley of decision.”

Action Points

✍️What is the main issue for your church in keeping vision for accomplishing Christ's Commission? What becomes the greatest distraction?

✍️How do you personally respond to the call for "repentance" and "sacrifice?" Where do you think the Spirit's voice may be challenging you?

✍️Look at the growth rate of your church or denomination in the last five years. If you were to set a faith goal of growth, what would it be?