

Building on a Remarkable Legacy:  
Baptist Witness in Western Canada; Missional Challenges  
and Opportunities Within a Canadian Context

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Baptists were often successful in saving Jews during the Nazi invasion and subjugation in the Ukraine because they existed on the margins of society and they had a healthy disrespect for authority. — Martin Gilbert, official biographer of Winston Churchill

We're here to celebrate the frontier strength and spirit of an indomitable man, born to a minority group (Clark is here referring to John Diefenbaker's Baptist faith), raised in a minority region of Western Canada, leader of a minority party, who went on to change the very nature of his country – and to change it permanently. When any man dies, after nearly 84 full years, there is a mixture of memories. With this man, there is the certain knowledge that he leaves his country better, broader, prouder than he found it. — Former Prime Minister Joe Clark at the graveside eulogy of Baptist layman and Prime Minister John Diefenbaker

There has been for many years a sense that the Jewish historian Martin Gilbert's observations about Baptists remain true in many regions of the world even to this day. Former Prime Minister Joe Clark's comments on his predecessor John Diefenbaker's identification with the Baptists "minority group" would also be historically true in the present day with possible exceptions in certain regions within the United States of America. The Canadian experience in general and the Western Canadian experience in particular reflects these simple statistical realities. Yet as Gilbert's observation declares in this healthy "disrespect for authority", Baptists have had a disproportionate influence on the cultures in which they have lived: Oleksandr Turchynov, the Baptist chairman of Ukrainian Parliament; Walter Rauschenbusch, the American theologian and social commentator/activist; Ernest Bevan, the Baptist lay preacher and British Foreign Secretary; not to mention the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century American "noteworthy" Billy Graham, Martin Luther King Jr., Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore. The Canadian and especially Western Canadian social experience is crowded with such remarkable personalities and figures. The second Prime Minister of Canada Alexander Mackenzie, a Baptist layman and stone mason, was renowned for clearing up financial corruption, cronyism, and outright

criminal fraud in the Canadian public sector in the 1870s. This integrity had a profound implication for the opening up of Western Canada. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was the first Commonwealth Prime Minister of any racial background to speak against South African apartheid. He placed the first woman in the federal cabinet, the first Indigenous man in the Senate, guaranteed the federal vote in 1960 for Canadian Indigenous people, and penned the first Canadian Bill of Rights and Freedoms. Reverend Tommy Douglas, a Baptist minister, social activist and politician, was cofounder of the federal New Democratic Party, comparative to the British Labour Party from 1995 to 2005 or the Democratic Party under Bill Clinton in the 1990's in the United States. Douglas is best known for the introduction of universal health care beginning in his home province of Saskatchewan. As a socialist he is ironically also known for governmental debt repayment, non-deficit budgets (indeed, he produced surpluses), and small user fees for those enjoying social programs like Medicare. Again, ironically for someone left of centre, the thing he claimed to be proudest of was the grand precursor and primer of private enterprise when he reveled in bringing electricity to rural Saskatchewan thereby increasing productivity by some accounts by 250%. We could not mention iconic Canadian figures without also referring to the rather unknown Margaret Ridgeway a single woman who was a teacher at the time of Japanese internment in Canada. She chose to leave her successful occupation to go into the internment camps to teach Japanese children school. For this she was disowned by her family enduring much ridicule. It is to her person, character and influence I dedicate this paper.

This paper sets up a discussion of present day missional challenges in the context of public, social, ethical, and legal issues, and also places the discussion firmly within a national narrative that often reflects experiences elsewhere in the world.

The current challenges of Baptist witness can only be understood by examining Baptist denominational life within the historical context of a wider Canadian narrative. This larger narrative begins with describing the founding Christian traditions of the country. First contact by European colonizers was with French settlers in the 1530s, and was predominantly a Roman Catholic experience. The Protestant influence did not take hold in the various colonies, territories and provinces of Canada until the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Protestant work evolved the primary influences were Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian. But these, along with the already established Roman Catholic traditions, soon became rooted as the predominant faiths of the Canadian social and religious landscape. Baptist work began in the 1760s in Nova Scotia but was not established in Western Canada until the 1870s. You will note that Dr. Schoeber's paper asserts that this later start compared to other Christian groups may have affected the growth in establishing Baptist churches. This may be true, but there are two other important factors to consider. While Baptist traditions in Canada were dividing in the mid- to late- 1920s, the majority of Methodist, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians were collaborating to establish a new church entity, the United Church, in 1925. This new entity became the pre-eminent Protestant voice in Canadian life until charismatic renewal, the rise of evangelicalism, major immigration, and the rebirth of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches (which showed great promise for the health of the Canadian Christian church as it entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century) changed the landscape of faith in Canada. Also part of this change was the blossoming of Christian Missionary Alliance and Mennonites, renewal of "free church", and rapid expansion of para-church organizations.

Christians in North America, particularly Baptists, are always needing to tell their story. It has been important for Canadians and Canadian Christians to individuate and differentiate between a Canadian faith experience and an American one. The danger in this exercise is often to overstate the differences, but nonetheless two examples of this are noteworthy. The last official biography of our first Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald as penned by Richard Gwyn has as one of its major theses that Canada's *raison d'être* (lame as this may be) was based on wanting not to be American. However accurate or unhelpful that image is, it is reinforced in daily cultural conversation. Secondly, Dr. Henry Morgentaler was a Holocaust survivor and the prime enabler of ready access to abortion in Canada. He once found himself in a hotel in which a pastors' conference from my denomination was being held. He asked three questions of a participant. They were in very specific order the following. "So you're Baptist. Are you evangelical or fundamentalist?" "Evangelical," was the reply. Secondly, he asked, "Are you American or Canadian?" "Canadian," was the response. To which he added a third question: "Would you like to have a conversation?" This particular interchange does not paint anyone in a greater or lesser light. It simply exhibits a cultural pattern. I have both spoken and written elsewhere about the inflated sense that Canadians often have of their place in the world (Desmond Tutu once famously quipped, "Since Barack Obama was elected President, Americans have stopped wearing Canadian flags when they undertake international travel"). These comments are simply to highlight the internal strain on national and faith identity, nothing more.

There are seven specific missional challenges and opportunities:

Missional Challenge and Opportunity: A Postmodern World?

A Summary: “Culture”, at least in popular media, is really post-postmodern, but the residual effects of the original postmodern shift are still strongly with us.

A Response: The Christian Church in Canada has spent a great deal of time and energy battling the real or imagined threat of postmodernity without embracing the amazing and genuine gifts the primacy of narrative offers. A post-postmodern world within the context of social media and the internet is both obsessively story orientated and presents a rather democratic opportunity for everyone’s story. A recent discussion this author had with an Iman underlined exactly that point, with both parties agreeing that this new world order offered opportunities heretofore unimagined to reciprocally tell each other’s stories.

The church’s missional challenge is to be open to the new reciprocal storytelling environment and to invite an exchange of narrative from other faiths, secularists, and agnostics. This mutual respect and exchange opens the possibility that we might share the story of faith in our era of real (or imagined) openness.

Missional Challenge and Opportunity: Syncretism or Pluralism

A Summary: The cultural challenge and tendency to choose syncretism over pluralism.

A Response: In response it is important that the Christian Church offers its support for pluralism for all (in many ways a founding Baptist principle). This reflects not only religious and social tolerance (and places us firmly as a proponent and participant in civil society) but in affirming the rights of all, we clearly raise the expectation that that includes ourselves. In preaching, in published materials, and in the public context the Church needs to critique syncretism (which is

at its very least the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought) as the unhelpful notion that it is. If we believe in everything (the broad definition of syncretism) then one ends up believing in nothing. Stephen Prothero in his book “God Is Not One” is extremely clear that the popular syncretizing of religious belief is not only intellectually dishonest but disrespectful to those traditions. By reinforcing the portrayal of different traditions in their own unique way it allows the Christian faith to stand out for the uniqueness in Christ that we represent.

#### Missional Challenge and Opportunity: Public Prayer

A Summary: The great ambiguity around public prayer in multiple jurisdictions has heated up considerably since a 2014 Supreme Court of Canada decision commented on how a piece of legislation in Quebec affected a small town council, which opened its council meetings with an explicit Roman Catholic prayer.

A Response: The primary challenge for the Christian Church is not to panic and overreact to the Supreme Court of Canada decision. Many jurisdictions, including the Muslim Mayor of Calgary, felt that this very specific Supreme Court decision on a particular provincial law was generally applicable to public prayer in Canada. This blanket application of the law is not accurate at present. The general principle of inclusive or even pluralistic prayer has not been addressed by the Court. This has been further confused by the present Governor General of Canada, a public official representing the Queen of England, who arranged prayers to be said at his own investiture. Public figures including the Supreme Court, military, and members of parliament regularly attend the Provincial and National Prayer Breakfasts. The challenge and missional

opportunity for Baptists who have a congregational history in pluralism and religious tolerance have a role to play in insisting on two simple things. One, that prayer occurs meaningfully for those who find it meaningful. Two, that public prayer is not only effective in that it is meaningful for those of faith but, Baptists have a role for ensuring that those who are not of faith are not marginalized.

### Missional Challenge and Opportunity: Indigenous People

A Summary: Some of the highest teenage suicide rates in the first world occur in Canada's Indigenous communities. With extreme poverty, lack of access to safe water, shrinking control over habitat that would ensure their cultural and economic survival, high instances of domestic violence, and multiple reasons for lack of opportunity, Indigenous Canadians find themselves at profound risk.

A Response: Out of approximately 1.5 million Indigenous people, approximately 17,000 are Baptist. They are generally spread through a multitude of Christian denominations with by far the strongest being Roman Catholic. The missional opportunity is to find ways of supporting educational and economic opportunities, infrastructure development around safe water, assistance in equitable land claim negotiations, a concerted effort to differentiate First Nations religious and cultural practices, and wherever possible to integrate those cultural practices into the context of mission and justice. Baptists did not hold contracts for Residential Schools which many other Christian denominations did. However, Baptists have been part of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's apology to First Nations communities and are actively pursuing several opportunities to see a healthy, ongoing reconciliation occur.

Missional Challenge and Opportunity: The Environment

A Summary: Canada has the interesting irony in being well known for dirty oil (or, the extraction of heavy crude from “oil sands” or “tar sands”) while also being a world leader in renewable energy. 63% of our energy is created from renewable of hydro, solar, and wind. In contrast, Mexico has 25% of such sources and the United States has just 13%.

A Response: There are a great number of environmental groups that have begun in Canada: Greenpeace, the Sea Shepherds Society, and the David Suzuki Foundation. A Christian creation care and stewardship group called A Rocha is also very active and well connected in Canada with two major centres in the Greater Vancouver and Greater Toronto areas, three hubs, and more to come. They emphasize a Biblical form of earth keeping, creation care, theological reflection, and education. Most of the leadership in A Rocha Canada are Baptist.

Missional Challenge and Opportunity: Assisted Dying Legislation

A Summary: In 2015 the Supreme Court of Canada struck down a criminal code section that banned assisted suicide and gave parliament one year to amend the criminal code to frame criteria that enabled assisted suicide to take place. In June 2016, parliament passed a bill which, while allowing physician-assisted dying, included protection for the young, mentally impaired, and those for whom death was not an immediate prospect.

A Response: There were many Christian representations to the Supreme Court. While there has been some concern, the primary focus of the Christian community has been to address, embrace, and provide comprehensive palliative care.

Missional Challenge and Opportunity: Gender and Sexual Issues

A Summary: Same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide in Canada on July 20, 2005. Since that time there have been a variety of gender and sexual orientation issues before society.

There has been an increasingly strong divide between many young Christians, millennials most clearly, who do not feel that same-gender partnerships are at all an issue. That has created a great deal of controversy within individual churches and denominations.

A Response: A response to this will be engaged in general discussion.

Contrary to popular opinion and misconception (sometimes attributed to Mark Noll's assessments) the Christian faith and Church is challenged, but in many ways is thriving in this wonderful gift we have been given in the country of Canada.

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