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MORE BUDDHISTS THAN BAPTISTS?:
A CALL TO REFRAME BAPTIST DISCOURSE
FOR MISSION IN CANADA

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Living in a region where Baptist heritage looms large, it is interesting to note that there are almost as many Buddhists as Baptists in Canada today. We should not be surprised. Nationally, the number of people of the Baptist faith has never been significant, though their concentration differs in various regions of the country. Still, along with most other Christian families, the Baptists have watched their numbers decline steadily, while the numbers of Buddhists have continued to increase at the same rate. Indeed, the number of Buddhists in British Columbia and Ontario outnumber Baptists, though each religious group only forms merely one to two percent of the population nationally.

When compared with the growth of other religions, this reality is even more notable. There are twice as many Hindus as Baptists and three times as many Muslims. Yet, there are some Baptists alarmed to find a Masjid being built in their town where there are at least 20 Baptist Churches within a few kilometers. Many of these churches sit on the perilous brink of existence, looking down at those who have already gone over and wondering how long they might hang on.

Baptists perhaps often overestimated their strength and numbers, as have Christians overall. I remember forty years ago in school and later university being one of very few people of faith, a reality we simply accepted. In primary school days, we had Bible reading and prayer to start the day and said the Lord's Prayer in senior school assembly. Christianity in this form was simply latent in culture, and the only person who seemed to take faith seriously

was the Chemistry teacher, who was hysterical when she found out there was someone coming to speak at the school offering a “scientific” calculation of how Noah fit all of the world’s animal species in the ark.

When my husband and I were first dating, he was the only person on our large residence floor who would come to church with me. He had not yet come to faith, and there was only one other person besides me who identified as Christian. When he told his family he was being baptized by immersion, they were concerned he was joining a cult. I knew through my educational experience that Christians were few, but that was the first time I realized how odd it was to be a Baptist.

The reality is that the story of the decline into ever smaller numbers in the 2021 census should surprise no one. Canada has diversified. The number of Christians is declining, and the Baptists along with them. As a new generation of Canadian-born people distance themselves ever further from their inherited faith traditions, immigrants are reported to be far more religiously committed. A majority of immigrants to Canada still identify as Christian. This no doubt bolsters the numbers in churches on Sunday while the next generation of Canadian-born Christians is eroding.¹

As others have noted, immigrants bring with them deep religious commitment, Christian and otherwise, that impacts our public religious landscape. Johanna Lewis has noted that religiously committed immigrants come with an expectation that their religion will have an impact on the public sphere.² This may concern those who have developed over time a largely quietist attitude to faith in the public realm, but it may also bring encouragement to acknowledge that no faith can be entirely private.

All of this affirms a trajectory of change that sees Christians in general—and groups like Baptists in particular—in an increasingly marginalized position in Canadian culture. As they contemplate the demographic shifts in Canadian society, are Baptists able to

1. Sam Reimer and Rick Hiemstra (“The Gains/Losses,” 327–44) noted before the most recent census that immigrants bolster number of all religions in Canada, including Christianity.

2. Lewis, “Religion and Belief,” n.p.

reimagine their identity and shape their discourse in a way that converges with a new vision of Canada, or are we relegated to polarization and marginalization by our own design? Are Baptist leaders able to engage the mission of the church in society with transformative action that is faithfully distinctive and yet winsome and nurturing of diverse cultures? Or will they be keepers of ever smaller aquariums until there are no fish left inside?

As Gordon Heath has suggested, there are moments in history where changing discourse sets the trajectory of Baptist life in Canada.³ He notes that the discourse that surrounds these moments has shown Baptists to be adaptable to significant change in the interests of mission. For example, in the decline of empire, Baptists were able to reimagine their identity away from Anglo-Saxon exclusivity, suggesting a new trajectory for Baptist life that stretches to the present. Most importantly, he indicates, “What is noteworthy is that in the midst of tumultuous and terrifying times, much of the discourse of the churches facilitated rather than bucked that reimagining of the nation.”⁴

Just as Baptists in the past have shaped the discourse for mission in a changing cultural context, it would seem advisable to re-discover their identity in a missional calling today. Declining numbers and influence leave Baptists across the country reacting to their increased insignificance by marginalizing themselves in their response to culture and polarizing within the ranks. At a time when Baptist distinctives could provide a common center for Baptist identity in Canada, mission is jettisoned for culture wars and sectarianism.

There is a temptation amongst many today to form a collective identity by naming a common enemy. Carl Schmidt, the political theologian of Germany’s Third Reich, seems to be everywhere. Schmidt insisted that a group comes to know who they are by identifying their shared enemy. Internationally and within national borders, the identification of a common enemy is a widespread

3. Heath, “Canadian Baptists and the Fall(ing) of the British Empire,” n.p.

4. Heath, “Canadian Baptists and the Fall(ing) of the British Empire,” n.p.

practice. In Canada, there is a polarizing left and right that has a menacing feel because it is not only predicated on difference but also the idea that those who are different are dangerous.

In a country that posits diversity as its greatest strength, Canadians may be struggling to live into diversity when internet algorithms and nefarious forces are interfering to create division. Baptists and other Christians become subject to the same forces of suspicion. Instead of finding common identity in the Lordship of Christ, it is found in defining the enemy. The enemy used to be out there somewhere, but now, the enemy is within and needs to be called out.

And so, we see Baptists across the country falling out over views on cultural engagement without recognizing that the culture they live in has raised an entire generation of young people with an open view on sexuality, gender, and a host of other issues. To draw hard lines now on such issues alienates an entire culture whose people cannot understand the attitudes of exclusion they face. At the same time, some immigrant communities may hold to a hardline on these similar issues. Yet, rather than frame cultural engagement as mission, culture is often regarded as a common enemy. In a culture war brought inside the walls of the church, both sides become entrenched, believing that the other is the unbiblical compromiser of truth. The divide becomes ever greater.

Can Baptists expect to survive such division when there are so many other factors that mitigate against a thriving Christian faith? If the discourse is shaped solely as a matter of dogma, polarization increases to the point of fragmentation, as Baptists across Canada have experienced in discussions around sexuality. Views are called out as unbiblical by both sides, and accusations of gospel compromise are universally made. Baptists face the danger of fragmenting into oblivion so long as the discourse is shaped around doctrinal ethics without referencing mission.

If Baptists were to take their mission seriously today, they might ask questions about how a gospel presentation could be offered in a way that could be heard and understood in Canadian

culture today.⁵ Is cohesion of Baptist life possible in Canada now? Can Baptists live into their mission fully if they fail to stick together? Can Baptists, and indeed Christians, learn to engage the public realm winsomely from the position of numerical and practical marginalization? How might internal and external Baptist discourse contribute to the direction of Canadian diversity rather than resist it?

Perhaps some guidance exists within Baptist distinctives themselves. The Baptist distinctive of the Lordship of Christ, for example, humbles perspectives and relativizes extremes when it is recognized that Jesus is above all views and perspectives. The fact of Christ's Lordship holds Baptists in unity even when they differ on some aspects of how that is lived out. The Lordship of Christ calls us to humility regarding our theological views that are by necessity tentative unless we think ourselves immune to the noetic effects of sin.

The Lordship of Christ beckons us to recognize the competency of each soul to decide for themselves how to serve God and that the mind of Christ is discerned in the meeting of each congregation. That has never yielded unanimity in practice but calls us to respect the dignity of others' spirituality. Moreover, soul competency spills over into the advocacy for freedom of each to believe and worship however they wish, something Baptist forebears in the faith have died for, arguing that whether Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheist, no one should be compelled to religious belief. Baptists could have a unique role to play in defending the religious freedom of all in Canada, creating a discourse that shapes the diversity of Canada in ways that are inclusive of all, including Christians. Rooting identity in Baptist distinctives rather than in some perceived common enemy produces a missional discourse worth pursuing.

As churches continue to decline, unity rather than fragmentation suggests a potentially flourishing future. Beyond the dis-

5. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*. In this classic work, Tillich identifies the pre-apologetic task, which is to engage in a correlative process to be able to prepare a culture to receive a Christian message that is so alien as to be incomprehensible.

agreements within, Baptists may be able to find ways to reach out to other Christians and work for the common good together with those of other religions out of respect for universal human dignity and soul competency. Baptists might then develop a discourse that regards increasing religious diversity as a positive cultural reality for Christians in Canada and recapture a sense of mission to culture that draws circles around people rather than lines between them.

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