

EMBRACING THE POSSIBILITIES OF RESURRECTION

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It is no surprise and the truth is clear: the decline in Canadian Christian belief and practice is long-term, systemic, and does not seem to be stopping. Whether it is because the Canadian Church as a whole has not yet found the right solution, or God for some reason has decided not to act is unclear. How deep the valley will be is anybody's guess.

Over the past decades, there have been many different creative attempts to reverse the decline. They seem to fit within the categories that Jim Collins uses to describe an organization in freefall:

1. Endlessly pursuing silver bullets—“game changers” that promise to quickly catalyse breakthrough;
2. Grasping for leaders to be saviours;
3. Hasty, reactive behaviour and emotion-driven decision-making;
4. Cries for “revolution” [or in the church context, “revival”];
5. Hype preceding results – overpromising and underdelivering as opposed to the opposite;
6. Initial excitement leading to inevitable disappointment;
7. Confusion and cynicism;
8. Constant restructuring¹

I am confident that each reader will be able to supply examples of many of these from their own lived experience. It is important for those concerned by this trend to recognize that the decline is not purely a local or personal thing. Whatever is causing this, the scope of it is certainly more expansive than any organizational leader or theological tradition. So, for those carrying the responsi-

1. Collins, *How the Mighty Fall*.

bility for turning their particular church around, or for those blaming their pastor or denominational leader for the struggles of their local church, this larger perspective can perhaps soften their critique. This is a long-term, multi-denominational, national trend.

Further to that, what if, in the divine economy, this decline is not meant to be reversed? What if God has a purpose for what is occurring? What if these attempts at reversing the decline are signs that we have succumbed to the temptations Marva Dawn warns against?

Both the concern for “church growth” and the concern for survival (which sometimes are the same thing) lead to many of the tactics of the fallen powers, such as competition, the overwhelming pressures on church leaders to be successful, reduction of the gospel for the sake of marketing and so forth.²

As we continue to ride the slide downward, how could a Christological perspective inform this journey? What if the decline of the Christian institutional church in Canada is serving to bring the people of God closer to the posture and mind of Jesus? Perhaps the work of breaking down the former established order is necessary to clear the ground for new adaptations to flourish? Mac Loftin, in his September 2023 article in *The Christian Century*, contends that this is the case:

Who Jesus is is the one who effaces himself so that others can take his place, the one who allows himself to be transformed into what he is not . . . This means that we’re called to look for Jesus not by turning inward to the already known but by leaving the familiar behind and seeking him in an unknown future . . . If the church is the body of Christ, and if Christ is the one who effaces himself to make room for others, then the anxious desire to preserve Christianity . . . at all costs is revealed as an enormous theological error . . . Christianity—at least Christianity as we in the West have known it—may very well be in its last days. But Christians should reject the temptation to rage against the dying of the light, whether by weaponizing state power against

2. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God*.

those bringing change or by cozying up to the rich and powerful and well-connected. Permanence was never our calling.³

So what? What does it mean? What are we to do?

Perhaps the first step is to embrace the journey of grief, a la Elizabeth Kubler-Ross,⁴ encouraging those still within Canadian institutional Christianity to face what aspects of grief or lament they must address to move towards acceptance and be released to engage in new possibilities. Whether that is denial and isolationism, anger and bargaining or despair, unresolved grief may be much of what is driving our current religious polarization. Loftin legitimizes the need to process grief and loss in his article, along with an invitation to move forward:

The loss of the traditional and familiar is certainly a cause for mourning, as the death of anything cries out to be mourned. But—having consecrated these passable forms with our gratitude—we must allow our mourning to pull us forward, elsewhere, on toward the unknown. We as Christians are called to have faith that while our wanderings will bring risk and danger, we might also find grace in being altered by what comes, in listening with attention to the incomprehensible words of the strangest stranger as perhaps the word we have been listening for.⁵

I would invite those who occupy leadership positions within the existing Church hierarchies to embrace this as their calling for the next several generations—to provide palliative care and support to the people and organizations that need to continue to decline while also holding space for what comes next. Forty percent of Canadians still hold to Christian belief, even though far fewer engage in regular religious practice.⁶ So this work will still be important and challenging as people continue to struggle through the process of caring for what remains, grieving and letting go.

While the Christian narrative embraces the idea of surrendering to death and giving up one's life for another, this also eventually

3. Loftin, "A Better Response," n.p., emphasis added.

4. Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*.

5. Loftin, "A Better Response," n.p.

6. See this sobering article from 2016: Hiemstra and Stiller, "Religious Affiliation," n.p.

leads to resurrection. Elaine Heath and Charles Kiser describe the transition we seem to be experiencing in this more hopeful way:

We are at the forefront of a new reformation, one that is freeing the Christian faith from the sinful structures of patriarchy, racism, classism, many phobias, and exploitive forms of mission and evangelism. The new reformation is about the emergence of a generous, hospitable, equitable form of Christianity that heals the wounds of the world.⁷

Seen in this light, decline and possibly death can have a cleansing, freeing function, releasing the followers of Christ from the bondage of institutional power and privilege. If this is the case, what might that new reformation look like? How might the explorer of new territory move forward in search of a resurrection for Canadian Christianity? I have been intrigued by the path that Randy Woodley offers in his “Missiological Imperatives”:

1. There is no place we can go where Jesus is not already present and active.
2. Since Jesus is active everywhere, the first responsibility of mission among any culture is not to teach, speak or exert privilege but to discover what Jesus is already doing in that culture.
3. Realize that God expects two conversions out of every missional encounter: 1) our conversion to the truths in their culture, and 2) their conversion to the truth we bring to the encounter.
4. Our humility as servant of Jesus should naturally lead to us first convert to the truths in their culture wherever we see Jesus is at work.
5. Through the work of culture guides (people of that culture), earnest study, prayer and experiential failures, it is our responsibility to first adapt to and then embrace their culture, and as much as possible, their worldview,
6. Realize that conversion is both instantaneous and a process (the biblical data of salvation is becoming wholly healed) and think through these implications as you begin to consider your timelines. Then, throw out your timelines.

7. Kiser and Heath, *Trauma-Informed Evangelism*, 61.

7. During this time, also read, study, and discuss with others the ways that you can continue to deconstruct your own worldview and culture. This is a long, painful, and yet freeing process.
8. Our own process of conversion may take years, so be patient with yourself and with God. When and if they invite us to share the gospel they have noticed us living out, then the process formally known as cultural contextualization should occur.
9. Their process of conversion may take years, so be patient.⁸

First, I take heart from Woodley's assertion that even as the institution declines, *Jesus is not absent!*

Second, I encourage us to take seriously the invitation to consider that God is at work in the growth of the "nones" in Canada. There must be something redemptive and compelling about the pursuits and lifestyle that draws Canadian people to think and live the way they do. An attentive missionary might be able to observe and tease out the difference between Christological principles and practices and those that conflict with the Jesus Way.

The challenge that is most poignant comes in Woodley's third point—that conversion must go both ways. Perhaps the "nones" are on to something—something that the current vision and practice of Canadian Christianity is missing? We might begin by sifting through the critiques that are currently being offered of the Church, and see if there are grains of truth that invite a response. It is this point that seems most lacking in historic and current postures within the institutional Church. There is a common attitude that the Truth (note the capital "T") resides within the Church and that outsiders have nothing to offer, which leads to a defensive posture by default. Instead of seeing themselves as bringing the light of the gospel to a lost and dying world, perhaps Canadian Christians could begin with a diligent search for what is good and right in their communities, find people of peace,⁹ and partner with them in working for the common good.

8. Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview*, 108–109.

9. A la Luke 10:5–6.

Fourth, Woodley's challenge to patience is extremely appropriate. Rooted in the Indigenous peoples' patient yet persistent pursuit of treaty solutions, this word "patience" should have a meteoric impact on our pursuit of quick fixes. The journey of decline and resurrection for the Canadian Church is multi-generational and will likely require many more generations before it comes to fruition. Lord willing, it will include a deep and meaningful transformation of the relationship between the Church and First Peoples.

Finally, I take hope in the idea that this decline might just be successful in accomplishing the cleansing and restoring work that Heath and Kiser describe. Who knows? The conversion process might result in our *own* conversion, restoring Christian communities in Canada back to the original fervour and radical compassion that was evident in the early Church. Canadian Christians might one day be able to return to that place, where people from outside would ask of them, "Why do you live and love the way you do?"¹⁰

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