

Was Canada Ever Christian

and other essays

Sample Reading from: www.BrianStiller.com

FAITH TODAY Publications, 1996

People often ask me, “Was Canada ever a Christian nation?” You may have heard that the United Nations said it no longer considered Canada as being Christian. I didn’t believe that story, so we had it checked out. No, the UN never said that. As well, we know that most Canadians today still believe in a personal God. Up to two-thirds of Canadians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But it does seem as if Canada isn’t as Christian as it once was.

However, as we accelerate to the end of this century, we do need to ask: What kind of Christian country do we pray for?

But first a word about being a Christian country. Former prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau said, “The golden thread of faith is woven throughout the history of Canada from its earliest beginnings up to the present time. Faith was more important than commerce in the minds of the European explorers and settlers.”

When you drive through the villages of the St. Lawrence region you can see the historical influence of faith. In the middle of each settlement the local church, usually Catholic, Anglican or Methodist, is the dominant piece of architecture. You really can’t understand Canada until you understand the central role the Christian faith had in the founding and shaping of Canada. But to say it was therefore a “Christian nation” calls for a look at the three main ways we use the phrase.

It can be used to mean a country with some connection to the Judeo-Christian heritage. Almost everything in Western culture from the late Roman Empire until 1800 was “Christian” in that sense, even though there were elements we would agree were not Christian.

The phrase can be used to mean a nation in which there are many individuals who claim to be Christian. But the presence of Christians in a country might only paint a picture of a country that is religious but not necessarily Christian. Consider, for example, South Africa. Most of the population confessed Jesus Christ, but the racial policies of apartheid imposed by the government were anything but “Christian.”

The phrase can also be used to mean a society that reflects the ideals and principles of Scripture. That is, a country in which people are not just talking about doing God’s will but are quite successful in doing it. I suppose this is the way we would want to use the term.

It is important that we make these distinctions. If we assume that political ideas and the bible are the same, it is not a long step to idolatry and national self-righteousness.

As evangelicals become more proactive in political and social issues – which, I believe, is something born of the Spirit – it is important that we not be caught up in wishful thinking of a return to some glorious Christian moment of the past. I think too often our memory of Canada

as being a “Christian nation” is caught up in either the first or second way we use the phrase.

I see two major ideas that can help to guide us as we engage our culture so that we are kept within earshot of Christ’s call “to be in the world but not of it.” These two are “corporate” Christianity – the Christendom model – and “individual” Christianity.

Corporate Christianity’s first expression appeared in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. In one stroke, Christianity changed from being an obscure sect that worshiped a Jewish rebel to a major world religion that sought to apply Christ’s teachings to the political structure of the world’s then-greatest power.

Though it was distorted and abused and was used to connect political and religious power, this expression of Christianity does remind us that a biblical vision of life for a nation has value.

The “individual” view of Christianity came out of the Reformation, which brought the understanding that God works in the hearts of individuals. Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin and Menno Simms became major forces in the shaping of North American Christianity. At its heart, individual Christianity sees the relationship of the individual to God as being the most important expression of Christian experience.

These two views, corporate and individual, though seemingly in opposition, are never completely distinct. The combination of the two holds us in healthy tension. God does enter our hearts and does bring personal transformation and forgiveness. And he cares about the way in which we are ruled. It does matter to God that we live within a nationhood that blesses the people. King David understood that well: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,” he said. Be wary of people who wish to return us to some former state wherein Canada was “Christian.” They may be caught up in believing that by political force we can bring a spiritual rule. But also be wary of people who individualize faith so much that it has no concern whatever for the country.

Let us not misunderstand: the heart of this nation will be changed and renewed only when the people of God act like the people of God.

May our God rule Canada from sea to sea to sea.

ISBN: 0-9695596-6-6