

Some Thoughts on the Role of the Church in Canadian Society by Lois P. Mitchell, PhD, December 2000

We have a tendency to see the church's role in society as one of "swimming against the current" or "swimming upstream" against the influence of the world. How helpful is this analogy? I think it is totally WRONG! I don't think God calls us to swim against the current and when we do, we become exhausted and often discouraged.

If we compare life to a stream or river, it is true that there is a current which carries the water to its destination (the ocean, for example). The route the water takes typically includes a variety of conditions - smooth going, pools of still water, rapids where rocks and other obstacles make navigation difficult and even treacherous, etc. There is not only the natural pull of the water to deal with (the current) but back eddies and undertows - this is life, in the world!

When we, as Christians and as the Church, find ourselves in these waters, we tend to get swept along. From time to time, this alarms us and we attempt to grab onto an overhanging tree branch or something in the water or on the shore. This may afford us some rest and respite but we can't stay there forever so we either let go and try to swim against the current or allow the current to once again sweep us along. If we try to swim upstream, we are soon exhausted.

And let's not forget the other "swimmers" in the water with us. There are those, like us, who by times are trying to resist the current, and there are those who are being swept along in the current with varying degrees of enjoyment. So long as we are in the water, we have little hope of rescuing our fellow travellers!

Is this the abundant life Jesus promises us? I don't think so. I think, rather, that Jesus would have us get out of the water, and from the safety of the shore, offer help to those being swept out to sea.

Okay - enough of the analogy. I am really dismayed by the state of the Church in Canada, especially as I consider our overall impact on our society and our loss of influence and credibility in virtually every arena of our social and political life, even in my lifetime. We are doing something wrong. More critically, I am increasingly convinced that our fundamental theology is flawed. We are little better than the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' time. We are committed to our religion and to our religious institutions and we have confined Jesus largely to a ceremonial role.

I know this sounds harsh, but look at us ... we are so busy with the mundane realities of life, "what we shall eat and drink", our homes, cars and careers, our pension plans and medical plans, our retirement funds, etc. We are easy targets for Satan. And I do not say that lightly! Have we forgotten that Satan is the one who's goal it is to destroy our marriages and families, to bring division and conflict into our churches and to tie us up with "busy-ness"? Don't be deceived! Almost half of marriages in Canada end in divorce and we are systematically turning our children into young people and adults who have no understanding of authority or of "denying themselves and taking up their cross daily to follow Jesus."

But there we are, making our feeble attempts to swim against the current. He has deceived us into thinking that we cannot simply get out of the water. We yearn for rest and an escape from the "rat race" but he (Satan) reminds us that we have responsibilities - we have a mortgage and our kids need an education and God does not really expect us to be totally committed to Him. After all, He promises us an abundant life and it must be here somewhere, at the end of a busy day or year, or lifetime. But Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest

for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Has this been our experience? If not, where have we gone wrong?

We have listened to Satan’s lies and we have not only believed them, but we have taught them in our churches! We do need a revival (of epic proportion) and we do need to repent, and I believe God will heal our land. But repentance is not an easy thing. We have to let go of the variety of things (idols) that are keeping us from God, things which we don’t even see as being idols. We have to look honestly at the condition of our hearts - the problem is not the things we cling to but our hearts’ bondage to them (for example - it is not money which is evil but the love of money, etc.).

What does the church stand for in Canada? Who knows! We say, when we dare to speak at all, that we are against all kinds of sinful behaviour, but do we know what we are for? Let’s face it, the accusations of hypocrisy are not so far fetched. Where we ought to be sprinkling salt and spreading light, we are hiding behind our “righteousness”.

Which reminds me, when Jesus quoted Scripture, it was in one of four ways:

1. to rebuke Satan;
2. to point out to the religious authorities their misinterpretations and distortions of God’s Word;
3. to demonstrate the fulfilment of prophecy; and
4. to encourage an understanding of God’s plan and purpose.

Never did Jesus use Scripture as a means of coercion or for political influence. He did not impose truth on His society. He was and is the truth and yet His influence was through His own example and by teaching His disciples so that when He had returned to the Father, they would be equipped to carry on His ministry.

Jesus calls us to personal holiness and to compassionate ministry. I am convinced that our failure to be “doers of the Word” has resulted in the Church’s lack of credibility in society. As a result, too much of our energy is currently expended in “social action” in the form of letter writing campaigns, petitions, and other forms of negative protest. We need to be speaking prophetically to the Church first, not to society.

And this is the convergence point of my two streams of thought - the problem is, the Church does not want to be confronted with its sin and therefore, it cannot effectively evangelize. Again, I’m sure there are those of you who may read this who feel I am being TOO critical of the Church. But I challenge you to entertain this line of thought for, let’s say, a 30 day period. Ask God to reveal to you whether or not this is true. Is He pleased with your local Church or with our denomination? Is He pleased with your own personal witness of Jesus?

To help you get started, I’ll give you a “for instance”. A biblical concept which has been pretty much trampled by our society is “submission”. The Bible says that we ought to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). [Actually, why not read Ephesians 4:17-5:21 everyday during that 30 day period!] The study note in my bible says “to submit meant to yield one’s own rights.” Does this sound any alarms? Ring any bells? Our government and courts seem to be almost obsessed with defining and protecting each person’s rights. There is literally no thought of yielding those rights. Submission has become an archaic term, not only in the context of marriage, but throughout society. And what of the church? Do we model submission? If we don’t, what does this say of our reverence for Christ? How can we presume to speak prophetically to society when we have not yielded our own wills to Christ?

I have rambled long enough. If you are willing to accept my 30 day challenge, and/or if you would like to respond to these comments, please email me.

[The thoughts expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Social Action Commission or of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches.]