

THE CHURCH LIVING IN EXILE

1 Peter 1:1-9, 2:9-12, 3:14-15

July 11, 2021

On July 1st we celebrated Canada's 154th birthday – and as we reflect to when our nation was founded, I want us to think of what has happened to the church during the past 154 years? There is no doubt that 154 years ago Canada was a Christian nation. On July 1st, 1867, the newest country in the world chose the title “*Dominion*,” taken from **Psalm 72:8** (KJV), “*He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.*” This verse declared to the world that Canada belongs to God and is part of God's Dominion from sea to sea, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. At the founding of this country Christianity infused every part of Canada: politics, culture and everyday life. It guided how you voted, how you conducted business and family life, and had a central place in our health care and education institutions. As well, to be considered a respectable citizen, one had to be a faithful churchgoer. Christianity drove both social and spiritual reform: churches founded schools, hospitals, senior's homes and orphanages. Christians organized most of the nation's social programs: they battled prostitution, domestic violence, child abuse, drunkenness, and strictly enforced the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest. Then, when Canada entered WWI in 1914, many of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers were motivated by their Christian faith to enlist and serve God in fighting evil overseas.

Statistics tell us – that membership in mainline Protestant denominations reached a peak in the 1960's, but then the wheels fell off as Canadians started abandoning their faith in increasingly greater numbers, a trend that has not stopped to this day, and has been accelerating over the last few years. Today, less than 50% of Canadian adults identify themselves as Christians, while less than 25% of our youth claim they to be believers. And then when we look at church attendance by those who call themselves Christians, attendance has declined dramatically. There are many reasons given for this steady decline, and experts don't anticipate a halt or reduction to this downward trend, unless God intervenes. So, over the last 50+ years, as the culture began to shift towards becoming more-and-more secular, the church has lost its place at the center of national, social and family life, leaving the church now on the very margins of our secular society, with basically no voice.

That's the bad news for us here in Canada – however, there is also good news. The good news is that Christianity is growing by leaps-and-bounds outside of North America and Europe; especially in the continents of Africa, Asia and South

America, where churches are full to over-flowing with enthusiastic on-fire believers. What I find interesting about this good news is that in these continents there is no social incentive to being a follower of Christ, in fact it's often detrimental and dangerous to become a Christian in many of these nations. People living in these nations come to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour despite the hardships, persecution, and the constant threat of death their faith brings them. Unlike other parts of the world, here in Canada it's been extremely easy being a Christian. There are government incentives and benefits to being a follower of Christ, and it has been extremely rare for Canadian Christians to face the same persecution, hostility, loss of jobs, or death for their faith that those in other nations face. So, we have gotten used to having it easy being a believer here in Canada, and as a result, we have taken our faith for granted, creating a church that has become weak, complacent, and reluctant to speak out against the ungodliness that is taking place all around us, and the many ungodly laws that are currently being passed through by our politicians with little opposition from believers.

Despite our current condition – I am still hopeful and optimistic because I see our near future as the greatest time to be a follower of Christ all because Jesus promised us that when it's the darkest, our light will shine the brightest! And YES, I believe we will continue to see churches close their doors and sell their building. And YES, I believe we will continue to be pushed further and further to the margins of society. And YES, I believe we will soon lose many of our current government benefits and face persecution. However, for those believers who fully embrace these challenging times and stay faithful, regardless of what hardships may come their way; and for those believers who will embrace their faith with passion and joy regardless of what is happening around them; and for those believers who are committed to spending time together on their knees in prayer and studying God's Word; and for those believers who become outward focussed and highly visible in their community, where the gifts and fruit of the Spirit are evident, it will be at time like we haven't seen since the establishment of the church in the Book of Acts. Everything is moving towards the greatest revival in history!

I'm confident in saying this – because I believe the time for the nominal, in-name-only Christian is coming to a rapid end, and the time for the on-fire, passionate and totally committed Christian is coming to the for-front and will lead our movement to greater glory despite increased opposition and persecution. Those believers who are dedicated to work together with other like-minded, totally committed, and on-

fire believers from every denomination, and allow the Holy Spirit total freedom to do His work, will turn their communities upside-down. And we can only do this as a church when we start to realize that the old way of doing church is no longer valid and effective in reaching others for Christ, especially our youth. In this age of technology, our buildings are not as important as they were in the past. Our past rigid programs will not work with a society that is highly mobile with strict time commitments. The church of the future will have an on-line component and be highly flexible, willing to change at a moments notice. The Apostle Paul was an innovator in presenting and spreading the Gospel during his day, and if Paul were here today, he would have used every aspect of modern technology available to him to reach as many as he could. The church is moving from a cruise ship mentality to a battleship mentality!

I am suggesting that the only option for the church of the future is to embrace living in exile, living as foreigners and aliens who don't belong to this world; instead, we belong to the foreign spiritual worldwide nation known as the kingdom of God. This is how the early church, during the first few centuries, lived out their faith. So, I believe it's time for believers to realize that God is placing a fresh new calling and anointing on His church, which is to rediscover their true identity and purpose as kingdom people, living in a nation that has abandoned God. In God's kingdom, each member will actively live out their salvation with fear and trembling before Almighty God, because there will be no longer be a place for spectators, for those uncommitted, what-is-in-it-for-me unengaged, distant Christians. The church living in exile, at the edge of society, will need to be totally committed to serving Christ wholeheartedly to survive and grow in ungodly surroundings!

One of my Seminary professors at Tyndale, Dr. Lee Beach, wrote a highly challenging book on this topic of how we now need to see the church that is now living in exile, because the Christian voice in Canada is being drown out, and will one day soon be considered hate speech. His point throughout his book is that most of both the Old and New Testaments were written as encouragement and instruction to God's people living in exile, living as foreigners on this earth, awaiting their real home in heaven. According to Dr. Beech, what has brought the church to where we find ourselves today, is that the church has been powerless and has retreated from secular society, not getting involve; instead, staying within their safe and secure church walls, and as a result, they have become complacent and lost their voice and influence on society.

This decline is the result of many believers living out their faith today as consumers, who act as if their church is a social club, here to meet their needs, rather than equip them as God's army, fighting against evil and darkness within their community. As a result, our churches have become powerless, irrelevant, and no longer growing through conversions and discipleship like the church of the book of Acts. This consumer mentality has resulted in most of our children and grandchildren dropping out, creating elderly struggling churches, which are desperately trying to survive. Then, unfortunately, there are also some denominations that are trying to fight their way back into society by compromising the Gospel message, which is causing even more division and dissent within the body of Christ. The problem is that secular society sees the church as just another type of association – like any other social club of people who share in common interests or activities. The end result is that the church is not attracting new followers, but only shuffling members around.

So, here is the question I have for us this morning – *“As this faith community we call SCCC, how are we different from any area social club or organization?”* How are we different from the Rotary or the Kiwanis clubs? The Bible clearly teaches us that when we become followers of Christ, we are united together as one body, where every member is adopted into God's family, becoming spiritual brothers and sisters. We become citizens of a different kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, what Peter in his Epistle calls a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation who love God and love one another, having this desire to change the world. While many social clubs or organizations have the same goal to change the world, making it a better place to live, which one of them can claim the kind of openness and freedom that we have, where we can confess our sins one to another and pray for one another without condemnation and judgment, and have the kind of unity that is based on love for God and love for one another? So, as members of the Body of Christ, we have become part of something much greater than ourselves or individual churches. We are all connected to Christ, and offer so much more to society than any social club, and then the benefits of belonging adds eternal rewards once we leave this world!

That is why true believers do not get discouraged and despondent as they look at the state of the church; instead, they are motivated to rise-up and become the church that Christ died for. The message I want to pass on to you this morning is one of hope, encouraging you to start looking at the Bible differently than you ever

have in the past. I want you to start reading the Bible as God's words of encouragement and instruction to foreigners, aliens and exiles living among unbelievers. As you start reading the Old Testament in this way, you will notice that it's a story of God's people, the Israelites, living for most of their 5000 years of history, as exiles among pagan nations, called not to be swallowed up by these ungodly people they live among, but to represent God to them as an alternative and much better lifestyle. And then, as you start reading the New Testament in this way as well, you will notice that the early Christians also lived as exiles, called to transform their idol worshipping pagan culture by not living like them as worldly people, but as kingdom people. Today, here in Canada, we are returning once again to the first century church, and as they flourished and grew, despite the moral degradation around them, we will as well if we follow Peter's instructions in 1 Peter 2:12!

I encourage you to read the entire epistle of **First Peter**, which was written to exiles scattered around the Mediterranean area. This morning, I want to highlight a few of those verses to make my point:

First I want you to notice how Peter addresses his audience as he starts off his epistle: **1 Peter 1:1-2**, ***"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance."***

Then, I want you to notice how Peter encourages the exiles by reminding them of what God has done for them as they live among their pagan neighbours: **1 Peter 1:3-7**, ***"In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."***

Then as exiles, we are to never forget our divine purpose and place within secular society: **1 Peter 2:9-12**, “***You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*** ¹⁰ ***Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*** ¹¹ ***Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.*** ¹² ***Live such good (holy) lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.***”

Peter is giving us here instructions on how we are to live as citizens of Canada. How we are to behave in our workplaces; how we are to treat our spouse, our family and neighbours. In this way we become a witness among unbelievers who can’t help but be drawn to us – wanting to know why we live with such hope, peace and joy, despite the health issues, difficulties and hardships we may be going through. That is our witness as Peter tells us in **1 Peter 3:15**, “***Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.***” As we live out our lives in our community, the only way that others will be attracted to the Gospel is if we live transformed holy lives, remembering not to return to the sinful lives we once came from. As Peter instructs us in **1 Peter 1:14**, “***As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’***” We are called to be a holy nation!

In this epistle, Peter gives the church excellent instructions on how to live as foreigners, exiles and aliens, relegated to the margins of society. I encourage you to read this entire short epistle for yourself and understand how Peter sees the church as God’s chosen people, His one-and-only-plan to reach the world with the good news of the Gospel. You will also notice in **1 Peter 2:5** that Peter calls the church, “*God’s spiritual house.*” In other words, the church continues the work that God had commissioned Israel to do throughout the entire Old Testament period, which was to transform the pagan culture around then. And then, we continue the work that Christ began which is well documented for us in the New Testament. From the very beginning, God’s one-and-only plan was to use His people, who are called by His name, to transform the ungodly culture around them.

Currently, in the year 2021 – living in this nation of Canada as exiles, strangers and foreigners, I believe we are finally right where God wants us to be as His, “*chosen people, His royal priesthood, His holy nation, His special possession,*” for the current time in which we live. In this Epistle Peter shows us the strong link that exists between Israel, Jesus, and the church, who all lived on this earth as exiles and foreigners, awaiting their future home in heaven. So, now that we are currently living as exiles, pushed to the margins of society, we now also have this great privilege of living out the ongoing ancient story of our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites, as well as the story of Jesus Christ and the early church, who all realized that they were exiles, strangers and foreigners on this earth.

Now we are in a good place, right where God wants us to be as His people, much like Peter’s audience was back when this Epistle was written, to not only see ourselves as citizens of Canada, and blindly accept everything that is forced upon us, but to identify ourselves as citizens of the coming kingdom of God and present ourselves to those living around us as an alternative society, set apart for Christ. In the first century Christians were only given freedom to practice their faith if they first paid their allegiance to Rome, to Caesar; however, Peter encourages them not to identify themselves with Rome or Caesar, but only with Christ, and we are to do the same. As exiles living here in Sombra and the surrounding area, we have a different approach to life than the unbelievers living around us. We are called to stand in the gap, like watchmen on the wall, who raises the alarm whenever they see the enemies of God approaching. So, we gather to pray as God’s chosen people for our nation, our leaders, our businesses and workplaces, our schools, and families. That a great awakening and a life changing revival would take place and that it would begin with us, right here at SCCC!

Living godly lives is never easy with the pressures of secular society constantly trying to conform us to their standards, and that is why we need to never stop meeting together, encouraging one another to be committed to always be true to our divine calling, which means to never compromise those crucial aspects of the Gospel that we all believe as followers of Christ.

The Old Testament book of Daniel is a great example on how to live in exile, when there is constant pressure to compromise your faith. When the Babylonians defeated the Southern kingdom of Judah, Daniel and his three friends were among the first captives taken to Babylon. In Babylon, Daniel’s commitment to God was tested repeatedly, and he passed the test every time, as did his three friends. They

were good citizens of Babylon and happy to serve the king and use their training, intelligence, and spiritual gifts to make Babylon a better place to live, but only as long as their service did not require them to compromise their faithfulness to God. They never crossed the line to compromise their faith, and when tested they were willing to put their lives on the line in a furnace or in a lion's den to prove their allegiance to Yahweh, the One True God. We are told in **Daniel 3:16-18**, how they dealt with this threat to compromise their faith, ***“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.’”***

What we also need to notice with Daniel and his three friends is that when they were taken to Babylon the first thing that happened was that their names were changed. They were given a new identity in **Daniel 1:7**, ***“The chief officials gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abendigo.”*** To assimilate them into their pagan culture, they took away their biblical names and gave them secular names after their false gods. The Babylonians tried to take away from these godly men any reference to God, and that's why it is also so significant for us to always remember who we are in Christ Jesus and know our identity as believers, especially whenever we are threatened to compromise our faith. We need to keep in mind whenever we are rejected by this world that we are chosen and precious to Jesus. That's what we are told in **1 Peter 2:4**, ***“As you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him.”*** As Jesus was rejected, we are not to be surprised when we are also rejected. So, it's important that we understand who we are in Christ because what we believe about ourselves, and what we do comes directly out of who we believe ourselves to be. If you believe you are a loser defeated by this world and your life is not worth anything, then you will make bad choices that reflect that lack of value and worth. However, if you believe that you are created in the image of God and have great worth, and have been called according to His purposes, then your behaviour will reflect that belief and you will make good choices that glorify God.

As Canada celebrates its 154th year – I encourage you to never look back at the church of the past with regret or discouragement, because our gift to our Lord & Saviour is not scepticism or fear, or throwing up our hands in defeat, but being

fully engaged and optimistic as His true church while living in an increasingly secular culture. We must remain optimistic that change can take place around us when we become communities of grace and truth, love and compassion, forgiveness and redemption, as we boldly and faithfully bear witness to the Good News of the Gospel which is never old or out of fashion, but always new and transformational, remembering we are people of revival!

Then, to change the attitude of society, the church must never be seen as out-of-touch and judgmental but a safe place, especially for those that are not like us, coming to us with sexual confusion, addiction issues, family issues, health issues and heavy burdens. As the church we need to take seriously our role as agents of reconciliation in a fallen world that desperately needs healing and restoration. And the solution is not to compromise the Gospel message by embracing the trends of society around us, making the Gospel more palatable, but to become salt and light, showing others how the Gospel has transformed our lives, and it can transform their lives as well. Remember be encouraged, we are living in an exciting time as Christ's church, but only when we: **START BEING THE CHURCH THAT LIVES IN EXILE**, set apart and never willing to conform to the ways of this world!

What we need to especially remember is that our God is a good God! We are reminded of that in **Psalm 118:1**, ***"Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever."*** And also in **Psalm 145:8-9**, ***"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made."*** Everything that Jesus did when He walked this earth was a revelation of the goodness of God, pointing out that God is not against us; instead, the true enemy of mankind is the devil. Look at what Jesus said in **John 10:10-11**, ***"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*** These verses describe the devil as the thief who is completely evil and bad. The devil, not God, is responsible for all the suffering and evil around us! Sickness, poverty and death are under the curse, while life, healing, health and prosperity are blessings from God, and they belong to you and to me. **WE ARE THE BLESSED**. Why? Because **GOD IS A GOOD GOD!** So, declare this every day: ***"I belong to God! He is a Good God! He is Bigger than all my problems and health issues! He is rich in mercy, and He loves me!"***

When we read about the early church in the book of Acts – we notice that the early believers were referred to as, ***“These who have turned the world upside down”*** (Acts 17:6 NKJV). Then we are also told that they lacked nothing, ***“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had...And God’s grace was so powerful at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them”*** (Acts 4:32–34). The early church was so unique that their world viewed them as the supermen and superwomen of their generation because they eliminated sickness and disease from those who suffered around them and cast out demons, as they shone as bright stars in the midst of their dark generation. My prayer is that SCCC would be seen in the same way as the early church was seen, as an alternative community that proclaims the Good News of God to a world that desperately needs to see and hear it, and this is all done through the help of the Holy Spirit with power!

Let’s close with God’s promise and commission to the church from **Isaiah 42:6-7**, ***“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open the eyes that are blind, to free the captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”***