

Christian Faith and the Role of Scripture in Canada

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Canadian
Bible Society

Introduction

The church in Canada is in a state of steady decline. Each year, fewer people identify as people of faith. Attendance at religious services is plummeting even faster. Why is this so? What factors are contributing to the realities facing the church today? What hope is there for the church today?

At the time of this writing, it is Summer 2021. Many Canadians are hopeful that the worst of the pandemic is now behind us. Congregations are imagining reopening their church doors, meeting for worship in-person once more – and perhaps even engaging in congregational singing. There is both optimism and hesitation in the air. Will people return to church? What will have changed for congregants after so many months of being isolated from their faith community?



The current moment has been challenging for congregations, denominations, and the organizations that support them. While the shape of the current challenge is new (it has been about 100 years since the last pandemic), Christianity in Canada was in a state of decline well before the Covid-19 pandemic shuttered church doors.

To better understand the state of Christian faith in Canada today, the **Canadian Bible Society (CBS)** contracted with **Credence & Co.** to provide research and facilitation services to engage questions of faith and scripture in Canada today; to assist CBS in understanding its role in the current social context; and to consider visionary strategies for CBS moving forward. On CBS' behalf, Credence engaged in a literature study, interviewed key leaders, and led dialogue circles with a wide range of Christian leaders in Canada.

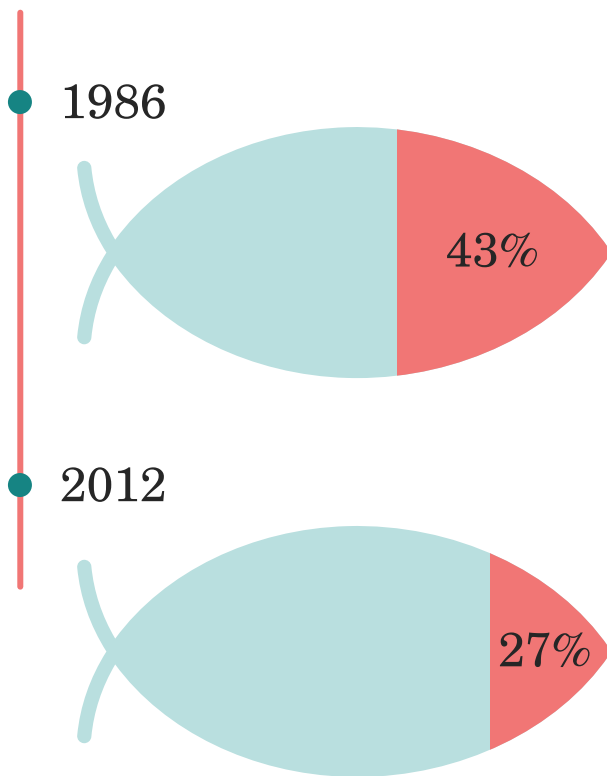
With this article, CBS is sharing the key outcomes of this research and these conversations.



Faith By The Numbers

According to the Pew Research Center, in 1986, 43% of Canadians stated that they attend Christian religious services at least once a month. By 2012, that number had fallen to 27%.¹ By 2019, monthly church attendance had fallen even further to 20%.² By comparison, despite low church attendance, in the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey, 67.3% of the population identified as Christian.³ The percentage of Canadians who identify as belonging to faiths other than Christianity has grown from 4% in 1986 to 11% in 2012.

Religious Attendance in Canada



Between 1971 and 1980, 56% of immigrants identified as Christian, 23% identified as belonging to a faith other than Christianity, and 20% identified as having no faith affiliation. Thirty years later, between 2001 and 2011, 39% of immigrants identified as Christian, 39% identified as belonging to a faith other than Christianity, and 21% identified as having no faith affiliation.

In other words, while the number of those proclaiming no faith has remained relatively stable, the number of immigrants claiming non-Christian faith affiliation has grown⁴ by 16%, while those claiming Christian affiliation has decreased by 17%.

1 "Canada's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, June 27, 2013, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

2 "5 facts about religion in Canada," Pew Research Center, July 1, 2019.

3 Canadian Demographics at a Glance Second edition, February 19, 2016, 39.

4 Ibid. For more on the faith of affiliation of migrants globally, please see: <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/08/religious-migration-exec/>.

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Overall, the numbers provided by the Pew Research Center create an important window into the life of faith in Canada: In the Pew Research, the fastest growing “religious” group in Canada is that of no religious affiliation. Among those that still identify as Christians, the number that regularly connects with a faith community is small – almost equal to those that identify with no religious tradition at all.

The 2012 “Hemorrhaging Faith” study offered a deep dive into the relationship between Canadian young adults (ages 18 – 34) and Christian faith.

The study found that young adults were not connecting with the church as previous generations had, contributing to the decline in overall church attendance: “For every five Catholic and mainline Protestant kids who attended church at least weekly in the 1980s and ‘90s, only one still attends at least weekly now as an adult; for those raised in Evangelical traditions, it is one in two. And that’s not all. Most who have quit attending altogether also have dropped their Christian affiliation.”⁵

When asked about their relationship with Scripture, some young adults shared the importance of their parents modeling a love for Scripture. Nonetheless, many of those interviewed shared that “they want to feel [God]. The witness of the church and Scripture doesn’t satisfy this need.” Those interviewed for the Hemorrhaging Faith study are now between 37 and 53 years old – a demographic that is often still “missing” from congregations today.



⁵ Penner et al., “Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church.” Foundational Research Document commissioned by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, 5.

⁶ Penner et al., “Hemorrhaging Faith,” 50.

The Current Social Context



The current social context in Canada represents a significant challenge to the church and to those institutions that support it. Not only are fewer Canadians affiliating with Christian faith or engaging with church, still fewer appear able to speak with confidence about their faith in the current social context. It appears that Christians, even in their most believing moments, are aware of the pluralism and/or secularism that permeates Canadian culture, creating hesitation or even embarrassment regarding matters of belief.

When people today speak about what they personally believe, they are simultaneously aware of the culture in which they are living and that others do not necessarily think in the same way as they do. This has significant implications for how people engage in the world and how they engage with matters of belief.

Many today are uncomfortable speaking with confidence on matters of belief. Others shrink away from conversations about belief altogether.

Some suggest that the time in which we are living is more defined by secularism than it is by pluralism. While pluralism creates space for multiple belief systems, secularism rejects faith-based belief systems altogether. In secularism – together with the individualism with which it is so often paired – there is little place for spirituality, peoplehood, and Scripture.

This reality is evident across Canada: While some regions of Canada exhibit a greater tolerance for faith, other regions can be described as hostile to faith. Still other regions simply see faith as irrelevant. Whatever the regional norm, it has become difficult to talk about faith in the current Canadian cultural context. While many still identify with faith in some fashion, it feels almost shameful to talk about one's religious beliefs. Faith, it appears, has become an intensely private matter for Canadians.



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While Canada is regarded as post-modern, post-Christian, and progressive, immigrants more commonly come from a Christian or religious context. The diaspora churches that immigrants establish are more likely defined by a modern or pre-modern worldview. This difference creates challenges for those seeking to integrate into the Canadian context as they experience changes which are geographical, psychological, and spiritual in nature.



While some embrace or confidently navigate the new context, others remain caught in the memory of their homeland as it was when they left it. The cultural shift that immigrants experience upon coming to Canada creates unique challenges between immigrant parents and their Canadian-raised children who, over time, come to identify with the worldview of their Canadian-born counterparts. These challenges also find their way into the church.

Can Christians in Canada lean into this current moment to learn from its critique and reground their faith? Some propose that the current time is a gift to the Canadian church, creating opportunities to reclaim the meaning and purpose of faith for the current time.

The Bible in the Current Social Context

The role of the Bible in the lives of Christians – and in the eyes of the broader culture – has been significantly impacted by the current social context. Whereas at one time society may have regarded the Bible as sacred and as a text of value, now the Bible is frequently considered, at best, irrelevant. At worst, the Bible is considered to be offensive, archaic, oppressive, homophobic, repulsive, and dangerous.

The Bible has been regarded as being on the “side” of Residential Schools and sexual abuse scandals, and as a weapon against LGBTQ2+ people. Where at one time people may have asked whether the Bible was true, now the question is whether the Bible is loving or good, to which the answer is commonly perceived as “no”.

Those who remain in the faith can experience a complicated relationship with the Bible. For some, the Bible is seen as an artifact that is best left to history as it does not speak today. Many (including some clergy) are Biblically illiterate and/or they consider the Bible inaccessible, intimidating and confusing, leaving many feeling incapable of reading the Bible.

Some are dissatisfied with the interpretations they were taught in their youth and do not know how to return to the text as adults. Some have experienced Scripture used as a weapon against them. In these situations, a return to the Bible can be traumatic. Others are uncomfortable with the hard Biblical messages related to living a life of faith.

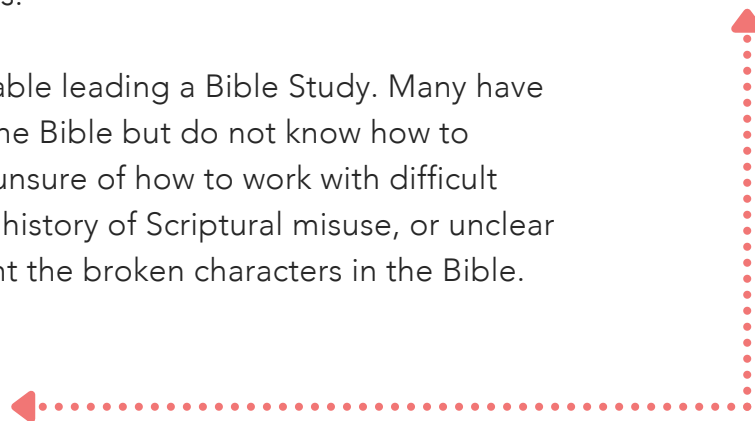


Resistance to the Bible

An inclination toward individualism can create resistance to the Bible as it challenges readers to think communally. Some who still read the Bible-pick and choose the passages they find palatable or see as relevant while ignoring the rest.

Naturally, hesitation or resistance to the Bible brings significant implications: Those who pick and choose their favourite texts may end up creating a God of their own imagination. Some clergy have not known how to translate the Bible to the current context or for the people in their pews. Some are unsure how to interpret the current context through a Biblical lens.

Some clergy are not comfortable leading a Bible Study. Many have learned how to deconstruct the Bible but do not know how to reconstruct it. Some may be unsure of how to work with difficult passages, unfamiliar with the history of Scriptural misuse, or unclear about how to honestly present the broken characters in the Bible.



For those in the diaspora church, there is a perpetual switching of frames from one's culture prior to coming to Canada, which is often more conservative theologically and socially, to the new Canadian context, which is more progressive theologically and socially. Diaspora congregants are often much more Biblically literate than their Canadian-born counterparts – and are accustomed to reading the Bible conservatively.

In contrast, Canadian-born congregants are regarded as having a more robust understanding of Scripture while also being comfortable challenging and interpreting the text in new ways. Diaspora congregants have often depended on their faith for survival. This type of dependence is less common among Canadian-born congregants. The difference between diaspora churches and mainstream Canadian churches can create a gap which can be hard to bridge.

Opportunities for Scriptural Engagement Created by the Current Social Context

As distressing as the current moment may seem with respect to waning interest in both faith and Scripture, the current time is also ripe with need and opportunity. It poses crucial questions for consideration by clergy and denominational leaders:



As our society has polarized, there is a need to learn how to talk well with one another regarding our differences, including our differences related to Scripture. What does generous disagreement look like and how do we make that happen?

How can we help one another wrestle with the text in a curious fashion?



Knowledge of the Bible is critical for those who wish to claim the gifts of a multi-faith or pluralistic society.

The more we engage multiculturally and in a multifaith context, the more we discover new ways of understanding God, ourselves and our neighbours. It is difficult to dialogue with other religious traditions if we do not know our Bible.

How do we help people become conversant with their own Scriptures once more?



There is power in Scripture to engage the larger culture and to call Christians into being countercultural. In an age of anxiety, Scripture has a prophetic role to play. Can we help people see this prophetic role again?

How do we help people to let Scripture speak to them again?



To engage Scripture for the current context, clergy need to know how to read the culture, to raise up the good in our culture while critiquing what is harmful to humanity and the world.

How do we help clergy read the culture in order to allow Scripture to meaningfully speak to this context?



Preachers must learn to read the Bible in a manner that peels back the many layers of interpretation and meaning. The task of the preacher is to model this ability to imagine the “thickness” of the Bible, allowing it to speak into our context in multiple ways.

How do we inspire this type of reading of the text?



While some churches are full and growing and while many believe that the church (writ large) will live on, the Canadian church’s fear for its own survival has led it to an identity crisis. Movements of faith, however, are not driven by looking for texts that are relevant. They are driven by an experienced and lived encounter with God.

How do we invite Scripture to open the doors to this type of encounter?



Through history and today, Christian leaders have noted that rather than being a barrier to faith, engagement with Scripture can nurture faith and spiritual growth, encourage prayer and ready the soul for an encounter with the triune God.

How do we invite people to see the depth of faith made possible by engagement with Scripture?



In an age of anxiety, where people are looking for meaning, purpose – and comfort – the Bible is a strong voice for the healing power of spirituality. Can the Bible be a source of succor and redemption again? Jesus said, “Come to me all you who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Through Jesus, peace is waiting to be discovered.



How Do We Bring People to Jesus Through the Scriptures?

Bible courses are among the most popular across Canadian Seminaries and especially among younger people: Many want to understand the Bible and are open to being taught how to read the Bible.

What is the Bible? How does one read Scripture? How do we see the Bible, not as historical artifact or literature but as a place where God speaks? How do we follow the narrative – the larger arc of the story?



Because of Biblical illiteracy, it may be possible to read the Bible with fresh eyes once more.



Because some have never held a Bible before, it has the potential to be new again.



There appears to be a new openness to mystery.

Can We Help People Rediscover The Wonder of the Book?

In a postmodern culture where things are open and individually oriented, there is a yearning for a metanarrative: Where are we going? Engaging the Bible creates an opportunity to explore the metanarrative it provides.

The Bible is not an artifact on its own. It involves a community of readers – both among people today and over the course of history.

The Bible is meant to be read in community in order to create and inform a community. It is the common book of the Christian community.

To use the Bible well, the community has to engage the text together, working to understand the text rather than using it uncritically or unconsciously. How do we learn to read and engage the Bible as readers together?



The Bible has often been interpreted and shared by mentors; elders of the faith who have lived the text. In a sense, the Bible is incarnational.

What does Scripture look like when it is lived? Many younger people are longing for mentors to walk alongside them as they navigate this world.

There is an openness among young people to let the Scriptures speak in new ways. How do we make space for this?

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Many are looking to rediscover what it means to have a lived experience of God's presence in their lives. How do people rediscover the ways in which the sacred texts can point to prayer and a lived faith experience?

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the current social context represents a significant challenge to the church and to the institutions that serve the church. Not only are fewer Canadians affiliating with Christian faith, even fewer are engaging with the church, and still fewer appear able to speak with confidence about their faith in the current social context. Further, many are Biblically illiterate and/or express discomfort with the Bible.



While many immigrants to Canada maintain a close connection to the church and Scripture, this connection appears to weaken with each subsequent generation. All of these realities pose challenges for the church in Canada – and also for the institutions that serve the church.





Despite these challenges, the current social context provides churches with a profound opportunity. When so much about traditional faith and patterns of engagement with church and Scripture are stripped away, new ways of speaking about faith and/or engaging with Scripture become possible. Many, at this time, are open to understanding faith, Scripture and nearness to God in new ways.

This creates opportunities to support those who are open to learning how to talk about faith, read and interpret Scripture. The stress being experienced by the church today suggests that the time for distrust and division between faith traditions must come to an end. Instead, churches are encouraged to mutually support one another, to engage in interconfessional dialogue, and to create dialogue opportunities regarding a diversity of interpretations of the Biblical text.

The Biblical tradition is clear: It is in dying that we are reborn. Rebirth also awaits the church. To embrace new life, we – the church and the institutions that serve it – are invited to lean into this moment of decline, learn from it, release our attachment to the way things once were, confess our contributions to the harms we have done or that were done in our name, and let go of traditions or expressions of faith that are no longer life-giving.

As we open ourselves to being transformed, a new horizon – perhaps still unseeable – will emerge.

Our task is not simply to wait for this new horizon. Instead, we are invited to walk the death and resurrection journey that, according to the promise, leads to new life.

