

Child Theology In Canada

As I think about the continued activity of the Child Theology Movement and my own heart for this, I wonder often how to express it in the Canadian context. There are many that assume we are much like the United States, but there are significant differences that have tremendous impact on how theology is understood and expressed. Consider for example, the following:

- We are technically a Confederation – a gathering of groups identified in various ways including geographically, economically, religiously, legally, politically, culturally, historically and socially in order to facilitate the existence, protection and prospering of each group. This is most acutely understood and expressed by the declaring of one of our provinces as a distinct “nation within a nation” and the fairly recent recognition and emancipation of the First Nations people.
- Beyond our French, British and Aboriginal origins, Canada is now comprised of over 200 nationalities, each remaining distinct and encouraged to do so through our official multiculturalism policies and our many “non-official” practices. In light of this, one is challenged to answer, what does it mean to navigate theological expression in a neighbourhood where 150 language/people/cultural groups are represented in a single school, the majority of whom have no connection to Christian theology or teaching; or who have been in conflict with such, even if only at an ideological level?
- Almost 3% of our population are descendants of Home Children - children who were removed from UK streets and workhouses where they suffered subsistence living and were sent into harsh servitude in Canada from the 1860s to 1930s to meet the growing demand for farm labour. This movement was led by people who truly believed they were doing God’s work yet it resulted in a scathing and lasting wound that is still to be addressed by those in power or those in the church.
- Within the Aboriginal communities, the child population is growing at 7x the rate of any other group of children in Canada. Just 50 years ago, under the leadership of the Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Churches of Canada, in partnership with the government of Canada, aboriginal people – adults and children alike – were considered wards of the state. This formal “recognition” was the peak of one of the greatest tragedies in Canadian history. From the late 1800’s to the 1950’s (the span of two biblical generations) aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents’ homes to live in residential schools, many suffering horrific abuse. These schools were designed to assimilate the aboriginal community into the “white community” through religious/Christian instruction and Western/European lifestyle, and the forced abandonment of their own language and culture. The last such school finally closed in the 1980’s.

In the wake of yet another engineered social experiment at the expense of children, the social/theological/ religious costs have been monumental. How do you explain to these people and the many who have walked with them that fundamental to the Christian message is “child in the midst”?

- Canada is now considered the most post-modern country out of all of the western/European countries, partly and significantly rooted in how the Christian church treated the most vulnerable in the land, or in the lands where many have come from.

Thus, the challenge of the Child Theology Movement in Canada is exacerbated by the reality that we do not just need to embrace Jesus putting a child in the midst; we are in desperate need of embracing Jesus...and we are not simply “pagans” never having heard of Christ but represent a paganism that

once embraced the gospel and now wants nothing to do with it...that much more resistant because of its historical expression.

The struggle is not just rooted in religion however. It is also rooted in the deeply entrenched illusion that the nation does indeed recognize and value the child. Yet, as Carole Henderson Carpenter presented in a lecture titled, "In Our Own Image: The Child, Canadian Culture And Our Future (29 March 1995, York University, Toronto, Ontario), "Children are a recurrent image, a central concern, even a national symbol, but they are not considered to be people like or, more to the point, quite equal to other people. Rather they are treated to a greater or lesser extent as objects – possessions or commodities to be manipulated at will."

Thus, the fact that the child in Canada holds a symbolic position in the cultural consciousness actually impedes the embracing of the child in biblical/theological realities and practice. We think they are already in the midst.

For these reasons alone, the work of the Child Theology Movement is critical. The challenge in Canada will be to address the illusions and the violations that have left generations aching for good news but no longer looking to the Christian gospel and the church that gives witness to it. They particularly are not about to expose any more of their children for fear that "child in the midst" may mean "child in the midst of further violation"; not an unreasonable fear in light of recent history.

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